



FOCUS: **Contact Center**

Reimagining the **Blended** Contact Center



Martha Rogers, Ph.D.

Recognized for more than a decade as one of the leading authorities on customer-focused relationship management strategies for business, Martha Rogers is an acclaimed author and a founding partner of Peppers & Rogers Group. Martha has coauthored eight books with Don Peppers. Their newest book, *Rules to Break and Laws to Follow*, advances the concept of the customer base as a revenue-producing asset for businesses, capable of driving a company's long-term economic worth.



Mark Frei

Mark Frei is a Senior Vice President for West Corporation, responsible for new business strategy and service development for West's Customer Management Group, including both agent-based and automated customer contact solutions. Prior to that Mr. Frei was focused on West's home agent solution, West at Home. With over 13 years at West, he is a frequently published expert and a sought after speaker.

The right mix of agents and advanced technologies can help meet customer preferences and maximize results.

Virtually all contact centers are on a mission to achieve three things concurrently: improve the customer experience, increase productivity, and grow revenue. Today's "new" blended contact center can help achieve those goals.

Historically, blended contact centers have been positioned as settings where agents can both make and receive calls by combining automatic call center distribution for incoming calls with predictive dialing for outbound calls. But traditional approaches limit the potential to harness the power of agent capabilities and advanced technologies available to meet customers' multimodal demands, including home-based agents and interactive services. In addition, most approaches to using blended solutions fail to recognize the type of multimedia communication outreach preferred by each customer, including chat, email, mobile or emerging channels such as social media.

In this *1to1 Executive Dialogue*, Martha Rogers, Ph.D., Founding Partner at Peppers & Rogers Group, and Mark Frei, Senior Vice President at West Corporation, examine the cultural and process barriers that prevent traditional blended contact centers from realizing their full potential, as well as how best to identify and incorporate customer contact preferences in order to drive better results.

The notion of the blended contact center has been around for some time. What are the key gaps with current approaches to blended contact centers?

Mark Frei: The true gaps usually come from the organizational structure of companies, which makes it difficult to get all of the cast members, such as the heads of customer care and sales, to work collaboratively on these efforts.

Taking a strategic view of the overall customer experience versus focusing on its individual components helps executives from functional units see the impact that each division has on that overall experience. If these business leaders look at this globally, or at least across the enterprise, then they'll be motivated to eliminate functional barriers and collaborate to improve the service experience.

Martha Rogers: Companies also need to work past channel and reward structures. For example, if I'm responsible for the Web and my job is to accomplish certain missions and do it within a certain budget, then I'm not so worried about a customer's experience when they're directed to the call center or how they might react to a piece of direct mail.



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But I *am* going to focus on doing a great job with the website because that's what I'm rewarded to do.

When companies have a blended contact center, however, we need to create a structure that rewards the Web manager for recognizing how important a smooth transition from the Web to the contact center is to the customer's experience and acting to ensure that smooth transition.

It's only when decision-makers consider how customers are creating value for the company and company leaders create some structure around accountability that you begin to achieve some alignment around customer-centric goals.

What are some best practices for delivering consistent experiences to customers, regardless of the location of the agent they speak to or the support platform being utilized?

MF: The most important thing is to know your customers. And you do that by talking to them. Ask them questions; offer them the chance to opt-in to surveys across multiple channels. Take that insight about opportunities for improving processes or other activities that affect customers and deploy it into your existing channels.

Listening to your customers will also help you to identify the channels where the most changes need to be made, as well as to learn customers' channel preferences. For example, SMS might seem sexy, but it may not be the best channel for reaching your prime demographics and audience.

Once you know your customers, customize the message as much as possible. The tools available today really allow you to personalize every interaction you have with each consumer. A small amount of personalization can go a long way.

Let's say Martha calls our company on a Tuesday to check on an account bal-

ance. When she calls back on Wednesday and we ask her "Martha, are you calling back regarding your account balance or is this in reference to something else?," right away Martha feels great. She feels like, "Hey, these people *know* me."

MR: And they know me throughout their company.

Sometimes people get put off by using technology for support. But by personalizing, you can help them feel more comfortable.

MF: Right. And personalization isn't isolated to an interaction with a live agent. You can personalize just as much using IVR, email, and other types of notifications. Sometimes people get put off by using technology for support. But by personalizing, you can help them feel more comfortable.

Why is it so important to deliver a consistent customer experience across all channels and platforms?

MR: It's very simple: customers see you as one company.

If I connect with a company through one channel and then I have to re-identify myself all over again through a different channel, then I might as well start all over with a different company. Because it's the same experience either way.

Customers may not know what an IVR is or what's meant by multichannel. But they'll know if they're treated right regardless of how they interact with us.

We also need to be as responsive in all channels as we are in our best channel. Some customers have realized that the only way they can get a fast and reliable

response is to use Twitter to tweet about a problem they have with a company. If they complain loud enough and generate enough attention, chances are pretty good that they're going to get a response from that company unless that company is a dinosaur. Someone will handle it, the customer will be satisfied, they'll tweet that they're feeling good about it, and then the whole world will know.

What we're finding is that if you tweet today and you then immediately email the same company with a complaint, and then call to complain, there are different rates of response for each. You may not get a response to your email for three days. And even then it may be a generic response. We find very high non-response rates to customer problems sent by email.

Not only are the response rates different between channels, but the resolutions to problems may vary. Using a blended contact center can help resolve these types of issues by offering a consistent customer experience regardless of channel.

Earlier, you mentioned the importance of providing customers with preference management tools. How can companies offer their customers personalized contact services while containing operational support costs?

MF: The travel industry has done a terrific job of providing people with self-service tools that allow customers to opt-in and build a personal profile of how they want to be notified in the event of service disruptions, upgrades, availability, low rates/fares, etc. Being able to personalize my contact preferences is essential because I get to manage how and when I receive notifications. The ability to go in and make changes to my profile on the fly is important too. Not only are you providing a capability that your customer wants, but you're reducing call volume expenses with agents.



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How does customer choice over the method of contact fuel customer lifetime value?

MR: Customers who use multiple channels are nearly always more valuable than customers who use just one channel. The more ways they come to us – whether that's through their cell phones, the Web, voice, email – the more valuable they become to us. And that's really the right metric for us to be looking at.

Different customers will reach out to companies in different ways. But customers are also different in the degree to which they're willing to collaborate with companies and to share information with them.

At Harley-Davidson, they have what they call their two-percenters. These are people who typically purchased a Harley jacket in their late teens or early twenties and finally were able to buy their first Harleys some years later. A typical two-percenter wears the jacket all the time and looks the part.

And those two-percenters are like riding billboards. These are customers who will tattoo the logo of the company on their bodies. We see them as incredibly valuable customers even though they might not spend as much money as some other customers. We have to be prepared for them to go online and design what they want their next Harley to look like. We also have to be prepared for them to only want to discuss questions they have with the dealer they know. We also have to be prepared for them to call requesting a solution to a problem they might have when they're out on the road. We have to be set up to be able to respond to any of those situations.

How can companies determine whether they're delivering consistent service to customers, regardless of whether the contact has been made over the phone, via the Web, etc.?

MF: Providing customers with survey capabilities is critical in today's world, with

so much focus on customer satisfaction. You need to have tools that can support customers across multiple channels. Giving people the ability to opt-in and provide immediate feedback and then being able to take that information and act on it is crucial.

I recently had an oil change on an almost-new vehicle. I got in the car with my family and drove 100 miles. After I parked the car, I noticed there was some oil leaking underneath it. It turns out they had failed to put on the oil filter correctly.

When we think short term, what we're really thinking about is how much money we're going to make from customers each quarter.

I got the problem fixed and received a post-service survey *three days later*. In my survey response I explained what had occurred, yet received no follow-up whatsoever from the company that did the oil change. You would think this would have been flagged as a follow-up item. But it wasn't.

In this case they got the direct feedback and did nothing with a consumer who owns four vehicles in his family and changes the oil on their vehicles every 3,000 miles like clockwork. And guess what? I'm no longer their customer. A simple follow-up call to address the problem would have satisfied me.

So when you're asking for responses, make sure you're reacting and doing something with them to make your business better and to build relationships with your customers.

MR: Chances are the company not only didn't address the problem with you, but they probably didn't address the same

problem with other people. So how can you have any trust or confidence in them at all?

MF: That's why it's important to have analytical people on staff to help companies gather this kind of information, decipher it, and then take action on it.

How can companies optimize customer value with a blended approach?

MR: If you think about customer value, it's a matter of what people spend now versus their potential value, their referral value, and their willingness to collaborate. We need to remember that customers are the only source of revenue to a company. Products, services, promotional campaigns, contact centers – none of those things pay us money. Only customers do.

When we think short term, what we're really thinking about is how much money we're going to make from customers each quarter. Because that's ultimately where the revenues come from. It's important for us to recognize not only how those customers are creating value for us right now, but also how and whether the company is creating or destroying customer value in the future by the way we're treating customers today.

Let's go back to Mark's experiences as an oil change customer. If the company was willing to pay for its errors today, they might've been able to save all of his future and long-term value to the company. Instead, they didn't apologize or act on this at all. As a result, they destroyed all of his future value.

Our ability to support customer experiences across channels today will ensure that our quarterly numbers are good today while building future value for shareholders.

What are the most important technological considerations for decision-makers as they create the optimal blended contact center?

MF: When you sit down with a group of decision-makers in your company and



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say, “Here’s where we want to be,” it can be very intimidating. So you really need to block your strategy into chunks. For example, we want to improve customer satisfaction among the top fifth of our most profitable customers by X percent first, then increase cross-sell/upsell to that same group by Y percent over a specific period of time.

Also, the technology to support these requirements can be expensive. Before budget pressures became such a constant concern, companies would invest in hardware and software and build a lot of these systems from the ground up. Today you’re lucky if some of these systems have a shelf life of two to three years.

It helps to partner with an outsourced provider whose job it is to keep up with emerging technologies. You’ll never face end of life with these systems if you pick

the right partners to do that work for you. This strategy will allow you to be able to focus on your core competencies.

If you want to know what the future of the blended contact center is going to look like, you’d better be looking at social media and mobile.

What will the blended contact center of the future look like? How close are we to meeting that today?

MF: If you want to know what the future of the blended contact center is going to look like, you’d better be looking at social

media and mobile. Because that’s what today’s youth is using to communicate and that’s how they’ll expect to be communicated with in the future.

Authentication technologies that can identify the customer you’re interacting with regardless of the channel will also be critical. Security and fraud prevention, such as voice biometrics to identify customers, will become more prevalent. All of this will reduce the amount of traffic in the voice channel.

MR: Customers are going to drive how they interact with companies. Companies that are able to combine the right technology and customer-centric strategy are the ones that will be wildly successful because they’re not just meeting an industry norm, they’re getting out in front of their competitors. ■



West Corporation is a leading provider of technology-driven, voice-oriented solutions. West offers its clients a broad range of communications and infrastructure management solutions that help them manage or support critical communications. West’s customer contact solutions and conferencing services are designed to improve its clients’ cost structure and provide reliable, high-quality services. West also provides mission-critical services, such as public safety and emergency communications.

Founded in 1986 and headquartered in Omaha, Nebraska, West serves *Fortune* 1000 companies and other clients in a variety of industries, including telecommunications, banking, retail, financial, technology and healthcare. West has sales and operations in the United States, Canada, Europe, the Middle East, Asia Pacific and Latin America.

For more information on West Corporation, please call 1-800-841-9000 or visit www.west.com.

Peppers & Rogers Group

Peppers & Rogers Group is dedicated to helping its clients improve business performance by acquiring, retaining, and growing profitable customers. As products become commodities and globalization picks up speed, customers have become the scarcest resource in business. They hold the keys to higher profit today and stronger enterprise value tomorrow. We help clients achieve these goals by building the right relationships with the right customers over the right channels.

We earn our keep by solving the business problems of our clients. By delivering a superior 1to1 Strategy, we remove the operational and organizational barriers that stand in the way of profitable customer relationships. We show clients where to focus customer-facing resources to improve the performance of their marketing, sales and service initiatives.

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