Advances in Technology Are Paving the Way Forward for Customer Service Centers

Customer service has always been a key aspect of business – now more so than ever. A Microsoft study conducted in 2017 determined that 54% of customers had higher expectations for better customer service than the year before[1]. Technological advances have helped businesses better manage their customer service departments and improve communication, collaboration, speed, and accuracy.

THE EVOLUTION OF THE CUSTOMER SERVICE DEPARTMENT

In the past, customers that had a technical issue or some type of problem with a transaction or procedure had limited communication avenues available. They had to call an 800 number and stay on hold until their call was answered. Usually, resolutions were hard to come by on the first communication attempt. This meant the customer would have to end the call and wait for the company to investigate the issue and report back – which could take weeks or even months. There was no guarantee the issue would even be resolved to their satisfaction.

Customer service processes started to improve with the rise of the internet in the late 1990s. Companies that were on the ball early offered email as a way of reporting issues, which sped up responses and/or resolutions.

Now, customer service departments are expected to be innovative – and provide real-time investigations and immediate responses.

THE PRESSURE TO IMPROVE SERVICE LEVELS

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected just about every aspect of life – customer service is no exception. Even with the rise in the amount of employees working from home or other remote locations, customer service volumes have not slowed down at all. In fact, many businesses are reporting even more inquiries.

Due to these increases, businesses are making capital investments to improve their customer service capabilities. Many organizations are opting for artificial intelligence (AI), automation, and cloud-based platforms, tools, and applications to boost productivity. These trends were already making

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mainstream inroads prior to the pandemic, but the virus has been an accelerant.

Most businesses realize that the operational ways of the past will not work in the future. These companies are turning to technology to provide a bridge to the next generation of customer service improvements[2].

Companies must also improve the ways they supervise, coach, and train their call center employees in the modern business environment.

Organizations can realize savings of approximately $11,000 per year per employee[3] by:

- Employing AI, chatbots, and voicebots.
- Allowing their customers to self-serve and take a more active role in diagnosing their issues via searching FAQs, tracking their delivery, and verifying their identity.

HOW TECHNOLOGY CAN ASSIST CUSTOMER SERVICE OPTIMIZATION EFFORTS

Today's businesses are fortunate to have access to the latest technological advances to help transform their contact centers. Not only can these advances save time and money – they also save customers headaches and frustration when dealing with transactional issues.

OMNI-CHANNEL SERVICE EXPERIENCE

Businesses have a great opportunity to improve customer satisfaction and engagement by creating a consistent experience across all channels and offering rapid responses and issue resolution. The use of video, real-time messaging, chatbots, AI, and self-service opportunities represent real change for contact centers[4].

Omni-channel support results in a cohesive experience across all communication avenues, so customer service teams can work seamlessly amongst them. Customers can have direct

interaction with organizations via social media, third-party review sites, and e-commerce platforms, so it's important that businesses incorporate these new entities into their customer service strategies.

Evolving technologies will play a prominent role in contact centers for the foreseeable future. Here are some forecasted improvements that are expected to further influence the way customer interactions are managed going forward:

- Video communication will increase and become part of the new normal.
- Real-time messaging will grow, and email communication will fade.
- Remote work will be part of customer service strategy.
- Bots and AI will be helpful tools to customer service reps.
- BlockChain will have a big influence on e-commerce support.
- Self service will become critical.
- Training will become personalized.
- Customer success will become a competitive differentiator.
- Resolutions will be more data driven.
- Social media will be a very important customer service tool.
- Customer service reps will solve fewer issues and be more flexible.

AI PLATFORMS IN THE CONTACT CENTER

Traditionally, businesses have been more interested in technology for its cost cutting benefits rather than its improvements to the customer experience. Two recent megatrends flipped that scenario 180 degrees.

The mass adoption of smartphones, social media, and consumer-friendly apps have changed customer expectations. Poor experiences are no longer tolerated. Along with that, the growth of cloud-based products and services has put powerful

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AI tools into the hands of call centers to improve customer service[5].

AI-enabled agents have tools at their disposal that bring them up to speed before they even answer a customer's call. They know who's calling, what they need, and in many cases how to get it.

Here are three of the most common ways AI is changing the call center and redefining the customer experience:

AI-Powered Customer Assistants

Organizations that have high call volumes tend to have overwhelmed service agents. For example, in 2016 Humana call centers were receiving over one million calls every month – and 60% of those calls were simple inquiries for basic information. This led to longer wait times, frustration for their customers, and higher costs to Humana that paid for outsourcing companies to manage those calls.

Since Humana employed AI-powered assistants in 2019, the percentage of callers using the AI system has doubled and the costs have dropped by two-thirds[6].

AI-Powered Human Agents

AI-powered assistants also provide human agents with intelligent data and analysis to deliver better, faster outcomes. An AI application called sentiment analysis understands customers' spoken or written comments and recommends a handful of solutions to the agents, which helps them use their perception to gauge the customer's emotion and decide on the best course of action to satisfy their inquiry.

Predictive Call Routing

AI has also improved calls by implementing predictive behavioral routing. This technique uses analytics to match the personality of a caller with the agent best equipped to handle that personality type.

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Although few companies have embraced this technology to date, it is expected to become more mainstream due to the COVID-19 crisis.

MACHINE LEARNING IN THE CONTACT CENTER

The use of artificial intelligence and machine learning is at the forefront of the most recent service level improvements. Contact center automation works best if there's a balance of core service goals and KPIs (key performance indicators) mixed in with automation. It's important to know when to utilize live human interaction and when to deploy AI-powered virtual assistants.

For example, a contact center might consider using AI virtual assistants to cut down on the amount of time-consuming, repetitive tasks that eat up employee bandwidth. This strategy saves time and frees up contact center agents to handle more complex customer-centric interactions.

Automation should be considered a great behind-the-scenes application that can be launched when needed, help stabilize operations, and facilitate quicker decisions[7].

The most common call center automation trends are:

- Chatbots and active listening.
- Robotic process automation (RPA).
- Statistical machine learning.
- Deep learning neural networks.

Predictive Call Routing

These tools provide opportunities to improve customer and employee experiences as well as contact center operations. However, they are not free from weaknesses, so it's important to know what automation does well while recognizing its limitations.

MACHINE LEARNING IN THE CONTACT CENTER

When automation is incorporated into the mix, new service models are possible and stress levels decrease. It also moves the benchmark of success from calls per hour, handle time, and other operational KPIs to outcome based metrics like customer satisfaction, first contact resolution, and net promoter score.

Intelligent automation takes the best of humans and technology to develop and improve interactions. It combines the emotion and empathy that people possess with the speed and accuracy of digital tools. And it's this mix that enables call centers to operate more efficiently, accurately, and intelligently.

If your organization needs assistance formulating a customer service call center strategy that incorporates the latest available technology, we can help you navigate the competitive landscape and create a customized plan to fit your needs. Contact us today for a free, no-obligation consultation that will set your customer service teams and your business on a solid ground for the future.

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