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Optimizing Your Customer Service and Support Strategy

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Today, software companies must not only provide great products, but deliver solid customer service and technical support at an affordable cost as well. As a result of the Internet explosion, customers are demanding that they be able to reach you anytime, anywhere and through the communication channel of their choice. Since the phone remains the channel of choice for most, how do you meet expectations for phone-based service without breaking the bank?

Luckily, today's contact center technologies are more powerful, more flexible and more cost-effective than ever. The right combination can help you increase customer loyalty, boost first call resolution rates, optimize agent efficiency, cut costs and increase the number of revenue generating opportunities. When rethinking your call handling procedures, consider these three key areas: increasing automation rates with more robust voice self-service solutions; enhancing the customer experience by personalizing interactions and incorporating remote agents to reduce overhead and expenses.

Voice self-service can have a great impact on improving the support experience for end-users while controlling costs. By using the phone to handle certain routine customer service options, such as product registration, password resets and order status questions, you can shorten call times or eliminate the need for agent interaction altogether. Speech-enabled access to FAQ documents can help eliminate the burden on technical support operations. Your agents will be free to handle more complicated inquiries. Self-service options can also make a smaller software company appear larger and provide larger vendors with the efficiency they need.

When examining your self-service offerings, conduct a thorough review of both your business processes and customer interactions. Listening to actual customer conversations can give you a fresh perspective on their needs. Look at existing IVR call data

to better understand how customers are using your automated services and where they could be enhanced. Look for new automation opportunities and ways to streamline menus. Consider increasing contact center efficiency with speech-enabled call steering. Matching customer needs with a business process flow chart will further illuminate speech opportunities and how your solutions can be structured to best serve everyone.

For organizations looking to cement loyalty, personalization should play a key role in customer service strategy. When an agent takes a call, they should not have to ask basic information. The agent should already know the customer's value to the company, what kind of treatment they expect, and how recently they've bought something new. In doing so, companies can increase cross-sell and up-sell opportunities, not to mention innumerable chances to build deeper ties with customers by cutting issue resolution times.

The key to implementing a personalization strategy is CTI (computer-telephony integration). CTI unites both telephony and data systems to create a new set of applications that include agent screen pop, desktop call control and intelligent routing. Sending a screen pop of the customer's record along with the call allows agents to personally greet callers and engage in a more meaningful conversation from the start. Pre-identifying callers eliminates the institutional feel of the "Can I have your account number" opening statement and shaves 10 to 20 seconds off each call. It can also be taken one step further by enhancing the agent's desktop with the information and tools that they need to be more productive, including access to multiple data sources to better handle complex customer inquiries, scripts and wizards to improve up-sell/cross-sell outcomes, onscreen call control to increase productivity and workflow automation tools.

For calls that need to be escalated, CTI enables onscreen intelligent transfer options that ensures the best person suited to help receives the call, along with a screen pop that contains a summary of the previous interaction. This eliminates the frustration customers experience when forced to repeat themselves to the sec-

ond agent. It also lets agents see what has already been done so there is no wasted time, for both the customer and the employee. CTI is a proven solution for gaining the superior service advantage, streamlining contact center operations, increasing first call resolutions and boosting agent success rates.

Incorporating remote agents is a great way to reduce operating costs by enabling organizations to leverage low-cost labor pools and reduce the square footage of their contact center facilities. In addition, agent quality becomes more important than agent location because physical proximity to your headquarters is irrelevant. It is important to note however that if you do decide to go virtual, your organization must make a corporate commitment to modify hiring and training practices accordingly.

Great service and support is well within every organization's reach, it is simply a matter of rethinking your call handling procedures. We all interact with service and support organizations

every day, to find out a credit card balance or to get a problem with the cable TV fixed. Organizations that do it well continue to earn our loyalty, those that do not are put on the list for replacement. Make the commitment to service today and you will gain customers for a lifetime.

J.R. Sloan joined Syntellect eight years ago and brings more than 17 years of experience in the technology industry. While at Syntellect, J.R. has been responsible for systems engineering, product management, and most recently, for leading efforts related to marketing, strategic direction, defining product and solution content, specifying product and solution requirements, and related areas.

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