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Why CCaaS Is the Right Choice for Omnichannel Flexibility

Most organizations lack the expertise to handle the growing complexity of the contact center, opening the door to CCaaS providers.

By Michael Finneran

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Why CCaaS Is the Right Choice for Omnichannel Flexibility

The contact center business has been thrown into turmoil by sweeping changes in consumer buying behavior. These changes have been driven by the move to online shopping, widespread adoption of mobile devices, and the explosion of new communications options such as text and email. With all of this change underway, a contact center operator can't simply sit by the 800-number waiting for someone to call. At the very least, all contact centers will need to "respond" to these changes, but forward-thinking companies look at this environment as an opportunity to excel.

Contact center managers must come to grips with these developments while continuing to execute the already complex dance of managing the contact center. In the current hyper-competitive market, businesses are all following the imperative to "do more with less." However, that runs directly counter to the need to upgrade the contact center infrastructure to begin interacting with customers through the methods they have found to be most convenient and functional.

Both existing contact center operators and businesses that are just coming to realize they will need to invest in improved customer communications are faced with this same hard reality. The core question comes down to whether businesses should attempt to make this change using a premises-based system, which has been the



Source: TMCnet

dominant solution in the past, or move to a cloud-based, or contact center as a service (CCaaS), approach.

Opening Up to Omnichannel

The biggest driver at the heart of the premises-versus-cloud decision is the need to fully support omnichannel. That is, the ability to interact with customers through email, text and social media in conjunction with traditional voice calls. The plummeting costs of toll-free voice services have reshaped the economics of the contact center to the point of enabling such strategies as outsourcing contact center functions to overseas service bureaus.

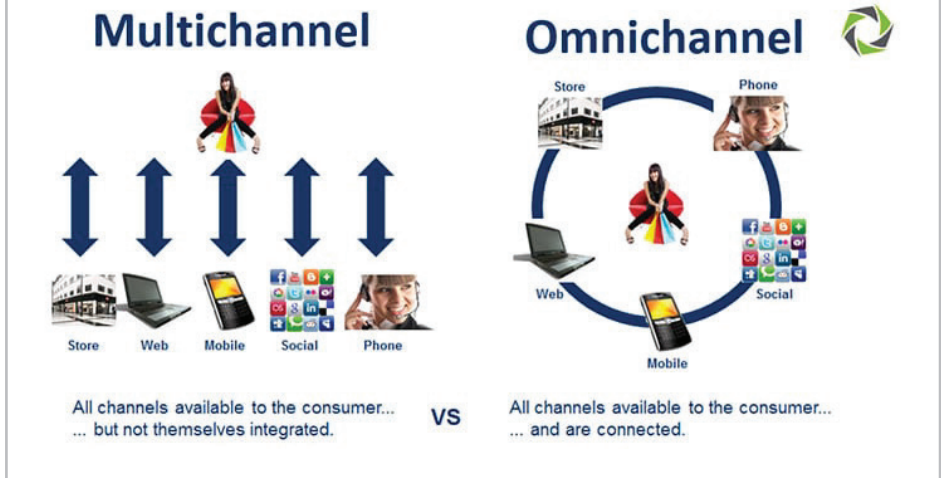
All of that happened in an environment where voice was the only medium contact center operators had to worry about. The challenge each new medium brings with it is the range of questions including how that connection will be implemented, how it will impact workforce management and how to maximize the functionality each new option will enable.

We should note at the outset that nobody expects that voice interactions will be fully eliminated in the foreseeable future. When it comes to resolving complex, multifaceted issues, even millennials will reach for the phone. However, personalized phone service is expensive to provide, and contact center operators know that requests served by digital means are typically far cheaper. Inevitably, the goal will be to handle higher and higher percentages of calls by digital means. The incorporation of technologies such as speech-capable, artificial intelligence (AI)-enabled bots aims to increase the percentage of requests that can be handled digitally.

Parsing 'Omnichannel'

Email is typically the easiest and least encumbered of all digital options to implement. You set up an email address and platoon a

Multichannel vs. Omnichannel



Source: Multichannel Merchant

number of agents to handle those inquiries. Even then, you have decisions to make: Should voice agents handle those emails during idle periods, or do you assign specialized agents to handle emails? Beyond that, you have to decide how functional you want those email interactions to be, and how you can best use that vehicle to service customer inquiries or close sales.

What if the customer needs to follow up? Is the original email stored with the customer's record? Is there a case number that the customer can provide to a voice agent if that's how they choose to follow up? How cumbersome a process will that be for the agent? And email is the easy one!

Text offers a panoply of options. The most rudimentary form of text is web chat, or the ability to text with a live (though "multitasking") agent through a pop-up that appears on the company's web page. Most of those are transitory exchanges,

and if they are retained at all, the context is related to agent training and there is no connection to the nature of the customer's inquiry – or the fact that the inquiry occurred at all.

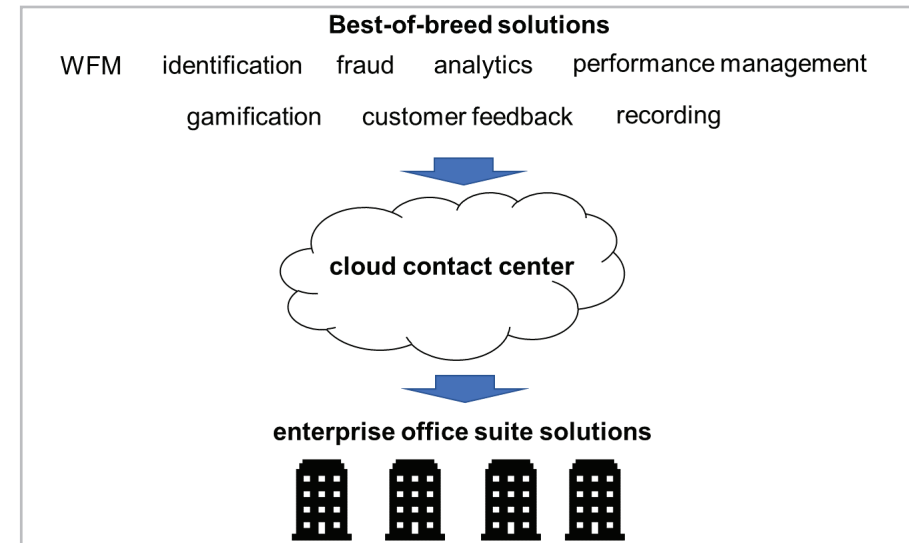
Recognizing this, mobile device and application manufacturers are developing ways for businesses to communicate with their customers through text or messaging. Apple calls its capability Apple Business Chat (ABC), which allows businesses to maintain persistent chat sessions with customers through its Messages app. That is the same iPhone app customers use for their everyday personal communications.

As chats, particularly chats with businesses you buy from, don't call for an immediate response, customers can get back to them whenever they want. While selling a particular item may involve several short chat sessions over the course of a few weeks, in the end, you wind up with a sale. Also, if there's a need for after-sale follow-up, the chat session is still there. In addition, Apple provides tools to automate tasks like choosing a color/size, picking a seat or setting an appointment optimized for a mobile device.

However, there are a lot more Android devices out there than Apple iPhones. So messaging service WhatsApp is building many of the same features as ABC into its platform, which runs on both Apple and Android devices. Facebook is also looking at how it can enhance the marketing capabilities of its platform.

If that's not enough, Google and the mobile operators are introducing a new text service based on a technology called Rich Communication Services (RCS) that will allow the carriers to offer open, generic text services with many of the same features as Apple Messages or WhatsApp. As a carrier-based capability, RCS could be available on all smartphones. However, Apple has yet to make a commitment to support RCS on its devices.

We could go on about even more scenarios a contact center may



Source: Ovum

need to plan on, including ones that would involve video or picture sharing for some portions of a task. However, it is clear that the path going forward on contact center requirements (and how soon they may be relevant) is anything but clear. The important question of how contact centers will support these capabilities remains unanswered.

Doing Omnichannel Right – Full Integration!

The key message here is that all of a company's communications with its customers, regardless of what form they take, must be integrated to be effective. As more of the world's commerce shifts from face-to-face interactions to digital exchanges, how those digital exchanges are handled will become critical in shaping the company's image in the mind of the consumer.

When people dealt with the butcher on the corner, they would know he could

be grumpy but they also knew he was a good guy at heart. Plus, they knew he was a really good butcher and would go out of his way to help out a customer. There is no such free pass for “grumpy” in the digital environment.

Contact centers must be available 24x7x365, responsive, helpful, knowledgeable and, above all, pleasant for every single interaction regardless of how “challenging” it may be. And organizations have to figure out how to deliver on that promise close to 100% of the time with a diminishing budget. By the way, all of this is now done in an environment where mistakes can quickly be broadcast over social media.

From the infrastructure standpoint, the key to delivering all of this is to be able to capture every element of that customer interaction regardless of how they engage – text, email, social media, voice call, etc.

An interaction may begin over text or email, but as the complexity of the problem begins to reveal itself, the need for a phone exchange may become apparent. If that customer should randomly call into a contact center, possibly a day or two later, the content of that previous text exchange must be available to the agent. Preferably that exchange should be available directly so the agent doesn’t have to log in to a completely separate text system to access it.

“For many organizations, the advent of omnichannel customer contact may mean that they can no longer afford to do all of this on their own.”

Build or Buy?

Given the critical business importance of the contact center and the amount of customization that was involved in tuning it (over a matter of years) to respond to the unique mix of calls that an organization receives, contact center operators are extremely reluctant to either move the contact center to a different platform or move to a cloud-based CCaaS alternative.

Rather, the primary approach has been to maintain this finely tuned “voice” system and augment it with standalone systems, often operated by separate staffs, to deal with the digital contacts. The level of information transparency between the different platforms will vary greatly, but the less transparency the agents experience between the various platforms, the more difficult it will be to meet customer expectations.

From our daily lives we can readily see

that consumer trends all point toward people conducting more and more of their research, buying and subsequent sales support through mobile devices or traditional PCs. When you couple that observation with the industry knowledge that there could be potentially dozens of incompatible customer engagement mechanisms you may have to consider, the notion of taking this all on your own shoulders is daunting.

What is certain is that this reality will come crashing down on contact center operators, who will have to somehow develop an integrated solution or continue to exist on a hodgepodge of standalone, disconnected systems each supporting a specific sub-portion of the customer engagement task.

For many organizations, the advent of omnichannel customer contact may mean that

they can no longer afford to do all of this on their own. We have already seen the birth of specialized communications service providers like Twilio that manage many of the specialized network service requirements like SMS notifications for well-known web-based businesses such as Uber and AirBNB.

There will certainly be some very large contact center operators, particularly ones where the contact center is the key sales vehicle, that may need to maintain their own customer contact infrastructure and they will typically have significant resources available to stay on the leading edge of customer service expectations.

Most others will be taking a slower and more selective route to choosing which capabilities are critical, what vehicle will provide access to the largest portion of their customers and what specific function will be most important. Finally, they will need to decide how this fits into their overall customer engagement and brand enhancement strategy.

Making the Break to CCaaS

The key for each organization is to recognize where they are today and the range of options that they may be required to support. That is particularly challenging given the inherent unpredictability of consumer preferences. A lot

of that will have to do with the type of business being supported, and its organizational goals regarding how digital engagement and leading-edge customer support factor into its marketing.

Omnichannel, and particularly text, offers an amazing array of options with the ability to help build customer loyalty and brand value as well as servicing inquiries and complaints. With the addition of artificial intelligence and machine learning, these tools could eventually serve a far higher percentage of calls with zero human intervention.

However, few companies will have the expertise or the resources to implement all of these. Further, if they try to implement them through a collection of specialized adjuncts to the existing voice contact center, the result could be a decline rather than an improvement in service levels.

The growing complexity of the contact center means that the expertise required to maintain it will evolve beyond the capabilities of most organizations to support it. That reality opens the door to specialized cloud-based CCaaS providers. Digital is the future of marketing, and many businesses will need this technology to stay on top of their markets. CCaaS appears to be the best formula for getting that done.

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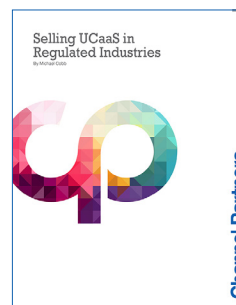
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