

Contact Centers with a Different Twist: Unique Applications for Small-to-Medium Businesses

An Automated Call Distribution (ACD) platform can enable a company of any size to perform as if they had a dedicated call center. It can be as simple as using ACD to queue up calls for the parts department of an auto dealership. It can be as small as a single staff person scheduling appointments at a physician's office. The key is that calls are handled in the most efficient manner possible to ensure that customers' needs are met and they leave a call feeling that they are of value to the organization.

While it is possible to add ACD as a stand-alone system, that may not be your best option. The problem with this approach is that you will need to interface an independent PC with your PBX system. You will have to pay for licensing from two different vendors, not to mention programming and maintenance for two different technologies. Instead, we recommend integrating ACD directly into your PBX. That way, all technology is provided by the same vendor, eliminating licensing and maintenance complexities.

Your ACD platform needs to be programmable directly, without requiring third-party software. You should be able to choose how the ACD system prioritizes call transfers when it is searching for the best way to route a call. An ACD system can prioritize call routing by determining which employees are logged in, and out of those who is the most qualified to address the issue. The system can also look at which extensions have been idle the longest, in order to load balance inbound call volume.

Interactive voice response (IVR) can also add a new element to the value of ACD. Advanced speech recognition (ASR), text-to-speech conversion (TTS), and speaker verification (SV) can now be added through ports in the IVR system. Combine this with a flat menu structure, and you can eliminate tedious dictation to the caller such as "Press 1 for sales, Press 2 for customer service, Press 3 for operator, etc." Now, a caller can simply speak the information they are searching for, such as "account balance" and be connected instantly.

Finally, through Computer-Telephony Integration (CTI) a business can integrate common software such as a CRM application with a phone platform. Now, a customer service representative can pull up a customer record and dial that customer's home phone number right from the computer. Or, when an inbound call comes in, the system can recognize the number and have all of the customer's files ready to access by the representative.

Traditional versus contact centers "with a twist"

Let's look at the dynamics of a traditional call center, and how the latest technology can apply those concepts in non-traditional ways to empower the small-to-medium business. Call centers are often organized into a multi-tier support system for a more efficient handling of calls. The first tier in such a model consists of operators, who direct inquiries to the appropriate department and provide general directory



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information. If a caller requires more assistance, the call is forwarded to the second tier, where most issues can be resolved. If a caller requires more assistance, the caller might be forwarded to a third tier of support; typically formed by product engineers/developers or highly-skilled technical support staff of the product¹.

Now let's look at how a smaller company might provide this same level of service without the massive investment in hardware and staffing. Through ACD, the same inbound caller could be transferred to the requested primary destination, but if there is no one available at that destination the system will automatically route the call to someone else to pick up the phone. That way, if Tech Support is busy handling other calls, the call could be routed to someone in Customer Service (who might be able to address the customer's question anyway). When combined with IVR, an inbound caller can be directed through a series of prompts to the representative with the best knowledge base to address the situation. If that person is unavailable, the call will go to the second most qualified person in order of priority. And all of it is completely seamless with the caller thinking that the call was connected to the right person almost immediately. If a CRM application is also integrated into the platform, then the representative receiving the call will have all of the customer's information waiting on screen at the moment the call is connected.

Proper measurement

To gain a truly effective contact center, you must also gauge what the customer expectation is, and what the impact of meeting that expectation is — and most importantly — what is the impact of not meeting that expectation. The right technology can help you accomplish this by answering key questions such as:

- How many calls are processed per hour, per day?
- What is the call abandonment rate for inbound calls?
- How many times does the phone ring before it's answered, and how often is a customer put on hold?

You need to use this information to develop a profile of a typical customer's patience. This could be patience with being put on hold, or patience navigating through the prompts of your phone system. Customer patience can actually vary depending on the type of business that person is dealing with. Customers will typically be willing to hold longer when dealing with a monopolistic business (such as a utility company) when compared to a highly competitive industry where the customer can easily take his or her business elsewhere.

Take this information and compare it to your company's average time-to-answer calls. If you discover a gap exists between customer patience and your average time-to-answer, you're not alone as that is the situation found by many businesses. But you can use the same phone platform that identifies this issue to also address and overcome it by decreasing the time it takes calls to be routed to the proper destination.

Every business should have a contact center because every business wants to provide their customers with the best service possible — it's that simple. If your organization still does not have a truly functional contact center, the question is why? With dynamic solutions that can bring a contact center to any size business, there really is no reason to miss out on the customer service benefits that will be gained through this approach.

¹ This information on call center dynamics was obtained from Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Call_centers



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