Making Next-Gen Contact Center Agents Successful in the Digital Era

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Next-gen defined

For the purpose of this article, we are defining “next-gen” as millennials (born between 1980 and 1995) and Generation Z (born between 1996 and 2000.) These two are the primary generational groups that are, or will shortly be, a big part of the frontline workforce in the customer service contact center.

Next-gen drives digital

It is no secret that the next-gen is digital. You ask them what the capital of Burkina Faso is, and unlike older geography nerds (myself included) who will blurt out “Ouagadougou,” they will just look it up online. Gen Z is a more extreme version of millennials in these aspects—while millennials grew up digital, Gen Z was literally born digital, holding a silicon tablet! They might not even have a clue about what an AAA map is, thanks to today’s GPS systems. They are used to instant gratification. They expect things to be bought and stuff to be done at the push of a button (their GPS device, the Amazon Dash button, or the Staples Easy button) or at the yell of an order (Alexa and the like). However, today’s customer service contact center is often ill-equipped to handle digital consumers and digital agents.

Smarter self-service is a double-edged sword

The next-gen consumer demands smarter self-service. In a survey of 5000 consumers by Forrester Consulting, sponsored by eGain, 31% of them cited the inability of websites to answer their questions as one of their top three pain points. The good news is that self-service systems are getting smarter thanks to Moore’s law and sustained research in knowledge management (KM) and artificial intelligence (AI) technologies (eGain’s innovation in this domain included). Even IoT is fast becoming IoIT—Internet of Intelligent Things. The not-so-good news here is that phone agents, store associates, and branch office workers will mainly get complex customer questions. It is also worth noting that escalations to agents happen only after the consumer has tried self-service in vain, which means the consumer is frustrated when they get to a human, making the voice frontline even more difficult for the agent!

Next-gen consumers are less forgiving of “ignorance”

The aforementioned survey also found that next-gen consumers are less forgiving than older consumers when it comes to agents’ lack of knowledge (40% vs 24%) or when different agents give different answers to the same question (48% vs 33%). These pain points were mirrored by agents themselves in a 2017 eGain-SurveyMonkey survey. Agents pointed to the difficulty of finding the right answers as their biggest challenge to providing good customer service when the customer was on the line (26% of those surveyed). That was followed with discrepancy of answers from disparate systems (25%), hopping across applications (20%), and keeping up with new information and changes to information (14%).

But training is not next-gen agents’ cup of latté!

Absorbing information and expertise through training requires agents to pay sustained attention over hours or days. While millennials have a short attention span of 12 seconds, Gen Z has a “gnat” attention span of 8 seconds (Source: Sparks & Honey)! Gen Z does not like formal training either—65% of them like to just learn on their jobs, according to research by Capita. They bring these traits and preferences to the workplace, adding another challenge to contact center leaders, many of them still relying on traditional methods to onboard agents.

First, it is a huge challenge for training organizations to account for all the service scenarios that the agent will encounter. Moreover, material shared in training sessions becomes obsolete in no time thanks to rapid changes in the business or the industry the company is in. Despite all the training, agents are still expected to read through voluminous documents to figure out answers, rules, logic, and steps in processes, when the customer is on the line. This puts undue pressure on them since the temperature of the conversation goes up as the customer starts to get impatient.

While daunting, the challenges we have discussed are surmountable. Here are steps that our Global 500 clients have taken to make their next-gen agents successful in the brave new smarter digital world.

Three steps to mission possible

1. REINVENT THE AGENT DESKTOP FOR THE DIGITAL ERA

Many contact centers still impose on agents an antiquated desktop that is geared for the voice channel with inadequate digital engagement capabilities. They need to revamp the desktop for digital sooner than later.

**Containment:** Make sure the desktop offers deep capabilities to support digital channels such as chat, SMS, messaging, cobrowse, social, email, etc. However, these touchpoints should be unified through a platform so that the customer gets a connected experience and the agent has complete context (e.g., no asking the mother’s maiden name 10 times during one multichannel interaction).

Convenience: Contextual knowledge for customer questions, and AI for process guidance to walk the agent through next best steps (or the next compliant step in the case of regulated processes) should be available at the push of a button, just like the GPS that these agents are used to. Our next-gen agent desktop--eGain Adviser(tm)--offers not only this feature, but also one-click access to in-band collaboration with peers and SMEs for real-time internal help for the agent, and ability for agents to suggest answers to add to the knowledge base.

Context: Make the 360-customer view hyper-relevant. Information that is most important to the customer question in hand — and not the irrelevant, albeit valid, information— should be prominently shown. In fact, eGain Adviser desktop morphs the agent workspace to declutter the desktop focusing it situationally at the task on hand.

2. HIRE AND MANAGE RIGHT

Hire for attitude and alignment with brand personality than for aptitude. While agents with the best aptitude and attitude exist (we call them “models”), they tend to be the exception rather than the rule. Of course, they are a model for the team, and should be retained and motivated to do even better. “Maverick” agents have good aptitude and less-than-desirable attitude. Sometimes, they tend to improvise and not follow process, creating compliance challenges in regulated industries. In fact, our clients find that even models and mavericks do better when our tools are used than without. “Makeover” agents (those that have good attitude but limited aptitude) do well when the tools do the heavy-lifting for aptitude. Make sure you align your metrics with your brand intent. For example, a brand like Nordstrom wouldn’t want to compromise high-touch CX, their brand essence, with a metric like Average Handle Time (AHT) where the agent is hell-bent on disposing the customer as quickly as possible.

3. INSPIRE AND INCENTIVIZE

Industry research indicates that Gen Z workers care deeply about a higher purpose for their jobs—2x and 1.5x over boomers and millennials, respectively. As Gen Z takes over the frontline, this will continue to gain importance. Contact center leaders should incorporate this in vision and mission statements, presentations at team meetings, performance reviews, etc. Along with lofty issues, next-gen also wants you to show them the money. After all, they have grown up through one or more of difficult events such as the dot com bust, 9/11, the Great Recession. Make sure to include financial incentives to motivate these workers.

A final word

You can make next-gen contact center agents successful with next-gen tools for the agent desktop, push-button access to knowledge-enabled answers and AI-enabled process guidance, and next-gen management practices.

About eGain

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