



Reinventing the call center

Driving customer engagement with AI

Sorry, wrong number

Since the inception of call centers in the 1960s, many people have dreaded landing in a help line phone queue. Often, call centers have been defined by personnel with lack of expertise, language barriers and long wait times. The reason for these problems are manifold, including poor training, lack of access to data, the inability to scale based on uneven demand, not being open on evenings and weekends and an overriding focus on cost take-out over customer satisfaction. But recent improvements in artificial intelligence, machine learning and other cognitive technologies are poised to change everything.

A changing landscape

Because of their multichannel capabilities, today's call centers are evolving into contact centers or, even more recently, to customer-engagement centers. And they are being outfitted to provide much more rewarding experiences for companies, their customers and even call center agents.

Claes Fornell International (CFI) Group, a US-based firm that specializes in customer experience measurement and business insights, conducts an extensive study of customer satisfaction with contact centers called the Contact Center Satisfaction Index (CCSI). The CCSI for 2017 was 68 (on a scale of 0-100). The score was unchanged from 2016 and is the lowest score in more than a

decade. This study involved a panel of 1,528 respondents who had contacted customer service in the prior 30 days.¹

Despite this decline, reliable, useful and meaningful interactions with call centers, along with other customer touch-points, are increasingly crucial. According to one recent study, customers are ready to abandon a brand after only three unsatisfactory support interactions.² Among millennials, the same study reported that 22 percent said just one bad interaction is sufficient impetus to leave.

But such challenges are not uniform. Forward-looking companies are differentiating themselves in the marketplace through their

customer-engagement centers. These centers are beginning to support deeper, richer communications, and technological advancements have reached a tipping point in their ability to make centers more interactive. Combining these new technologies with better human agent training is beginning to shift the role of the contact center. It's moving from a business-centric, cost-cutting measure to a facility for customer-centric tailored interactions based on individual customer preferences. When done correctly, contact centers are becoming customer-engagement hubs. Centers act as a safety net for all interactions, regardless of channel.

Saving time, saving money

The majority of millennials prefer using self-service options such as FAQs, forums and online chat or bot services rather than traditional call centers. With these tools, customers can manage customer-engagement center interactions on their own timetable, without worrying about interruptions or being tied to a linear conversation. In fact, more than 70 percent of US consumers say “valuing their time” is the most important thing a brand can do.³ Even when messaging and calling are presented side-by-side with no context, eight of ten consumers prefer messaging when they need to contact a brand.⁴ And 72 percent of millennials say a phone call is not the best way to resolve customer service issues.⁵

In one communications-industry example, a study by the IBM Institute for Business Value found that services providers who measure customer effort, had more than 250 percent higher market-share growth than their peers.⁶ With future generations likely to be even more self-reliant, automated customer-service technologies will be crucial in developing captivating customer experiences.

Whether they’re looking to drive revenue, cut costs or improve customer satisfaction and experiences, enterprises running large customer-engagement centers are all about saving time. Cutting just five seconds off an average call can save a business millions of dollars.⁷ It also provides agents with time for other work, such as helping customers make purchases, or matching callers with products, services and other solutions.

AI to the rescue

Augmenting customer engagement centers with AI can help enterprises reduce call times and make call centers a more positive experience for customers. Consider these statistics:

- More than 60 percent of failed customer-support calls could have been solved with better access to data.⁸ Pairing human agents with virtual “smart agents” can put the right data in front of the customer in near-real-time.
- Only 36 percent of centers can track a customer journey that spans multiple channels.⁹ AI can help route contacts to the best source of help. For repeat callers, AI can route a customer to the agent who handled the prior call, if available. AI also can potentially offer the customer the choice of speaking to the same or a new agent.

– A mere 17 percent of centers can locate problems that negatively impact the customer experience.¹⁰ With machine learning and data mining, each contact can be analyzed to assess its success or problems.

A successful customer-engagement center can help transition customers from simply checking FAQs to seamless engagement and interactions within or across digital channels. For example, chatbots can offer 24/7 customer service, rapidly engaging users by answering questions or providing resources. With the increasing need for speed in customer service, leading brands are deploying chatbots to expedite service while cutting costs.

AI also can help identify the intent of an interaction to help route the request to the best source of help. Is the intent proactive or reactive? Is the interaction business-driven, such as a response to a marketing campaign? Or is it customer-driven, such as a product inquiry or technical support?

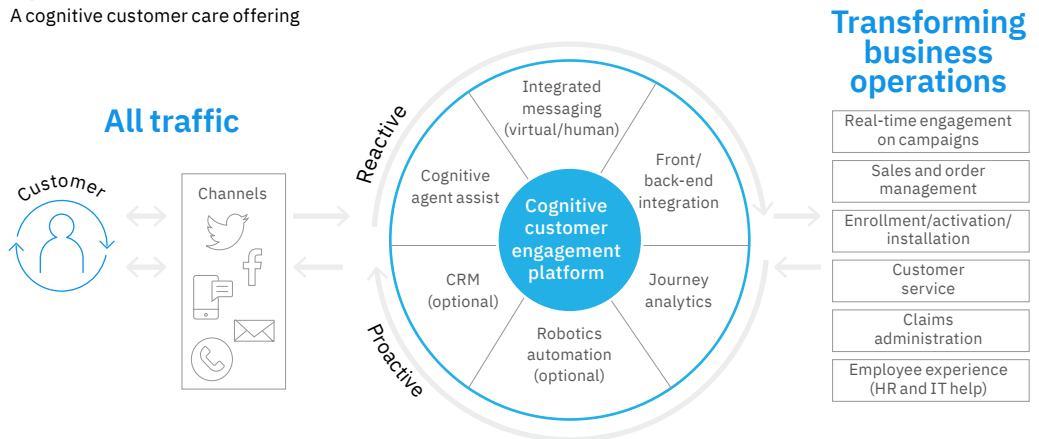
Because virtual agents can handle some of the boring, repetitive assignments, with the help of virtual agents, human agents can spend more time on interesting, complex engagements. This change has the potential to improve job satisfaction and reduce employee turnover. The economic benefits of happier employees can be significant. With a turnover rate of 30 – 45 percent annually, agent job satisfaction can make a sizable difference to the bottom line.¹ On average in the United States, each turnover can cost more than USD 6,000.¹²

3-2-1 contact

The combination of human agents and AI can deliver a level of responsiveness that isn't possible with humans alone. With virtual agents, messaging and chat, traditional telephone and self-service content can become highly interactive and engaging. AI systems can monitor a nearly infinite amount of website and in-app activity for distress indicators, identifying customers experiencing issues and

routing the problem to the best resource based on customer-identified preference or most likely to help. The system also can be designed to recommend the "next best action," such as discounts or loyalty rewards to help defuse a customer complaint. A recent survey found that extensive personalization using next best action increases average revenue per user by 166 percent.¹³

Figure 1
A cognitive customer care offering



The ability to resolve customer service issues before they escalate has the potential to significantly lower customer abandonment rates in the purchasing cycle, reduce customer complaints and improve consumer and agent satisfaction.

However, upgrading a contact center to a powerful customer engagement hub is a significant undertaking. The project requires strategic buy-in and leadership from across the company's C-suite. However, taking several straightforward steps can help simplify the transition.

1. *Determine strategic intent.* Is the primary objective to drive revenue, reduce cost or improve customer and agent satisfaction? All of these goals are, of course, highly inter-related. But everyone needs to agree on the overriding reason the upgrade is critical.
2. *Select a vendor.* When you're looking for a vendor to help build out an AI-augmented customer engagement center, you'll find no shortage of hype and puffery, so ask a few

key questions. How was the AI system trained? Was it trained by experts who understand the operations and demands of both customer engagement centers and the specific industry? Is there a strong portfolio of accounts where the system was successful that can be referenced?

3. *Retrain agents.* In an AI-augmented customer-engagement center, human agents will require significantly different skills. Although the AI can be trained on FAQs, model numbers and prices, agents would be responsible for questions that require critical thinking, stronger communication skills, empathy, conflict management and upselling.
4. *Establish strategies for deflecting callers from interactive voice response (IVR) to digital response.* Some callers may not know a digital channel exists that can respond quickly and operates around the clock. The IVR system must present callers with compelling options and experiences to move customers to the digital channel.

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