

### **Will Contact Centers Take the Plunge into Unified Communications?**

*Don Van Doren, UniComm Consulting*  
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There was a vigorous discussion at a recent conference about whether today's contact centers would start adopting unified communications advances. Most of the evidence to date has been "No, they won't." We talked about what are the causes and what's likely.

I maintain that contact centers were the first examples of the essential concept of UC – the integration of communications into a business process for the purpose of accomplishing a goal. Telephone communications and customer data were combined with software-based queues and skills, all to handle customer interactions efficiently. More recently, customer contacts have extended to other media – email, webchat, and even video.

But, all of this communications is happening within the center. Some companies have started deploying IM within the centers. The purpose is to link agents to supervisors, or to other agents, so that staff can communicate more easily, and to seek help from each other for suggestions about thorny questions or situations.

However, the promise of UC goes far beyond IM, as an example to help address first call resolution (FCR) issues. Many studies point to FCR's impact in helping to establish customer satisfaction and build loyalty. UC can link agents with experts in other parts of the organization, so that difficult questions can be resolved on that "first call" by finding (through skills-based presence) the expert who is available and can address the issue.

"That's a great marketing pitch, but it just isn't going to happen." That was the opinion of the man heading UC for one of the major suppliers. His feeling was echoed by some of the others around the table. Three problems, they said:

- Contact centers are all about centralized control and operational metrics. Managers feel a strong need to control calls by keeping them in the center, and are often measured by how calls are handled. Sending calls to experts outside the center would impede that control.
- Contact centers are usually cost centers, and often the focus is on metrics like average handle time. Sending calls, unsupervised, around the organization would lengthen call times and raise costs.
- The experts who would be tapped are busy with other things, and often don't see their job as interacting with customers, let alone be considered call center adjuncts.

My vision is different. Those companies whose strategic focus is on the customer (and that is only a fraction of all firms) will increasingly tear down internal divisional or functional silos and organize their operations more around the customer. In that environment, the contact center will cease to be a stand-alone group sequestered in a corner, but will become a much more integral part of the organization.

That shift is happening in some companies, as the sales function in the contact center intertwines with the sales function in the channel. Smaller prospects go to the center; larger ones are handled by a field team. There is strong communication between the two groups, so that their efforts are coordinated. In other cases, sales and service are closely linked.

UC brings a much richer set of tools to enable smooth collaboration between external and internal sales and service groups. Instant availability, presence awareness, delivery of information to and from mobile devices, and more.

What is needed in the future is to dissolve the wall around the contact center, and make it part of a broader group whose work is to do what is necessary to meet customer needs. Certainly the contact center will continue to function as gatekeeper (an increasingly important function), and will still have primary responsibilities for production handling of contacts. This will be aided by improved self-service tools, and more empowered agents with access to policies and information so that they can make decisions, as well as UC tools to reach out to others.

As truly “customer-centric” companies push this concept further, the entire organization potentially can become part of the contact channel, and be online to address issues if needed. Several things are necessary for this to happen. First, skills and queuing functionality need to extent throughout the organization. Second, presence capabilities need to track a skill, not a person. Creating and keeping such information current will be one of the challenges.

For this growing group of customer centric businesses, UC will enable capabilities for identifying and bringing together people and information to meet customer requirements. In such an environment, the key metric shifts from “average handle time” to “did we achieve the customer’s objective?” And in that, UC supports an entirely new set of value creation capabilities.

*Don Van Doren is Principal of UniComm Consulting, an independent UC consulting firm, and a co-founder of [www.ucstrategies.com](http://www.ucstrategies.com). Don is also President of Vanguard Communications. Contact Don at [dvandoren@unicommconsulting.com](mailto:dvandoren@unicommconsulting.com).*