

**PROFITABLE EMAIL MANAGEMENT WHITEPAPER SERIES**

# ***Reducing Total Email Response Time***

Today's competitive marketplace is placing extraordinary demands upon customer service organizations, sales teams and call centers. Managing the rapidly growing volume of email from customers can be a daunting challenge.

Key to managing this influx of customer email is reducing the ***average total email response time***. This is the measure of how effectively your staff is replying to, or otherwise processing, email messages. For organizations that deal with a high volume of email, shaving seconds off the average total email response time can save hundreds of thousands of dollars.

This white paper examines Total Email Response Time by breaking it down into its three component parts and explores ways to improve each of these three areas.

## *The Total Email Response Time Formula*

The formula for calculating total email response time is:

### **Routing Time**

**+ Agent Pending Time**

**+ Agent Effort Time**

**= Total Email Response Time**

By acknowledging the independent nature of these three base metrics, we can examine the challenges of optimizing each and explore strategies for improvements that yield dramatic gains in overall email management efficiency.

### *Routing Time*

Routing time is the time it takes for an email to be received into a group mailbox and be assigned to the agent that will be responsible for replying to it. Since not all emails are created equal, and not all agents are as adept at handling every type of customer inquiry, optimizing this metric presents a number of challenges.

### **CHALLENGES**

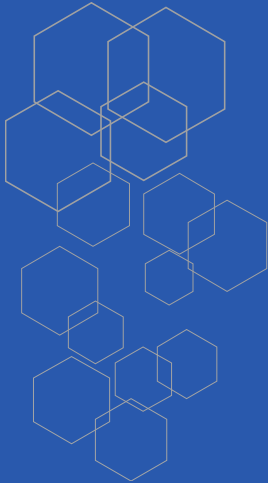
#### *Ambiguous Message Assignment Responsibility*

Corporate email messages often sit in public folders or group mailboxes waiting for someone to deal with them. This pre-assignment waiting period can be unnecessarily long due to a lack of constant agent visibility into the message backlog. Moreover, the typical public folder system makes no attempt to assign messages to agents; instead, it relies on agents to know what to work on and when. This contributes greatly to lengthy routing times.

This pooled approach to message management also means that agents can cherry pick the messages they want to work on, rather than dealing with them in a priority manner—such as the order in which they arrive.

#### *Matching Message Assignment with Agent Skills*

Routing time can increase dramatically if a message is passed from one agent to another in an attempt to find a colleague capable of dealing with the subject matter of the email.



Providing quality replies to customer inquiries starts with ensuring that agents get assigned messages they are capable of answering. In many companies, this assignment process is performed by a dedicated individual who triages each message and manually assigns it to the correct agent. This model is both labor intensive, and a process-bottleneck that increases routing time.

## **SOLUTIONS**

### ***Auto Message Assignment***

For general email inquiries that can be handled by multiple agents, setting up an auto distribution process to assign messages directly to agents can greatly reduce routing time. Various methods such as round robin or load balanced distribution can be employed to help balance the workload between agents. Limits can be established to ensure that emails are parceled out in manageable chunks. This measure prevents any one agent from receiving an overwhelming volume of email.

### ***Skills-based Routing***

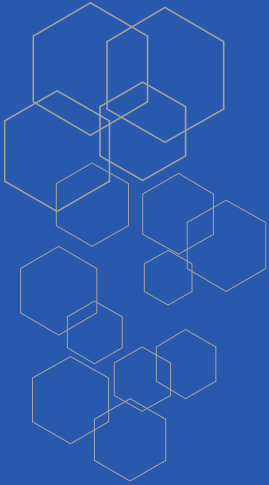
Where specialist knowledge is required to handle specific email inquiries, using rules to route these messages directly to the agents who have the skills to respond to them will shorten routing times. Skills-based routing helps eliminate the problem of messages bouncing from agent to agent in an attempt to find someone capable of responding.

Email management rules reflect agreed upon business processes and can be triggered by various elements of the message, including: subject or body content, standard message header information such as the From or To address, whether or not the message is a new message or a reply, whether or not the message has already been assigned to an agent, or any combination of these.

### ***Message Thread Continuity***

While companies should strive for first email resolution (where the initial reply to a customer's inquiry completely resolves the problem without any secondary replies on the issue), many email exchanges become full-fledged conversations requiring a number of email messages back and forth to deal with the issue.

Depending on the kind of issues that need resolving, and the nature of the company's business, secondary replies might be best handled by the agent who provided the first message reply. Since the agent is



already familiar with the customer's problem he or she will be more effective at answering follow-up-questions. By utilizing a system that automatically routes email replies to the previous owner, you can further reduce email routing time.

## ***Agent Pending Time***

Agent pending time is the amount of time between when an email is assigned to an agent and when the agent begins to compose his or her response. The average of an agent's pending time represents the size of the message backlog that the agent is experiencing. Agent Pending Time is closely linked with Agent Effort Time since both occur after ownership has been passed to a particular agent. As such, improvements in agent effort time (composing appropriate replies more quickly) will also work to reduce an agent's email backlog, but this section focuses in on efforts that can be taken before the agent begins working on the message.

### **CHALLENGES**

#### ***End of Day Replying***

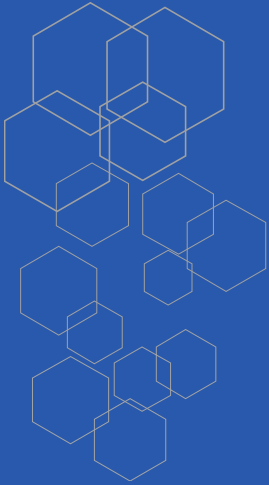
Often, agents that are tasked with replying to emails also have to take phone calls, respond to online chats and perform other tasks throughout the day. Replying to emails can easily become a lower priority function in the face of multiple demands on an agent's time. The result is that an agent will often allow email to pile up all day, and then hurriedly work through the backlog at the end of their shift. Not only does this type of behavior increase agent pending time, but it often reduces the quality of email replies produced.

#### ***Scheduling Complications***

An email assigned to an agent will only be processed if he or she is available to work on it. Meetings, doctor's appointments, sick days, vacation days, etc., can present problems for an email customer service team if they are not properly accounted for. Messages assigned to agents that are out of the office will remain idle until he or she returns, causing an increase in average agent pending time.

#### ***No Radar***

If a company doesn't have real-time visibility into the pending backlog for each agent, then they can't bring to bear tools and techniques that can streamline mail flow.



### *Prioritizing the Backlog*

Every company will have customers that from time-to-time need some extra care. Being able to prioritize the emails received from these customers can be very important. Taking step to ensure that these emails get responded to first will drive down the average agent pending time for this high priority group.

### **SOLUTIONS**

#### *Schedule Time for Emails*

Management needs to create and enforce policies that ensure email responding is an activity valued as much as the other agent tasks. The two most common methods for doing this are:

- a) Creating aggressive email reply time performance goals for agents that require constant effort throughout the day to achieve (thereby eliminating the end of day replying problem);
- b) Scheduling a specific period of time each day for agents to exclusively work at replying to email inquiries.

#### *Push Reports to Agents*

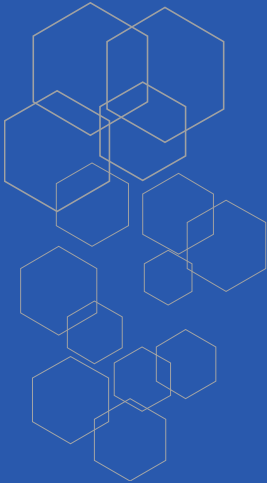
If agents are sitting on messages and replying at the end of the day, then start by publishing service level standards that dictate more aggressive reply time requirements for agents. Follow this up by publishing reports that show how each agent is performing relative to the service level goals. Ideally, your email management solution includes a number of user-oriented reports that can be made available to agents. Consider offering incentives to agents for maintaining certain service level standards. This type of motivation can dramatically reduce average agent pending time.

#### *Auto Re-assign Old Messages*

Since each agent will have their own pending pool of email messages to work on, it's important that your email management system monitor each agent's queue, and if a particular agent is falling behind, automatically re-assign their messages to other users.

#### *Auto Re-assign at End of Shift*

For companies running multiple shifts, and where agent continuity isn't critical, consider automatically re-assigning messages at the end



of a user's shift to the remaining agents that are still working. This will minimize the over-night carry-overs and greatly reduce agent pending time.

### ***Real-time Reporting & Management Alerts***

Real-time reporting on current email backlog performance is a critical tool in helping marshal the necessary resources to manage the email load efficiently.

In addition to real-time reporting, automatic alerts can monitor important metrics to keep you apprised of potential service level problems. Set alerts to monitor the depth of the current email backlog and the age of unanswered emails. These are the key metrics to help you avoid being out of covenant with your service level policy. Create an action plan for staff to rapidly rectify any backlog or age issues should an alert occur.

### ***Use Rules to Automatically Prioritize***

Some tasks, or customers, may require priority email queuing. Avoid having to manually triage each email that comes in by setting up incoming group mailbox rules that automatically move these priority message to specific agents or a special priority group mailbox. Agents can be coached to answer these emails first; ensuring current corporate priorities are being followed.

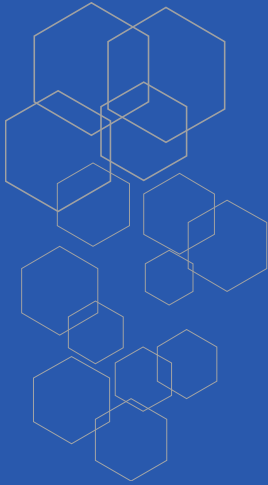
### ***Agent Effort Time***

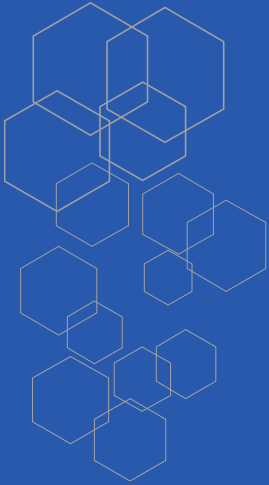
Agent Effort Time is the total amount of time it takes for agents to craft the response to a customer email once they begin working on it. This includes the time spent looking up information about the customer, consulting with other staff members or internal systems, and composing the email response.

## **CHALLENGES**

### ***Lack of Access to Information***

In order for an agent to solve a customer's problem, they often need to have ready access to the customer's email history. Being able to see how past issues have been dealt with is often key to delivering a quality response to the customer. Cumbersome search mechanisms can delay the agent's access to the information they need, increasing the average agent effort time.





### ***Email Overload***

Psychologically, people have a strong aversion to being overwhelmed. In fact, the stress associated with facing what appears as an insurmountable task (such as an enormous email backlog), typically causes a marked decrease in motivation and therefore productivity. This will have a significant negative effect on average agent effort time.

### ***Continual Message Re-invention***

Most organizations receive customer inquiries that fall into a handful of recurring categories: What do you charge? How do I return an item? How much do I owe? How do I change my address?

Agents that take the time to re-compose what is effectively the same message over and over again will have dramatically higher average agent effort times.

## **SOLUTIONS**

### ***Fast, Powerful Searching***

Scrolling through thousands of messages in a folder in an attempt to find an old email is not efficient. Agents should use a message finding solution that offers multiple search criteria so that agents can quickly hone in on the exact historical messages they are looking for. Instant access to complete email audit trails will increase agent efficiency.

### ***Throttle Message Distribution***

Set a low maximum number of messages that agents can be working on at any given time. A low maximum setting, in combination with automatic email distribution, will keep the perceived workload for each agent to a manageable level. Controlling workload volumes will keep agent stress levels lower and motivation higher.

### ***Standard Responses***

Effective use of standard responses is the number one thing you can do to significantly reduce average agent effort time, and average total email response time in general. Used properly, standard responses can reduce agent effort time to a few seconds for a significant portion of the emails that agents handle.

There is upfront effort required to build a library of standard responses based on commonly received questions, but these

responses can be used thousands of times by every agent, so the return on this investment is enormous. It also has the added benefit of improving the overall quality of responses made to your customers.

## **Conclusion**

As email continues to grow in popularity with consumers as a primary means of communication, it presents formidable challenges for companies to manage the timeliness and quality of their responses without incurring disproportionate cost increases. While each of the solutions outlined in this paper will incrementally provide efficiency improvements, utilizing an email management solution that delivers all of these benefits will dramatically improve the email effectiveness of any organization.

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