

## **Serving the Person-of-the-Year**

*Don Van Doren, Vanguard Communications  
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I'm writing this column the week that Time Magazine announced their "Person of the Year". In celebrating the anonymous and universal "You" Time recognized a fundamental sea change in how many people are communicating with each other individually and to the world. Time acknowledged the impact of literally millions of people shifting from being couch potatoes to contributing to sites on the Web their observations, comments, blogs, video clips, and more about anything and everything. 38 years after Andy Warhol's prediction of everyone's 15 minutes of fame, we have in place a mechanism to accomplish it. That is, if you can find our pixels among the cacophony and onslaught of bits.

As the Time article states, "[The year 2006 is] about community and collaboration on a scale never seen before. It's about the cosmic compendium of knowledge Wikipedia and the million-channel people's network YouTube and the online metropolis MySpace. It's about the many wresting power from the few and helping one another for nothing and how that will not only change the world, but also change the way the world changes."

Blair Pleasant, my colleague at [www.ucstrategies.com](http://www.ucstrategies.com), recently wrote a blog about a tragedy that involved a young man who lived in her local community. Within an hour or two the kids all knew exactly what had happened through their MySpace postings and had organized a vigil. The adults in the community were still contacting each other by telephone the next day to understand what was going on.

As Time points out, we have a revolution in the way that both interpersonal communications and the building of knowledge systems are evolving. And, companies are getting into the act, too. Second Life, a virtual reality website, has been doubling its population of "residents" every couple of months. In early December there were over 2 million. But this isn't a new Dungeons & Dragons or a site to snare the insomniacs. Many major companies are rushing to set up their own virtual storefronts in Second Life, where visitors can find out about the company, walk down aisles, view products on display, and in some cases place an order.

The concept lauded by Time is that information content is willingly and generously supplied by the users. That's the story of Wikipedia, eBay, FaceTime, There, craigslist, all those mentioned above, and dozens of others. What are the implications? A centerpiece of John Chambers' recent speeches has been that many of the innovations we will see in the next decade in business will be introduced by the consumers. Cisco, in particular, is rebranding products under the Unified Communications banner and is building a new wave of video capabilities into new products.

## **What About Contact Centers?**

With all that's going on here, how is that affecting contact centers? The answer, so far, is relatively little. A few years ago, we changed the name of our industry from "call" to "contact"

in recognition that the telephone wasn't the only way to interact with customers. A number of companies have made provisions to handle email in their centers, but there has been relatively little movement away from the phones. Yet, if Chambers and Time are right, there is a growing appetite, at least among an emerging generation of customers, for new ways to seek information and to communicate with others. If this explosive trend continues, it seems clear to me that contact centers will have to figure out how to interact with and serve those customers.

Contact centers tend to be conservative. Partly that's because of the need to guarantee secure, reliable service, rather than test the still-flaky www world. Partly it's because executives tend to view them as cost centers, and the emphasis in many is to deliver services quickly while containing costs. These new communications modes mean acquiring new equipment, looking for different skill sets, providing new training, fragmenting the agent pools, and potentially raising the cost-per-call.

In fact, despite the popularity of the web, there have been relatively few companies that have built effective links back to the centers, or situations where agents help callers find their own answers on the company website. We find the reason given is that websites are designed for self service. Agent access through click-to-talk adds an expense that is perceived to be unnecessary with appropriate web design.

### **The Role of IP**

As Time acknowledges, there is a new wave of communications capabilities and a willingness to use them that changes how the world changes. I feel that it's inevitable that this will impact how contact centers interact with customers. Peer-to-peer communications is one trend. While there will continue to be gateways to the existing PSTN infrastructure, there may be some interesting advantages of being able to bypass those and directly access the company of choice.

Another near trend is access from within those virtual reality stores. While these may evolve to look like websites designed for self service, a different model is that there will need to be shop clerks available to provide assistance. Text chat seems cumbersome; voice communication and instant collaboration would be a much better answer. Skills-based groups of agents ready to directly engage the avatar of a shopper browsing through the store could be an effective approach.

In both these cases, IP can enable the voice, data, and video functionality needed. It's one of the reasons a forward-thinking CMO recently told me, "We're not exactly sure how this new wave of consumers will want to reach us. But we'll be on the virtual reality sites, we're investing in interactive ways that we can engage with customers, and we're building an IP infrastructure that will give us the flexibility to respond."

It's going to be a wild ride.

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