

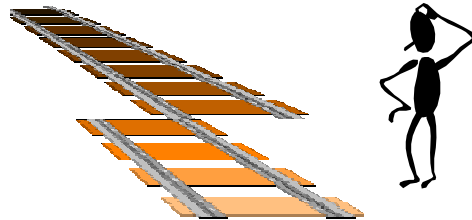
Adding Web-based Capabilities to Traditional Call Centers

Don Van Doren, President of Vanguard Communications

The Internet is increasingly becoming an important channel to support sales and service contact with our customers. Companies' websites are adding new capabilities. Yet, too often, the web functionality has developed independently of our call centers, while seamless integration with the centers is what's really needed. Forward-looking companies must align emerging eBusiness initiatives with their traditional call centers. Here are some suggestions about how to do that.

What's Happening?

In many companies, website development has been on a separate, parallel path from the contact center. The IT department is responsible for the website, with little or no coordination with those responsible for the call center. The webguys think that the purpose is to avoid phone calls at all costs—in fact, sometimes it's even hard to *find* a phone number on a website. At the same time, call center agents have little or no understanding of what capabilities are on the company's website, let alone how to use them. There is no consistency between the two channels, and in some companies different data bases support similar activities, meaning that an agent can't reference an earlier change made by a customer on the website.



Many capabilities—both text and voice oriented—are being introduced to bridge the two. Most organizations will realize great improvements in customer satisfaction, and in improved sales and service statistics by building effective, *integrated* links between the website and the contact center. Here are some suggestions about what's available, and how best to use them.

Text Capabilities

The first approach is email. In the early days, these messages from customers went to the “webmaster” or someone else equally qualified to deal with customer issues. And many companies have been overwhelmed with the volume of messages, leading to very poor response rates or no response at all. Email response management systems (ERMS) have been introduced to send an acknowledgement with a tracking number, route the message based on factors such as the originating webpage, and even compose a tentative response. Agents can review the suggestions, and draw from a library of responses. This library helps comply with some concerns that the legal department must approve such written communication from the company.

Another text-oriented approach is text chat, in which the person browsing a website (a “surfer”) pushes a “Contact Us” button. This results in a pop-up window in which the surfer can type text back and forth with the agent. Today, text chat is typically anonymous unless the surfer is asked for identifying information. Recently, companies are starting to deploy “Instant Messaging” type text chats, which has the advantage of identifying the surfer, and giving the agent more information about how best to be helpful. Companies are finding that the average text chat can be several times longer than the average phone call. In some cases, that “inefficiency” can be offset if agents can assist several surfers at once, especially if supported by

access to libraries of answers. Still other companies use “chat rooms” to group callers who have similar issues.

Voice Capabilities

While text chat can be helpful to get quick answers, surfers frequently want to speak with someone. Selecting a webcall option displays a “call-back form” for a return call now or later (if the surfer is using the only phone line for the internet hookup). The system often schedules and completes the call for the agent. Calling back later isn’t as effective, because it’s helpful to have the agent and the surfer both looking at the same web-based information.

But when there is a single communication link, there aren’t good alternatives today. “Voice over Internet Protocol” (VoIP) is a technique for digitizing voice communications so that the conversation can be transmitted over a single link along with the web information. However, VoIP has some quality limitations today when used over the public internet. These limitations are being addressed by suppliers and carriers, and improvements will make this technique more widely acceptable.

Collaboration

For any of the real-time methods to provide communication between the agent and the surfer, collaboration is an important addition. These techniques allow the two parties to be looking at the same webpages while discussing them in text chat or speech. One party can direct or “push” a page to the other; an agent can assist the surfer in completing a form.

Usually, we think of collaboration being initiated by a surfer contacting the center. But consider going the other way. The richness of information on a website means that it makes sense for agents to proactively suggest to phone callers, “Can you get on the internet while we’re on the phone? Let me show you our webpage with detailed instructions to solve that problem...” This approach leads to a better customer experience. But more importantly, it shows the caller that there is self-help information on the website, that he can access in the future.

Supporting Systems

Customer Relationship Management (CRM) has become an important component of many modern contact centers. CRM requires embracing a company-wide attitude of becoming customer-centric in all contacts. Just as there are a number of systems that support CRM in the contact center, there are a growing number of “eCRM” solutions designed for web-based contacts, too. It’s important, however, not to let these separate systems become “silos,” in which information from web contacts is unavailable to the agents. Similarly, there are new systems devoted to “analytics,” the analysis of information collected from website visitors.

Management systems have to evolve to embrace web capabilities as well. Take workforce management systems. If agents are going to be handling email, text chat, and webcalls, somehow we need to do scheduling. This generally requires simulation techniques to correctly portray the workload imposed, for example, by email, which doesn’t have to be answered immediately. Most of the workforce management suppliers are working to incorporate web-based contacts into their solutions. Similarly, quality monitoring suppliers are scrambling to be able to record these other media contact types.

Working with Multiple Media

Customers will want to contact us using different media at different times. Today, most companies keep these “queues” separate. Frequently, this impedes understanding all the contacts coming in. Combining these queues enables companies to apply the similar business rules to contacts with similar circumstances, irrespective of the media used for the contact.

However, this does not necessarily mean that all agents must handle all media types. Most companies will find that a better approach is to have many of their agents dedicated to specific media contacts, where the agents have particular proficiency. Some agents will “swing” between media types to accommodate volume fluctuations. These will be managed as “skills”, to assure that different contact types go to the best available agents.

There are many operational, organizational, and process issues that need to be examined when integrating the website with the traditional call center. Increasingly, this is going to lead to new opportunities to provide better service to our best customers. But we need to re-examine some ingrained beliefs. Let’s examine one—response times for email. Standard thinking is that a 24-hour turnaround is acceptable for email. Yet, most of us are “online” to our email when we’re at our desk. What’s your reaction when you send an email request and get an answer back in 10 minutes? Wow! And isn’t that our objective? To “wow” our best customers. Companies need to consider measuring the value of their business relationships, identifying their best customers, and providing significantly better service for them.

The good news is that the systems to support such objectives are now being deployed. It’s important for companies to think through what their vision is for integrating multiple media, and to put in place the attitudes, the organization, the technology, and the processes to support them.

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