

## Enhancing customer experience: first, do no harm

Few things can cause customers' blood pressure to rise more quickly than a bad customer service experience by phone. Frustration builds when they are forced to endure lengthy, less than helpful menus or they have to repeat information multiple times. In addition, the system may guide them to the wrong place the first time, so even when they reach the right person they may have to identify themselves yet again.

No organization wants to deliver a bad experience that alienates customers or, worse, drives them away. But sometimes problems can arise when a call handling system is installed and then goes unmodified for months, if not years. Why does this happen?

Organizational inertia can be one factor. Sometimes people are simply reluctant to change call routing schemes, data integration architectures and skill sets that may have been in place for years. A call handling system also can be complex, so changes may be intimidating. We often see this in organizations where the pressure to keep up with evolving customer demands is unrelenting and when refinements to the call handling system can have unintended consequences elsewhere in the company.

For self-service solutions, powerful new analytical tools are available to diagnose interactive voice response (IVR) system bottlenecks, dead ends and other problems, but these tools may not provide a complete picture. Why? Because, although many organizations may feel that they have the wherewithal to use these tools, once issues are identified, they can stumble when making changes. The tools often point them toward the need for technology upgrades, which may also affect costs and current operations. But should this be the first recourse?

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Finally, with so many other critical demands across the enterprise, IT department priorities may fall somewhere other than identifying and resolving call handling problems. Change requires resources and a champion, and even if someone is assigned to identify call handling issues, that individual is rarely given the authority to see that needed changes are made.

The barriers to a better customer experience are not trivial. However, with the right focus and commitment, achieving improvements may be simpler than you think. In our experience working with Avaya customers, we have found that identifying and executing basic changes initially can have a profound effect on containment rates and customer satisfaction. In fact, such fundamental improvements can often lead quickly to cost savings that may even cover the cost of more rigorous analytics and IVR changes.

## Look for low-hanging fruit by assessing obvious problems

You don't need sophisticated software and systems to tell you that someone has tried three times to speak an account number into the system and it still hasn't been identified. Instead, you can uncover a host of problems by simply having an objective caller dial into the contact center and look for obvious customer experience issues. By going through a variety of scenarios, you will likely find obvious programming errors.

For instance, do you know how often your customers must re-identify themselves when they dial into your systems? Are your self-service options more focused on the business—"press one for sales, press two for service"—than on the customer? And once customers finally reach an agent, are they greeted by name? A systematic review of existing systems by an objective caller can root out these types of issues.

Your staff should be able to do this, but you need to assign people who are committed to improving the customer experience instead of protecting the status quo. Assign people who, in addition to testing your IVR system, can also comb through customer comments and surveys for refinement clues. Identify people who will be motivated to call your competitors' call centers to learn how they operate and then implement some of the better ideas. They also need to help identify issues with documentation, processes and time delays that force customers to call repeatedly for service.

Another critical success factor is assigning people from your organization without previous call center experience. Such people will be less likely to tolerate system responses considered normal by experienced call center personnel. At the same time, don't assign newly employed people to this task, and don't let their findings be relegated to a "to-do" list. It is important that the people undertaking this task understand the ins and outs of your business and that the results of their work be acted upon.

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Uncovering obvious improvement areas is only useful if these efforts lead to meaningful change. Often, the problem isn't that the platform can't be changed. Instead, the personnel operating it simply may not have the time, authority or motivation to make the necessary modifications.

Assigning a change champion who has both responsibility and authority can help you turn opportunity into action. While call routing and IVR systems are often designed by committee, the most effective way to implement change is to have one person with sole authority to dictate and direct appropriate improvements. The rest of the organization should follow along and carry out the transition.

## Make technology changes when the time is right

Once you've picked low-hanging fruit by making simple process and programming changes to enhance your customer experience, you can then build on those refinements with system upgrades. One area of focus is deploying technology that makes it easier to refine the scripts that guide callers through a self-service

interaction. It also may be time to implement sophisticated analytics to uncover further enhancement opportunities. After that, you can take advantage of before/after analytics to track and assess the benefits of the changes.

### Updating scripts regularly

Most self-service applications are built on proprietary hard coding and contain scripts that may have been written long ago. Sometimes, because making changes can be difficult, organizations continue to use the same script year after year, rewriting only if it becomes unworkable. Newer scripts or applications may be added without consideration of existing voice personas, making the routine difficult to follow or use.

The key to enhancing customer experience is to update your scripts regularly, fix routing problems, and respond to shifting customer and market requirements. Doing so requires adoption of newer software releases that contain design interfaces specifically built to allow trained in-house staff to make minor changes. Standard protocols, such as VoiceXML, that support interactive dialog between the self-service system and back-end computers can help you personalize the experience for your customers.

Organizations are often reluctant to incur costs for implementing new technologies. They may also resist changing a system in which considerable effort and resources have previously been invested. During tough economic times, it may be easier to maintain the status quo than to consider changes when the system seems functional. However, the potential benefits of these actions can be measurably improved customer experience and retention. Making such changes may therefore prove to be a sound investment.

## Leveraging analytics

After you have refined your call handling processes by critically observing how the system operates, you can focus on a more refined analysis of how customers behave and what they say.

Reporting tools traditionally found in call management systems may provide huge volumes of data, but do they give you ways to analyze that data fully? New data mining tools support extensive analysis of what's happening in the system and why it is happening. They can identify trends and indicate where changes might be made to improve the system.

Yet without additional investigation, analysis software alone may not give you specific answers about what needs to be changed and how. In the hands of an inquisitive and analytical professional, this software can help you uncover new areas and opportunities to investigate. In the end, detective work can help you uncover the problems customers are experiencing and a creative approach can lead to the design of a more customer-friendly system.

Tools now provided in current releases of call distribution software examine how vector directory numbers are used to direct incoming calls. They can help you identify circuitous call paths or unnecessary steps that callers are forced to take. Understanding the call results and handling time allows real-time analysis of how skillfully contact center staffs are handling inquiries—information that can then be used to route customers to the best agent for their needs.

## Cross-pollinate with the rest of the organization

A wealth of resources may also exist elsewhere in your enterprise to help improve contact center performance and customer experience.

For example, the marketing department puts extensive time and effort into customer segmentation. What if your contact center agents could use this information to tailor their conversations with customers based on pre-identified characteristics?

A process improvement group may have developed significant expertise and capabilities in Six Sigma. Is your contact center leveraging these resources?

Web services have been developed with rich functionality to serve customers online. Are these same tools made available to your self-service system and contact center agents? If those processes are being refined to provide better online experiences, are the lessons learned being transferred to the voice channel?

## Take a reasoned approach

You can improve performance significantly by analyzing your current call handling systems and capabilities, appointing a change champion, deploying new technologies, and tapping the experience and understanding across your organization.

For most organizations, voice calls are still the primary customer gateway to the business. Constant and critical evaluation, coupled with frequent modifications to various voice applications, can influence whether customers enjoy a good experience and stay loyal to your offerings and your brand.

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## About the author

Maurice Bell is a principal management consultant for Avaya. With more than 35 years of global business management experience, he advises executives of *Fortune* 500 and other major global corporations about the effective use of business communications systems, including corporate and branch telephone and VoIP systems, mobility, home office, call centers, e-mail and voice mail, and automated speech systems.

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