



FOCUS: **Contact Center**

Evolving with the Cross-Channel Customer



Don Peppers

Recognized for over a decade as one of the leading authorities on customer-focused business strategy, Don Peppers is an acclaimed author and a Founding Partner of Peppers & Rogers Group, the world's premier customer-centric management consulting firm that provides clients with world-class customer strategy, flawlessly executed, for bottom-line impact.



Skip Hanson

Currently serving as president of Consumer Services for West Corporation, Skip is responsible for the leadership and management of two business units: West Customer Management Group and West Interactive. West Customer Management Group has more than 20 domestic, offshore, and near-shore contact center locations in addition to thousands of home-based agents located across the United States. West Interactive is a global leader in delivering automated customer contact solutions.

Technology, customer insights, and channel savvy can help customer agents deliver consistent experiences cost effectively.

Contact centers are undergoing a dramatic transformation. As contact channels increase in number and type (chat, social, etc.) and customers adapt to using them, service centers also need to evolve. This means that agents require the knowledge, training, tools, and skills to interact successfully with customers across channels in order to deliver a consistent experience across all the touchpoints they use.

In their current state, few companies are able to provide consistent experiences across the multiple channels customers use. In many cases customer experience is managed and monitored through individual channels. Plus, there's typically little if any integration between the various channels that companies do support.

In light of channel proliferation and rising customer expectations, companies need to transform their contact centers to equip agents and automated support mechanisms with the right information about customers at the right time in order to serve customers consistently and effectively across channels. Knowledgeable agents who are trained on how best to interact with customers through each channel are better prepared not only to deliver superior service, but also to identify and act on sales cues with customers, including cross-sell or upsell opportunities.

In this *1to1 Executive Dialogue*, industry thought leaders Don Peppers, Founding Partner of Peppers and Rogers Group, and Skip Hanson, President of West Consumer Services, discuss the reasons why it makes sound economic sense to develop a well-defined multichannel customer support strategy and provide recommendations for developing that strategy.

What are the major trends that are driving multichannel customer experience?

Don Peppers: The first is the e-Social trend. Consumers talk to each other a great deal now—a great deal more than they used to—and they're all publishers. It's quite a crowd effect.

Word about customer experience gets around very quickly. When customers talk to each other about a brand or a company, they don't talk about the company's advertising or its brand positioning statement or even the last offer. They usually talk about their experience with the company. This trend towards sharing customer experience represents a profound change in the way businesses have to think about their reputations. It used to be that what happened to the customer stayed with the customer, to paraphrase the Las Vegas slogan.

Another trend that's connected to the e-Social revolution has to do with customers' rising



FOCUS: Contact Center

expectations for trustworthiness in a company. Trust is one of the key ingredients of interactions, and with technology, interactions are accelerating at the pace of Moore's Law.

Customers increasingly expect the companies that they interact with to be nearly as trustworthy as their friends. There are two issues with trust. The first is that you're viewed as having good intentions, that you have a customer's best interests at heart. The second is that you're competent to act on those intentions. Competence is critical in the contact center. Customers expect agents to remember what they told them in their last interaction, not to force the customer to have to repeat the nature of their problem.

Skip Hanson: We're trying to lead our customers to look at social media more in the customer service realm. This includes proactively engaging customers and addressing customer issues ahead of time.

Another significant trend is the emergence of the smartphone. There's so much that you can do with these devices. It's not just voice. You can text. You can chat. You can hit your social links. You can visit a Web page. It's creating so much flexibility in the hands of consumers that companies are beginning to realize that they've got to look at how they harness that power and how they engage their customers and figure out how their customers want to be engaged.

Why is it so important for companies to provide customers with consistent experiences across multiple channels?

Peppers: Customers have memories, and they remember you. So when you don't remember them, it's a black mark against your competence as a company. Not remembering has become less and less acceptable because so many companies have the ability to put those dialogs in context and to

remember what customers said in previous interactions in different channels.

The relationship that a company develops with a customer and the context of that relationship is the most critical aspect to loyalizing that customer. I buy a lot of books from Amazon. I know from experience that half the time I look I can find a book at a lower price than what's available on Amazon. But I don't go looking for those books because when I see the book I want on Amazon, I click on it and it comes to my

"That contextual relationship is further strengthened if the company responds in the channel that the customer is comfortable using."

*—Skip Hanson,
President, West Consumer Services*

home. They already have my address and my credit card number. They are very reliable and competent. And they remember me and my thread of interactions with them.

What customers tell you from time to time, event to event, interaction to interaction, and from channel to channel, is the way to create that very rich context. And the richer the context, the more valuable and loyal that customer is going to be.

Hanson: Absolutely. And that contextual relationship is further strengthened if the company responds in the channel that the customer is comfortable using. Addressing customer issues in the digital channel of their choice doesn't always escalate to a higher-cost agent. This is very important because companies want to build credibility in each of those channels so that it becomes as standard as calling the 800 number and getting an IVR or an agent.

Another thing that's important is that when you have an IVR front-ending an agent, there's nothing more frustrating than providing your information to the IVR

only to have to repeat everything to an agent. Similarly, customers coming from another channel, such as chat, who have to re-explain their situation to an agent will also be frustrated. That's why companies need to connect those touchpoints, as well as solve customers' issues through the channel of their choice.

This goes back to competence and customer satisfaction. There are too many disconnected touchpoints right now. You've got social being run by the marketing group. Online might be run by sales, while customer care might be responsible for chat. Companies need to transcend those channels and bring them together to make it easier for customers.

What are some ways in which companies can use technologies such as chat or social to help agents to engage more deeply with customers?

Hanson: We're working with some companies in consumer retail and healthcare to help them to understand what people are saying about them in social and how they're saying it. It's a way for us to help these companies collect this type of information and identify what's going on in social communities.

From there they can develop a plan to be more proactive with customers before problems arise. For instance, some of our pharmaceutical clients use proactive text messaging to get ahead of customer issues before they're posted in social media. This way, you can interject yourself sooner to solve the problem before it becomes an irritant or costly.

How can companies balance their use of support technologies with delivering customers personalized service?

Hanson: We look at what we call a context-



FOCUS: Contact Center

aware database where we're capturing the pertinent customer information from each of the channels so we can get a more holistic view of each customer. That's where you really begin to derive that contextual awareness, because we can see where customers have been interacting and what they've been doing.

When this is done properly, companies can use this information about customers to help determine how to address their issues in the most cost-effective manner.

Peppers: What Skip said is spot on. I would just add that one of the outcomes of the social media revolution is that for companies to have credibility with their customers in the future they are going to have to put a face on the company-customer relationship. Customers don't want to have a relationship with a brand or a product. They want to have a relationship with a person representing a brand or a product. Ultimately, the trust customers have in a brand is the trust they place in the human face of that brand to treat them with good intentions.

One way to provide that face to customers, as well as to deliver more personalized service over time, is by empowering employees to use social media and take the initiative with customers. Companies are going to discover that the most powerful ways of interacting with customers socially will require employees that are not directed so much as motivated. You need those employees to be engaged in their work and to thoroughly embrace the corporate mission and to represent the company enthusiastically.

Hanson: That's a great point. To the extent that we can build more intelligence into how we are coordinating and managing this context, customers will feel like "I don't know what happened, but somebody's watching and addressing my needs. I feel good about that." And then if we can solve the simple problems through this intelligence and

manage it, motivated agents can then tackle more complex issues and act as problem solvers. The simpler the issue is, the easier it's going to be to handle via self-service channels. Call center agents are going to have to be trusted with a higher level of authority because the problems that you can't anticipate are going to become more sophisticated.

"Customer inquiries provide a great deal of insight into what's going wrong at your company."

*—Don Peppers, Founding Partner,
Peppers & Rogers Group*

We've been talking a lot about the importance of using the context of interactions with customers to help shape future support for them. Along those lines, how can effective "customer preference management" increase ROI and cost efficiencies?

Hanson: As we work with companies to understand their customers better, we start to look at customers in terms of segments such as "high value, low transaction" and then developing an understanding of the best channels in which to provide them customer care. Doing so presents opportunities to customers to highlight their preference as to how they would like to be communicated with, say through their responses to an online survey. Is it via email? Is it via text? Is it via proactive SMS? By understanding and meeting customers' channel preferences, that hopefully should drive customer satisfaction.

By learning more about customers' channel preferences, this also enables companies to use their internal resources more effectively so that one interaction doesn't drive five additional interactions. Customer issues are taken care of once

and for all and it doesn't drive any additional cost to the company.

Peppers: If you're doing it right, if you're not just answering calls at the call center, you're looking at calls and inquiries as a source of customer insight. Then you use that insight to improve your operations. The primary mission of a call center or a contact center is to find out why calls are coming in and try to fix whatever that problem is.

Customer inquiries provide a great deal of insight into what's going wrong at your company. And if you can fix what's going wrong, you can make money faster and be more efficient.

A few years ago Frank Eliason founded the Comcast Cares program for the cable operator. Under the program, a team of employees monitor the Twittersphere and blog posts and they look for mentions of Comcast that might be negative and then they intervene. They reach out to customers and they try to fix those problems.

After Frank left Comcast (for Citigroup), I reached out to him and asked him how he and his team spent the majority of their time. He said that 90 percent of their time was spent trying to figure out who at Comcast had responsibility for whatever problem the customer identified. And that approach by itself is very sound.

The way most companies run their contact centers, there's nobody really doing that. If you really want to get good use out of your contact center, you need to use it as a source of insight about your company and what it does right or wrong, not just as a source of insight about your customers.

Hanson: When we manage a company's IVR, for example, we're analyzing monthly information, trying to understand where problems are occurring. For instance, are there any new issues we need to be aware of? Can we address these by changing a menu option? Or can we help to resolve them by adding a new service that used



FOCUS: Contact Center

to be done by an agent but now can be automated?

We can take the lessons we've learned in the agent and IVR world and apply these to social or the Web to make operations more cost-effective and efficient. Then we can look at additional opportunities, such as ways to drive more revenue. How do we provide more proactive communications so that we contact people sooner in the sales cycles or when they have a need, as opposed to when it becomes a problem?

Turning the discussion away from technology for a moment, another growth area in the customer service arena is at-home agents. How can the use of home-based agents help companies to identify and meet customer channel

preferences while optimizing contact center efficiencies?

Hanson: The home-agent environment has created a lot of opportunities, providing companies with a broader range of demographics and socioeconomic linkages between customers and potential agents. We can leverage those skills, those backgrounds, and the experiences of home-based agents and potentially connect them more directly with the type of individuals who might prefer to use specific channels such as social, chat, or the Web.

Can you point to examples of companies that are taking a proactive approach to aligning their customer service practices with the cross-channel customer's preferences?

Hanson: Some of our healthcare clients are proactively communicating with their customers when a refill is necessary or to remind them when they have an upcoming appointment. Some are taking this a step further and are providing customers with reminders on when to take a medication. Healthcare groups are getting very creative with this.

Utility companies are also finding new ways to proactively communicate with their customers, including outage notifications and when power can be expected to return to their neighborhoods. In fact, we can expect even greater machine-to-machine communication once we start to see more extensive build-out of smart grid capabilities. ■



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.

For more information, please visit www.peppersandrogersgroup.com.