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INNOVATION

The Brave New World Of Contact Center Automation



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Jul 20, 2022, 06:45am EDT

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Customer service is in a state of crisis—fueled by the loss of talent during the pandemic, the "Great Resignation" and the rising demand for quality service. It's no wonder that contact centers are feeling the squeeze, given that their business model remains centered on humans doing monotonous, repetitive work.

As in other industries, automation can now provide relief. Here's how modernizing contact centers with automation can improve agent and customer experiences, reduce costs and reignite the sector.

The Contact Center Crisis

Despite widespread automation in other industries, contact centers are still lagging. Humans largely handle everything from resolutions to logging call summaries. I recently asked a 30-year contact center executive how she compared her agents' work today to the work at the same company 20 years ago. She said she used to handle six calls an hour, and her agents today handle exactly the same number of calls.

Call volumes have increased with unpredictable spikes. Contact center leaders have lost their ability to plan workforce assignments effectively, and call patterns continue to change with pandemic waves and hybrid work—leaving leaders with no baseline for planning.

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Impact On The Customer Experience

These challenges deeply affect customers. They're often forced to wait hours to speak with agents, and once they do, the agents are overwhelmed or inadequately equipped to assist. The cause may be understaffing, high turnover, rushed onboarding of new hires or a lack of training and experience—all of which are common during periods of high agent attrition. The impact on the customer experience is extensive, along with harming brand perception and loyalty.

Managing The Fallout

For companies, the fallout is significant. In addition to searching for solutions, organizations are struggling to address damage to reputations, revenue, high customer churn, reduced customer lifetime value and difficulty attracting and retaining employees.

Pushing customers to adopt alternative communication channels like chat has shown minimal success—especially as a standalone solution. Phone calls remain customers' preferred method, and there simply aren't enough people to answer the phones or handle their problems sufficiently.

Considering Automation As A Solution

Increasing recruitment might seem like an obvious strategy, but competition is fierce across a shrinking agent pool. In addition, forecasting how many agents a contact center might need on any given day is challenging, leading to shorthanded staff or outsized costs. The answer may lie in leveraging contact center automation powered by artificial intelligence (AI). No longer a "pie in the sky" idea, contact center automation is a sophisticated and comprehensive technology that can solve customer service problems and allow a smaller workforce to handle a much larger volume of calls.

How To Get Started

A primary reason why automation adoption has lagged in contact centers when compared to other functions is simply due to a lack of turnkey software solutions like those available for sales or marketing.

However, many of today's solutions are pretrained on customer service data, require little development effort and natively integrate with existing contact center software. This eliminates the need for contact centers to hire their own machine learning experts or accrue thousands of hours of training data themselves to deploy an effective automation solution.

Instead, contact center leaders can focus on choosing a solution provider that best fits their needs. The vendor evaluation process often entails working with a partner to evaluate call flows ripe for automation, measuring anticipated ROI and aligning on a deployment timeline.

In most cases, contact centers can begin their automation journey with a few high-volume customer service requests that are both prone to spikes and repetitive in nature, like scheduling appointments, obtaining proof of insurance or checking the status of an order. Once deployed, contact centers typically expand automation to additional channels and more complex conversation flows like emergency roadside service.

Organizations should consider looking for contact center automation solutions that staff their own teams with contact center experts, conversation designers and solution engineers. These experts specialize in working with contact center stakeholders to customize a solution for their brand. This can help ensure that return resolution rates and customer satisfaction scores are on par with (or even better than) live agents with continued ROI as more conversation flows are automated.

From a technical standpoint, some vendor solutions can also bring expertise in integrating automation into any CCaaS, CRM or telephony system. They also typically come vetted with industry-standard compliance, security and redundancy protocols, ensuring contact center automation is both reliable and secure.

Enjoying The Benefits Of Contact Center Automation

Automation has the power to free up agents' workdays, allowing for more meaningful work and complex tasks. This can lead to better retention and reduced time and money spent on onboarding and training. Furthermore, it can minimize the customer frustrations currently plaguing industries—which, in turn, can lead to higher brand loyalty.

Accenture predicts the use of AI will increase contact center productivity in the U.S. alone by 35% by 2040, and I personally believe it will happen a decade earlier. The benefits of providing customer service through contact centers include:

- Reduced wait times, with immediate resolutions for many requests without speaking to an agent.
- Round-the-clock availability, a vital factor in global enterprises across time zones.
- Reduced cost of the customer service department and quickly generated ROI.

- Improved customer service through state-of-the-art monitoring that provides contact center leaders insight into performance and customer experiences.

Contact center automation can transform the way technology and humans work together. It can empower customers to get their questions addressed faster, give agents space to provide support to customers who need it the most and increase productivity and profitability. It's truly a brave new world out there, and contact center automation could help customer service leaders navigate it.

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