



Customer Service NEWSLETTER

The authority on managing the customer contact center

Technology Trends

Tomorrow's call center will integrate proactive calls, mobile technology, and social media

The advent of social media has done a lot for customers — they now have a way to vent their frustrations with a company's products and services publicly and with much greater impact than in the past. A customer's service complaint, for instance, can be broadcast almost instantly to thousands and even tens of thousands of customers and potential customers via social media. That gives customers more leverage than ever.

But it's also having an impact on the traditional contact center, particularly as companies seek to find ways to deal with social media. One impact is that some companies are looking at turning their customer service operations — once focused almost exclusively on phone-based service — into multi-channel customer contact centers integrating phone, IVR, web-based self-service, web chat, proactive service, mobile communications, and social media.

That's a huge challenge, says Art Schoeller, principal analyst, contact centers and unified communications, for Forrester Research, and a participant in a

recent webinar sponsored by Knowlagent. "It's not just about the technology," he says, "it's about how we invest in hiring, training, and developing agents that support customers via these channels."

Customer contacts — today and tomorrow

When Forrester Research asked consumers in a recent survey, "Which of the following customer service support methods have you used in the past 12 months?" the results were relatively predictable. Consumers preferred to use the phone (69%), email (55%), and web-based self-help or FAQs (55%) by fairly large margins. Other channels used less frequently included: Keyword searches on a company's website (29%), Touchtone IVR (26%), web chat (19%), company-sponsored online forums (7%), and third-party online forums such as Facebook and Twitter (5%).

In this survey and in others of the same type, Schoeller says, "the desire to connect with an agent

comes out at the top of the list."

A look at future preferences doesn't seem to change things greatly. When Forrester asked customers, "Which of the following customer support methods would you be interested in using in the future?" the same channels — telephone agent (63%), email (57%), and web-based help or FAQs (51%) — came out on top. But the rest of the list suggests that consumers are becoming more familiar and more comfortable with a variety of other contact channels, including: search engines (33%), web chat (29%), keyword search (28%), click-to-call (21%), telephone IVR (16%), screen-sharing (15%); company-sponsored online forum (10%), third-party forum (8%), virtual agent (8%), mobile messaging (4%), and Twitter (2%).

And as Schoeller points out, a future customer transaction might involve a number of these channels in the same interaction. For instance, a customer complaint on social media might result in an outbound email to that customer inviting the customer to call a service agent, who might then use screen-sharing technology to go over an issue or view options, and might then involve a transfer to a sales agent to complete a cross-sale.

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Planning a multi-channel investment

Given the trends in terms of social media and other customer contact channels — where should a company be looking to make investments for the future? For that, Forrester has also surveyed companies on where they expect to make contact center investments over the next 12 months.

Results are reported in the table on page 6, and interestingly, workforce optimization comes out on top, with 43 percent of companies stating that they are planning to invest in this area over the next 12 months. It suggests that companies understand that the technology is important, but “agents need to be trained and developed to respond and to manage all of these channels,” Schoeller says. Second on the list is “Support for home workers,” which is “something that is growing in importance for many enterprises.”

The rest of the list is comprised of a number of technology and self-service types of investments, “but note how social media is starting to show up on the radar,” Schoeller says. “It’s as if many enterprises are starting to say that it is no longer sufficient to have social media hidden within the marketing group, handling it for PR and branding purposes. We are starting to see support issues that need to be handled with the more rigorous processes and procedures that would live within the contact center.”

Be ready for social media in service

Forrester’s research has social media appearing pretty far down on consumers’ preference lists, “but don’t let that mislead you,” Schoeller says. “While social

Where enterprises will invest during the next 12 months ...

(Multiple responses accepted)

Workforce optimization	43%
Support for home workers	40%
Computer telephony integration	40%
Proactive outbound notification	39%
Upgrade to IP	36%
Upgrade IVR	35%
Social media support	31%
Add speech recognition elements to IVR	25%
Multichannel integration	21%
Contact center managed services	19%
Multimodal support such as mobile SMS and video	14%
None of the above	8%
Don’t know	4%
Other	2%

Note: Data comes from 304 North American and European network and telecommunications decision-makers at companies with 50 or more contact center seats.

Source: Forrester Research Inc., *Forrsights Networks and Telecommunications Survey, Q1 2011.*

media may indeed be a lower priority channel for consumers looking for service and support, and the contacts that come into enterprises via social media may be low in volume, its impact can be huge.”

Companies should see social media as an opportunity rather than a threat, Schoeller says, but they will have to have the tools to monitor, route, and respond to those comments. In addition, “they will have to have agents skilled enough to look at and respond to highly unstructured interactions — as opposed to the more structured types of transactions that they have handled in the past.”

“This could be a great career path for some of your more senior agents — the ones who are more familiar with policies, procedures, and to some extent, the technology within your enterprise,” Schoeller says. “Give them the opportunity

to get involved in a new area and test their skills in this unstructured transaction environment.”

Even if the service department is not responsible for handling social media, service managers should be tracking what’s going on. According to a survey of the attendees of Knowlagent’s “Multi-Channel Call Center” webinar, the majority of service centers (54%) are not presently involved in handling social media interactions. Most often a company’s social media effort is driven by a company’s marketing or PR department.

The risk of this, as Schoeller points out, is that your agents are put at a disadvantage “if there are interactions going on, problems being solved, or trends being observed on the social media side of the world, and those aren’t getting over to the call center.”

Ideally, there would be a common knowledgebase shared by customer service and whoever is handling social media interactions. Customer service managers “should reach out and find out where those interactions are occur-

ring, and make sure there is some linkage. Whether customer service needs to handle those interactions is one question, but at the very least customer service should try to learn what those people in the marketing department who are han-

dling social media are learning.”

Contact: Art Schoeller, Forrester Research, www.forrester.com; To listen to the full webinar visit www.knowledgegent.com/resources/webinars.aspx. Please note that registration is required. 