

Three Keys for Small and Medium Businesses to More Effectively Serve Their Customers

Small and medium businesses must respond to customer problems and inquiries more quickly and effectively to succeed in today's market. Competitive pressure and ever-increasing customer expectations are driving companies to look for new ways to enhance the customer experience while improving contact center efficiency and effectiveness.

The dilemma for many is that yesterday's call center technology doesn't meet today's diverse requirements and rising customer expectations. Agents must be available and equipped to respond to a contact anytime, anyplace, whether it comes via phone, email, or the Web. Doing this cost-effectively requires operating at peak efficiency. But cost-effectiveness is often in direct conflict with improving service. One way to do both is by deploying a virtual contact center with multi-channel support and integrated CRM capabilities—creating key business differentiator, and putting those who don't at a competitive disadvantage.

The three keys to delivering more effective customer support are discussed in this paper followed by a solution example. The three keys include:

1. Improving customer support while controlling costs
2. Optimizing agent productivity and availability
3. Ensuring business continuance with a disaster recovery solution

1. Improving customer support while controlling costs

Operating a contact center at peak efficiency and effectiveness is a complex balance of resources against service demands. This is not an easy task with multiple media channels for voice, email, Web-chat, co-browsing, and disparate support applications. Fortunately, new contact center technology goes a long way towards reducing complexity and costs, and facilitating peak performance.

Virtual contact center technology provides a quick and easy solution for multi-channel integration, contact prioritization, skills-based routing, and customer relationship management (CRM) with the goal of improving service quality, increasing agent productivity and reducing costs. A virtual contact center can also provide remote agent support for geographically dispersed around-the-clock service, leveraging work-at-home or remote office agents, and facilitating an off-site disaster recovery solution.

Quality and consistency across any media type

Customers contact your company through a variety of media—voice, email, Web-chat or co-browse—whichever way is convenient for them. It's not uncommon for a customer to follow up an email message or Web chat session with a phone call. A lack of media integration is immediately obvious when the customer must repeat the original inquiry. Customers expect a quick and consistent response regardless of the media channel.

Multi-channel integration brings together voice, email, Web chat, and co-browse capabilities into a single, unified system. This integration provides a consistent level of support, controlled response, and continuity across all media channels. Better incoming contact identification and classification complemented with skills-based routing ensures that the best-qualified agent handles the most important customers.

Channel integration also provides for data consolidation, giving agents a single view of all customer information and interaction history across all channels. Visibility into all open issues allows agents to more effectively respond to a customer query or problem.

Table 1: Quality and consistency across any media type

Challenge	Solution
Ensure consistent handling of contacts across all media types.	A single, integrated voice, email, chat, and Web co-browse solution with CRM capabilities can provide contact prioritization and routing control to consistently meet service level objectives across all media channels.
Ensure the best agents handle the most important contacts.	Better incoming contact identification and classification mapped to skills-based routing ensures most important customers are handled by the best-qualified agents.
Reduce call waiting / queuing times.	A unified queue for all interactions including phone, email, and Web chat provides better first-in first-handled support, or prioritized responses. Agents can easily move between media types to handle peaks, or handle low priority cases during slow periods.
Ensure agents are aware of contact / case history.	Integrated CRM, contact database and case history database allows information to travel with the customer regardless of media choice for an individual interaction.
Reduce agent errors in handling of contacts.	The same consistent, easy-to-use agent interface across all media types reduces errors.

2. Optimizing agent productivity and availability

Agent productivity is significantly affected by the quality of the contact center solution. Some ways to improve productivity are obvious, such as good training. Others are less obvious, such as a well-designed user interface minimizing the number of screens an agent must navigate to complete an interaction. A good user interface design, considering agent work process and task-flow, can dramatically reduce the amount of time it takes to complete an interaction.

A critical factor in improving both agent productivity and availability is resource planning and allocation. Managers must establish queue priorities based on business success factors with the system providing contact prioritization based on customer information, case history, or transaction information. Also, skills-based routing ensures that interactions are handled quickly and effectively by assigning the best agent. Media integration makes more efficient use of resources allowing agents the flexibility to move between media channels for workload leveling. For example, voice traffic overflow can be routed to agents handling email, while third shift agents can handle low priority email responses during low call volume periods.

Table 2: Optimize agent productivity and availability

Challenge	Solution
Optimize agent resources.	Contact prioritization and skills-based routing ensures that the most important customers get the best service. A unified queuing and routing mechanism provides workload leveling across all agents.
Handle peak traffic and overflow.	A virtual contact center allows work-at-home, branch office and other non-call center staff to handle overflow and to reduce customer-waiting times. A single, consistent user interface makes it easy for agents to move between media channels to assist in peak periods and makes it easier for non-contact center personnel to assist during peak periods with minimal training.
Handle globalization and provide around-the-clock “any-time, any-place” service.	A virtual contact center solution with geographically dispersed agents can provide around-the-clock coverage, reducing the costs of running a second or third shift.
Respond to trends in traffic levels or support requirements.	A virtual contact center solution makes it easy to add, remove and change agents as demand requires.

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Another important benefit of a virtual contact center is support for remote agents. Remote agents working part time or split shifts are useful in operating a 24x7 contact center. Geographically distributed agents can provide national, or even worldwide support. Remote agents can also help minimize work disruptions arising from severe storms, natural disasters or other types of disasters.

Agent productivity can be improved by increased agent training, and by a simple, easy-to-use system with minimal training requirements. With non-integrated, disparate media solutions, agents and operations personnel must learn and use multiple systems, each with its own look and feel. They must learn that one media channel is not transferable to another. Integrating media provides a common look and feel across all media types and provides a single view customer data.

A consistent user interface makes the system easier to learn and use, and makes it easier for agents to move between media types. Agent training time is low and management is significantly easier than dealing with multiple applications and technologies.

3. Ensuring business continuance with a disaster recovery solution

The September 11th tragedy in the United States reminded companies how an interruption in system and network availability can significantly impact their operation and even financial viability. Some contact centers near the World Trade Center ceased to exist. Others nearby were down for days and even weeks.

Businesses must be prepared for an unexpected emergency. According to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), it is fifteen times more expensive to recover from a disaster without a properly planned recovery strategy. Companies must be able to recover quickly and efficiently to minimize negative affects on employees, productivity and company profitability. To achieve this, companies must:

- Provide contact center backup with emergency routing
- Backup data and voice recordings
- Create and maintain a business continuity and disaster recovery plan

A virtual contact center can be used to provide a disaster recovery solution. Large spikes in traffic can be handled using remote agents or even non-contact center personnel. Since most staff already have PCs, administrative and management staff can also log in as agents and handle a surge in call volume.

Table 3: Disaster recovery solution

Challenge	Solution
Implement the disaster recovery solution to ensure non-stop service and support.	A virtual contact center solution makes it easy to add, remove and change agents as demand requires. Flexible staffing using work-at-home, branch office and other non-call center staff to handle overflow and to reduce customer-waiting times.
Ensure agents are properly trained and familiar with using the recovery solution, especially if they only use it during disasters.	A virtual contact center allows you to use the same system for normal operations, handling overflow with remote agents, and disaster recovery. Agents and operations staffs don't need to learn multiple systems.
Set up agents to work from an unaffected area during a disaster.	Virtual contact center solution geographically dispersed agents can be used to provide around-the-clock coverage, and can also be used as part of back up strategy for disaster recovery.
Provide supervisors, administrators and non-contact center personnel with access to handle contacts.	Consistent, easy-to-use system requiring only a personal computer and telephone to access PBX, ACD and CRM features. Managers and supervisors can log on as agents to handle customer contacts.

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It is also recommended that the recovery plan mirror normal operations. People work best with familiar methods in a disaster rather than having to learn new procedures. Since a virtual contact center can be accessed from anywhere using a personal computer, Internet browser software, and a telephone, it can be easily extended to handle overflow or disaster recovery using remote agents.

Customer and case data is secured off-site with the virtual contact center, so no data is lost, and all information is available to agents even in the event of a disaster. Handling overflow or disaster recovery is dramatically simplified since it is a natural extension of the virtual contact center and agents don't need to learn a new system.

Solution Example

White Pajama, a CRM contact center solution provider, is a good example of a technology that enables efficient customer interactions across all media channels while reducing costs. White Pajama's turn-key contact center is built from the ground up to provide unified voice, email, Web chat and co-browse with integrated contact management and case management capabilities. It combines traditional automatic call distribution (ACD), interactive voice response (IVR) and computer telephony integration (CTI), and supports a broad set of features including customer interaction and customer relationship management (CRM).

Because White Pajama is delivered via the Internet, agents with only a phone and a Web browser can handle telephone, e-mail and Web chat interactions. All contacts are queued and distributed through the ACD system, and can be routed based on agent availability, skill level or other parameters. CRM features include contact and case management systems geared toward efficient problem tracking and resolution. Customer self-service offloads agents from handling routine tasks.

The system offers both real-time and historical reporting, with analytical tools that enable managers to assess overall contact center performance, at both a high level and detailed information by agent, communication channel, and queue. Reports are consolidated across all media types, to help balance workload among the various contact types.

The White Pajama contact center can be used as the primary contact center, or as backup contact center for disaster recovery. An XML-based API can be used to retrieve, add or modify data objects such as customer contact information, cases and FAQs to synchronize information between a primary contact center and White Pajama. If the White Pajama solution is being used as a backup contact center, routing instructions can be set up to redirect contacts to White Pajama for overflow traffic or disaster recovery. In the event of a complete system failure, the telecommunications carrier can reroute all contacts directly to White Pajama.

For More Information:
