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interactions
talking with customers

**How to drive
your workforce**
to achieve optimal
customer satisfaction

Kate Zawerucha is a Business
Analyst in Dimension Data's
Customer Interactions Business.



Summary

01 Foreword

02 How to drive your workforce to achieve optimal customer satisfaction

With customers becoming more tech savvy, companies need to up their game to ensure their agents are equipped with the necessary tools to deal with customer requests. Ensuring customers are connected to the right people at the right time takes skill and experience. Through more effective use of these tools customers can look forward to better service and increased satisfaction.

05 Driving productivity through the customer experience

Today's customers are the best judge of performance. In being able to tune in to their voice and use their critique to measure the overall experience, contact centres are able to provide excellent service to the customer and map an internal path forward to enhance service levels.

08 Creating value through managed services

Globally, companies are faced with numerous challenges when it comes to maintaining their competitive edge in the marketplace. In order to stay really focused on the business' key priorities, more companies are buying into a managed service strategy. Solutions range from simple technology maintenance through to proactive support, solutions management and even on-premise/off-premise hosted technology solutions and other business support services.

11 What do customers really think about speech self-service?

Self-service is not just about reducing the number of agent calls but rather about taking the easier transactions through a dedicated process. Leaving the more complex transactions to be dealt with by the agents will in turn reduce hold times and increase customer satisfaction levels. But do customers see it this way?

This Quarter: we shine a light on **productivity**

As we consider the challenges that lie ahead in the new year, one important issue is how to use the resources we have in the most effective and efficient way. Today's customers are more demanding and competition is fierce. The global economy is only beginning to show signs of recovery and organisations are seeking new and creative ways of optimising their existing resources. In this tenth issue of Interactions, we focus on productivity and suggest ways that businesses can boost performance and their bottom line.

In our first article, we look at the topic of Workforce Optimisation. Through effective management of their workforce across many communications channels, organisations can ensure a slicker delivery of an excellent customer experience. Today's tools are enabling companies to improve productivity from a workforce management and service perspective, while boosting customer retention and profitability and optimal utilisation of resources.

Given that the customer is the most important judge of performance, our second article discusses the benefits of increased engagement with

customers. Using a 360° real-time survey solution, companies are able to tune into the voice of the customer at any time and use that feedback to improve the way they do business and deliver service through the contact centre.

The concept of Managed Services is the focus of our third article. Within the contact centre, the need to balance cost, performance and risk is becoming increasingly important in maintaining a competitive edge. By handing over management of contact centre technology to experts, companies can focus on adding real value to the customer experience, while providing a reliable and efficient contact centre service to customers.

Our final article looks at how customer views are changing when it comes to speech self-service. As the technology continues to mature and customers become more accepting of speech recognition, it is exciting to see the resultant upswing in productivity as a result of well planned, delivered and maintained speech self-service solutions. The important decision for companies is how to select the appropriate service to automate.

I hope that you are able to use this issue of Interactions to gain further insight into how to boost productivity in your business. Finally I would like to wish you all the very best for 2010.



Best wishes,

Martin Dove

Managing Director,
Customer Interactive Solutions

How to drive your workforce

to achieve optimal customer satisfaction

Getting the right people in the right place at the right time is no easy task. Add to this increasing demands by customers for immediate service and the challenge becomes even tougher for companies worldwide. But there is good news. With today's tools, we are entering a new era in workforce utilisation. Through more effective use of contact centre agents across multiple communications channels, customers can look forward to slicker delivery of an excellent customer experience.

Today's customers are more sociable, explains Dimension Data's Customer Interactive Solutions Business Analyst Kate Zawerucha.

“One need only look at the rise and rise of social networking sites as proof that people are more connected than ever before. And as customers become more connected, they expect the same access to the companies they do business with”.

The consequence for companies is more pressure to deliver more for less, using existing resources.

More customers than ever before are using instant messaging (IM) and web chat as their preferred style of doing business. The focus for businesses today is shifting to how to meet those needs across multiple channels including telephone, web, IM and e-mail. Matching changing customer trends means companies will have to be able to resource multiple channels.

A solution evolution

Traditionally workforce management solutions haven't been able to accommodate multi-skilling across e-mail and web. Zawerucha adds that although we aren't there yet, new technologies are emerging to take workforce management to the next level.

“Multiple channels are a fairly new concept and workforce management tools need to manage staff across these channels. The important thing to remember though is that no tool will completely manage your workforce – you will still need everyday managers”.

“One need only look at the rise and rise of social networking sites as proof that people are **more connected** than ever before. And as customers become more connected, they expect the same access to the companies they do business with”.



Historically, workforce management systems have supported forecasting and scheduling of resources to handle call volumes. Recognising that for every customer interaction it is important to start off on the front foot, it is critical to ensure you have the right resources in the right place at the right time.

The knock-on effect of better scheduling of resources is a boost to the bottom line. By offering multiple types of media to customers and using agents to support them at peak times translates into happier customers who are more likely to stay loyal.

Zawerucha adds that as we move towards more e-mail and web chat, this multi-channel approach to customer interactions means we need the right systems to predict volume and to balance the workload across all agents.

“This new type of blended agent can work across multiple media types and through intelligent workforce management tools, can delay deferred work and proactively handle peak traffic when required”.

Another useful tool is desktop process analysis. Through event triggers at different points, managers can better measure average handle times and

processes to help schedule back office functions.

“Extending these principles beyond the ‘front of house’ contact centre, workforce management is reaching into the back office”

says Zawerucha.

“Better workforce planning tools are helping to predict backlogs and do better forecasting. This collaborative approach between contact centre and back office results in more cost effective processes and a more efficient customer experience”.

Especially important is the recognition of the parallel challenge of managing multiple channels for front and back office operations. The next evolutionary step is a maturing of this capability to gain a real benefit in efficient service delivery to customers.

More insight

The evolution in workforce management tools is translating into better high level planning to identify gaps in workforce processes and to better forecast and schedule staff resources. The beauty of the tools as Zawerucha explains is in its ability to test different scenarios.

“The What-if? tool allows users to manage intraday scheduling needs to help even out the peaks and troughs of service levels and average speed to answer to ensure that customers ultimately know what they can expect”.

As with all technology, the tools are only as good as those managing them. There is and always will be a requirement for hands-on management to set up systems and manage them on a day-to-day basis. Then, if processes aren't working, the manager should be able to identify problems and modify the processes to meet expectations.

Technology in practice

New generation workforce management tools are delivering real improvements to overall resource management. In the back office, more efficient use of staff is resulting in better quality service and a reduction in errors. As with the front office, it helps managers in setting service goals and planning for the staff needed to do the job.

Zawerucha adds that through process analysis, managers can see a pattern of events on agent desktops.

“This allows them to drill down further to find out where processes may have broken down and to re-engineer processes to work better. On a day to day basis, managers can enter backlogs and calculate the staff numbers required to manage volumes and set service levels for call resolution”.

This ability to define service goals means improved service levels for customers. As companies fight to retain the customers they have, it

“New generation workforce **management tools** are delivering real improvements to overall resource management. In the back office, more efficient use of staff is resulting in **better quality service** and a **reduction in errors.**”

is now more important than ever to keep existing customers happy. And, as younger consumers enter the marketplace, the demand for immediate interactions across multiple channels will no longer be a choice but an expectation if companies want to attract them.

The same is true for attracting and retaining talent in the workforce. Management tools can support more features to increase staff satisfaction. With the ability to reward hard workers through ranking agents on productivity and quality results or a combination of both, managers can rank high performers and set preferences, explains Zawerucha.

“Those high performing agents would then be allowed to choose their preferred shift times, days off and even allow them to bid on particular shifts. High performers could even be rewarded through the system with a first priority on breaks. Backed up by a healthy reward and recognition system, new workforce management technologies can support businesses in keeping the talent they’ve trained”.

Embracing the future

We are already in an age of increased choice. Social consumers readily share their opinions on a wide scale through the internet and companies are under extreme pressure to act quickly.

Through effective workforce management, organisations can ensure their agents are maintaining service levels across all communications channels.

Knowing that a bad experience can travel, adds Zawerucha, organisations are faced with several challenges around using their resources effectively and efficiently.

“And if they can get the right people in the right place at the right time, customers will stand up and take notice of their proactive stance on delivering an effective service”.

Looking to the future, successful companies will be those that know how to manage their workforce optimally. Using technology, businesses will be able to run an efficient operation while getting the most out of the people they have. And, if companies are tackling improvements in productivity from a workforce management and service level angle, they can look forward to a healthy bottom line too.

About the Author:

Kate Zawerucha is a Business Analyst in Dimension Data’s Customer Interactions Business.

With over eight years’ experience in the contact centre industry, Kate began her journey as a contact centre consultant for a major Financial Services company before moving into Quality Management in 2003. In this role Kate managed a team of Quality Analysts and was responsible for the ongoing development of internal and external quality metrics in the drive for customer advocacy and maintaining relationships with external business partners.

Kate joined Dimension Data in September 2008 where she utilises her Quality background working on Workforce Optimisation deployments and consultation across a range of industries including Telecommunications, Financial Services, Media and Community Services.

Driving productivity through the customer experience

Increased engagement with customers is boosting agent productivity and driving improvements to the customer experience. Using a 360° real-time survey solution, companies are able to access up-to-the-minute feedback from their customers and put it to good use in enhancing their ways of doing business.



Survey 360° from InsightNow is a web-based customer survey tool that **works in real time** to engage with customers and employees at the **point of service delivery**.

The customer is no doubt the most important judge of performance. By listening to the voice of the customer, companies are able to focus their efforts on the areas that can make a positive difference to the customer experience.

Survey 360° from InsightNow is a web-based customer survey tool that works in real-time to engage with customers and employees at the point of service delivery. Analytical tools within the solution give organisations the ability to glean critical information about overall performance both in terms of the actual service and the agents providing that service.

And, as Dimension Data CIS General Manager Simon Cranswick explains, the feedback gained is invaluable in mapping a clear direction for enhancing levels of service.

“By providing a real-time measure of the customer experience that is being delivered, the solution also highlights operational areas for improvement that affect the overall customer experience. Companies can use this insight to tailor specific training and skills development programmes to address any gaps and problems within operational processes”.

Already in use by several clients of Merchants, Dimension Data’s contact centre outsourcing and consulting business, the solution has generated significant input into business planning processes. Cranswick says companies are moving beyond using internal measures alone.

“By helping identify what constitutes excellent service, organisations can use the realtime survey solution to provide insight into how their best performing agents deliver that service. This shows a clear evolution from traditional coaching and training approaches”.

The solution

Survey 360° from InsightNow provides a three-way view of each and every interaction with customers. Through engaging with customers and employees instantly at the point of service delivery, the solution generates immediate feedback to agents. It shows them how well they scored according to how they were judged by their customers, team leaders and against their colleagues.

This is a pioneering customer survey solution that gives three different perspectives on calls and enables real-time contact centre management. Integrated with the contact centre ACD systems, surveys are done automatically and are integrated with voice recording systems. Offered via IVR, e-mail and WAP/ SMS, the solution helps companies optimise the customer experience while engaging with employees and driving efficiency of internal processes.

Designed by InsightNow, the real-time survey solution was designed to score different factors that impact on the customer satisfaction and the overall experience and includes measurement of:

- Agent Knowledge;
- Understanding of the customer issue;
- Reason for call;

- Agent empathy with the customer on the call;
- Helpfulness and value provided on the call;
- Customer satisfaction with the way the call was handled;

Customer satisfaction with the outcome of the call and even willingness by the customer to promote the company to others.

Survey results are unbiased and fair and avoid situations where the best calls are ‘cherry-picked’, adds Cranswick.

“Calls are linked to ensure that scoring is done on identical calls and because it’s a totally web-based, hosted solution, it can be offered in any location using web-browser technologies and requires very little bandwidth”.

Survey scores and results are captured by customers, agents and team leaders as well as quality assessors. The business intelligence function feeds invaluable information to the operations management team and supports regular performance reviews.

“Individual KPIs are realigned, coaching and review sessions can be aligned to customer satisfaction outcomes, training needs are set to target improvements to the customer experience and quality monitoring and training programmes can be developed to drive a positive customer experience”,

explains Cranswick.

In addition to the obvious benefits of instant access to information about the customer experience, businesses can use the solution for other purposes. Organisations are able to benchmark their customer experience across sites,

companies or industries. A change management dashboard assists in monitoring the impact of numerous initiatives, projects or programmes on the customer experience and business processes.

By capturing customer commentary on their experience, good or bad, the solution is built in the ongoing daily tasks of the contact centre. And because its real-time, managers can focus on fine tuning and making the necessary improvements to the service being delivered.

A case in practice

One leading UK retailer is seeing tangible improvements to customer satisfaction levels through using the 360° survey from InsightNow. Having already outsourced the management of their customer service centre to Merchants, the challenge for the retailer was how to gain valuable information on where customer satisfaction could be improved.

“This meant getting clarity on which factors directly impact on satisfaction and adding value to the retailer through helping them improve their service delivery throughout the supply chain”,

adds Cranswick. Having gone through a rigorous process of numerous workshops and development phases, the resultant survey solution has proved to be a useful tool.

All levels of management within the Merchants outsource operation have access to a real-time view of the customer experience which enables focus on ongoing qualitative performance standards. By being able to accurately report back based on quantifiable objectives, KPIs and any other key

enhancements and performance improvement projects can be reviewed on a monthly basis.

The quality assessment process is also more refined. It is easier to identify excellent performers in the contact centre and develop training interventions that reinforce those winning behaviours. This means team leaders and quality managers are able to hone in on these specific 'winning' behaviours that drive excellent outcomes.

From a productivity point of view, recognising what factors contribute to a happy customer experience means managers are able to identify good performers in terms of customer feedback. They can also go on to align skills profiles to improve existing recruitment and skills development programmes to ensure new and existing contact centre agents are performing optimally.

An added benefit to having a

clear view of overall performance extends to managers themselves. By being able to recognise all behaviours – including management ability - organisations can isolate those negative behaviours that detract from performance and the customer experience and encourage a more proactive management approach.

As companies fight to attract new customers and retain existing ones, the voice of the customer holds the key to their success and survival. By asking customers about their service experience and using that feedback to improve business processes, organisations can ensure they focus their efforts where it counts. And by empowering contact centre agents with this information, organisation can look forward to better productivity and the delivery of an excellent customer experience.

“Insight Now! gives ASDA a very clear view of how our customers feel about our services. In turn this information will **help us understand** where we **must improve our operations** as well. I love the fact that **we get a 360 degree view of an experience**, where else do you get this?”

Britt Fonnestved – Client Relationship Manager ASDA

About the Author

Simon Cranswick –

Simon is General Manager for Dimension Data's Customer Interactive Solutions in South Africa's Western Cape region. He has 13 years experience in the Contact Centre industry with a strong vertical knowledge of the Telco and Service Provider space.

His experience covers Virtual Contact Centres, Outsourcing, Knowledge Management, Self-service, MIS, Customer Satisfaction and Quality solutions and development of sustainable Managed Services models. He is passionate about his team's ability to deliver Remote Managed Services for Contact Centres in offshore markets – and believes strongly in understanding CC operational drivers and challenges. Doing this ensures they have a solid starting point for driving solutions into customers rather than pushing technologies to find business problems. Value propositions are led through business demand and more often than not enabled by key technologies, so his message is “make sure you are including the CC operations in your strategic planning.”

Creating value through managed services

Across the world, companies are faced with a host of challenges in maintaining their competitive edge in the marketplace. In the realm of the contact centre, the need to optimise the balance of cost, performance and risk is becoming increasingly important. Through well delivered managed services, organisations can manage their costs and resources effectively, whatever their technology choices.

The managed services concept addresses the way technology is delivered to contact centre businesses and their agents. It can take many forms - from simple technology maintenance, through proactive support, solutions management and even on-premise /off-premise hosted technology solutions and other business support services.

The common theme in a managed services approach is the payment of an annual fee for services that are linked to a business outcome. This is quite different to the service fee linked to the repair or replacement of a faulty device that is typical of a maintenance contract. Managed services can allow companies to share risk with a supplier and avoid high capex spend, while getting the best value out of the deal at the same time.

Dimension Data's Operations Manager (Australia) Jeff Rosser says businesses have many choices available when it comes to a support contract.

"ICT managers can leverage a managed services model to ensure optimal performance through more functionality, while containing or reducing costs and minimising the risk of any loss of functionality. Companies can therefore focus their energies on creating value, delivering an ultimately more efficient and effective service to their customers".

The beauty of managed services lies in its ability to use a commercial model to deliver technology that is not constrained by who owns the technology. As Rosser points out, managed services go beyond the traditional view of technical support.



"Intelligent support services help companies **achieve their business objectives** through technology and **ensure the headache is taken out** of managing the technology."

“Intelligent support services help companies achieve their business objectives through technology and ensure the headache is taken out of managing the technology. The best part is companies can focus on their core business by doing what they do best, using the best tools for the job”.

An intelligent approach

Best practice ICT Management for the contact centre includes minimising risk while increasing stability, ensuring continual improvements to the technical environment, supporting business objectives through understanding how best to leverage available technology and above all, an understanding that technology support is just as much about customer service as it is about technology.

For organisations wishing to drive costs down, Rosser advises companies adopt an intelligent approach to support contracts which can mean the difference between success and failure.

“Simply purchasing break / fix contracts with many different vendors can end up increasing business risk because of management challenges and because the costs of support aren’t linked to system availability, financial planning becomes impossible. And other problems can crop up too, such as inadequate change, support and configuration management”.

For contact centres, managed services offer more real value to companies. It’s an intelligent evolution in service provision and aids companies in focusing on their core business, while providing a reliable and efficient contact centre service to their customers.

The challenge for managed services suppliers such as Dimension Data, explains Rosser, is how to address different client needs and levels of maturity when it comes to their approach to support services.

“The core innovation for managed services lies in its partnership approach. By working with a partner that can help your business through doing your IT for you, companies can hone in on their core business. The reality however is that while some clients are clear on their core business requirements of technology, some remain confused”.

A mixed bag of challenges

Depending on their relative maturity in contact centre ICT management, organisations may find themselves faced with issues around how to tactically support the technology and strategically manage its future development, adds Rosser.

“From an operational point of view, many companies could find themselves over the rack in managing multiple support vendors and not having enough support and change management. Often there is a lack of on-the-ground expertise and support costs aren’t linked to system availability which works against their aims of reducing costs”.

Some companies, however, are trying to take a more mature strategic approach. They would like to optimise their use of the available functionality, while planning more developments to maintain their competitive edge. To ensure this improved flexibility and speed to market, these

companies need an ownership model that can reduce their risks and support future development plans.

For so long, says Rosser, organisations have been logically constrained by the way in which they’ve purchased their technology support.

“Instead of buying support on the basis of the actual usage of the capacity, they have found themselves purchasing functionality at a level required to support business peaks, which is clearly an inefficient offering. Managed services has opened the door to new opportunities for growing their business, while staying competitive and delivering value to the customer”.

How to make the decision

A well constructed managed service can balance performance, cost and risk and deliver a real, viable support solution for companies. Companies would do well to understand whether they have the tactical and strategic expertise to manage the technology and then ask themselves whether they have the desire to maintain something that goes beyond their core business, advises Rosser.

“This means thinking about your business and establishing your cost and risk profile. Often companies aren’t even aware that there are other options beyond pure maintenance. Working alongside a veritable army of experts, companies can be certain there is a managed service that balances all their needs – whatever their position on risk, performance and cost”.

For the contact centre, it's a good idea to work with partners that understand the specific requirements of the contact centre environment. And companies can also look forward to more choice when it comes to ownership of the technology. Some businesses may choose to run it themselves or insource or outsource the running of the technology. Others would prefer not to own the technology at all. Choice appears to be the key word when it comes to managed services.

Rosser points out that there is some growth in adoption of more proactive and preventative support models.

“While we see more of this growth in larger contact centres and more mature industries, we can expect to see more companies follow suit. These organisations are beginning to understand that effective support should ensure the cost is linked to availability, not failure of the technology”.

Thinking about the next step

As companies consider taking the managed services route, Rosser suggests a step-by-step approach to finding the right match for your business.

- Decide what you need out of technology for your business and establish your risk, performance and cost profile;
- Choose a good partner – this includes the right expertise, credibility and experience in supporting the contact centre operation, not just the technology;

- Establish a service delivery model – agree who will do what;
- Define the commercial model – link performance to cost;
- Review the service contract on a regular basis based on performance and cost.

In a fiercely competitive marketplace, organisations are realising they don't need to control the technology to control the customer experience. Once they understand what they want out of the technology, they need to weigh up their inhouse expertise and whether or not they want the responsibility.

Looking to the future, competition will be even stiffer and companies will have to think smart. Add to this the increased complexity of technology and the growing requirements for functionality to support multimedia and blended agents for example, and managed services presents a real and viable alternative to traditional technical support models.

With more pressure on companies to slash costs and get more value out of suppliers, managed services allows organisations to leave the IT management to the experts and focus on adding real value to the customer experience, explains Rosser.

“The great thing about managed services is that it is not a one size fits all solution – it's about finding an appropriate fit for each company and offering more flexibility in the management of technology’.

And for customers, it's even better news. As companies build relationships with managed services partners, they can

ensure they get the most out of their technology. For businesses striving to offer more choice to their customers across different channels, this will give them the competitive edge they need to stay ahead of the game.

About the Author

Jeff Rosser – CIS
Operations Manager,
Dimension Data Australia

Jeff is Operations manager for Dimension Data Australia, running Professional Services and Managed Services for CIS. Before this he was General Manager of Customer Interactive Solutions, for the Western Cape of South Africa, and has been with Dimension Data Customer Interactive Solutions since 1998.

Jeff has 17 years experience in both management and consulting to the contact centre industry, in Australia, South Africa, the UK and the US. His experience covers technology systems design and implementation, operational management and support management for contact centres, and quality assurance.

Before joining Dimension Data, Jeff spent four years as European Vice President of Process and QA and worked as a Quality Assurance consultant and systems engineer in both technology and process development, in military and commercial technology manufacturing environments.

Jeff has qualifications in digital systems design and is a qualified Lead Assessor for ISO9000 quality management systems.

What do customers really think about speech self-service

Speech self-service has grown up and companies are seeing its value to their business. Improved productivity and a personalised customer experience are just some of the real benefits delivered to organisations across the globe.



“Customers will continue to **expect to talk to a person,** either **because of personal preference** or **access reasons.** While we won’t see the demise of the contact centre, **we will see the reasons for using them change”** .

We’ve come a long way since speech self-service first hit the market and both suppliers and buyers have matured in their approach to buying the technology. Perhaps most importantly customers have changed too. Today’s customers are more accepting of speech self-service as they grow more comfortable with the technology.

Given the dynamic nature of language, we see speech self-service solutions evolving significantly to keep pace of this rapid change. Dimension Data’s Customer Interactive Solutions consultant Leah Eyler explains that although this does involve more maintenance, today’s solutions are certainly worth the effort.

“We see a lot more standardisation across the board and the big difference now is a move away from awkward interactions and a trend toward more diversification” .

Already we see self-service on the web as the most mature channel. However, if you recognise that customers don’t have access to computers all day long, self-service still has to be provided using, for example, mobile phone technology. The buzzword for customer interactions today is choice. For companies, this means offering convenient ways for customers to communicate with them from wherever they are.

Finding a balance

Self-service is not just about reducing the number of agents taking calls. As Eyler points out, technology does not provide a magic bullet that removes the need to take care of your customers.

“The key to effective use of self-service is how and where you use the technology. Lessons from the past have taught us that companies examine the particular needs of the business and its customers and matching them to the available technology”.

In addition to finding an appropriate fit for the technology, it's equally important to understand what is going to work and the maintenance that will be required. And this is where it really pays to talk to the experts. People who have experience in the realm of speech self-service can help companies evaluate solutions to ensure they are fit for purpose.

Eyler adds that although speech self-service is important, it does need to be balanced across other media types.

“Companies would do well to combine speech with web and incorporate SMS for follow up campaigns and for initiating an interaction with customers. Think for example of the financial services sector where customers receive instant responses to account enquiries and are alerted to any unusual activities on their accounts through fraud detection services”.

The question to be asking, when it comes to speech self-service, is how you can use it to personally engage with your customers, explains Eyler.

“We see a trend towards personalisation and technology in general and important advances include the provision of a service that is personal and specific to customers. By using relevant CRM information

about customers in the conversation, you can ensure the speech solution is both conversational and personal”.

It's all about the right fit

Recent research conducted by Dimension Data has shown that people's reactions to speech self-service applications have been directly related to the type of service being delivered.

One such study focused its attention on an application that provided personal healthcare services to people using speech self-service technology. The results offered an insightful view into how such solutions should be fine tuned and what the rules were for engaging with people.

What was most surprising says Eyler was the preference by people for speech self-service over talking to a human being when discussing confidential matters of a personal nature.

“This interesting study has provided further proof that speech self-service will find its niche in delivering a service that is appropriate for particular needs. In this case, some users actually felt the technology provided a more ‘confessional’ type interaction that felt better than talking to a human being”.

The important factor in all of this is to remember that speech technology can only be relevant to the interaction you're selecting to automate. Speech self-service can provide a truly autonomous solution that bears no judgement in conversations that are very personal to the people using it.

Recognising that quality of care is pivotal to the ultimate success of any company, Eyler adds that

professional experience in this field is a must when considering different solutions.

“In evaluating whether it's a good fit, even if speech is relevant, one should weigh it up against the complexity of the technology and the demographic of the people who would be using it”.

Getting these factors right at the start can help keep standards high and manage customer expectations.

Once cost and return on investment (ROI) have been established, it's important to tackle speech self-service from several angles:

- evaluate the appropriate and intelligent use of the technology;
- ensure integration across multiple channels to avoid unnecessary repetition of information;
- measure the quality of the interactions and how they add value to the customer experience;
- consider how to use more personalisation by using CRM information.

Making it work for you and your customer

In the continuous quest to reduce costs and retain customers, companies should bear in mind that speech self-service is not a one-stop solution for everyone. The decision to take the self-service route cannot be one that is based on the bottom line alone.

Understanding that the interaction should help and not harm the customer relationship, Eyler advises organisations to ensure a balance across multiple channels including dual-tone multi-function (DTMF) and web.

“As a rule, the interaction should add value to the customer experience. Delivery of that service is relevant and is about having the correct conversation with your customers. And, if you get it right, your customers will be pleased with the solutions you’ve chosen”.

We all know about the benefits to the bottom line in automating particular services. What is exciting is the resultant upswing in productivity as a result of a well planned, delivered and maintained speech self-service solution.

Through clever integration of technologies and personal information about customers, companies can look forward to a significant improvement in productivity levels, adds Eyler.

“If you pick the right part of the customer service experience to automate and use customer data in those conversations, customers are more willing to engage with the call. The result is a positive experience for the customer if certain tasks are taken care of in an automated way”.

The benefit for companies, on the other hand, is the effective use of human agents. All too often agents end up dealing with frustrated customers who have had to repeat themselves when using speech self-service applications, before being bounced back to a human agent.

If agents were able to understand and have faith in the technology

doing its job, companies would soon see a rise in staff satisfaction and productivity levels. Research already shows that people will choose technology over an agent if it is done well.

For any business, this is the news they’ve been waiting for. Through effective and efficient use of their agents and connecting calls appropriately to the right agent, customers are happy and remain loyal to the organisation and agents will make productive use of their time.

Once cost and return on investment (ROI) have been established, it’s important to tackle speech self-service from several angles:

- evaluate the appropriate and intelligent use of the technology;
- ensure integration across



multiple channels to avoid unnecessary repetition of information;

- measure the quality of the interactions and how they add value to the customer experience;
- consider how to use more personalisation by using CRM information.

“The fact is human agents will always be needed – you simply cannot take people out of customer care” says Eyler.

“Evaluate where technology can solve particular tasks and use human agents to offer specialised services, thereby getting the most value from your human resources”.

When thinking about speech self-service for your company, Eyler says the best advice is to be an advocate for the customer.

“When evaluating speech technology solutions, think about the customer and how the experience will add value to the interaction. Speech cannot and should not be kept separate from other channels and must be seen instead as one of many in a mix of different touchpoints”.

Whatever the hold back factors – be it cost or simply not understanding the technology – companies are changing their mindset. As more mature market sectors continue to see the value of self-service, it will only be

a matter of time before other businesses follow suit.

Hosted solutions now offer companies the opportunity to try before they buy and can offer more options in terms of budgeting. With an increased acceptance by customers of speech self-service and a rising demand for service across more communications channels, the question you should be asking is how it could work for you?

About the Author

Leah Eyler – Speech Applications Consultant on the Customer Interactive Solutions team for Dimension Data North America

Leah Eyler is a Speech Applications Consultant on the Customer Interactive Solutions team for Dimension Data North America. Leah has over seven years’ experience working with speech technology, focused specifically on product research and development for packaged applications and

offerings, and a concentration in web-based speech application development technologies and installed software.

Before joining Dimension Data, Leah worked as a Product Manager at SpeechCycle in New York focused on development technologies, and spent five years at Fluency Voice Technology in London and New York working in product research and development, focused on their core platform and productised application offering. While at Fluency, Leah was Head of

Training globally and Fluency’s principal consultant in the US.

In addition to speech technology, Leah has also done product consulting with other technology startups, and is an experienced speaker at conferences. Leah presents annually at the SpeechTEK conference in New York each year tackling a different topic in the areas of business strategy, VUI principles, development technologies and applications

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