

3 MEGATRENDS SHAPING THE CONTACT CENTER

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What hasn't changed in the contact center? That's probably a better question than asking what is different in this rapidly evolving market. Cloud-based contact center platforms, while still on the leading edge, are gaining traction – allowing centers to tap into labor markets closer to home, driving down costs and increasing customer engagement. The consumer has changed, as well, with instantaneous self-publishing making every branded touch-point a potential word-of-mouth-worthy event – for better or worse. And caught up in this wave of technology and real time communications we see a return to one-on-one, human-to-human contact as something more than problem mitigation. We see the contact center emerging as a strategic asset, a first line of consumer interaction that impacts brand perception more personally than traditional marketing can.

We recently spoke to four contact center experts from the US and Europe – Brendan Read from Frost and Sullivan, Tracey Schelmetic of Syllepsis Communications, Juliana Kenny of TMCNet.com and Henrik Brodersen of Jabra – to discuss what they see as the major shifts taking place in this rapidly evolving space. Here's what they told us.

MEGATREND #1

The Rise of Home-Based Agents



"The rise of home based agents comes from the proliferation of cloud based contact center platforms," Schelmetic told us. "Once upon a time, you could do home based agents if you had calls coming in through a VoIP basis – it gave agents access to the voice calls, but the rest of the stuff, the workforce management, the chat functions, the call backs, they really couldn't do that."

The key drivers affecting the growth of home based agents include cost savings, flexibility and quality. "There are savings of going to a home based model because you don't have to deal with facilities," Frost and Sullivan's Read explains. "If you've got a call spike and you have home agents available, you can send out an alert and get people on the phone. You can boot up in 5 minutes as opposed to having people dropping everything and spending 50 minutes in the car to get to their location." Beyond flexing to accommodate spikes in traffic, contact center managers also have the peace of mind knowing that their business continuity is ensured with a distributed workforce. "If things do happen, you've got a work pool that is unaffected," Read explains. "I've seen this from first-hand experience. I witnessed the attacks on the World Trade Towers when I was services editor of Call Center magazine. I evacuated carrying my laptop and my cell phone. I logged in that night from a friend's place in New Jersey and answered emails." The overall quality of agents tends to improve as well as companies can now hire agents outside of the usual commuting distance from centralized facilities. "You tend to get a better quality workforce, too," Read told us. "They're older and they're more responsible than the 20-somethings that tend to work in call centers."

Beyond these business drivers, we also see a further driving force born of the growing frustration with off-shore outsourcing both among consumer and American lawmakers. Speaking of the typical off-shore contact center experience, Schelmetic reiterated, "Americans don't like this. They don't like the accents, they don't like the implications that US jobs are sent overseas, they don't like the fact that their credit card and bank account data is sitting on a server in Malaysia. If pending anti-off-shore outsourcing legislation passes, any company that takes a federal tax break will lose them if they send these jobs overseas." Faced with this reality of potentially losing federal tax breaks for sending contact center business overseas, many companies are realizing that expanding their existing capabilities is better accomplished by hiring home based agents than opening up a center elsewhere.

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The rise of the home based agent seems to mirror a lot of what's happening elsewhere in business, with the growing decentralization of the workplace and rise of the virtual worker, and in pop culture as well. The sight of the businessperson taking a conference call on the beach or appearing on a videoconference in slippers is now standard fare. If pop culture is buying into it, so are workers.

MEGATREND #2

The Rise of Social Media



Social media has become the communications media beauty contest winner almost overnight. The desire to play in these unfamiliar waters is matched, almost, with the lack of understanding of where to start – or how to play well.

The emergence of the major social media platforms – Facebook, Twitter, the blogosphere itself, as well as others like Yelp – has given brands the ability to engage with fans one on one, tap into consumer sentiment and monitor their unique ecosystems. It has also given consumers the power to say anything they want whenever it pops into their heads without the social friction that comes with having to actually confront them in person. But with the acknowledgement that something

must be done to tap into this new phenomenon, comes the decision of exactly who in the organization should be tasked with doing it.

“Contact centers are still trying to get a handle on social media,” Read told us. “They know that customers are having conversations about them and they know it’s important to understand what’s being said about them. Only the contact center is equipped to listen. Other departments within the company, from marketing to legal to PR to sales, are more geared towards talking to customers. They don’t talk with customers.”

Social media monitoring at the contact center usually escalates from simple brand chatter monitoring and “disaster control” to full integration with incoming customer support calls. The more sophisticated products from many of the major contact center players, including Avaya, Interactive Intelligence and others, allow the user to open up a customer record and see their full social media timeline - what they’ve said about your brand on Facebook, Twitter and elsewhere. “It’s going to be 10 years before we say that ‘most companies’ are comfortable with social media, especially in the call center,” Tracey advises. “Most are overwhelmed with it. Once upon a time, if you had a customer with a bad experience, they’d tell 10 people in a week. Today, they share that bad experience with a thousand people in 30 seconds.”

But with the acknowledgment that social media is a critical and growing part of the contact center’s communications mix comes the understanding that there’s often a strategic capabilities gap between the customer’s expectation and the brand’s ability to meet it. “What’s the triage – does it go to customer service, to marketing, to legal...,” Read cautions. “Is the contact center agent really equipped to handle this?” It’s important to realize that while customer support is still a matter of an agent helping an end user, there’s a fundamental shift between the inbound call and the monitored Tweet. “This is a public conversation. They’re now a spokesperson for an organization. The responsibility is great. Most contact center employees don’t have this training. They certainly weren’t hired for this. It only takes one slip up to majorly damage the brand.” What was once a conversation between two people on the phone is now out there in the open. And the internet never forgets.

TMCNet’s Kenny agrees with the evolving nature of this shift, saying, “Social media’s impact on the contact center

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is continually changing as different social networks become the preferred methods of communication among end users and customers. This development requires the “modern” contact center to maintain a flexible approach to call operations. Self-publishing has meant that quality monitoring in the contact center is of the utmost importance, but social media can also be leveraged by the contact center to gain customer feedback.”

Staying on top of this evolving combination of social media platforms is a difficult assignment for anyone in business, and certainly for most contact center managers who have responsibilities elsewhere. The reason that the struggle is worth the effort is the payoff: if properly leveraged, the insights and degree of engagement are irreplaceable. This will require training, investment in monitoring and probably a cultural shift within the company itself. But if the goal is to create customer conversations – and if agents can meaningfully and appropriately step into this gap – then our company’s best “listeners” will be connected with the market’s most prolific “talkers,” each one of whom will be happy to rave to their 4,028 followers on Twitter about how much they love your brand.

MEGATREND #3

The Rise of the Contact Center as Strategic Resource



Many popular business writers and bloggers have seized on the truth that the customer’s likely first real face to face encounter with a brand won’t be the product of the marketing department at all, but the contact center due to a tech support call or a routine inquiry – and this insight throws the current view of what constitutes “branding” on its head. When the customer experience is shaped more by how your contact center agent manages the touch point than by all the traditional above-the-line activities like advertising and public relations, one has to quickly come to grips with a new reality. The contact center must be viewed as a strategic, customer-facing resource rather than just a cost center.

“Social media is forcing a convergence between customer service and marketing,” Read told us. “The conversation is about the customer. They don’t care about who is responsible for all this. It’s about listening to what people say and what people want. And yet marketing needs to know what’s going on. They need to know if there’s a hot new product or hot new trend or if there’s a fire. Someone needs to be listening to this and if they need a full picture of what’s going on, they’ve got the contact center. The contact center is aggregating all this information, no matter whether it’s on the phone or chat or email, they actually know who the customers are.”

“Do you look at your contact center as a place where you solve problems or customer issues? Or are you using it as an inside sales vehicle?” Schelmetic identifies the shift from purely inbound to outbound as a signal that a company has acknowledged the possibilities of using the contact center as a more strategic resource. “The ones that are credited with turning a contact center into a strategic asset are the ones that are doing something outbound... outreach. Not necessarily cold calling, but contacting existing customers, follow ups, up-selling. I’m a fan of Lands End. I buy a lot of kid’s clothes from them. I’ve noticed that they have a rating on their website asking how you like a particular product, with a rating system from one to five stars. Every time I’ve given something a bad rating, I get a call from them asking if I’d tell them a little more about the problem or what I’d like to see. I don’t mind those calls. If you’re following up on a complaint and offering a little something, then customers don’t mind that sort of thing. But it’s focused, specific to me, and offering me something. I’m going to be happy about that.”

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“I think the Dell Social media command center illustrates so very nicely how their contact center philosophy is moving from cost center to a marketing tool, providing feedback from the frontline to the back office in real-time and in a seamlessly way,” Jabra’s Henrik Brodersen says. “When companies are using contextual inquiries to gather customer usage information – this is marketing intelligence. When using this to connect to the customers, this is then a powerful sales tool with revenue attached – and when used for solving tech support issues, it is a very effective way of solving the customer’s issues. Jabra has begun using contextual inquiries to connect with our customers and profile usage. You can imagine the impact of this sort of system being used to connect to customers on Twitter, Facebook or others forums.”

CONCLUSIONS

What is the next logical evolution of customer service? Or of the contact center itself?



Technology is quickly replacing the low end script based agent as end users become comfortable with internet-based self-help. What is the impact to the contact center? It means they need to hire and retain real subject matter experts, no matter where they are, and make them findable using technologies that span geography and ensure real-time collaboration. If users are increasingly mobile, abandoning their old landline phones in favor of mobile phones, they are less likely behaviorally to accept long wait times. Home based agents who are a cut above – who are experts in their fields – are quickly connected in rapidly changing groups to customers who have complex, nuanced problems.

Agents are going to be triaging calls and figuring out who they can bring into the conversation using Unified Communications and bring in the two or three people who can help. Those agents who remain in this new world will be in demand.

Again, this signals a cultural shift in the organization, as many of these subject matter experts may have acquired their technical skills despite their less-than warm-and-fuzzy interpersonal skills. Interpersonal communications again rise to the fore. Not only does everyone need to communicate well, they need to work well together – and in front of the customer.

Frost and Sullivan’s Read sums it up, advising us, “When it’s done right, it enables a large organization to have the same kind of knowledge and flexibility as a small company. You can look through and see the same insights a small company can.”

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