

Live service versus self service: getting the balance right

With local government budget cuts a reality, what services can councils deliver on a self-service basis without adversely impacting service quality and customer satisfaction?

Self-service statistics

They say don't not always accept statistics at face value - and here's a case in point.

According to Govmetrics, an organisation that measures multichannel citizen contacts for around 80 UK local authorities, 70% of citizen interactions are now via the web, 20% are by phone and 10% are face-to-face.

However, according to ContactBabel's 2009 UK Contact Centre Decision-Makers' Guide, 77.2% of (private and public sector) UK inbound customer contacts are by phone, 9.8% by email, 8.0% by self-service, 2.3% by letter and 1.6% by fax. And despite the massive media focus on new digital media, only 0.3% of inbound customer contacts are by SMS, 0.2% via collaboration and 0.1% by text chat.

The two sets of stats are clearly polls apart - but why? Is the nature of citizen contact wildly different to that of people dealing with private companies? Is one set of statistics wildly wrong?

The answer to both questions is 'no'. It's simply a simple case of the statistics measuring different things.

Govmetrics measures local government interactions aggregated into service areas (Council Tax, Education, Housing etc.) but it doesn't measure whether those interactions are for information-gathering purposes or whether they are complex service requests. Govmetrics business partner Socitm (the Society of Information

Technology Managers) however does. And it reckons about two-thirds of all citizen contacts over the web are for information-gathering.

ContactBabel, on the other hand, is measuring the multichannel handling of 'customer service queries'. Chalk and cheese.

Live versus Self Service

The above is important to bear in mind when considering transferring council services handled by live contact centre agents over to self-service.

For while a quick glance at the Govmetric stats would reassure most public sector contact centre managers that citizens are happy to use web (or phone self-service) to resolve a service issue, the truth of the matter is that it depends on the nature of the query.

Here is a list of ten of the most common customer queries handled by contact centre agents in one UK local authority:

1. Are all students exempt from Council Tax?
2. Where can I view planning applications?
3. How do I make a comment or complain about a Council service?
4. How do I become a taxi driver?
5. What are the housing need factors?
6. What job vacancies do you have?
7. Will I have to pay to make a request?
8. How can I dispose of my old television?
9. What is Park and Ride?
10. How much Council Tax does each household pay?

In theory, all of these could be classed as 'information-gathering tasks' and handled by a self-serve system over the web or phone. But what would happen if self-serve was the only option? The answer is probably chaos – for several reasons.

Firstly, because while there are those that prefer to use the web or an Interactive Voice Response (IVR) system, the vast majority of people still feel the need to speak

to an individual when they have a pressing customer service issue. That much is evident from the ContactBabel stats.

Secondly, because self-service simply isn't viable for many people. For example:

- older citizens, disabled citizens and others that don't have easy access to a PC or the skills to operate an internet-enabled PC
- older citizens and others that are uncomfortable with the use of automated call handling
- those that don't have access to a PC or a live internet connection at the time they're making an enquiry

And thirdly because there's no such thing as a standard question – which means, of course, there's no such thing as a standard answer. This particularly applies to queries such as 'what happened to my application?' and 'my situation is complicated by the fact that xxxxx' where a self-serve system is unlikely to deliver a full answer unless a 'case' has already been set up.

So in summary, while web or IVR self-service has a key role to play in cutting cost-to-serve – and is entirely complimentary to live agent operations – it is rarely a complete substitute for a live agent operation.

Knowing when to switch to self-service

So when and how should councils look to introduce self-service? Several considerations need to be taken into account:

- From the customer point of view, citizens must be able to get to the answers they want simply and quickly and under circumstances where the system delivers a positive customer experience.
- From the local authority's point of view, it's all of these things - plus managers must factor in the complexity of setting up the system, and the financial calculation of whether, in the medium to long term, self-service can save them money.

It's critical that council's don't just look at self-service from the their own standpoint. Ultimately, the success of the service will come down to whether customers are happy to use it and whether they get to the right answers quickly and efficiently. If using self-service simply results in irate citizens subsequently calling in to speak to a contact centre agent then it's clearly time to rethink.

Understanding customer preferences

Understanding customer preferences is also essential to getting the balance right between live agent and self-serve. For the most essential lesson to be learnt from the ContactBabel and Govemetrics research detailed above is that a range of contact channels are required to suit different customers at different times.

Just because a customer prefers to speak to a live agent on one occasion doesn't mean that they aren't prepared to use an automated phone system, complete a web form or text on another occasion. Macfarlane is finding that automation via SMS, for example, is an increasingly popular option for a range of services from Choice-Based Lettings to the payment of Council Tax, Parking Fines etc., getting account balances, and updating back-end and CRM systems remotely.

It's all about delivering an appropriate customer contact channel strategy – and the starting point for this is always to listen to what customers want. Only with this information can organisations tailor services to better meet customer needs and source the most appropriate technology to support telephone advisors, improve service quality, cut costs and automate services.

No-one is suggesting this is going to be easy. In recent research conducted by Macfarlane amongst 63 local councils, 'Improving service quality to meet customer demands' was identified as the most significant challenge facing local authority contact centres – but 'reducing costs' was identified as the prime driver for introducing new technology into the contact centre. So the option of throwing money at a service operation to improve quality just isn't an option. Nor is working with a 'one trick pony' technology provider that can only deliver a single point automated solution.

The answer is to always take the broadest possible view of customer contact from the point at which your customers first make contact with your organisation – not at

the point at which they contact you with problems – and to consider technologies that fit your AND your customers' needs.

From a 'behind the scenes' perspective, public sector organisations should consider workforce management, call recording & quality performance management, multichannel integration (to create a single view of the customer), front/back office system integration and other technologies that can help maximise customer contact efficiency and effectiveness while reducing costs. And from a 'customer interface' perspective, they should consider a broad range of live agent, automated, SMS, collaboration, speech recognition etc. technologies – rather than rushing down a single technology route that might turn out to be a blind alley.

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