

By: Elaine Cascio



The Future of Self-Service

This new column is going to focus on technology, process, and organizational issues from a different perspective — that of the customer.

In a technology-oriented world, it's easy to concentrate on the bits, bytes, bells, and whistles, and forget an overarching goal — serving our customers better. The team at Vanguard Communications will be writing each month on ways that technology can be planned and deployed to help achieve that customer-centric goal.

Self-service has become a part of everyday life. Every day we stop at an ATM, pump our own gas (ok, unless you live in New Jersey), buy a book online, check ourselves out at your local supermarket or check ourselves in for a flight. Often, we don't think of these everyday tasks as self-service, which is the real key to usability — transparency.

Looking three to five years out, I think we'll see more changes in self-service that we're only beginning to think about today. Businesses have *a lot of* opportunities to interact with customers. And as more and more tools are available for us to reach out, the lines between "self-service," "assisted service," and "full service" begin to blur.

What do we see in our self-service magic ball?

- Fueled by online communities and the increased availability of information, customers demand that businesses meet them anywhere, anytime, on their channel of choice. That may be on the phone, via text message, IM, at a grocery store checkout, or on a social networking site like Facebook or Second Life. The availability of these additional channels will prompt opportunities for proactive outbound contact, as well as new self-service capabilities.
- Self-service is also becoming an important component of customer segmentation and customer choice in terms of level of engagement with a company. And I'm not talking about charging \$15 to speak with an agent or punishing customers who don't do a lot of business with you, but different levels of service clearly based on customer selected price-points and relationships. Successful companies will be the ones that are able to clearly communicate costs and benefits for different levels of service, whether it's live assistance, self-service, or partial automation.
- For IVR self-service, we see the migration from touch-tone to speech accelerating, and we expect that most companies will deploy speech recognition within five years. The improvement in capabilities, implementation cycles, and cost will significantly increase the range of applications for which speech makes sense.
- On the web, dynamic web 2.0 interactions mean that virtual user communities will more fully address service needs. These may be communities such as Second Life or MySpace, or company sponsored or owned communities (Communispace, Dell's Ideastorm, Qtopia).

- We also see more use of partial automation that leverages the unique skills of agents combined with self-service. On the web, companies will deploy chat and talk in *strategic* ways that either help close a sale or build customer loyalty. With IVR self-service, this may mean pre-qualifying a new customer using automation, or gathering new customer information (address, phone, etc.) before transferring the caller and a screen pop to an agent.
- We also see increased availability of self-service interactions. This ubiquity may mean that cable companies, utilities and others partner with banks for bill payment via ATM or that consumers can do much more than just buy groceries at a self-service checkout. These types of customer lifestyle stations will enable consumers to complete a number of tasks at a single place.

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- Finally, we believe that Unified Communications (UC) will open a new era of corporate transparency to customers, enabling us to better meet customers where they are. For self-service, we see opportunities to establish portals that enable customers to directly interact with the company. This can include delivering customer-specific information or directly linking customers to specialists within the enterprise.

Getting It Right

I hope we've all learned from self-service failures of the past, which were driven by technology and by budget cutting that tried to move *all* contacts away from the contact center. Today's successful companies build customer contact strategies *first*, then design technology to support them in usable, customer-centric, and cost effective ways. Only then will self-service become not only transparent, but an integral part of our daily lives. **IT**

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