

Telecommunications and Customer Care: A Contradiction in Terms?

By Jeff Nicholson

Telecommunications companies do lots of things right. But customer care?

- A study in the U.S. and UK reports that a mere 42 percent of customers are satisfied with the treatment, relationship and services they receive from their mobile network operators.
- A recent study in Australia poses the question: “Why is the quality of customer care being provided by telecommunications companies failing to meet consumers’ expectations when the services they provide generally do?”

With customer churn on the rise across the industry, improving the customer experience is paramount in attracting, retaining and satisfying customers—and effective management and use of customer data and data analytics is the key to gaining a competitive edge, making their customers happier, and improving performance.

#1: Start With Customer Centricity

Every company claims that it’s customer centric. But, there is a vast chasm between most business’ claims, actual organizational structures, and service



delivery. Instead of organizing around customers; businesses have organized around products and channels—and that interferes with customer focus. Recognizing this, and finding ways across existing structures to standardize, improve, share and enrich customer data, is a first big step. Customers like simple, they like convenient—and they like things that fit. So it’s important to strive for that elusive 360-degree view. Armed with perspective on customer interactions, preferences, and usage patterns and needs, it becomes considerably easier to shift from sales pitches to customer conversations and to match services to people—and build relationships that last.

#2: Focus on Cross Channel Customer Dialogue

With customers suffering from ad fatigue, overstuffed inboxes and mailboxes, and social media providing

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alternate sources of product insight, it is essential to create interactions that take on a dialogue format and are more focused on the specific needs and preferences of the customer. Telling customers “we value your business” is not enough. Effective dialogues are two-way, built from new inputs to the conversation, are channel agnostic, and encompass both inbound and outbound conversations. Adding predictive analytics and customer intelligence into day-to-day workflows is essential, as these conversations often have a give-and-take aspect to them: they recognize that providing additional customer benefits (a bundled discount, unlimited text, etc.) can result in a longer, stronger customer relationship that provides higher ROI and a better customer experience over the course of an extended customer lifecycle.

The Ongoing Nature of Ongoing Dialogues:

Telecommunications providers need to develop an institutional memory of each customer in order to be able to maintain a fluid, ongoing conversation across channels. Effective dialogues are not about getting interactions right once at a particular point in time, they’re about getting them right continuously by connecting them across time to nurture ongoing relationships.

Moving to a dialogue-based strategy requires stopping to listen—and maintaining a conversation level that is comfortable to the customer. It is about ensuring that each interaction has a true potential positive value that outweighs the value of no interaction at all. And this will sometimes mean choosing one positive contact over another, prioritizing communications and limiting volume in order to ensure that customers are not over-inundated.

#3: Listen Before You Speak

Shifting to a dialogue approach is also vitally important to keeping the lines of communications open—and campaigns are just points along a continuum of customer communications. Any given campaign may stir more interest and more sales, but it can also serve to cut short the continuum of contacts. And this is particularly true now that so many communications are made via email.

When customers opt-out, tune-out, or relegate communications to junk mail or spam, the lines of communication are cut. To optimize customer lifetime value, telecoms must rethink how they measure campaign effectiveness. Response rates and conversions are just one side of the equation—to truly understand campaign results, negative results as well as sales that would have happened

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unprompted—need to be factored in.

#4: Inform Interactions with Individualized Best-Next-Action Decisioning

Real-time decisioning is particularly powerful at the flashpoint where a customer is on the verge of attrition. Its uses, however, are more extensive. At time of enrollment for periodic proactive account re-evaluations, and reactive adjustments to trigger events ... real-time decisioning enables telecoms to be more nimble, more adept at tying customer preferences and needs to appropriate telecom service bundles, and more attuned to their customers overall. The result: better customer relations—and fewer of those flash-point calls. Today, consumers still pick up the phone when they have an issue, question, or concern—and with customer satisfaction low, service packages increasingly complex and competition on the rise, telecoms are getting lots of calls.

Consumers today know about the data companies collect on them. They understand how technology can be used to transfer, share, and interconnect information. They want businesses to have a clear record of their interactions. They don’t like to repeat themselves; and, now more than ever, they don’t believe that they should have to. At the same time, they have grown to have low expectations for the call-center experience: the long wait times, the “get them off the phone” dynamic, the probability that their calls will be outsourced to someone overseas who will read off a script that may or may not address their question head on.

This is a ready-made opportunity for businesses to shine. All of the components discussed above—better data, data integration across channels and lines of business, using data for prediction—can all be brought to bear in transforming call-center interactions with unhappy customers from “Hail Mary” account-preservation offers to positive conversations that can extend and grow customer relationships. Marketing automation that enables real-time decisioning can equip call centers to capitalize on customer needs at a particular point in time.

For example: If a customer calls incensed regarding over-limit charges on a bill, a quick review of the customer's usage patterns may uncover new ways to save, or new services that the customer may want to consider. A customer questioning the value of his/her current TV package may be enticed by a limited-time offer to try new channels, or a triple-play package that gives them more for their money. A customer calling to make an account change, such as adding a teenager to their cell plan, may benefit from a rethink of their overall service bundle.

Rather than using a series of pre-prioritized prompts, advanced real-time decisioning generates best-next-action prompts specific to the customer and interaction themselves.

Advanced real-time decisioning considers context from the perspective of what the customer has done recently (account behaviors and interactions such as usage, payment patterns, and service contacts); contacts he/she has received (recent marketing activity, promotions, billing communications and more); how, when and where the contact was initiated; as well as the reason for the interaction in the first place.

This more timely and holistic view can present the most current, relevant, and appropriate offers--and demonstrate a true understanding of the customer. Because the offers are more closely aligned with the customers' needs, the benefits of this best next action approach are two-fold:

- The likelihood of a sale is higher.
- The interaction is more likely to be viewed positively (sale or not) by the customer, strengthening satisfaction and loyalty, and reducing the likelihood of attrition.

The Bottom Line: A Better Customer Experience Doesn't Happen by Accident

Let's go back to the question "Why is the quality of customer care being provided by telecommunications companies failing to meet consumers' expectations when the services they provide generally do?" It seems that the shoemakers' children are going barefoot. The very companies that have such extraordinary powers for helping people connect with each other are not communicating as effectively as they could within their organizations and with their customers.

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About Pitney Bowes Software

Pitney Bowes Software, a wholly owned subsidiary of Pitney Bowes Inc., is a software & services company that enables communications providers to acquire, serve and grow lifetime relationships with their customers.

Our proven solutions enable organizations to engage with each of their customers as individuals and to connect every customer communication outbound, inbound, marketing, sales or service into an on going dialogue where customer insight and understanding forms the basis for each and every interaction. The end result is that your customers, no matter how or where the contact was made, always go away with the feeling that you know them, you understand them, you care for them and you value them.