

## **Customers still prefer the phone**

Five years on from the 2005 target date for the electronic enabling of services, is it any surprise that local councils still have the telephone at the heart of their customer contact strategies? Not if you consider the statistics.

In its 2009 UK Contact Centre Decision-Makers' Guide, ContactBabel states that 77.2% of 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 stats for the Public Sector are broadly the same – albeit email contacts are slightly lower at just 8.0% of total.

These figures must come as a body blow for public sector strategists that are banking on a significant switch to customer self-service in the near future. For despite the billions spent in recent years on automated web technologies, customer front ends, collaboration, text chat technologies, knowledge databases, web optimisation and so on, the ContactBabel stats show that customers still prefer to pick up the humble telephone when they have a problem on over 3 out of 4 occasions.

Understanding customer preferences is essential to the success of any customer contact operation. And the most essential lesson to be learnt from the ContactBabel research 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.

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, this may involve looking at 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.

While from a 'customer interface' perspective, it will generally mean considering 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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