

Make yours customers work for you

How can businesses deliver true self service without damaging customer experience?

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How can businesses deliver true self-service without damaging customer experience?

All that every customer wants is a quick and accurate answer to their question. Most don't mind how they receive it. Yet, the days when organisations were advised to bury their contact details deep in their website so that customers had no alternative but to take the self-service option are well and truly over.

The emergence of smartphones, tablets and an 'always on' culture means that consumers are now far more willing to help themselves to information. Indeed many prefer to do just this, especially when the question is straightforward. However, at the same businesses have become far more aware of the importance of customer choice and customer experience.

This means they are becoming more willing to balance the financial seesaw. No longer is their business model all about ruthlessly reducing cost per customer, but instead, recognising that money spent offering better service and providing every customer with what they want provides a good return in the long run through customer loyalty and ongoing revenue.

So by making their self-service option the best it could possibly be and making it quick and easy for those who are happy to take this route to find their answers, businesses are helping themselves to a win-win situation. There will be always be some customers who want to interact with a human being no matter what, but on the whole, most telephone or email enquiries will be those that are more complex or unusual than the standard questions.

By not so much encouraging, but more enabling, more of those who want the quick, no-fuss answer to look for themselves when it makes sense to do so, these organisations give themselves some space. They are 'going with the flow' and making the most of this new willingness and growing IT literacy, so there is no negative impact on customer experience.

However, they have to know when to draw the line and resist the temptation to merely regard the savings incurred as profit. The extra money saved needs to be invested in the other end – so that those queries needing expert help and maybe a longer call can be escalated from the first response contact centre to higher-paid specialists in the middle office.

It's all about creating a connected business, combining self-service with the skills of front, middle and back office. The technology is available – for example, a combination of an intelligent customer interaction platform with the latest unified communications (UC) technologies – but it may take a culture shift away from departmental silos and restrictive productivity metrics to achieve this vision.

However, taking a few steps towards getting the self-service layer right will help free up overheads to do this. For example, it's possible to:

HARNESS PEER TO PEER SUPPORT

Harness the momentum of peer-to-peer support. Just because this originally grew out of a mistrust of big business doesn't mean organisations should ignore its power or be frightened of encouraging customers to discuss your products or services outside your jurisdiction. If appropriate, user forums should be supported and the experts within your company encouraged to give advice when needed.

After all, what your customers say when they don't think you are listening can be valuable – and third party endorsement even more so.

ALLOW CUSTOMERS TO FIND ANSWERS THROUGH FAQs

Ensure search engine optimisation (SEOs) keywords and terms embrace the kind of questions customers are likely to use to search for answers to accelerate time taken – and use historic information on search terms to populate FAQs. See this as an area of continuous improvement feeding back results and updating on an ongoing basis.

IVR FOR CONTACT AVOIDANCE

Use interactive voice recognition (IVR) where it make sense, that is for tasks where customers want a quick and straightforward answer and are unlikely to need human interaction; for example, checking their balance or paying a bill. However make it easier for them to transfer to a real agent if they need one.

FLEXIBLE OPTIONS TO ALLOW CUSTOMERS TO SELF SERVE

Be open minded about new advances that are emerging all the time and look for opportunities to make it easier for customers to help themselves. For example some businesses are becoming more proactive about self-service to improve customer experience; for example offering options with tick boxes for delivery methods.

Of course, how much emphasis an organisation gives to self-service versus human interaction will depend on its business model, the nature of its products and services, its pricing structure and its brand values.

But, providing those who want self-service with a rich seam of advice and information which is accessible from anywhere and at any time is no longer a cost-cutting exercise, but a sensible move to help improve the customer experience for all. exercise, but a sensible move to help improve the customer experience for all.

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