SMS for Customer Care

Consumers have adopted text messaging with unprecedented fervor.
A well-rounded customer care solution should take this preference into account.

By Mike Roddy / *NuTEQ Solutions*

The broadband industry is often considered a bottom dweller in the customer service department. Service providers are plagued with relentless call-center volumes, generally from customers who are unhappy just because they have to call.

The definition of customer care changes from service provider to service provider. Many small providers claim their level of service is a differentiator. However, cost-effectively scaling that personal level of service to a large corporate structure seems an ever-elusive goal.

In addition, customer needs change. Societal expectations have changed from high-touch service to no-touch and on-demand touch. Customers want a person on the phone when they want one, but otherwise, they want to be left alone.

Few technological leaps have taken place in call centers. IVRs have been around for years, and callbacks – though better than being left on hold – are simply another form of delay.

Customers despise going through phone trees, validation processes and endless holds to achieve what they wanted in the first place – talking to a person – only to be subjected to the same validation and data gathering again with a call center rep. Online chat sessions provide some relief, but they appeal only to a particular segment of the market, not to all consumers.

To provide quality service at acceptable cost, service providers consider affordable call-center labor well beyond their service territories and third-party call-center outsourcing, domestic and international. Does simply adding head count – at any price – solve the underlying issue: "Why are my customers calling month in and month out?"

DIFFERENTIATION IS KEY

New service providers do not necessarily need to follow the old models. Differentiation is key, not just in product and price but also in customer experience. Technology enables more opportunities and reduces cost structures.

For instance, smartphone apps drew a lot of attention just a few years ago. Each service provider created its own app, believing it would capture consumers' hearts. However, though developing a smartphone app may have a manageable cost, consumers rarely download and use these apps, and their long-term maintenance costs are high as smartphone life cycles get shorter.

Adding head count to call centers may reduce hold times but will not solve the underlying problems that cause customers to call their service providers.

A report by Forrester, Top Trends for Customer Service in 2014, notes that customers have adopted mobile-first mind-sets and that they expect outbound notifications. These and other Forrester trends suggest that SMS text-based services are timely and on point. Consumers have adopted text messaging as their preferred method of communication, and the fact that most mobile plans include unlimited texting eliminates a consumer cost concern.

Usage trends confirm the growing preference for texting in personal communication. More than 80 percent of cell phone users also are text users, according to the Pew Research Center. According to CTIA – The Wireless Association, 2.3 trillion text messages were sent from cell phones in 2012. Research by Frost & Sullivan shows that a text message is four times more likely to be opened than an email. Slick Text finds that text messages are opened within 90 seconds on average; an email or other communication often goes unopened for days. Because tight regulatory control minimizes unsolicited SMS messages, text communications have a high perceived value, undiluted by the spam factor.

GROWING PREFERENCE FOR TEXTING

Banks, airlines, credit card companies and wireless carriers all leverage consumer preference for SMS texting to enhance customer satisfaction and control operating expenses. The largest broadband companies, including Comcast, Time Warner Cable, DISH Network and Verizon, have incorporated texting alerts into their customer care solutions – although, in most instances, the service is one way and fairly limited in scope.

The reason to use texting is clear: Consumers demand virtually instant responses to their inquiries. In a world in which attention spans have been shaped by six-second video clips, consumers resent the delays and hold times inherent in every traditional contact point – phone call, IVR, chat, email, social media and even IVR callbacks. Customers simply want

account information *now* without a lot of effort. SMS is instantaneous, and an opt-in process can take care of account verification.

Industry trade press covered the recent Internet outages of two large MSOs. The outages drove huge spikes in call volumes that overwhelmed call centers and negatively affected day-to-day call-center inquiries. Text alerts allow an operator to proactively notify customers that the operator is aware of an outage and working to repair it and to communicate the status of the repair, including expected time to completion, through periodic updates.

A truly sophisticated solution should allow a consumer to inquire through SMS and not simply receive messages that may result in inbound calls if the consumer is not satisfied with the information. In the recent outages, proactive SMS notification could have had enormous impacts on the call centers' operating expenses and on consumers' views of the operators.

Perhaps most important, using text messages to address the simple transactional inquiries that drive call volume and costs can free call center reps to focus greater attention on complex issues that require more time and hand-holding.

AN EXAMPLE

NuTEQ Solutions' GOCare is an SMS texting solution that integrates with a provider's billing, scheduling and NOC back-office systems.

GOCare provides two-way messaging capabilities between subscribers and a provider's back-office system without the need for human intervention. Proactive outbound messages include balance due, payment

> Internet outages lead to huge spikes in call volumes – calls that could be avoided if providers sent texts assuring customers they are working to repair the outages.

verification, late payment reminders, outage notifications and appointment reminders. Subscribers can query the back-office system via text message about these same data points.

GOCare also offers real-time subscriber feedback through its survey capability. Multistep surveys with conditional responses can alter survey questions based on the previous response. Negative responses can be shared with a supervisor immediately for corrective action (for instance, returning a truck to the subscriber's location if an installation or a repair was not successful).

A TOTAL SOLUTION APPROACH

Consumer preferences change like the wind, and no single solution will address everyone's needs. A well-rounded solution should include multiple touch points at which consumers may define their preferred method of communication – which may change depending on the event or customer location at the time.

In a world of increasing competition, rapidly changing technology and slimming margins, the path to best-in-class customer service is not hiring more people to answer the phone more quickly. A technology that customers prefer can address many call-center functions at a fraction of the cost. ❖

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