

Contact centres

Sales through service

A bricks and mortar retailer's contact centre was traditionally a departmental function providing store support within the organisation. The introduction of the online channel has seen this back-office function having to transform itself into a front-office, customer-facing operation. Emma Herrod looks at how its status is yet again changing as the contact centre moves from being a cost to a revenue-generating hub.



Shoppers' expectations of customer service are well documented and many retailers are working hard to meet these expectations in every channel. When things go wrong, though, it is the contact centre that bears the brunt of customers' frustrations and it is the agent who carries the responsibility of maintaining the brand's reputation in their response and handling of the situation.

Call centres have changed their function to become contact centres. They no longer simply handle calls but now have agents who troubleshoot customers' problems and give product advice pre- and post-sale; increasingly, they are becoming profit centres with agents up- and cross-selling. David Potter, Business Development Director, EMEA at Sitel says the contact centre is now about "customer service,

communications and generating revenue".

With retailers busy trying to create a seamless experience for customers across the various sales channels, the contact centre needs to reflect the same quality across its communications channels – telephone, email, chat and post.

"In this era of multi-communications, consumers are no longer allied to any particular mode of communication. They will select the most convenient or appropriate channel, regardless of how the business trades," says Neville Upton, CEO of contact centre operator The Listening Company. "As a result, brands need to provide their contact centre agents with the tools to seamlessly combine different communication channels such as telephone, email, vmail, web chat and SMS to communicate with the consumer and meet

their service expectations."

A customer's experience during transactions with contact centre agents establishes their overall impressions of the brand and both parties should feel as confident online or on the phone as they do in-store.

Customer service

A recent customer satisfaction survey revealed that 73% of internet shoppers are happy with how e-tailers have responded to their queries sent by email or made over the telephone. But, from that figure, we can take it that more than a quarter of internet shoppers have been left unanswered or unsatisfied by e-tailers.

"It's absolutely right to go with self-help and put up FAQs but you also need a live agent readily available when a customer wants to talk to someone," advises Adam

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Gould, Director of Retail at contact centre outsourcer Teleperformance.

Teleperformance works with Sainsbury's, feeding back recurring issues picked up by its 250 contact centre agents in order to drive down the need for inbound calls. The contact centre agents' remit is all about customer retention, resolution and giving a high-quality, personalised experience so that customers will come back again.

The national press continues to cover stories of customers who have had bad experiences with service and retail

advises e-tailers to aim for a response time of no more than four hours. He says that email communication means that the speed of response has to be so much faster, especially since people are making purchasing decisions based on the reply.

However, eservice provider Transversal warns against looking at email purely in terms of the volume dealt with. "Companies that are paid a set amount for every email answered have no incentive to ensure agents are providing detailed, useful responses. Equally, contact centre managers

This is a growing problem since shoppers expect a swift reply to their emails but in the majority of cases the response times are getting longer.

"Just because the customer is not actually in front of you, customer service and communication remain vital. Many of our surveyed sites fell down the ranking because of poor and even non-existent telephone and email communication channels, as well as delivery and refund backup," said Chris Russell, Founding Director of eDigitalResearch.

John Lewis, Amazon and Argos generally come out as top performers in studies of retailers' overall quality of customer experience. A Foviance/RXPerience study found that John Lewis delivered an excellent online experience and handled calls very well. Although Amazon provided virtually no way of contacting it by phone, the online experience it offered was so good and its response to email so fast that the overall experience was positive and consistent. It also revealed that Argos had good response times and knowledgeable call centre agents who seized the opportunity to cross-sell.

Staffing

Agents are the most significant cost in a contact centre, accounting for 80% of the overall budget, according to customer service software provider Jacada. They are also its most valuable asset, so it is essential that they are able to provide an effective customer support function while reflecting an accurate image of the brand as well as being fully incentivised to grow the retailer's business. Agents who can take on several duties – from customer care to technical support to sales – are an invaluable resource, both in terms of reducing costs and adding business value, advises Sitel.

As desirable as a 'universal agent' – who can be trained to perform multiple tasks – is to a company, a single point of contact who can address all of a caller's needs is even more important to the consumer. If one agent can fix a problem with a return and then offer a replacement product, the caller does not have to deal with the frustration of being put on hold and transferred to various other agents. Not only does this improve the customer's experience and enhance the brand's reputation, but it can also lower costs by eliminating multiple queuing problems and increasing agent utilisation.

Technical support

The product knowledge and support which



organisations. With the internet spreading the news of good – and bad – reputations faster than word of mouth, customer service is still a differentiator for e-retailers and contact centres can win or lose customers for a business.

Worryingly, of all the internet shoppers surveyed for customer experience management company Tealeaf, only 47% felt that contact with a retailer over a specific issue had resolved their problem. Some 40% of those surveyed who experienced bad customer service following an online issue stopped doing business with the company altogether.

The speed of response in resolving a customer's query is as important as the content of the response. Whereas customers were once happy to wait two or three days for a reply to an email, Potter

targeted purely on numbers don't have a remit in their jobs to monitor content," warns Dee Roche, Director of Marketing at the firm.

Email

"Consumers are increasingly choosing to contact customer service departments via email, but businesses are slow to recognise the need to deliver the same level of service through this channel that a customer would get face to face or even on the phone," claims Tim Easton, Director of customer interaction specialist Numero.

Very few organisations have the infrastructure to cope with the enormous increase in customer contact involving both email and telephone customer service, claims a shopping survey conducted by market research company eDigitalResearch.

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used to be available for store staff is now on offer to retail customers as the contact centre agents become the sales assistants for the internet businesses.

Technical support agents need to have technical awareness, a talent for troubleshooting and the ability to offer clear explanations in a patient manner. While these are not the same skills needed by someone who is up- or cross-selling, they can mean the difference between a customer buying a product following a pre-sales enquiry or returning it post-sale because they cannot understand the instructions or get it to work.

When a customer walks into a shop they expect the sales assistant to understand the products and be able to help them. The same is true if a potential customer picks up the telephone, sends an email or clicks for instant chat. Replacing a skilled operator with an automated service might save money in the short term; in the long term, however, you risk losing brand advocacy and sales, according to the Listening Company.

Gould says inbound customer calls generate "sales through service". By resolving customer issues and exceeding their expectations, a contact centre agent is sustaining rather than losing a revenue stream. But he believes an overt sales push as part of a customer service call "jars with the caller experience".

The 250 Teleperformance agents working on behalf of Sainsbury's online business have a very good view of the customer; they can see the order history regardless of the channel used, as well as brand and call guidelines. Conversations are not scripted, so a genuine dialogue can be maintained; and Gould says that if there is an appropriate offer the customer is made aware of it as part of the natural conversation.

"Customer satisfaction is the lifeblood of the Sainsbury's Online Groceries service, but it is virtually impossible to formalise procedures to cover every eventuality because no two customers are alike," says Penny White, Head of Online Customer Care at Sainsbury's Supermarkets. "That's why we rely on Teleperformance's customer service agents to provide a personalised response and determine the optimum

solution for our customers – and our business. By taking the time to phone a customer who has written to complain they can very often diffuse a situation. When customers have provided feedback, we must listen and use that information to drive the business forward."

Revenue

"I'm a big believer in sales through service," says Andy Rowe, COO of Otto UK. He says that contact centres nowadays need to be positioned as a virtual store. "If a customer is looking to buy something, the agent should try and sell them other services as part of that." For example, if a customer buys a television they should be offered a SCART lead. For Rowe, it is all about "bigger basket size".

But it is a big challenge for retailers to turn customer service agents from order takers into relationship builders. A customer calling to change their address, for example, opens up the opportunity for the agent to gain a understanding of their needs and see if they can help them. For example, as they are moving do they need a new cooker, carpets and so on?

"Many retailers see customer service as something different from sales," says Potter, which is why, he explains, "very few businesses are selling on service calls".

A contact centre needs the balance of the different competencies – of troubleshooting and sales – while maintaining enough resource and flexibility to deal with peaks and troughs in demand. By understanding traffic levels and using skills-based routing a retailer can have its best sales people answering sales calls.

While effective calls require easy access to information, the emphasis must be on reducing the amount of administration agents have to do while dealing with the caller, so they can concentrate on talking with the customer, reassuring them and converting the sale, says David Holmes, Vice President of Jacada.

"Cross- and up-sales are a good metric to monitor to gain an insight into the productivity of your agents. It's obvious that the bottom line will improve significantly if every agent achieves an increase in these areas. The best way to

enable agents to do this is to empower them with all the information they need to do their jobs well. If an agent can access customer information – including purchase history – product information and special offers, all on the same screen, then they have all the knowledge that they need to complete these sales."

Outsourcing

Customer service is still a differentiator within e-retail and many consumers will give a retailer only one chance to get it right. Customers' expectations will continue to rise and e-tailers need to understand that every communication that takes place with shoppers is not a cost but an opportunity; a chance to turn a one-off purchaser into a life-long loyal customer – and an opportunity to add value to their initial purchase by offering technical support or cross-selling complementary products.

Transforming a contact centre from a cost-cutting afterthought to a viable, brand-carrying, profit-generating division of the business could give a business an advantage over its competitors, says Sitel.

Revenue generation should not take the place of customer service and the rationale behind making a contact centre a revenue generating part of the business should not be a question of service versus money.

Retailers need to look at their core competencies and may find outsourcing the contact centre function an effective way of improving the customer experience. "You then have an organisation under contract to improve customer service," explains Potter. Outsourcing also offers greater flexibility with opening hours, something a retailer on its own may not be able to provide. "The rationale centres on flexibility, infrastructure and experience," says Potter.

A mature e-commerce business with a low level of complaints, managing its email response times and so on will drive for revenue generation but it is still best practice according to Potter. Sitel's customers tend to wait six months "to make sure that customer service is as good as it can be before ratcheting up revenue generation".



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