Technical Article

Databases in the cloud: How business communication is changing

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has worked in the Telecoms industry for 15 years beginning his career with BT, followed by spells at MCI and Telstra. During that time Adrian has witnessed many changes, the most significant being the move from localised phone and data hardware to Computing as a Service and Cloud Technology. Intelcom offers multichannel cloud contact services that are enhanced by multi-layered business information tools.

ABSTRACT The shift to cloud-based contact centre solutions has given database marketing a new dimension. For example, it is now possible to identify a caller even if they hang up before being answered. This article looks at the future of database marketing in conjunction with multi-channel (voice, email, Web chat, instant messaging, video, SMS text and co-browsing) customer communication.

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INTRODUCTION

As discussed in the last issue of the *Journal of Database Marketing*, the last few years have seen significant changes in the field of database marketing, and similarly business communication has undergone a transformation with the increased use of social media, Web chat, SMS, video and other collaboration tools.

The shift to hosted contact centre solutions ‘in the cloud’ made available via the Internet has given database marketing a new dimension. For example, it is now possible for a database to identify a caller into a contact centre before the call is even answered. This article looks at the future of database marketing in conjunction with multi-channel (voice, email, Web chat, instant messaging, video, SMS text and co-browsing) customer communication.

SOCIAL CONTACT CENTRES

Although most people agree that contact centres are here to stay, it is also fair to say contact centres as we know them are changing. The increased use of social media including well-known sites such as Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter is evidence that customers are keen to access information via customer forums and online recommendations in addition to traditional communication with organisations via a Website, contact centre or face-to-face in store. To accommodate this change in customer demand, it is necessary for organisations to provide a service that is integrated with social media, always available, updated in real time and supported by intelligent databases.

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) on a corporate Website go a long way in providing people with the information they

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want and therefore reducing the need to research any further or to talk to a contact centre agent. However, we all know how frustrating FAQs can be if a simple search brings up 900 possible answers. An advanced intelligent database that has the ability to assimilate the question being asked with similar historical requests will deliver just a couple of potential responses and therefore increase customer satisfaction by quickly answering the question asked.

ELIMINATING BUSY TONES

A further change in contact centre technology makes it possible to eliminate the dreaded 'all lines busy' tone. Combining effective FAQs with a hosted cloud infrastructure will eliminate busy tones overnight. Traditional premise-based telephone systems are limited by the number of lines into the building and the number of agents available to answer those calls. Hosted contact centres have a huge capacity; for example, networks capable of handling 15 000 simultaneous calls worldwide mean that customers will never hear the engaged tone. Callers are held in queues in the cloud and presented to the first available agent.

This increases customer satisfaction, as initially getting a busy tone will usually result in yet more calls being made and further congestion on the network. This is particularly important where industries are regulated. For example, the Ofwat DG9 regulation aims to identify the ease with which customers can make contact with their water company and includes all lines busy and calls abandoned indicators. Using cloud-based computer-integrated telephony, one water company reduced its abandoned call rate from an average of 7 per cent to under 3 per cent, which is perfectly acceptable to the industry watchdog.

Intelligent databases also help the routing of calls to the right place and the right agent, therefore reducing all important call-handling times. By recognising a

customer's telephone number and connecting them to the same department or possibly the same agent as the last time they called the customer is handled more efficiently. Maybe the same customer calls once a month to make a payment or update their details, a hosted database will recognise their telephone number and therefore route the call to the right place speeding up the process.

Incorrectly handled calls create repeat calls and repeat calls create busy tones. The secret to eliminating busy tones lies in the cloud with intelligent databases doing the work before the call is even answered.

ELIMINATING DOWN TIME

Even the most advanced database is only effective when it is accessible, and thus another major advance in the world of database marketing and the cloud is the elimination of down time. Most businesses are reliant on services into their premises such as electricity and telecommunications. If there is an interruption in the supply of services, then the database goes down and often the telephones as well. With a cloud-based contact centre both calls and data can be switched to laptops and mobile phones should the worst happen.

Recently, an Intelcom customer's contact centre was disrupted by a major failure at a nearby telephone exchange. Fortunately, plans were in place to switch to mobiles by simply logging back into the hosted system using individual phone numbers to log in. The contact centre was down for moments instead of the predicted days to correct the fault at the exchange. Modern contact centres making use of cloud technology can in fact be managed from a mobile phone and laptop or a smartphone. Gone are the days of massive computer rooms supported by IT and Telecoms departments. The power of hosted databases and communication in the cloud increases resilience and ultimately eliminates downtime.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SPEED

Having seen that it is possible to eliminate downtime and busy tones, what is the benefit to a modern contact centre from these advances in technology? Also highlighted in the last issue was that database marketers of the past have become the customer relationship and customer strategy managers of today and their aim is to meet service levels and improve the customer experience.

Utilising the ability to recognise a caller's number as soon as it hits the network and then automatically linking to a database to provide a customer profile to an agent before they answer the telephone provides a perfect opportunity to deliver enhanced customer service. Premier or VIP customers can be routed through to the same agent using this data recognition process, providing a more personal service to maximise benefit for both the customer and the organisation through additional revenue and loyalty building opportunities. A good experience with a call centre agent impacts positively and typically builds loyalty towards an organisation.

Similarly, if a customer typically calls into the same department, data recognition will route the call to that workgroup avoiding the need for time-consuming transfers or even worse the inevitable interactive voice response and multiple choice menus adopted by many contact centres.

Speed makes a difference in customer care, as people want a quick and effective response with the minimum of fuss. By integrating customer contact using the latest cloud technology and intelligent databases, vital seconds can be saved, service levels met and happy customers answered and sent on their way.

EMPOWERING THE AGENT

With the ever-increasing number of channels for customer communication, it is essential that each and every contact centre agent is working to their highest level of

ability and capacity. More experienced agents need to be able to use their knowledge and skill to the maximum effect, whereas less experienced agents quickly learn and get up to speed. Regardless of the method of communication – voice, email, Web chat or instant messaging, video SMS text or co-browsing – agents need to answer the customer query quickly and effectively. Once again, the link between communication channels and the customer relationship management (CRM) database is central along with the all important agent.

Providing the agent with information on their desktop that is easily controlled enables them to manage each customer interaction to the best of their ability. A process that immediately presents the customer's history including the number of times they have been in contact and the main reason for previous enquiries pre-warns the agent and prepares them for the query. Within seconds, their desktop will light up with a pop-up and all the necessary information giving the agent the opportunity to welcome the customer and check with them what they would like to do today. This level of knowledge increases the social element to customer service and keeps customers coming back for more.

Agents are empowered to potentially answer several queries at once, for example, instant messaging or Web chat contacts can be dealt with in parallel and answered by reference to FAQs or by emailing or sending by SMS a URL, Web link personalised for the individual customer. It will not be long before agents can take this even further by using collaboration tools to work on documents with a customer even getting contracts signed there and then instead of having to delay the process by using the post to send and receive signed documents.

The benefits of empowering agents include greater job satisfaction for the individuals, as they feel valued for their personal skills and ability, but above all

completing the sale with the help of data from the CRM and the latest technology leads to increased revenue.

CUSTOMISED CLOUD REPORTING

Just as in the early days of database marketing when statistics and analysis became available as a result of the proliferation of data and computing power meant that marketing became more directed and targeted. Cloud-based business information reporting can go even further, presenting performance statistics in terms of customer contact like never before.

For example, a hosted contact centre infrastructure means that every call that enters the network can be reported on. Previously, premise-based services were unable to report on calls that were not presented to agents because of 'all lines busy' capacity restraints. Because of the increased network capacity afforded by the cloud, all calls are recorded to provide a true representation of a situation. Looking again at water companies, in the event of a major burst or shortage of water, it would be difficult to know how many customer calls this would prompt because many would receive an engaged tone or abandon calls unanswered after a few rings, therefore creating the need to call back again. Was it the same 10 customers calling back 10 times or 100 different customers just attempting to contact the company once?

Standard reports are typically available for call volumes and agent activity at network, queue and agent level; however, the opportunity for customised statistics is limitless in whatever format required.

RELEVANT REPORTING V RITUAL REPORTING

There is little point in producing management information from the contact

centre and database if it is not the information the business needs. There is nothing more soul destroying than ritual reporting where management take little or no interest in reports produced to show how customers are behaving and the responses they are receiving. With added flexibility provided by the cloud, management information can be gathered when and where it is needed and fast informed business decisions can be made.

Imagine the ability to access archetypal contact centre wallboard information on a smartphone or query your database from your iPad on a train—it is all possible with a hosted cloud-based contact centre and CRM. How liberating it would be to have a technology supplier ask how do you want to manage your business instead of telling you the reports available and instructing you how to use them. That time has arrived and every organisation should be receiving the management information they really want not just what is available as standard.

CONCLUSION

As the 'social media generation' comes of age, social and mobile media increases in importance, and methods of business communication continue to change, organisations will have to adapt to working cross-geography, cross-functionality and cross-industry. Technology is no longer a limiting factor to how people communicate or do business. However, one thing remains constant—people want relevant targeted marketing and for customer contact to be as quick as possible while creating the maximum benefit. To achieve this marketers, customer relationship managers, customer strategy managers and call centre managers must question the *status quo* and look to the cloud for the answers.