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How Emerging Trends are Affecting Contact Center Operations

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Contact centers are often viewed as the heartbeat behind an organization since this operation serves as the main point of connection between the business and its customers. As technology advances and customer demands change, contact centers must follow suit and adapt to new trends. The cloud, mobile devices and many other innovations have influenced the approach to contact center engagement and are expected to direct the field of customer service for years to come.

History of Contact Centers

"It's only recently that these changes have truly influenced the face of how businesses interact with their audience and what approaches they use to better serve clients."

Originally, call centers existed as the primary source of communication with clients. Most consumers are familiar with these centers as an 800 number they call to find out information or ask specific questions related to a product or service. Contact centers perform similar functions, but there is a distinct difference between the contact center and a call center. Call centers deal solely with voice interactions and are often more reactive to customers. Contact centers, on the other hand, handle more connection avenues like Web chat, email and video. This approach offers more channels for users to leverage, allowing them to choose their preferred method.

Steve McElderry, director of product management for contact center at ShoreTel, noted that many consumers are beginning to recognize how they can use web chat and email to engage the organizations they do business with. As businesses add these communication channels to their contact centers, they provide enhanced flexibility and will offer a truly unique experience to each client. Organizations that effectively leverage these solutions can improve their customer satisfaction, and in turn, their bottom line.

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Unified Communications Lead the Change

As contact centers evolve, one of the biggest adjustments is the sheer amount of communication channels that have been added to the contact center line-up. Unified communications, in particular, has significantly influenced how agents conduct business on a daily basis. Although some smaller companies may begin with a piecemeal approach, as organizations grow, it becomes more important to have a single platform that will handle a variety of tasks at the same time. Instead of duplicating various procedures per program, businesses will find it more beneficial to use a central platform.

"Businesses soon realize they don't want to replicate business logic across multiple systems," McElderry stated. "For instance, the reporting that you do on average speed of answer and traffic volumes, that's pretty common across channel types as well, so it makes sense to consolidate this and use a single infrastructure for managing all interactions."

Chat and email have become more prevalent in contact centers. If a user is visiting the organization's website, it's common for chat sessions to be offered—this allows customers to communicate directly with an agent and have their questions addressed faster than they would be through voice conversation. Similarly, email messages can be routed to the most knowledgeable resource available and the customer will receive an automatic acknowledgement response.

"Web chats and e-mails are usually more cost effective than a voice call," said McElderry. "When a voice call is queued, you're consuming network resources. Once the call is presented to the agent, the agent may need a couple minutes to query the caller. While these costs sound small, they add up. Web chat in particular can be more efficient as it is well suited to multitasking and can allow agents to handle multiple sessions simultaneously."

The Importance and Prevalence of the Cloud

The cloud has also emerged as a driver for contact center growth. According to McElderry, there are several reasons for this shift. Because the contact center is customer-facing, businesses require a stable environment that will minimize risks and provide strong security, so they are looking to outsource to solutions managed by reputable vendors. The cloud can fulfill this need because providers are dedicated to the stability and security of their infrastructure. As a result, their business depends on following best practices and investing in robust security mechanisms. Although the cloud market is still maturing, many businesses are choosing this option to make their communications more efficient. While the numbers are still relatively modest, the cloud-based services market is poised for growth.

"Maybe a few years ago, cloud was a little unproven and risky to them, but increasingly, organizations are becoming comfortable with services that their business depends on being delivered from the cloud," McElderry stated. "From CRM systems to telephone systems and contact centers, people see these are secure, they're robust, and they're willing to consider that model."

Influence of Mobile Devices

The emergence of mobile devices has shaken up organizations across industries, but it's also affecting how contact center agents engage with their customers. Contact centers have had to accommodate the mobile revolution by adopting enterprise mobile solutions to directly communicate with clients. In some cases, businesses may choose to send text messages to clients instead of voice calls because it's more efficient and less obtrusive, giving users and enterprises more flexibility in how they interact.

The use of mobile devices can bring significant advantages to contact centers in the form of more accurate data that agents can leverage to provide a tailored experience. Typically a mobile device is associated with a single individual. When the contact center receives a call or text from that device, the contact center can base routing and prioritization decisions on the fact that it likely knows the specific individual—as opposed to business-to-business or residential calls, where there could be several people that use the same phone. These informed choices help provide clients with the relevant information they need and boost customer retention. Mobile devices have also encouraged a broader use of texting and chat in the enterprise as a means of connecting with customers.

What Benefits Have Been Realized from the Latest Advancements?

In contact centers, the changes have provided significant advantages that can be used to promote future growth and ensure successful customer interactions. Some of the benefits include:

- Better customer service
- Improved communication and collaboration among coworkers
- Strategy for business continuity
- Enhanced efficiency and productivity

Each of these benefits helps boost the business's bottom line while improving profits. Contact centers will also help organizations improve the quality of their customer services and products. By having a dedicated contact center, other departments can focus on their core tasks and not solely on customer service. Having a robust contact center will help companies keep up-to-date and ensure they can leverage

the technology for years to come. In regard to cloud-based solutions, companies can additionally benefit from reduced operational costs, such as savings in maintenance and hardware investments. These funds can then be routed back into the organization for further development and tool integration, such as analytics that will help managers make more informed decisions.

What's Next for Contact Centers?

The next phase for contact centers will build upon the technologies that are currently making headway in the industry. Companies will likely see a broader use of the cloud, where vendors are making strides on a daily basis to provide a secure, versatile platform for users. Organizations are also likely to focus more on mobile strategies and accommodating these devices as mobility becomes even more integral to business operations.

The increasing popularity of the use of video and social media is expected to influence the next stage in customer communication. McElderry noted that video solutions are often used for very niche applications like "video concierges" at hotels, lobby ambassadors in companies with multiple buildings and even Amazon Kindle's Mayday button.

In addition, many organizations can utilize social networks to communicate with customers. While many businesses have a strategy in place to use social platforms for marketing purposes and to respond to customer posts that include brand mentions or complaints, the use of this technology for contact centers is still in the early stages. "In practice, I think most enterprises aren't quite ready to handle social media in the same way they handle a Web chat or email. It's more complicated," McElderry said. "The consequences of your response are more visible to the world at large. If you respond to a tweet with another tweet, it's not just a one-to-one conversation you're having with someone. This is something that can be retweeted, forwarded, so you need some level of oversight. Social media will become another channel into the organization just like email, Web chat and voice phone calls because the tools are emerging."

The Rise of the Old-fashioned Telephone Call

Organizations should not expect voice calling to go out of style anytime soon. Voice communication is by far the oldest and most established connection method that is available. However, businesses must also ensure they're using it effectively to serve their clients. By communicating directly with a live person, some situations

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can be addressed faster and more effectively than they could be through other communication methods.

"Some types of consumers are just more comfortable with using the telephone, they prefer it," McElderry said. "And the phone is essential if you've got an urgent situation, like I just missed my flight and I want to make sure I'm confirmed on the next flight. I suppose I could go to the website to do that or start a chat session, but I'm more inclined to pick up the phone and talk to a real human being and resolve the issue right away. So most urgent transactions require a phone call as well as any situation that is more complex in some way. Voice is very efficient for that."

Despite rapidly evolving technology environments, contact centers should continue to adopt leading voice solutions. Rather than going away, this communication channel will become more interoperable with new, innovative technologies and work together to create a single, powerful platform that will drive numerous advantages to businesses.

"Voice will still continue—these other channel types aren't replacing it, they're supplementing it," McElderry concluded.

ShoreTel is a Leader in Contact Center Solutions

Contact centers have significantly changed over the years and are continuing to adjust to consumer demands. With contact center solutions from ShoreTel, organizations can quickly adapt to these new trends and ensure they are providing their clients with more efficient modes of communication, while also supporting other forms of communication that callers are used to. ShoreTel services provide integrated tools like Web chat, email and social media along with the traditional voice offerings. These solutions make it easier to provide excellent customer service for clients and maximize the potential benefits of every interaction.

Sources:

Interview with Steve McElderry, director of product management for contact center at ShoreTel

Internal client docs

http://www.slideshare.net/sunshine1comm/advantages-of-using-business-call-center

About ShoreTel

ShoreTel is a provider of business communication solutions whose brilliantly simply unified communications platforms, applications and mobile UC solutions promise a new rhythm of workforce engagement and collaboration. With costly complexity eliminated by design from its award winning, all-in-one IP phone system, UC and contact center solution, and its industry leading hosted business phone system, workers enjoy a freedom and self-reliance that other providers can't match. Users have full control to engage and collaborate, no matter the time, place or device, for the lowest cost and demand on IT resources in the industry. ShoreTel is headquartered in Sunnyvale, California, and has regional offices and partners worldwide. For more information, visit shoretel.com or shoretelsky.com