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Five Contact Center Trends to Watch in 2017

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The contact center industry continues a remarkable transformation as consumers set the customer service bar ever higher. Connected to the world 24/7/365 through mobile devices, consumers demand from businesses quick resolution of issues—both simple and complex—across all communication channels.

This year, companies operating in-house contact centers and providers of outsourced contact center services will continue to tap the cloud to support forward-thinking technologies and strategies aimed at meeting the needs of today's mobile consumer. Thanks to the cloud's seemingly unlimited computing power, artificial intelligence—in the form of customer-service bots—will become more pervasive.

Contact center leaders will be challenged to allocate limited resources in an environment where consumers expect customer service "without limits." With this in mind, let's look at five trends that will shape contact center operations in 2017 and beyond.

1. Managing the "All-Channel" Explosion of Customer Activity

In describing the contact center services, the buzzwords "multichannel" and "omnichannel" still cause confusion. What word best describes a seamless customer-service experience?

For 2017, let's call it what it is: "all-channel" customer service. Let's look at a hypothetical all-channel customer journey:

- Your Facebook post or ad sends a customer to your web site. Next comes a web chat, a web order and a confirmation email.
- If there's a problem, the journey brings them back through some of those same channels, and possibly a phone call for resolution.
- If the experience is seamless, your customer has only to explain their issue one time to one person. Or, if you have invested in artificial intelligence, your customer's problem may be resolved by a software robot.

Some companies are fortunate to have the resources to offer support at every point across this all-channel explosion of customer activity, with teams ready to help by phone, email, webchat, social, mobile, etcetera. But realistically, many organizations will need to choose which channels they plan to support, and educate customers on the best way to use them. For example, a business should clearly explain on their web site's "Contact Us" page how long an email response will take, compared to a phone call. And if they don't offer customer service through social media, they should clearly direct customers to call or send an email for help.

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2. Self-Service Takes the Pressure Off the Contact Center

The telephone remains customers' preferred channel for problem resolution, according to Microsoft's Global State of Multichannel Customer Service Report. But most customers' first contact with a brand occurs online, using a computer, smartphone or tablet, Microsoft found. This presents the opportunity to help customers help themselves by steering them to online self-service resources. The contact center should be deeply involved in your company's self-service initiatives. Contact center agents and managers know exactly what causes customers to pick up the phone for help. Your customer service team can take the lead on creating an FAQ destination on the web that will keep calls, emails and other inquiries away from the contact center, where they become much more expensive to handle.

Other useful tools to add to the self-service portal include video tutorials, which are proving popular and practical thanks to the availability and reliability of high-speed mobile networks. High-definition videos can walk customers through complex tasks such as product assembly and device setup.

And if a customer has an issue that can't be resolved through self-service, offer an easy-to-find "click-to-call" button on the page to connect with a person.

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3. Rise of the Bots

Speaking of FAQs, why not have a chatbot answer your customer's questions or take their orders? This will be the year that we'll see more and more chatbots handle the easy work of the contact center. According to Venture Beat, more than 30,000 chatbots were active online in 2016. Insurance companies are using them to answer FAQs and handle simple forms. Hungry? Chatbots are also taking orders for Pizza Hut and Dominos through Facebook Messenger.

The artificial intelligence platforms powering chatbots are becoming more reliable and are achieving better understanding of natural language. So much so, that Venture Beat ventures to predict that chatbots will be added to the CRM toolkit of all Fortune 1000 companies in 2017!

With Google and Apple offering home chatbot devices that respond to "Ok, Google" and "Hey, Siri," consumers will get help without touching a computer or smartphone. At-home chatbots will continue to improve, and by linking to companies' apps (and CRM systems), expect them to answer questions such as: "When will my order arrive?" "Why was my card charged $49.99 today?" with no human involved on the other end.

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4. Humans Will Step in to Handle Complex Issues

Artificial Intelligence applied to customer service will be revolutionary, but there will always be a need for human-to-human interaction. In 2017 and beyond, look for human agents to continue to build their skillsets and knowledge bases. With bots handling password resets, change of addresses, routine orders and delivery statuses, contact center agents will establish reputations as technical experts, product-knowledge gurus and professional problem solvers.

With bots replacing some agents, the contact center model will change: There will be smaller numbers of human agents, but they will be highly skilled, with the ability to handle customer issues in all channels through cloud-based contact center software platforms that use single integrated desktops. Agents that thrive in this environment will be excellent communicators over the phone, and excellent writers via email, web chat and message apps—and some will have the ability to do so in more than one language. Compensation for these kinds of talented and experienced agents will trend upwards as contact centers compete for these workers.

5. Social Media Mining to Improve Customer Service

For better or for worse, we live in an era where personal information is publicly available and easy to find. Many of us use our social media channels to let the world know about our personal relationships, our political opinions, and our hobbies and interests.

Some companies are using this information in their contact centers to connect customers to best-match agents. The Wall Street Journal reports that startup Afiniti International Holdings Ltd. has introduced artificial intelligence software for contact centers that scours information from databases linked to customers' cell or landline numbers, as well as publicly available information on customers' social media channels, such as Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn. The Afiniti software, used by more than 150 contact centers of dozens of companies, will take this information—and contact center agents' call history—to arrange for a best match for customer service.

Afiniti tells the Journal that customer data is stored on their clients' systems and no on Afiniti's servers. The company says it expects to become profitable by next year and may launch an initial public offering.

If Afiniti finds success with its AI software, expect other companies to move into the automated profiling space. Publicly available data will only continue to grow, and opportunities for turning customer profiles into sales abound, from the contact center to brick and mortar retail locations.

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