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The Customer-Centric Contact Center: Creating Lasting
Loyalty in a Multichannel Service World

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We have worked with hundreds of very good contact centers. The reason why these very good contact centers enlist our consulting services is they recognize that "very good" isn't good enough.

In today's highly competitive business climate where so much product and service parity exists among companies, the differentiating factor – what tips the scales in a particular organization's favor – is often the customer experience that the company is able to provide during the customer's interactions with the contact center. Whether a customer contacts them via phone, email, chat or the web, today's leading centers de- liver efficient service with a strong focus on consistency and quality, and they capture priceless data across all customer touchpoints. It's no longer about handling calls as quickly as possible in an effort to keep operating costs down; it's now about taking care of customers -- regardless of the channel they choose – and creating lasting cus- tomer advocacy that drives revenue enterprise-wide.

The more customer-centric an organization is, the more successful it will be. The trouble is, most contact centers – still adhering to the efficiency and cost-cutting focus of the 1980s and early 1990s -- place too much attention on traditional ACD driven numbers. This quantitative approach to customer care doesn't cut it in this Age of the Customer, and contact centers that follow such an approach miss out on the hundreds of opportunities to get closer to their customers ever day.

World class contact center leaders create a contact center culture where everyone in the center – and in other departments – looks at each process and practice from the perspective of the customer. Many companies talk about having a "customer-centric" focus, but few actually have the tools, processes and insight required to manage their customer information and intelligence with real-time precision.

This white paper features the key tactics and strategies that the best contact centers in the world embrace to ensure that they forever remain close to their customers – the valuable individuals who speak to, email, chat with and even "tweet" with agents every day, and who increasingly seek autonomy through the use of IVR- and web-based self-service applications. What's highlighted here is not mere opinion, but rather key findings based on years and years of working with world-class customer care organiza- tions, as well as those that aren't quite there yet.

We'll discuss how the best contact centers capture and act on invaluable customer data and feedback – information that reveals what's really happening to the business on a

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daily basis. And we'll talk about how letting real customer insight drive focused changes in the contact center will drive huge improvements and success across the enterprise.

Attributes of the Most Customer-Centric Contact Centers

More than any other entity within an enterprise, the contact center has the power to create and sustain lasting customer loyalty, true customer advocacy.

Here's how world-class contact centers do just that.

They go beyond the traditional metrics to focus on those that drive customer loyalty. Many of the most common contact center metrics and numbers are about the center's "availability" -- not the impact on the customer experience. Metrics like service level, average speed of answer, abandon rate, et al, are all important measures, but they don't have much to do with quality or "value" from a customer standpoint.

Nonetheless, those metrics are the ones we see at the top of most contact centers' scorecard, and they are the metrics that executives frequently ask about. Sadly, this quantitative focus drives a continual evaluation of the scores, along with ways to ensure that the center gets the "right score" -- with little focus on customer impact.

In addition to tracking and reporting on key availability scores, top centers focus on such metrics as first-contact resolution, quality, customer satisfaction, and agent adherence to schedule. And they are successful in communicating the importance of such metrics to senior management.

These are the measures over which agents have direct control, and the ones that bring the contact center much closer to the customer – and vice versa.

They embrace a customer-centric view of contact center economics. Contact center economics isn't about always doing more with less – it's about providing optimal levels of service to the right people at the right time.

The best contact centers know that their real value lies in every customer interaction – and they instill that notion in their agents. Following each contact, agents are encouraged to ask themselves such questions as, "How could we avoid making customers call us about that issue in the future?" and "Who else in the organization would benefit from hearing the real voice of the customer?" Such questions will reveal numerous ways to improve efficiencies while simultaneously enhancing – not cutting back on – the service provided to customers. Hundreds of times each day, your customers are telling you what they really want. The key is to empower agents to pass

"Today's top contact centers realize that, to be successful, they must be able to cut through the clutter of available stats and data to find the metrics that truly impact and reveal key insights into the customer experience"

Greg Levin

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along critical information that can lead to quick and meaningful action – action that bolsters the bottom line and customer satisfaction.

While feedback from agents is powerful, the ability to dive deeply (and quickly) into all contact center touchpoints is quickly becoming a requirement. By aligning the agent feedback with centralized business intelligence from all customer access channels, world-class contact centers can track the impact of process changes and develop new ROI-driven improvement.

One of the biggest challenges in adopting a more customer-centric view of contact center economics is gaining buy-in from senior management. Many contact center managers struggle to explain to execs why, at certain times, a portion of the center's agents will be just "sitting around" waiting for calls to arrive. Senior management is often left with an unsettling feeling that money is being wasted because agents aren't on the phones at all times. Many times the agents are actually working on other key tasks or handling non-phone contacts, but it's difficult to quantify all of this without a holistic view of all media work types and how each agent is contributing. Key to getting senior management onboard is being able to connect all of the agent productivity dots in a single system view.

Customer channel choice insight is critical, too. In every business, there is a critical path to profit or fulfillment – the most efficient way for the organization to reach its goal. For example, in the case of an online retailer, the most profitable path would be the customer placing an order online, paying online, receiving the exact product when promised and being happy with it. Any deviation from this self-service path (e.g., phone calls to a live agent) costs the company more money in support. This is true, but if every one of those phone calls is viewed as a way to help improve the path for future customers, it's not all money wasted. Being able to connect the value of every interaction with the organization's critical path is key to getting additional support and investments.

Their quality program is built around the voice of the customer. In most contact centers, the quality monitoring process is half-baked. That is, the center does a decent job of measuring how well agents comply with internal requirements and polices during customer interactions, but fall short on measuring a very critical component – how the *customer* felt about the interaction.

In the best contact centers, the customer is considered a key judge of quality. This is not to say that these centers do away with their QA team; rather they have the team focus on both components of quality: internal compliance and the actual customer experience. This is done by having QA specialists rate agents on how well they carried out essential call requirements (greeting, accuracy of information provided, etc.) and combine that score with results from post-contact customer surveys in which callers

Call centers need to make it easy for everyone to understand what's really happening now and what needs to change, and to provide such information on a real-time basis along with the required actions. Given the number of disparate systems, pulling everything together is no easy task. However, the best companies are findings ways to make this happen.

rate the agent on things like courtesy, empathy, professionalism and ability to resolve the issue at hand. Such "voice of the customer" (VOC) based quality programs mark a true shift in how contact centers gauge performance and how much they value customer insight and feedback.

By implementing a VOC-based quality monitoring program, contact centers are able to not only uncover what truly drives positive customer experiences and what detracts from them; they are able to increase agent buy-in to the quality process, which, in turn, often results in higher quality interactions. When an agent sees that the center cares enough about customers to incorporate their direct feedback into quality monitoring scores, the agent too begins to value the customer more. And, certainly, agents are more open to coaching that includes real customer feedback than they are to coaching that includes only their supervisor's take on their performance.

They offer the right non-telephone channels to customers based on data, not assumptions. Many companies approach alternative access channels (chat, email, web calls, self-service) from a mere cost-savings perspective rather than viewing how such channels might enrich the customer experience when interacting with the company. Often, any potential cost-savings from implementing these channels is lost because customer issues are not resolved efficiently or effectively. Thus, too much focus on driving customers to alternative service channels can actually cost companies more money in their ability to provide real resolution.

In many companies, alternative access channels are supported by different systems, departments and people. Such incongruence often causes a disconnect with the customer and an internal misconception that the organization is providing great service based on the simple fact that the contact center is achieving its service level (and response time) objectives for each channel.

The best service organizations are finding ways to create a centralized view of the customer touchpoints, and are starting to prioritize and route work based on the insight they're gaining from a holistic view. The ability to integrate all customer interactions into a single view is key to being able to compete in the new era of customer choice. Call center leaders must have insight into what is happening across all channels to make decisions that correctly align customers with the most appropriate resolution.

To help gain such insight, top companies have invested in an integrated multi-media solution. Without integrative technology, it's difficult to gain a clear understanding of the real cost of each channel and the resolution rates achieved via each one. Consequently, the company fails to recognize that what they thought was cheaper is actually more expensive.

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> *"More than ever, businesses must align their customer communication strategies with where, when, and how the customer prefers to receive information. Yet, it's a lot easier said than done."*
>
> *Debbie Braunert*

They focus sharply on first-contact resolution and give agents the tools and training they need to achieve it. Improvements in first-contact resolution (FCR) rates can be directly correlated to improvements in customer loyalty, employee satisfaction, operational efficiencies and sales growth. In other words, FCR hits both the top and bottom line.

Some companies don't give FCR the focus and attention it deserves, claiming that it's difficult to accurately measure the metric. Experts disagree – explaining that FCR can be tracked relatively easily via post-contact customer surveys administered via IVR, email, or phone. As part of the brief survey, just ask customers straight out if they got what they needed the first time they requested it.

More important than the FCR metric itself is understanding the success drivers and foundational elements that foster continuous FCR improvement. For instance, if you're not meeting your service level objective on a regular basis (by interval), you'll never see improvements in FCR, as frustrated callers will hang up and call back later. They'll rate you low because you didn't solve the issue on their first call to you.

Even if you get the service level part right, if you're not providing quality, customers will be forced to call back because they don't feel comfortable with the resolution, or because what was promised didn't happen. Ultimately, the lack of quality will negatively impact service level and vice versa—resulting in no actual FCR improvement.

The best contact centers drive FCR success by giving agents the training and tools (e.g., powerful desktop tools/knowledge bases) they need to effectively and efficiently handle customer issues. In addition, these centers empower agents to focus on call resolution over average handle time. Telling agents that FCR is key while still holding them to overly strict AHT objectives sends a conflicting message, and will result in agents rushing calls in order to meet the latter metric. And when calls are rushed, mistakes are made, and when mistakes are made, customers call back – and both your FCR and your operational costs go out the window.

They understand the real "why" behind the reason for the call and find ways to turn it into a value opportunity. The best contact centers know that real value registers one contact at a time -- that every contact is an opportunity to add value to the organization. Just as you would go through a very thorough analysis to justify a new technology investment to land on a true return on investment (ROI), the same applies to every contact. Every interaction with a customer is an opportunity to learn about his or her needs, your organization, the competition and additional growth opportunities.

Contact centers that can make the ROI connection are the ones that easily move the conversation from cost to benefit -- adding new information to all parts of the organization. Key to getting buy-in from others in your organization is proactive communi-

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cation/education -- taking the time to provide new information without being asked to give it. If you operate under the assumption that every call provides something from which others in the organization can benefit, you're 99 percent of the way toward moving your center to the next level. Crossing the finish line requires actually sharing your findings with others. This is the easy part, and something that most people in other parts of the organization welcome with open arms.

While reports from your end-of-call drop-down menus or radio button reason codes can be helpful, it's important to not use these as the sole driver to change processes. These reports simply capture the internal company-driven reasons why people call; yes, they add some value as to "the why" and even shed light on what to fix, but on their own, they often fall short of providing actionable customer insight. The way to really show value is by finding new ways to extract those things that people don't know. You'll need to do a little something extra at the end of each call, but if you get your agents involved, give them the time and provide them with a reason, you'll be rewarded with the information you need to communicate the true value of the center. It really is about listening -- to your customers through your agents.

They strive to sustain high levels of agent engagement and retention. Everybody knows that happy employees beget happy customers; however, happiness is often not enough to build and sustain customer loyalty in today's highly competitive business arena. To truly engage customers and drive business results, the contact center must truly engage its agents. A big part of this entails having clear insight into the business performance of all agents across all channels, and empowering agents to continually improve.

In centers with a truly engaged frontline, agents do not merely want to do a good job; rather they feel *compelled* to do a *great* one. World class contact centers have easy to access metrics and reports that help reward agents that are doing great, thus increasing agent engagement. Fully engaged agents aren't just satisfied with their job; they are loyal to the organization for which they work, committed to its customers and its mission, and inspired to continuously improve.

In other words, contact centers that care about customers take care of their agents. To maintain high levels of engagement on the frontline, the best contact centers do the following types of things:

- Regularly reward and recognize agents when they perform well and achieve key objectives/goals.

- Train and develop staff using a diverse range of methods that captivate and educate – e.g., e-learning, role-playing/simulations, on-the-job learning, mentoring, etc.

- Empower agents to make key decisions that enhance the customer experience.

- Expand agents' roles -- giving them opportunities to work on intriguing off-phone projects and committees.

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So I guess it could be said that the most customer-centric centers are typically the most employee-centric centers. In fact, as important as all the practices listed in this white paper are, nothing enhances the customer experience more than interacting with an agent who is knowledgeable, professional, efficient, motivated and happy.

They are experts at communicating the value of the contact center and its impact on the larger organization. "Senior management just doesn't understand". That's a complaint heard time and time again from contact center managers who are struggling with issues such as staffing, getting support for new technology or obtaining respect for their department. However, it's really the job of contact center managers themselves to get leadership to understand and appreciate the value and dynamics of the contact center.

Most senior executives with contact center responsibilities have never run a contact center. In many cases, they're focused on other organizational issues that pull them away from gaining a true understanding of our challenges. But that's not a bad thing – – it actually makes it a lot easier to transform their opinions.

Internal systems contain valuable information that allows companies to "paint the picture" for all levels of the organization. Key to turning data into insight is the ability to connect every interaction with value to the company. While the data is often accessible, the insight gets lost in translation – and without the right tools, many of the contact center benefits get lost inside an internal black hole. Once you get senior management onboard, everything else becomes easy. Keep focusing on the value of the contact center and pointing everyone back to the customer as the driver of all improvements. Anyone, at any level, has the ability to drive change in a contact center; the key is to never give up and to keep encouraging everybody involved – from agents to C-level execs – to view all processes and practices from the customer's perspective.

More than 70 percent of consumers stated that they would increase their purchases with a specific company by 10 percent or more if that business delivers a superior customer experience.

Strativity Group's 2010 Consumer Experience Study

Close the Gap

There is a very long list of organizations that claim to be highly customer-centric. However, the list of organizations that truly *embody* customer-centricity is a whole lot shorter.

This is not an attack on today's customer care professionals, and we're certainly not calling their integrity into question. Most contact center leaders no doubt believe they are customer-centric, and they do strive to back that up with action. The problem is that many have struggled to break free from the operational models and strategies of yesterday, and thus continue to embrace metrics, processes, practices and tools that do little to enhance the experience of today's savvy and demanding customer.

Contact channels and technologies have evolved rapidly. Competition has increased exponentially. Customer expectations have risen substantially. It's no exaggeration to say that the entire customer care landscape has changed, so now must contact centers' approach to creating and sustaining loyalty.

Move your contact center closer to your customers. Otherwise, your customers may not *be* your customers for very much longer.

About the Author

Tim Montgomery is CEO of **Cooney Solutions Group**. Tim is an accomplished author and has written numerous insightful and forward-thinking articles and whitepapers on a wide range of leadership/management, customer service, and contact center topics. His work has been featured in many global publications, industry journals and position papers. He is also a contributing author to highly regarded books on Leadership and Business Management, Customer Relationship Management, Call Center Operations Management and People Management.

Tim has personally assisted some of the world's most recognized service organizations – **USAA, DELL, AIG, Lifetouch Publishing, ADP, Mitsubishi Motors, The Scooter Store, Farmers Insurance, Premera Blue Cross, Deluxe Corporation, Allstate, Kodak, Liberty Mutual, Cinergy, Prudential, Meguiar's, Coca-Cola, Isagenix, Department of Veterans Affairs, AAA of Canada, American Family Insurance, The Gartner Group, Amerigroup, Prime Therapeutics, Erie Insurance, Harvard Medical School, and many more**.

About Cooney Solutions Group

General Bill Cooney and Tim Montgomery, two of the most experienced and respected experts in customer service and contact center management, founded CSG with the goal of offering affordable, world-class outsourcing solutions to organizations committed to delivering high-quality, customer experiences. They are further supported by a team of recognized experts in the areas of network utilization, operational efficiency and culture development. This "dream team" has served as advisors to some of the world's most recognized and celebrated customer care organizations.

For more information, please visit **www.cooneysolutionsgroup.com**.

About Genesys

As the market leader in contact center software, Genesys knows what superior service means. And so do the companies that run our software.

Genesys has delivered contact center software and services for more than 15 years, pioneering the development of computer telephony integration software and developing a range of award-winning products for live support and self-help. Genesys delivers solutions for inbound customer service, collections, help desks, order desks, workforce management, and outbound telesales and service. Today, more than 4,000 companies worldwide trust Genesys for contact center solutions.

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