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The Top CUSTOMER SERVICE Trends

Building Better Service Beyond Voice

Artificial intelligence is making it possible to
personalize customer care

By Sam Del Rowe



Grand View Research valued the global contact center software market at \$16.3 billion in 2018, but the firm expects it to reach \$47.8 billion by 2025, growing at a compound annual rate of 17.6 percent. Among the factors expected to drive this growth are advances in artificial intelligence and the evolution of contact centers from voice-centric facilities to ones driven by multimedia, multi-channel customer interactions.

A greater emphasis on cloud deployments has also played a role. Though the contact center market is currently

split pretty evenly between hosted and on-premises solutions, Grand View expects hosted solutions to see greater demand going forward due to their ease of deployment, accessibility from anywhere and at any time, and simplicity in integration with other systems.

“Nowadays, buyers widely prefer cloud-based systems, owing to benefits such as usage flexibility, elimination of installation time and costs, and reduced maintenance charges,” it concluded.

The firm also expects robotic process automation, where companies turn over some of their more mundane tasks to automated solutions like bots and virtual



agents, to be a vital part of the contact center software market going forward.

“RPA reduces errors and improves work quality,” Grand View analyst concluded in their most recent market forecast. “Organizations are seeking solutions that allow managers and agents...to invest their time in analytical activities and decision making for organizational development and rely on robots for routine tasks.”

Technologies included within Grand View’s market analysis include computer telephony integration (CTI), interactive voice response (IVR), automatic call distribution (ACD) and dialers, call recording, customer collaboration, reporting and analytics, and workforce optimization (WFO). Of those, the firm expects the customer collaboration segment to see the greatest expansion through 2025, growing more than 25 percent per year.

Video is among the most noteworthy trends in the collaboration space, allowing agents not just to communicate with managers, subject matter experts, and others within the company to better assist customers, but also in direct contact with customers.

Visual assistance allows agents to see what customers see by sharing either their smartphone cameras or screens. Agents can then provide visual guidance when and where it is needed.

“Visual Assistance is a transformative technology that enhances customer service [key performance indicators] across the board. These double-digit improvements are a real game changer for contact centers,” said Amir Yoffe, cofounder and chief operations officer at TechSee, a provider of visual customer assistance technology that combines AI and augmented reality.

According to TechSee research, visual assistance technology was shown to deliver faster service, reduce escalations, and improve outcomes. For companies that have used the technology, first-contact resolution rates increased by 22 percent, average handle time decreased by 12 percent, and Net Promoter Scores increased by 25 points.

THE AI EFFECT

Grand View and other analysts are also paying close attention to social media, mobile, and analytics, though they can all

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agree that the one technology innovation that is having the most disruptive effect on the contact center market is artificial intelligence.

Mike de la Cruz, chief business officer at Directly, a provider of customer experience automation, expects AI and automation to continue dominating the conversation for many years to come, despite some early missteps.

“Most early investments in AI and automation failed, and the primary reason for this is not the implementation or the technology itself,” he says. “It is a lack of training. AI systems need to be continuously trained to expand their abil-

“We see expert-trained virtual agent technology as the future of customer service.”

ities, and companies need to invest more in the training technology that enables machine learning systems to learn more quickly and comprehensively.”

And while the growing fear in the contact center industry is that automation will eliminate the need for human beings, de la Cruz and others see things differently.

De la Cruz advocates for involving agents in the training process. “When the expertise of human workers is systematically injected into the AI, it becomes more accurate. This means that AI will continue to rely on the expertise of human workers to be successful. And because the more input from domain experts the AI receives, the better it becomes, the demand for workers to train AI will only grow,” he says.

Customer service consultant Brad Cleveland, a senior advisor, founding partner, and former president of the International Customer Management Institute (ICMI), also thinks that AI will only increase the need for highly skilled agents.

In the contact center, he says, AI is currently serving a support role, getting the right information to the agent desk-top at the right time or getting the right call to the right place.

“There’s a lot of room for development there,” Cleveland says. “The need for very savvy, very capable employees is only going to go up because the simple stuff will be automated or even, hopefully, prevented from happening. Then [agents] will be left with more complex and important work.”

Virtual agents infused with AI will also be essential going forward, de la Cruz asserts. “We see expert-trained virtual agent technology as the future of customer service,” he says.

“Virtual agents will serve as the gateway for every customer contact and will need to successfully understand and diagnose customer problems while integrating with internal systems to provide real-time answers,” he explains. “Virtual agents trained by expert users of a company’s products or services, specifically, will be key here.”

And as that happens, customer service representatives will need to become more strategic in nature, dealing with only the most complex issues that virtual agents can’t handle, according to de la Cruz.

CHANGING THE CHANNEL

Cleveland also sees a growing need for contact centers to adopt omnichannel strategies and software solutions. But even today, after talking about omnichannel for many years, some companies still aren’t ready for it.

“Omnichannel is a structural challenge for a lot of organizations just in how they’re setting up their agent groups,” he

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says. “If you split up agent groups based on channel, you’re creating division in the contact center. We don’t see that as practical long-term.”

Help is on the way, though. “Technology is increasingly getting better at bringing these different channels into a funnel that gets [every contact] to the right person, to the right desktop,” Cleveland says.

Nevertheless, moving to an omnichannel model in the contact center is just as much about managing personnel as it is about software and hardware. Cleveland suggests starting with agents who are already well-versed in handling multiple channels. “Any contact center manager is going to know they have a few agents who are proficient across the board. Start there and start experimenting a little bit with your technology,” he advises.

“You can still keep that email group and that phone group in place for now, but start moving in another direction and see how far away you are from pulling everyone into more of a universal approach with channels,” he continues. “Increasingly, we want to be thinking of how to equip all of [our agents] to handle the totality of work that’s coming our way.”

That will also require shifts in other areas. “In contact centers you can route, queue, and treat calls on any parameter you want. We really have to know what makes sense,” Cleveland says. “If [an inquiry] needs to go to an employee, you don’t want it to go to self-service.”

AGENT INVOLVEMENT

Equally important in 2019 and beyond will be the concept of employee engagement, something that Cleveland believes goes hand in hand with customer engagement. “You’ve got to have engaged employees if you’re going to have happy customers.... Of course customers are going to take us into the future, but having engaged employees is the means to get there,” he says.

Cleveland acknowledges that contact centers are usually very busy, often preventing managers from spending a lot of time with agents. But that doesn’t mean that supervisors can’t carve out a few minutes in the week to ask agents how things are going or how the organization can be more supportive of them.

Ultimately, employee engagement is about enabling connections between employees and customers, according to Cleveland. “That comes before any metric that might be outdated, like handling time,” he says.

De la Cruz adds that such a focus on connecting with customers harks back to the early days of the contact center. “The original thesis behind the industrialized contact center was to enable enterprises to provide personalized, individual, one-on-one customer care. Each contact was an important relationship, and it was a priority to solve problems through focused customer engagement,” he states.

But as technology advanced, the Internet emerged, and customer contact volumes increased, the focus shifted, de la Cruz continues. “It became possible to provide one-to-many customer service via support portals, FAQs, knowledge bases, communities, and other self-service initiatives. Instead of providing great customer service, it morphed into a strategy to avoid customers and the contact center at all costs.

“Now, we’re moving back to this idea of engaging with customers one-on-one, which is largely influenced by how smartphones have fundamentally changed our behavior and have trained our brains to expect near-instant, personalized answers across various channels. This is a difficult interaction to scale, but with the advancements in AI, it is possible again to provide personalized customer care,” he explains. 

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