The evolution of the contact centre

It may be surprising to learn that the first Private Automated Business Exchanges (PABX) were used to handle large volumes of customer queries in the mid-1960s. Initially, the contact centre was strictly an environment where people could phone in for assistance. Six decades later, its function has evolved and contact centres are now so fundamental to consumer businesses that they are driven by IT innovation and strategic conceptualisation.

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"Back then, the technologies utilised were archaic and not functional when it came to reporting and pulling insights into what customers were saying or required," said Karl Reed, Chief Marketing and Solutions Officer at Elingo. "The only statistics that could be provided were how many calls were being received. This was as a result of the lack of management information systems (MIS) and intelligent information on offer."

Companies saw the trend of contact centres rise and took a leap, investing in their own centres. However, many weren't prepared for the challenges - especially that of the public's generally negative perception of the contact centre.

According to Reed, it was a result of a tripartite of difficulties. "Firstly, technologies weren't flexible enough for the organisations using them. Secondly, many organisations were at fault, deciding to implement rapidly without any real strategy or forethought. A contact centre isn't a one month project - from inception to start date, it can take up to two years in some cases. Finally, as a result of the organisations' faults, the agents weren't trained correctly."

A true communication hub

In the last decade, the contact centre has transitioned from being a roomful of people on the other end of the phone to a true communication hub. "Tech innovation has enabled call centres to interact with customers via any means possible - such as phone, SMS and email," said Martin Lamberti, Sales & Marketing Manager of Smoke Customer Care Solutions.

This evolution of technology has enabled contact centres finally to become what they what were initially intended to be: customer-centric. "A vital component of customer-centricity is customer experience management, i.e. managing every aspect of the customer's interaction with the company. This can be measured through the use of post-call IVR surveys, for

example," explained Lamberti.

Yet customers find there's nothing worse than answering a lengthy survey and seeing nothing come from it. "Surveys need to be short, specific and must have a call to action. When a company receives customer feedback about its business - whether it's good or bad - it needs to do something about that. This is what improving customer experience is all about."

Surveys aren't just powerful feedback mechanisms for customers, but they're useful for staff as well. "It is a massive empowerment tool for call centre staff. Take, for example, a staff member who is frustrated with the system to capture customer details. If he receives enough feedback from customers that the process is taking too long, he can use it as motivation to escalate to management and ensure action is taken."

Reed agrees that the biggest driver of contact centres is the customer experience, and emphasises the importance of technology in customer experience management. "There are numerous solutions that provide metrics on how many calls were answered, how long the calls were, and so forth. However, as the contact centre has developed into a tool that values what customers care, it's important to look at other solutions that monitor the quality of calls and the service. These will be the tools that truly allow a business to benchmark itself against its competitors and deliver superior customer service."

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