



Tools and Technologies To Maximize Your Support Center's Potential

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Support centers gain competitive advantage when they deploy an integrated suite of customer service applications based on a sound multichannel strategy. While live assisted support via telephone remains a key contact point, businesses are cutting expenses and increasing customer satisfaction by choosing IP-enabled voice systems that integrate to other service applications.

Though savvy businesses have long recognized the power of customer service as a differentiator, more than a few find themselves playing catch-up as its impact as a corporate image-shaper grows. The Internet has been a game-changer for service, providing the platform for customers to trumpet their happiness or discontent to a ready audience. They're putting providers on notice that they have power beyond their individual spending.

Companies that take this notice to heart understand they must deliver the best possible experience each time they get the opportunity and, further, leverage every opportunity to deepen customer relationships. Ultimately, delivering that experience depends on ready access to accurate customer data. It's a straightforward goal, but creating high-level customer visibility into customer data and making it accessible to relevant parties — agents, partners, customers — requires that support organizations surmount a number of inherent challenges. On the technology front, current best practices for meeting these challenges call for deploying:

- Integrated customer service application suites with VoIP
- Multichannel service delivery
- Realtime and historical reporting and analysis
- Adaptable workflow

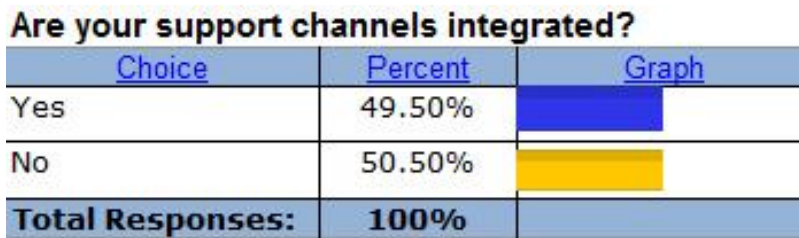
Suite Spot: Integrated Customer Service Applications

Though the best-of-breed vs. integrated suite argument continues across every technology type, service and support organizations that want to realize the returns of 360-degree customer visibility typically choose customer-facing applications built on a single, unifying platform. Even if they want to customize and further integrate to back-office and homegrown systems, they find that front-office applications are vastly more powerful when deployed within an integrated, out-of-the-box suite that features case management, knowledge management, business workflow optimization, reporting and analysis, multichannel capabilities, and other key functionality.

By purchasing solutions built on a unified platform, customer care executives significantly improve the effectiveness of their entire service operation. They reduce IT spend, increase their ability to respond to both internal workforce and external market factors, speed escalation and handling times, and increase first contact resolution. Rather than juggling multiple screens within multiple applications to handle a service transaction, customer service representatives (CSRs) gain a unified view of a customer — their

previous service interactions, their preferences, their sales history, and the actions they may have already taken to address a current issue. Streamlined by the ability to pull information from all relevant data sources, service interactions improve not only the customer’s satisfaction through speedy resolution, but the support rep’s individual effectiveness and morale.

“It’s critical to support efficiency that applications be integrated,” says Dave Brown, head of Support Center University, a Colorado-based consultancy. “One of the most costly challenges support centers have faced over the years is integrating key front-office systems to streamline data handling.”



Source: SupportIndustry.com, 2009 Metrics Survey

Even in the best situations, Brown continues, third-party integration is rarely seamless, and reps still often have to move back and forth between, for example, the CRM and knowledge management systems. “To have those systems integrated is a huge benefit to service management, and is often worth more than the extra bells and whistles you might get if you choose multivendor applications and try to integrate them,” says Brown.

Further, with an integrated platform, cases can be opened in the support system regardless of the channel a customer chooses for making contact, and new data uploaded to the unified customer record, improving case tracking and data accuracy. Integration likewise greatly eases escalation to a higher-level channel should a customer not find their solutions themselves.

“Companies are waking up to fact that the customer’s need for service transcends multiple touchpoints — be it Web, email, or phone call — even within the same transaction,” says Tom Sweeny, head of ServiceXRG, a Mass.-based market research firm. “If they don’t address this, they have no visibility into what customers are really after, and they create gross inefficiencies in delivery.”

Customer visibility has not only bottom-line benefits to the support organization, but top-line revenue potential for the entire corporation. With full-circle views into customer interaction, and proactive measures prescribed through reporting and analysis, more service organizations are able to turn transactions into cross-sell and up-sell opportunities, both directly from the service desk and indirectly via targeted marketing based on customer behavior.

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— Tom Sweeny, ServiceXRG

Choice Cuts: Multichannel Service Delivery

For some businesses, it makes sense to deliver support solely over the phone, but others must heed the fact that customers have grown accustomed to having a choice in the way they interact with their providers when seeking service. Now that they've gotten a taste of autonomy, they're increasingly demanding that all their providers offer their preferred service channels. Satisfaction is greatly improved when they can effectively interact with a service organization in the way most meaningful to them.

In addition to telephony channels, businesses are finding that a solid portfolio also comprises Web forms, email, and online and phone-based self-service. With delayed assist and unassisted options like email and self-service, support operations are able to not only free support personnel from repeatedly addressing the same issues, but are able to drive down costs by dealing with transactions during off-peak hours or letting customers handle problems themselves. By offloading repetitive problems to lower-cost channels, they improve satisfaction and even impact top-line revenues because they can focus on more business-critical issues and premiere customers. In turn, they increase retention, encourage support contract renewal and more.

What support channels do you offer your customers? (choose all that apply)

<u>Choice</u>	<u>% of Respondents</u>	<u>Graph/Respondents</u>
Phone	95.20%	
Knowledge management/knowledgebases	62.50%	
Email autoresponse/suggest	61.50%	
Web-based case submittal	50%	

Source: SupportIndustry.com, 2009 Metrics Survey

Still, even for those organizations deploying a multichannel portfolio, the telephone typically remains a key piece of the support puzzle, and has historically required that support centers invest in an expensive ACD system for queuing and routing calls. These hardware systems are costly to manage and customize, and don't provide much flexibility if management needs to move employees or wants to take advantage of distributed operations. And even as more support organizations adopt integrated suites to streamline data access, they still find themselves trying to harness the separate flow of data over their telephony system so they can combine it with data from other systems to create a cohesive customer snapshot.

These issues have more and more companies exploring VoIP as either their sole telephony platform or to complement their existing system. By integrating VoIP phone systems with other customer service applications, support centers are able to deliver consistent service over all available channels, while

leveraging the cost benefits of a converged voice and communications infrastructure. Like any new technology, VoIP had to overcome early technical and image issues, but it has overcome the reliability and sound quality problems that plagued early adoption to stride beyond its consumer beginnings into business-critical applications.

According to research group In-Stat, 41% of U.S. businesses who are leveraging VoIP capabilities no longer use traditional TDM voice services, up significantly from the 34% who were in that position in 2008. Further, 42% of respondents use VoIP solutions in at least one of their corporate locations.

In his consulting business, Brown is seeing VoIP adoption across a range of support center sizes, from large support centers, who are more likely to use it in conjunction with their entrenched hardware-based systems, to small to mid-sized centers, who don't want to make the hefty investment in a traditional hardware-based system and are confident they can handle growth with a VoIP-based system.

Support now has the opportunity to leverage the Internet for both their voice and data communications, reducing costs and greatly simplifying administrative tasks. Further, in TCO scenarios for support centers, VoIP-enabled phone systems deliver lower call rates as well as savings through federal tax avoidance, says Denis Pombriant, head of Mass.-based Beagle Research.

Voice-enabled systems have all the advantages of a big hardware-based system, plus many of their own. Not only can they handle call routing, skills-based routing, IVR, and many other features, but they are infinitely scalable, more flexible than hardware systems, can be easily integrated within the infrastructure, and allow support centers the benefits of a distributed workforce.

This option to create a true distributed workforce comes at a critical juncture: Companies are globalizing, trying to cut the cost of brick-and-mortar facilities, trying to give employees more travel flexibility, and even creating a virtual workforce from the outset.

"VoIP provides flexibility in how you deploy a call center and the individual worker," says Pombriant. "It offers a measure of sustainability in a time of rising fuel prices and an uncertain economy. Agents aren't at the top of any pay pyramid and when fuel prices go up, it makes getting to work that much more difficult."

The technology also gives greater flexibility in hiring, he adds, as support center "open themselves up to more and different worker populations, such as retirees."

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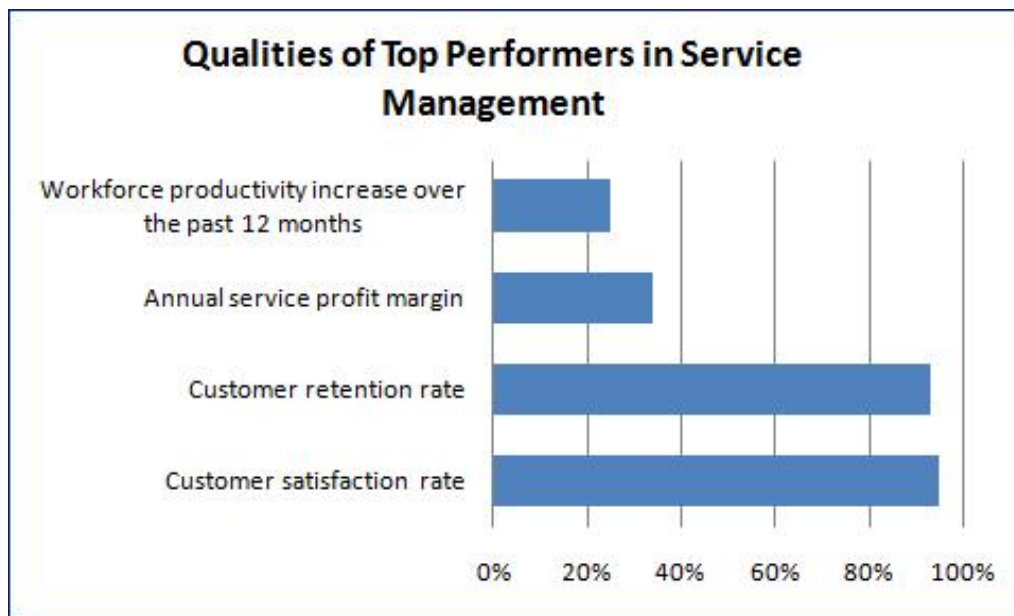
"VoIP systems ease the ability to integrate multiple types of workers into your support scenario. You can bring multiple centers and home agents together," says Brown. "Ten years ago the idea of home agents wasn't really feasible, but with this technology, the deployment of home agents is on the rise."

Insightful: Reporting and Analysis for Continual Improvement

Just as service needs complete visibility into customer behavior, so do they need insight into every aspect of their own. From such traditional metrics as hold time and first-call resolution to more elusive KPIs, measuring performance is critical to larger business improvements. But even with measurement as a long-standing cornerstone, too few support centers turn their findings into actionable data that positively impacts the business.

Here, sophisticated reporting and analysis tools step in. With so much to monitor and measure — and with every system from the phone to quality monitoring generating data — support center executives are able to capture relevant information and develop reports across a multitude of performance areas. They're able to analyze data across the parameters that best suit the business and present it across a variety of formats depending on the goal and audience. Analysis not only reveals key performance indicators within the support organization — allowing executives to justify staffing, improve service levels, and develop training programs — but can be extended to develop best practices across every department service touches, improving sales strategies, marketing campaigns, and technology planning.

This shared data model is crucial for aligning service management, marketing and sales groups for revenue generation. According to a 2009 report from the Aberdeen Group, the best-performing companies were twice as likely as lesser performers to share customer information with internal and external partners.



Source: Aberdeen Group, 2009

With integrated customer service applications and a sophisticated, configurable dashboard framework, support center executives perform realtime CSR data analysis so they can take immediate action and watch for troublesome or promising trends. Applications should also be able to take advantage of industry-standard third-party tools such as Crystal Reports to run reports on their historical data.

Mapping Success: Adaptable Business Workflow

Support centers today are dynamic environments, dealing with internal and external forces constantly in flux. Executives must somehow manage a workforce dealing with servicing customers across multiple channels, demanding customers who have immediate problems as well as long-term needs, and market dynamics unique to their industry that require quick reaction.

When support centers deploy integrated suites to ease administration and management so they can focus on business issues, they should feel comfortable that they're adopting industry-standard best practices so they can make immediate improvements. They should also be able to configure and customize their applications to meet their individual needs as they progress.

Whether they're dealing with heavy flux in their agent pool due to unforeseen sickness, or a troublesome bug in their software that's changing technical requirements, or a new product rollout, they should be able to easily change routing and assignment workflow. If their analysis uncovers inefficiencies in their business processes that need immediate attention, they should be able to change their business rules, processes and workflow to start taking advantage of their insight.

The same holds true if they're weathering external changes. If a market change, such as new industry regulations, will affect their service delivery and knowledge infrastructure, they should be able to tune associated workflows and the content itself.

The businesses that leverage service management best practices — including integrated platforms, voice-enabled service channels, and multichannel service delivery — stand to realize the best return on every customer relationship. Not only can they meet support expectations each time they interact with a customer, but the successful transaction and the satisfaction generated allows them to deepen the relationship for future return.

SIDEBAR: Voice Sells: VoIP-enabled Telephony

Despite channel integration benefits, customer service suites have traditionally lacked a key connection point — true integration with phone systems. Today, support centers are realizing the benefits of voice and data integration by adopting voice-enabled customer service suites delivered over IP networks.

With an integrated VoIP system in place, all contacts with the support center are handled using the same centralized data sources for a consistent user experience. If a customer needs to be escalated from an online self-service session, the VoIP system can intelligently route calls based on caller history or type, queue traffic, or agent skillsets. In addition, because VoIP systems are software-based, support centers opting for them over PBX systems eliminate the need for expensive proprietary hardware and can manage them using agile Web interfaces.

It's a major step forward in service response, according to experts. "In the past, if you wanted to do something like screen-pops, you had to invest a significant time and money to integrate your CRM system with your phone system," says Dave Brown, head of Support Center University.

About SupportIndustry.com

Supportindustry.com provides senior-level service and support professionals with direct access to information on customer support, including enterprise strategies, people issues, technology, trends and research. This data enables support professionals to benchmark and improve their customer support operation. Members are responsible for the help desk and customer support operation of their company. More information can be found at <http://www.supportindustry.com>.

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FrontRange Solutions develops software and services that growing mid-size firms and distributed enterprises rely on every day to build great customer relationships and deliver high-quality customer service. The company applies a unique combination of innovation and automation with a standards-based approach to simplify core business processes, including: IT service management; customer relationship and sales force management; and PC lifecycle management. More than 150,000 organizations, including some of the world's best-known brands, use FrontRange offerings to quickly improve their interactions with external and internal clients and achieve better business results. For more information, call 800.776.7889, visit www.frontrange.com.

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