

Reaping Benefits with Multi-channel Customer Service

Elaine Cascio, Vanguard Communications Corporation
in the December 20, 2005 issue of *ICCM Weekly*

We're all familiar with multi-channel or multimodal* contacts – they can be as basic as transferring out of the IVR to speak with a representative about the details of an account balance to pressing a button on a website to chat with an agent. Many companies are finding that strategically offering customers multiple, different channels can increase use, increase satisfaction, grow revenues and reduce costs.

And as the number of customer contact methods grows, we need to understand not only how different channels fit together from a customer experience perspective, but also how to encourage customers to mix channels in ways that prove most effective for them – and for us. This kind of multi-channel real time help and collaboration can provide a wealth of benefits for companies and their customers.

Using multiple channels to close the sale

Many companies have click to chat capabilities on their websites, but the real benefits are in adding this channel in a *strategic* way – for example, to help close a sale. Continental Airlines was an early adopter – they found that many users abandoned reservations at the last two steps (passenger information and billing). Rather than add chat capabilities throughout their site, Continental focused on these critical stages. The results? By adding another channel to the reservation process, Continental reduced website abandonment by 25% and realized a sales conversion rate of 35%. Plus, 92% of those who used the click to call option said it greatly or significantly enhanced their online reservation experience.

Increasingly, high touch companies like Spa Finder are adding a click to talk channel to their websites to provide the personal touch many of their visitors want before they finalize their spa travel. At Spa Finder, customers using click to talk complete purchases at roughly twice the rate of the average single channel customer.

Using multiple channels to reduce costs

Other companies implement multi-channel applications to reduce costs. For example, utilities can combine the power of speech recognition with the agent channel for account setup or service transfers. Here's how it works: a customer calls to set up new service. He or she provides contact information and an address for the new service, as well as a requested service date. The caller - and all the information he's input - is transferred to a representative who only needs to confirm the data and set up a service date. It's this mix of high tech and high touch that makes multi-channel service so successful.

What kind of savings are we talking about? By combining a voice response and agent interaction, utilities can reduce agent call handle times by up to two minutes. Multiply that by a million to a million and a half calls per year for new service and moves and annual savings can be substantial. Pretty powerful stuff.

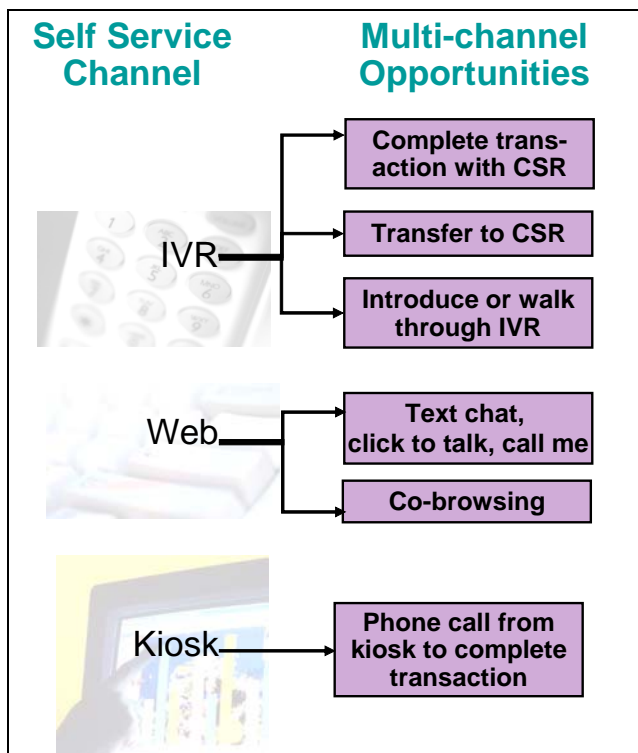
Customer experience is more critical than ever in multi-channel applications

So are you inspired to look at multi-channel applications in your business? First, make sure you have a well thought out customer contact strategy and a well-defined customer experience that you can replicate across all channels. Multi-channel service won't be successful if the customer's experience is radically different as he moves between channels. You might want to re-read an article I wrote for ICCM Weekly last April (*Why Customer Experience Matters*) for some of the gotchas of inconsistent customer experience.

Another key to success is using multiple channels in a *strategic* way. Don't just add click to chat capabilities to every screen on your website, but look at specific areas where your company and users will benefit from having another channel available. Likewise, look at designing voice response applications that seamlessly combine channels in beneficial ways, so that you're leveraging the strength of each channel and creating a total, seamless experience.

Summary

I encourage you to look at ways you can mix the channel experience for your customers. When implemented strategically and designed with the customer in mind, multi-channel service enhances the customer experience, reduces errors, reduces call times –and saves money!



Multi-channel opportunities

Elaine Cascio is a Vice President at Vanguard Communications Corporation, a consulting firm that specializes in contact center processes, operations and technology. She heads Vanguard's self service practice. Visit us at www.vanguard.net or contact Elaine at ecascio@vanguard.net.

*For many, multimodal also implies multifunctional devices that can accept text as well as voice input, for example, but we'll leave that to another discussion.