

Why it's time to reevaluate your customer communication, starting with email

By Wynand Smit

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The contact centre industry, by all media accounts, has its eyes fixed on AI, chatbots and a variety of other fascinating opportunities to engage with customers.



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For a moment, though, we should take a look at those channels' lowly, but enduring, partner: email. Before you roll your eyes in astonishment, consider the fact that all generations are comfortable using email to communicate with companies. Unlike chat, or other “sexier” communication channels embraced by millennials or Gen Z, email is the “middle ground” for your entire customer base. Email is by no means going the way of the fax machine just yet; most companies use it, and yet most don't use email very well.

“Hi Smit” is a favourite example of this. The email continues, “would you like to get your body bikini-ready for summer?” Now, I enjoy a day at the beach as much as anyone, but within a greeting and one line of text, this company has made two errors: if you're looking for personalisation, surely my first name is in your database? And if you want to take that personalisation a step further, offer me something I may actually want to use or buy. Although this is an example of a marketing email, and not necessarily linked to customer support, these errors showcase two points of failure that are common amongst businesses – both of which provide opportunities for improved service and communication.



The e-mail and SMS marketing juggernaut

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Real-time expectations

An email interaction requires a speedy response; just as your customer will get frustrated when on hold in a voice call, and response time is essential there, email response time is also critical. Customers with devices in their hands cannot understand why hours, sometimes days or weeks, may elapse between times of communication. Most importantly, email response time should be in line with service levels upheld by other communication channels, including voice. If a customer

emails your business and your support team takes two weeks to get back to him via email, is the channel delivering on its promise of swift and painless correspondence with a timeous and efficient resolution? If a customer is forced to phone the contact centre for a resolution after sending numerous emails without receiving a response, is the channel being used as effectively as it should be? Offering email as a customer interaction channel may be expected, but unless it is being managed correctly, it can cause more harm than good – not just to your customer experience, but to your company and brand reputation as a whole.

“Saying it right”

Agents in the email environment require a different skill set to those working with voice or other channels. While the desired outcomes may be similar, i.e., sales or customer service query resolution, the language used can influence the outcome – this will depend on how much training the agents have, as well as the communication skills they inherently possess. The agents must be able to express themselves quickly and effectively, getting to the point, while also ensuring that they get the tone of voice right. Is the agent succinct yet helpful and professional... and is the communication in line with the brand's personality? Is an adequate amount of empathy expressed in a response to a challenging or frustrating experience for the customer? Using templated responses for common queries can also improve efficiency and result in more consistent and measured responses to support queries.

Text-based intelligence

Using data for email personalisation in marketing or sales emails is a common occurrence, but other use cases are often overlooked. Email is generally part of a multi-channel environment that gives customers communication options, but it's also one that offers insights since customers use specific words or phrases to express themselves in their emails. This data can be used proactively by analysing key trends or customer sentiment regarding a particular product, brand, or even offer unique competitor insight to drive business strategies. Conversely, the trends in the data could expose inefficient customer support processes, or even highlight problem areas that need to be addressed. Using text analytics can offer a wealth of data to feed back into your company to gain intelligence and enhance business strategies.

Email may not be as new or as exciting as some other facets of contact centre communication, but it's essential to get it right – not just for the sake of enhancing your customer experience, but also gaining improved chances of enhanced customer loyalty.

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