



QUESTION & ANSWER: Is it time for smarter customer service?

Communication service providers face greater complexity in delivering their services than most industries. Name us another industry whose services are evolving as fast and are delivered in so many ways, from wireless to broadband and from cable to satellite. Here, the editor, Jeremy Cowan talks to Andrew Mennie, general manager at customer interaction specialists, eGain about the latest challenges and lessons for telcos.



Facing the questions is Andrew Mennie, general manager EMEA, eGain.

VanillaPlus: What are the challenges faced by telcos in delivering effective customer service?

Andrew Mennie: In one word: complexity. Consider the vast array of end-user devices, the differing services and the number of ways that customers can access them. Also, telcos have a broader spread of value per customer; some are high value business users, while others are virtually spending nothing on a pay-as-you-go basis. As such, the service levels need to flex accordingly. All this means customer service in telecoms is more complex than any other vertical, and that gap is growing.

Aside from this, another big issue is their telephony legacy. As a customer, you expect to be able to speak to your phone company, and for the call to be free. Other industries have tried to re-route expensive calls to the Web. Telco websites are mainly sales and marketing focused, and they have struggled to get defection to Web self-service. This is certainly changing, and helping this change is that more people have Web access via their mobile device.

Do these challenges apply equally to consumer and enterprise customers?

AM: The issues are similar, although the consumer business has to contend with a vast range of customers and devices. You have to feel for the contact centre agent. One minute the agent maybe faced with a 16 year-old who can't get Facebook working on their smartphone; whilst the next call is that teenager's parent, querying their child's excessive data charges.

Follow that with a less tech-savvy person, who doesn't use the Internet and only uses their mobile phone in emergencies. eGain believes that if you capture the right knowledge and serve it at the right moment; a lot of that complexity can be mitigated. For instance, a relevant FAQ can help the teenager to help himself; the parent needs a different data package; and the non tech-savvy customer needs a helping hand via a phone conversation.

The enterprise business, on the other hand, is pretty well segmented. Many enterprises are successfully using emails and self-service to control the costs, especially in the small business sector. At the higher end there are dedicated teams managing the customers. Multinationals or government agencies, which have tens of thousands of SIM cards, are easier to support because they've restricted the choice of phones and their functionality.

Are there any advantages in the customer relationships that CSPs have, such as knowledge of the customer or regular billing contact?

AM: There's a gap here between theory and practice. In theory, the more billing relationships you have with the customer, the more you can mine that information to provide more intuitive services. In practice, the rate of change and growth in telcos means that their systems aren't as joined up as they should be. For instance a large mobile operator might have 3-400 major projects at any one time, which equates to a lot of disruption. The data is certainly there, but extracting it, tagging it, de-duping it and mining

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it – now that’s a real challenge – but one we can meet. eGain’s focus, by the way, is on reducing and managing that kind of complexity.

That said, even on a more piecemeal basis, telcos don’t always deliver excellent customer service levels. They have more challenges than most and more legacy than most; but they also have more opportunity than most. If they can get it right, they will become *de facto* pace setters for other industries to follow.

Are CSPs failing here because their challenges are greater, or is that coincidental?

AM: It’s not coincidental. When we started out in this industry well over a decade ago, one of our mobile operator customers had 20 to 30 kinds of handsets, delivering just voice, SMS and voicemail. They’re now dealing with 50 new handsets a year and they still have to support all the old ones. A few years ago if somebody said they couldn’t get access to their email you simply had to work out what was wrong in the delivery. Today there are 20 ways a customer could access their email, so you’ve got to first identify which one they are using and then find out why it’s not working.

It would be wrong to think that these challenges can’t be overcome and that we all have to put up with the *status quo*. At eGain we certainly have some of the answers and can solve some of the conundrums. Our telco customers work really hard to make progress and you see the results in those areas where they’ve focused their effort, such as moving to Web self-service or integrating email, phone and chat into multi-channel services. Once the solutions fall into place across a broad front then the telcos will be setting the pace for other industries to follow.

Do customers actually value self-service?

AM: Personally, I prefer to go to the Web if I can, it’s my first port of call. The philosophy of self-service has changed over the years. Initially, it seemed to be about moving ‘lower value’ customers to the Web to save the cost of talking with them. What has happened in practice is that ‘high value, time poor’ customers are trying to solve things for themselves on the Web. There is a whole community of self-helpers out there, attracted by the empowerment, convenience and agility it represents. That’s an opportunity for ‘real’ telcos to differentiate their customer service from their more virtual competitors and collaborators. In theory, the major operators should be able to offer me a much better self-service environment than, say, a supermarket’s mobile offering who, because they own the systems, can be more integrated.

However, self-help has to be a more fulfilling and faster route to empowerment than its alternatives, or it’s doomed to fail. That’s an area where most telcos can do a better job. Helping the customer to quickly frame a purposeful query is often the first step, and that requires instantaneous and insightful feedback from the system, rather than ‘Contact Us’ forms and

irrelevant help pages.


The next step is to serve up current information, highly relevant to the query, in the form that the customer chooses. That means that the customer can sharpen their aim, yielding a faster and better resolution. Having a customer history preserved in the process can speed this up a lot, and that requires the customer to identify him or herself perhaps via a log-in. Marketing departments, which traditionally have owned the web presence, have tended to shy away from account log-ins, believing it deters potential purchasers within what it sees primarily as an environment for making sales. A commitment to self-service means changing those perspectives.

How long will it be before ownership of the portal extends to the Customer Service department?

AM: That’s a cultural issue; generally sales and marketing have more influence but we probably don’t need to rely on a change of ownership. Technology and customer culture are combining to ensure that our individual Web presence is a lot less anonymous than it used to be. If the customer gets help from their mobile device then the operator automatically knows who that customer is, and what type of phone they are using. There’s a separate point there, actually, about designing the mobile Web to better fit smaller screens. That’s worth doing for all sorts of reasons; mobile Web self-service is becoming a clear preference.

The younger generation are very technologically aware, preferring to interact through instant messenger or **Twitter**, than ringing up a call centre and talking to someone. You have to cope with that high spending demographic. In future, location-enabled services and social media will also have a big impact.

I said that self-helpers were a community and, in evidence of this, social media is being used to share complaints on Twitter or Facebook. For example, there are people out there, members of the public, actually publishing pre-formatted complaint letters on the Web. These include the personal email address of someone very senior in the organisation – so that anyone can cut through customer service processes and get their complaint right onto the CEO or board member’s PC. Organisations need to embrace this and learn how to respond. It is a case of working with consumers who use the Internet in this way, not against them.

In this regard, the retail industry is more advanced. Some of our clients in the retail fashion industry are using Facebook as their main tool to communicate with their customers. They’ve got over 100,000 fans on their sites and as you might expect, they send all of them newsletters. Engaging with customers on social websites and harvesting the best of their social knowledge to add value to contact centre services will become more prevalent in the coming years, and could become a real differentiator in the telecoms industry. 

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Andrew Mennie was talking to Jeremy Cowan (above), editor of VanillaPlus.