Contact Center Knowledge Management ' New Relevance And Best Practices For Today's Business Environment

By Amit Kotwal, eGain Communications Corp.

Survey after survey continues to confirm that contact centers are critical to customer retention and growth, particularly in today's business environment. In fact, 83 percent of participants in a 2003 Aberdeen Group survey said their contact center is critical or important to their enterprise.

However, as contact center managers, you operate in a challenging economic reality that makes it imperative to do more ‘and better’ with less. You need to deal with the constant challenge of keeping agents up-to-date as your company's offerings continue to proliferate. You need to wrestle with hot issues like global outsourcing. Virtually overnight, you may actually find yourself confronted with the challenge of training a whole new crew of agents on the intricacies of your company's offerings, policies and customer communication best practices. Perhaps you may also be tasked with transforming your service operation from a cost center to a profit center, which calls for your service force to evolve into a ‘sales and service’ force. And as your business goes through mergers and acquisitions or seeks to further improve efficiencies, you are asked to consolidate contact centers in a seamless manner.

But there's good news. World-class contact centers are not only dealing with these issues effectively but are also seizing this opportunity to extend their service-based competitive advantage and operational excellence. These contact centers are leveraging a new generation of knowledge management strategies, technologies, processes, people and best practices to power their customer interactions and attain these objectives.

How Knowledge Management Can Help The Contact Center

The inherent assumption, of course, is that you are open to learning 'and applying' knowledge management principles and best practices in your contact center. Done right, knowledge management in the context of customer service and contact center operations can deliver an array of business benefits. Among them:

- Enhanced agent productivity. A world-class knowledge management deployment empowers all contact center agents with knowledge, making each agent as productive as your best agent. Improving the performance of level-one agents increases first-time resolutions and reduces escalations, while allowing you to hire agents from a bigger and less expensive labor pool.
- Consistent service. Knowledge management ensures that customers with the same question receive the same response, regardless of agent, interaction channel (e.g., phone, Web, e-mail), interaction mode (self, assisted or proactive service) or even service organization (in-house or outsourced). The resulting service consistency not only increases customer satisfaction, but also helps divert a significant amount of call center traffic to less costly electronic channels like e-mail and Web.
Revenue generation. There's no better time to sell something to customers than when they have just received high-quality service. Thanks to knowledge management, agents can use the opportunity to provide the customer relevant information about upgrades, and new or complementary products and services in the context of service interactions, and upsell/cross-sell to add to your top-line revenue. Also, it's not necessarily true that agents who excel at service and support can also sell effectively 'that's where knowledge-guided selling can help, enabling support-oriented agents to sell unobtrusively yet effectively.

Seamless consolidation. Mergers and acquisitions have become rampant in the current business environment, leaving contact center and operational managers to deal with the daunting task of consolidating contact centers. The agents in these consolidated centers need to be able to provide high-quality service across a broad spectrum of product and service offerings, many of which they are not familiar with. A knowledge management system can be an indispensable enabler in facilitating these consolidations.

Outsourcing success. Companies are jumping on the outsourcing bandwagon, tempted by the persuasive economics of offshore contact centers. However, outsourcing, whether it's on-shore, near-shore or offshore, presents the huge challenges of agent training, maintaining service quality and enforcing compliance with corporate policies and best practices. Knowledge management can increase the odds of outsourcing success by reducing the need for agent training, guiding agents to the right information and answers ' all within a corporate policy and interaction compliance framework. In fact, a knowledge-powered outsourcing model can drive service efficiencies and allow you to negotiate lower prices for outsourced services, making its ROI even more compelling.

Best Practices In Knowledge Management Deployment

Team building. Depending on the scope of the project and the size of the contact center, the first challenge in the knowledge management process involves building a team of individuals with specific roles to play: typically a project manager, a lead expert, users and an author. If the project scope is limited, one person may play multiple roles. The lead expert decides how the knowledge base will be organized, which topics will be covered and to what extent. Users are call center agents who have good performance records and can provide suggestions, and also end-customers, especially in self-service projects. Knowledge authors are individuals who are technically trained in using authoring tools. And, of course, the project manager keeps it on track and within scope.

Setting content and time boundaries. It's critical to carefully define and stick to the scope of the knowledge base project, since overly ambitious and unfocused deployments will result in a knowledge base that is solid in places, but full of holes. If users are unable to find answers to their problems, or find wrong answers, they will quickly stop using the system. In the case of a multi-product business, say a computer manufacturer, it's advisable to cover desktop PCs first, then move on to laptops, and then peripherals and accessories, rather than attempt to support them all at once. Similarly, if the deployment appears to be falling behind schedule, narrowing the scope of the knowledge base and finishing on schedule is the best way to proceed. The longer it takes to get the system up and running, the longer it takes to achieve ROI. It's always possible to expand the scope later.

Managing the experts. Ensuring that the experts in any company are really 'in touch' with the issues even the most nontechnical customers face so that these issues are captured in the knowledge base in the first place is as important as ensuring that these technically competent individuals contribute to the knowledge base. Another best practice in this area is for enterprises to create incentives for domain experts to share their knowledge freely without fear of being replaced, and for management to alleviate any concerns such individuals may have of 'being replaced by a machine.'

Controlling the content. It is critical for organizations to set up a review process for approving knowledge content, and there are reasons for not leaving this decision to content experts alone. For instance, content exposed to customers could have legal or safety implications. Furthermore, you may want to allow agents and even external users to make suggestions or contribute new content, which would need to be approved by authorized individuals in your organization. And knowledge content needs to be managed on an ongoing basis, based on its performance. Therefore, it's important that robust workflow...
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and automation capabilities are used to create, authorize, maintain and evolve content over time.

Providing the right content access methods. Different users, problems and service situations call for different access methods to knowledge content. For instance, a dialog-based path to content may be more suitable for novice agents and end-customers looking to get answers to complex inquiries, and a search access to the same content may be more suitable for highly knowledgeable or level-two agents. Keep the user and usage scenarios in mind as you implement access methods.

Leveraging a common knowledge management platform. It’s important that you use the same knowledge content across interaction channels, access methods, agents and service organizations to ensure service consistency. As customers increasingly demand service through multiple channels and interaction modes, a 'silo' approach to knowledge management is not the best way to maximize knowledge ROI, improve service consistency and present one face to customers.

Determining the business value of knowledge. In the present economic climate, project managers must demonstrate compelling business value, and knowledge management is no exception. Enter the need for metrics ‘ and measurements ‘ that serve as the basis for establishing business value. These metrics fall into two broad categories:

Operational metrics. Sample metrics are the reduction of repeat calls, incorrect transfers, end-to-end call handle times, agent training time and staff wages; an increase in first-time fix and revenue generated; and reduced need for assisted service through self-service, in the case of self-service implementations.

Strategic metrics. Hardest to measure, particularly in the short run, these metrics are strategic to businesses. Among them: reduced customer churn, increased customer satisfaction and retention, and contact center profitability.

Some of these metrics may conflict with one another. Take the case of a technology subscription environment like cable TV, Internet service provision or mobile telephony. There are usually three competing goals: speed of problem resolution, also known as the 'right answer' focus: the shorter the duration of the call, the lower the cost to the enterprise. Second, customer retention: educating customers about unused features can result in greater consumer acceptance and lower churn. Third, upselling and cross-selling: at times, the best solution to a customer's problem is selling that customer a higher tier of service or an add-on product. As an example, the last two goals conflict with the first one, since they require longer handle times. In these instances, the contact center has to use metrics, content and processes that lie best with its prioritized business objectives.

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