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interactions
talking with customers

Self-service:
Grabbing the
opportunities

Simon Roncoroni talks about looking
beyond the benefits of cost-cutting
and eliminating human error.



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The pressures on the modern contact centre to meet growing customer needs and drive strategic business imperatives have never been greater – and technology alone is not the answer. It's the way you architect and deploy that technology that will determine your success.

This Quarter:
We speak from
experience

Contact centres today are becoming ever more complex. With such a wealth of new technologies and applications on offer, how do you sort the winning technologies and approaches from those that hold little intrinsic value for your business? How do you make the right choices for your contact centre, your customers, and your bottom line?

Speaking from experience, we know that trends in technology come and go, but that the primary driver of any successful system is a focus on the quality of the user and customer experience. The customer's interaction with the contact centre must be as efficient and user-friendly as possible.

In this, the fourth issue of Interactions, we draw on our 27 years of experience in the Customer Interactive industry to assess the new trends and technologies around the globe, discuss some of the less-perceived benefits, and communicate the driving trends in the modern contact centres of today.

The first article we feature speaks about grabbing the self-service opportunities. Empowering the customer with choices can be a powerful factor in improving their perception of your business and raising overall satisfaction levels.

Another trend to sit up and take notice of is Interaction Management (IM). IM is all about managing and optimising the interaction between the customer and the organisation to improve customer-centricity, satisfaction and loyalty. Read our article and make up your own mind as to its benefits and suitability for your organisation!

Finally, we close off with a question: how do you make your contact centre architecture count? With the arrival of IP architectures we are seeing many organisations use the opportunity to review their overall architecture and in general work towards a more simplistic architecture focused on meeting the primary current and future business requirements.



I hope you find this issue of Interactions informative, interesting and valuable and that it will ultimately provide you with fresh ideas for your contact centre.

Best wishes,



Andrew Briggs

Managing Director,
Customer Interactive Solutions
and Converged Communications

Self-service: Grabbing the opportunities

Look beyond the obvious benefits of cost-cutting and eliminating human error, and you'll find that there's a far greater opportunity behind the self-service phenomenon, writes Simon Roncoroni

It's not new or startling, but the biggest trend in the contact centre industry right now has got to be self-service – and a closer look at the benefits confirms exactly why self-service is having such an enormous impact on contact centres.

It's not just the new-found ability to migrate transactions from an agent wielding a script and a phone to an automated web-based system. For a start, there's the small matter of cost.

For the average organisation, a self-service transaction costs only 5% of what a traditional call centre transaction would cost. For the consumer, it's also a clear win: they choose when they want to do a transaction with the business they trust, and they know it is going to be performed exactly when and how they want it. They are in control. And nowadays customers don't expect anything less.

One of the joys of being able to automate a transaction is that it eliminates that very human margin for error that sometimes frustrates us beyond reason. You don't have to listen to anyone telling you to "hold on because your call is important". You don't have to press 1 for this and 2 for that, because all your options are on the screen in front of you. Fly anywhere in Europe, and you'll see airplanes belonging to the low-cost airline Easyjet – for which 98% of all bookings are done online. That's no small shift for an airline that started out with its telephone number painted on the side of its aircraft.

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This indicates a significant shift in consumer preferences and behaviour, and the impact on the modern contact centre is going to be staggering. The transactions that are being migrated to the self-service channel are those that we perceive to be relatively simple: like buying computer equipment, which is a simple purchase transaction, or looking at your bank account to see if a cheque has cleared. These are the kinds of transactions that contact centres process by their hundreds of thousands every month, with a relatively high level of accuracy and high first-call resolution.

Now take those transactions out of the mix, and what are you left with? The transactions that are more complex, take longer to resolve and have lower first-call resolution rates. In other words, the transactions that have a higher emotional content, because they are more complicated and the consumer feels they might go wrong, or there is a problem that has not yet been resolved. These are the transactions companies simply have to get right in the modern consumer-focused economy. Of course, the thing about the simple “commodity” transactions is that all you can do is get them

right. You can’t add anything to them to get them righter than right. If you call your bank and ask how much you have in your account, the answer is simple – and chances are you’re not going to be delighted with it anyway! The bottom line is that there’s no upside to getting commodity transactions “more right”, while with the complex transactions, there is potential for huge benefit to the company and its reputation, through delivering a service to the consumer that is accurate, does what it says it is going to do, and is brilliantly handled.

Case in point: on a trip to South Africa in March 2007, I fell asleep on a flight from Cape Town to Johannesburg – and when I disembarked, I foolishly left my laptop in the seat pocket, complete with all my company's banking details for anyone to hack into. When I realised the error, I called my bank and left a message for my personal banker. The banker called me back first thing the next morning, froze the accounts, organised new passwords and arranged immediate delivery of all the necessary documents instantly. The emotional relief was enormous – and I will not forget in a hurry the way my bank saved my bacon.

So what we have here is the opportunity to drive greater customer loyalty and satisfaction, both by dealing better with complex transactions, and by providing a self-service platform that is speedy, accurate and delivers what customers want. However in the contact centre, there is also a far greater risk of getting it wrong because we are left with complexity. This means contact centres are going to need better people, using better tools and

better workforce planning and management. It's also a lot harder to plan: when you take away the predictable transactions, what you're left with are the transactions that are driven by events rather than behaviour.

It also means that contact centres are going to need a new approach. The measurement techniques of the past will simply conclude that transaction costs are going up, and therefore management is at fault. They will see average satisfaction levels deteriorating through dealing with more complex scenarios, and may see corporate investment withheld as a result. Boards of Directors will not necessarily recognise the opportunity to drive key aspects like quality of service and customer satisfaction in this new environment.

This will demand a significant shift in the way we measure the success of contact centres. We traditionally talk about contact centres being part process, part people and part technology – and this move will have a major impact on all of them. There is no stone that we can leave unturned in this time of rapid change.

About the author:

Simon Roncoroni moved from a publishing career in the late 70s to help pioneer the modern call centre era, and was the driving force behind the creation of British Telecoms' call centre business before launching his own consultancy in 1987. Here he laid much of the groundwork for the UK's consumer careline business, doing seminal work around defining the direct distribution model. He sold this business to SITEL Corporation, then the world's largest outsourcing company for call centres. In 2000, he started SRC. He has a range of clients in the UK and Denmark, and has worked closely with the Dimension Data group for four years. He is also a non-executive director of Merchants, Dimension Data's contact centre outsourcing business.



Interaction Management:

Making your customers sing

How do you provide your customers with a superior contact experience? In the world of the contact centre, it's all about connecting your customers to the right people with the right information as quickly as possible. It's called Interaction Management (IM) – and although it is nothing new, it has taken on a new strategic imperative in the modern contact centre.

Simply put, Interaction Management is about providing the appropriate capabilities to customers based on the way they choose to interact with your company. This means managing and optimising all the different ways customers prefer to interact with your organisation to ensure a consistently high standard of service in an integrated, cost-effective manner.

“Today's spectrum of customers can (and do) expect to communicate with your company through many different channels and media – email, phone, Internet chat, online ordering/service systems, traditional mail, catalogue or any combination of these – and you need to provide the flexibility to move between these types of interactions without re-entering information already provided,”

says Dimension Data principal business analyst Grant Leader.

“Integrating these customer touch-points is crucial to enabling companies to better manage the customer experience, maximising loyalty efforts and retention.”



“By improving the **quality and effectiveness** of customer interactions, companies are able to differentiate themselves from their competitors with **higher levels of customer retention** and **satisfaction, growth and profitability.**”

Good interaction management systems do what they say on the box: they manage every aspect of a contact – whether that be a phone call, IVR technology with speech recognition, an e-mail, a fax or even a web chat – from the point it arrives to the ultimate goal of successfully resolving the customer query. Thanks to technology, this is not as difficult as it used to be. Telephone, Web and other communications channels can now be fully integrated with business and customer relationship management (CRM) applications, creating a true “customer interaction network” that goes far beyond the traditional call centre.

“Any time a customer contacts a company’s service centre, it’s a main interaction point that’s critical to ensure customer satisfaction. Mismanaging these ‘moments of truth’ can impact future revenue, customer loyalty and your company’s reputation,”

says Leader.

“Each and every customer interaction is a test of not only customer service, but the entire organisation and the brand as well. The outcome of one customer service experience can leave a lasting imprint – negative or positive – on the entire customer relationship. That’s why it’s more important than ever to improve customer-centricity, satisfaction and loyalty by committing to improving touch point performance so that customers receive maximum value out of each interaction.”

The benefits of a well-implemented IM system are immediate and far-reaching. For a start, the agent’s job is greatly simplified by having only one interface to deal with the contact – the mythical single view of the customer. This does, of course, mean that comprehensive customer information must be available to customer service agents immediately, regardless of where they are located.

As Leader points out, a good IM tool will draw the relevant customer information from multiple sources and present it to the agent in a single easy-to-interpret screen. What this means is that there is no longer the need to try and consolidate all the information that could conceivably be required into a single database – the downfall of many such projects in the past.

This single interface allows the contact centre to impose a process onto every interaction – which not only cuts the amount of time needed to be spent on training, but also reduces the likelihood of human error bedevilling the interaction. The process tells you who the contact is, what their history with the company is, and even what you are going to do with this customer – what information you need to capture from the customer, where you go to answer their queries and what you need to do to successfully wrap up the interaction as quickly as possible. The agent is practically driven through the process, as it were, and prompted at every step of the way. They can’t move on until they have completed a section, which means they can’t get it wrong.

Quick call resolution means only one thing: more calls handled at lower cost. And less training time means the same thing – lower costs. Using a process-driven IM approach, training time can be slashed by up to 75%, which means agents can be active and effective on the desk as fast as possible. By improving the quality and effectiveness of customer interactions, companies are able to differentiate themselves from their competitors with higher levels of customer retention and satisfaction, growth and profitability.

It sounds straightforward, but as Leader points out, good IM takes a bit of thought, as it combines business processes, business intelligence and technology. When in place, these basic components of IM allow companies to understand their customer base far more intimately in terms of preferences, profitability, past interaction history and satisfaction. This in turn allows a company to tailor their contact centre around the fundamental objective of attracting the best customers and holding onto them for a long-term relationship.

The success achieved with several of Dimension Data’s blue-chip clients in South Africa is proof that IM is here to stay, although there is no standard approach to its adoption yet. Installing one of the big enterprise resource planning (ERP) packages available in the marketplace can prove prohibitively expensive, so many players are experimenting with their own customised and developed applications. However, the rewards are more immediate than most, with some companies seeing their efforts repaying themselves in less than a year.

One financial services institution has consolidated its various customer service departments, including credit cards and online banking, onto a single IM platform. The move has proven so successful that it is now trying to drive the system into its branches as well, to manage face to face interactions more effectively.

“Good Interaction Management gives contact centre managers an excellent view of what is happening within their operation,”

says Leader.

“They are able to see exactly what processes are being used, and how those can be refined. Suddenly workforce

management models become more accurate, there is more control of agents; there is more value for money all round.”

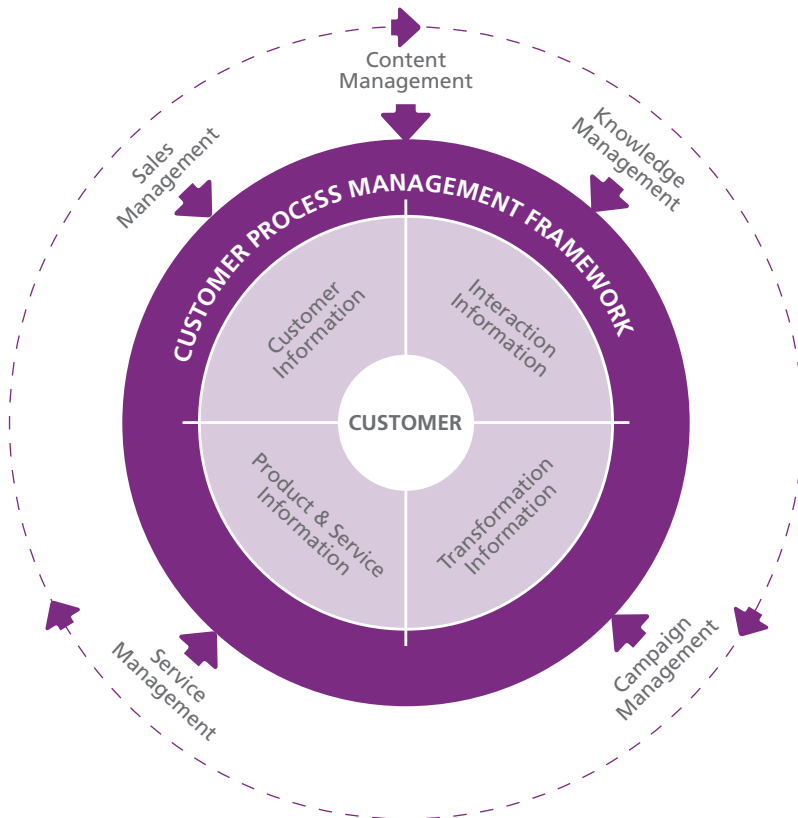
Ultimately, though, the understanding and control gained through IM enables the contact centre to maximise the value of the experience to the customer. Providing first-class service to customers, regardless of how they choose to contact the centre, is no longer an option, but a necessity in today’s ultra-competitive market.

And being able to provide the most effective and efficient customer interaction experiences are fundamental to survival in a business environment that is extremely competitive and increasingly commoditised.

About the author:

Grant Leader is the principal business analyst for Dimension Data CIS MEA. He is our authority on the Interaction Management applications from a business perspective and assists and oversees all the application design projects for these technologies. Grant has been with Dimension Data for two years and has designed, documented and assisted with the build and deployment of a number of Interaction Management projects.

Information analysis and business intelligence



Contact Centre Architecture: Make it count

The pressures on the modern contact centre to meet growing customer needs and drive strategic business imperatives have never been greater – and technology alone is not the answer. It's the way you architect and deploy that technology that will determine your success, says Neville Cousins, CIS Global's chief technology officer.

The good news is that a lot of organisations know what they need to do in their contact centres to maximise their operations and customer interaction strategies. The bad news, says Cousins, is that they are often limited by how their technology supports them.

"We often hear companies report that they can never rely on IT to meet their needs; if only their IT could do more. But when we dig into the IT environment, we find that when they do have the right technology in place, it is not tied together and deployed in a way that meets the needs of the business,"

says Cousins.

"The infrastructure in many cases determines to what extent the organisation can meet its requirements and leverage its applications. In other words, architecture is one of the elements that will determine how successful you are in executing your strategy."

What this means is that contact centre managers must rigorously rethink the way they provision technology, what technology they deploy and how the next generation of contact centre architecture will integrate with broader business technologies in ways that are sometimes unforeseen.

They need to take a far closer look at how their infrastructure is going to support trends like the new face of customer interaction, the move towards self-service and the greater need for contact centres to measure their performance and account for it.



Self-service, Analytics, IP based architectures, First call resolution, Contact centre integration, Workforce Optimisation, Increase wallet share, Reduce Churn, Customer Satisfaction.

Until now, there has been an almost flippant approach to infrastructure in many contact centre operations. Organisations have installed applications simply because everybody else has, or their technology partners thought it would be a good idea, without truly understanding the value of their underlying architecture.

“According to the Dimension Data 2008 Benchmarking Report, we see very little thorough understanding that the ways that contact centre infrastructures are architected can impact a contact centre’s operations,” says Cousins.

“It’s vitally important that we develop a broader picture of just how interrelated solutions within a contact centre can be, and how they build on one another and add value to the broader operation in the process.”

Tim Pearce, Dimension Data’s Global Solution Manager for self-service, couldn’t agree more. He believes there is an almost disproportionate focus on the application in the contact centre industry – that is, the things that function within a contact centre.

“We tend to get so caught up in having customers, having as comprehensive a view as possible of those customers and making agents and interactions as efficient as possible that we often fail to realise that the underlying architecture makes a huge difference,” says Pearce.

“It is vitally important to understand that there is a relationship between each part of the contact centre, and how those applications are managing what happens to calls, or what they do with information flowing within the network. How do these applications interrelate? How do we translate this into tangible business value? This is where the energy is shifting to.”

Cousins uses the analogy of going to the theatre to describe the underlying importance of the architecture. What the paying audiences see is the performance, with all of the props and flourishes. But that performance is supported by a massive behind-the-scenes operation that very few people ever see or consider, and without which the production would be a complete disaster.

In other words, there is a set of solutions that form the foundation of the contact centre somewhere in the background – and then there is the more glamorous stuff that we tend to talk to the customers about, like self-service, IVR and improved customer satisfaction. Each of these disciplines has its own set of specialisations – but the architecture below needs to meet each of these specific demands in a distinct way.

The challenge is to create clear and meaningful relationships between applications and the corresponding business functions they support. This creates functional units within a contact centre that operate through well-defined and published contracts that connect applications and their business functions across the network.

Cousins and Pearce’s drive to give the architecture the respect it deserves is particularly relevant as the contact centre industry faces ongoing major changes in the way it functions. It is not only the points of interaction with customers that are changing all the time; it is also the nature of those interactions, which are fundamentally redefining traditional measures of value and resource allocation within the contact centre.

In the past, the contact centre industry has spent a lot of effort in getting organisations to change the way they communicate with their customers. The industry has strongly promoted the idea of centralised contact centres, where all interactions are handled from a single point. The reasoning is obvious: a centralised operation is cheaper to build, and it is infinitely easier to manage information, agents and customer interactions in one location.

Over the next 10 years, though, there will be a steady move towards organisations decentralising, not just because the architecture allows it, but because this may be a more effective way to deal with certain types of calls.

Organisations will start changing strategies and providing new services, and their strategic thrust at any given time will largely dictate how technologies and platforms are deployed. If you’re in a customer protection phase, for example, your approach to practically every aspect of a contact centre operation – measurement, hiring, re-sourcing – will differ radically from what it would be if you were in a strong acquisition phase.

What is going to be demanded from contact centre consultants and vendors is a far greater emphasis on interoperability than ever before: facilitating relationships between diverse sets of information, allowing the right information to be delivered at the right time to either the contact centre agent or a self-service customer portal, providing a complete and consistent view of all of the data relating to a particular customer, no matter where that information resides.

This need for interoperability also extends to being able to function more effectively within a multi-vendor environment. Very few organisations have a single integrated suite from one vendor – and for good reason, as diversity breeds a richer, more heterogeneous architecture. Once application relationships are better understood, then contact centres are able to accommodate the process of making changes more smoothly and rapidly.

The benefits that can be achieved with greater insight into the underlying platform start with a long-lasting and robust architecture that facilitates the addition of new projects like self-service web portals to the contact centre, which are vital to enhancing contact centre productivity and improving customer communication options.

With enterprises increasing their customer communication options and creating cross-channel capabilities that are designed to address them, integration architects need a rapid development environment that facilitates the deployment of any combination of integration

strategies under one unified and consistent framework.

“Nothing is more important than getting the most out of your customer relationships: they are your business. But to do so, you must first understand your customers’ needs and, along with them, the value each customer has for your organisation,” says Cousins.

“Once you know this, you can then plan your contact centre strategy, staffing, and IT investments. This will drive your investment in services, tools, and technologies that help increase your productivity while still providing customers with convenience and control. Your architecture is critical to being able to deliver these levels of customer interactions.”

The bottom line, says Cousins, is that technology partners need to look at what the company is trying to achieve – the strategy, how they treat customers and so on – and then marry that to the operational plan by which the contact centre executes on those strategic imperatives. One of the things contact centres use to execute on the business strategy is technology, but they need to understand how the technology is going to meet both the operational and the business requirements.

If there’s a magic formula to guarantee success in the modern call centre, one of the elements is definitely architecture. The others will depend on your own unique business goals and focus. But regardless

of market sector, or the size or maturity of your contact centre, your underlying architecture is one of the critical success factors to build a thriving and dynamic service hub that delivers true value to the business.

About the author:

Neville Cousins is the Chief Technology Officer for CIS Global Solutions. Neville joined Dimension Data in 1995 as a product specialist and has taken the lead on many of our most complex and prestigious CIS engagements, including the design and sale of the largest Call Centre ever built in South Africa. Since then, he has moved on to become the Chief Technology Officer of the CIS Global team and is responsible for the Group’s CIS technology strategy, including our Partner and Alliance strategy.

Tim Pearce is Dimension Data’s Global Solution Manager for self-service and has nine years experience of multi-channel business process automation and optimisation. Tim has engaged on speech recognition solutions on four continents, holds a modern languages degree as well as a post graduate marketing degree, and is fluent in six languages.

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