

## **9 Essential Strategies to Improve Customer Experience**

*SAP CRM 2008: As advertising budgets shift  
to online efforts, customer care is where the money is.*

By Christopher Musico

LAS VEGAS -- The contact center is becoming an increasingly important facet in the arsenal of any company aiming to deliver not only high-quality service to demanding customers, but a profit center for its own operations. Knowing full well the challenges and opportunities hidden within the contact center were the main points of emphasis at a presentation held at SAP CRM 2008 here this week.

The session, "9 Essential Contact Center Strategies to Improve Your Customer's Experience," was built around a simple notion, one that may not, at first, seem like a contact-center-specific theme: The classic ways of advertising for business are slowly dying.

A study released on consumer online behavior by analyst firm IDC in February found that consumers spend 70.6 hours each week interacting with media in all its forms -- and that the largest share of their media engagement is with the Internet -- 32.7 hours per week, almost half of the total. Respondents only spent 16.4 hours per week watching television, a disparity that will likely only grow in the future, according to the report. "The time spent using the Internet will continue to increase at the expense of television and, to a lesser extent, print media," writes Karsten Weide, IDC's program director, digital media and entertainment. "This suggests that advertising budgets will continue to be shifted out of television, newspapers, and magazines into Internet advertising."

With more and more companies turning to the Internet to market their wares, customer service is becoming an important differentiator, argues Teresa Wingfield, senior product marketing manager at Genesys Telecommunications Laboratories, and a speaker at the meeting on contact center strategies. "We're in an era of information overload," she said during the session. "Individual consumer satisfaction matters more, and the contact center is central to your business. The contact center is now thought of as a profit center -- a strategic asset for the enterprise."

Wingfield stressed that there are four key components essential to delivering a "great customer service experience" in the contact center: convenience, competency, personalization, and proactivity. She went on to explain that there are nine ways to fulfill these requirements:

- \* conduct real-time satisfaction surveys;
- \* implement a customer front door;
- \* increase first-contact resolution;
- \* provide a consistent multichannel experience;
- \* maximize resource availability;

- \* communicate proactively;
- \* manage callbacks effectively;
- \* provide personalized services; and
- \* apply innovative communication.

While many of these strategies may seem like common sense for the contact center, two in particular -- communicating proactively and providing personalized services are often overlooked because of poor implementation, according to Wingfield.

Despite the popular consumer backlash against mass-marketing techniques that blindly send emails to consumers about product offerings that may not necessarily be tailored to their preferences, Wingfield said that keeping customers informed is key -- it just has to be done correctly. "Proactivity is getting a bad rap because it's not being done right," she explained. "There is a huge misperception that people don't want proactive communication -- but nothing could be farther from the truth. The key is in personalization."

In the same vein, providing personalized services is also overlooked -- but critical. "[Contact center agents] should not have to ask customers information [the agents] should already have in their system," Wingfield said, noting that customers find this "annoying." In order to avoid peeved customers, many companies are implementing Web self-service strategies to allow each customer to find the answers to problems and to perform services such as balance updates, transfers, and product returns.

This may satisfy some customers, but Wingfield pointed to the 2006/2007 Genesys' Global Consumer Survey, which found that 76 percent of consumers feel that companies are forcibly pushing them to use self-service systems instead of talking to live agents. Sixty-six percent of these respondents reported they were unhappy, and the overwhelming majority (75 percent) "feel less loyal and/or take their business elsewhere." Providing personalized services, using historical transaction data, and giving self-service applications a personal touch can make these customers more loyal.

"Allow for your customers to be connected with an agent at all times," Wingfield suggested in the session. "Provide an easy way [for them] to do business with you. Sometimes you may want to promote self-service callers to a live agent proactively -- but do not make the customer repeat information."

What's at stake are consumers' wallets, something not to be taken for granted as rising costs have more people seemingly thinking twice about every potential purchase. Providing top-notch, memorable customer service experiences will keep your customers from jumping to companies that may offer the same service at a lower price, Wingfield said. "To create loyal customers, you will need to provide high-quality, consistent service."