The coronavirus continues to wreak havoc on people’s physical as well as economic well-being. While businesses may or may not be people, depending on which side of the political spectrum you come from, there is no question they are also being impacted. The one thing they can ill-afford to mess up in this difficult environment is their customer experience (CX). Here are four things companies can do to sustain and even improve CX in the face of the coronavirus threat.

1. **Double down on digital**

Consumers will be less inclined to go to public places, including retail stores and banks, to avoid getting infected. The answer here is to accelerate your digital customer service and engagement strategy, whether it involves messaging, chat, cobrowsing, email, social, or self-service.

*Design common customer journeys with a digital-first mindset.* For instance, your customer should be able to converse with a chatbot, escalate to human-assisted chat with all the context intact, video chat and cobrowse with an agent on the other side to find his/her way around a website, fill out forms collaboratively, and complete a transaction such as a loan application, without ever having to go to a branch.

Hospitals and healthcare clinics are looking to avoid unwarranted visits by the “worried well,” which will make it difficult for patients with a real infection to get the care they need. One of the ways to get the worried well to stay at home is to provide them virtual care through technologies such as chatbot, text chat, and video chat, where the initial screening can even be conducted by the chatbot. Again, it is important to make sure these touchpoints are unified so that an already-worried person does not get frustrated and angry by having to repeat information at every channel switch!

If yours is a financial services firm, financial advice and even ongoing coaching about improving one’s FICO credit score or paying off student loans should be offered at scale by an automated banker bot rather than by forcing the consumer to visit the branch office.

A leading tax prep organization, one of our key clients, has been doing it already—helping taxpayers at scale with a chatbot-fronted, omnichannel digital service and sales process, that
includes human-assisted chat (text and video) and cobrowse. In a way, they had inoculated themselves against the coronavirus more than a year ago!

2. Leverage the gig economy

Some of your agents might be sick, some may be worried about getting infected, especially in crowded call centers, some may even quit. So you need to have a strategy to leverage the gig economy to fill the people gap. Finding these agents is hard enough in today’s tight labor market. Once you hire them, you need to onboard and train them, a tough ask since remote onboarding and training is much harder for both the business and the employee. Moreover, millennial and Gen Z workers have short attention spans and hate to sit in training classes, and this was before the pandemic even set in!

The answer? Provide them conversational guidance with AI and knowledge, which will take them step by step through customer conversations, telling them what to say and do next in a way that is compliant with best practices and industry regulations. That way, all agents, in-house or gig or completely outsourced, can be as good as your best agent. One of our multinational banking clients has been able to empower any agent to handle any call—attaining the contact center holy grail—while reducing training needs by 50% and moving from #4 to #1 in NPS score among peers, using conversational guidance, powered by our AI knowledge solution!

3. Deploy virtual assistants

The last I checked, virtual assistants aka chatbots were still immune to the coronavirus or anything else! Implemented right, VAs can provide engaging CX while helping the business deflect calls and drive down the need for human agents. But, many virtual assistants are not delivering on the promise. In fact, Forrester is promising a backlash on chatbots this year. Comments such as, “My service provider’s virtual assistant is actually a virtual idiot,” are common in social media. How do you get it right?
Power the bot with natural language understanding and machine learning to better understand customer intent and start the right conversation, reasoning technology to guide the conversation, knowledge base to provide answers, and analytics to optimize its performance over time.

Make sure you don’t create yet another customer engagement silo with your chatbot. Your virtual assistance initiative should be an integral part of an omnichannel customer engagement strategy. Go with an omnichannel solution partner with deep digital capabilities and stay away from point product vendors.

As you automate the handling of routine customer queries, transition your human agents to higher value-add activities such as sales. Empowering them with conversational guidance will help facilitate and even accelerate that transition.

4. Deliver proactive service

Proactive notifications are a great way to provide timely, convenient, and memorable customer service, while reducing the need for human-assisted service. Proactive notifications are especially valuable in a crisis situation such as the coronavirus when consumer panic can result in a flood of incoming phone calls. Make sure your notifications are omnichannel so that customers get them where they “live,” whether it is messaging, email, voice, or other channels. Your notifications should also be consistent across channels, powered by a common, omnichannel AI and knowledge engine. While notifications preempt the need for service and reduce incoming contact center traffic, serving up proactive and contextual content at the right time when a customer is on your website or app can also help reduce the need for human-assisted service.

Final word

When implemented, these strategies will not only protect you from today’s pandemic but also future-proof your business from tomorrow’s disruptions and market megatrends.

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