

CUSTOMER SELF-SERVICE



## Customer Self-Service: Is it an operator's Swiss Army knife?

The merits of effective customer self-service online are well documented. As Mark Dye reports, it reduces churn, increases customer lifetime value and significantly lowers costs. And he means significantly!

With the majority of calls that come into contact centres revolving around billing, self-service technology, if implemented strategically, can transform the way organisations interact with customers and increase revenues, according to Gordon Rawling, senior marketing director, **Oracle Communications**.



Gordon Rawling

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- Gordon Rawling, Oracle Communications

"By providing customers with the online tools to answer their own queries, the cost of a single customer interaction can be slashed from US\$35 on the phone to just \$0.75 online," he explains.

That's a potential saving of 98 per cent on just one interaction and one of the main reasons why operators are steering customers in this direction, through incentives and value-adds. Rather obviously, streamlined billing plans can generate good rates of return.

"Additionally, from a customer standpoint, the ability to analyse their spending and identify their usage is an empowering tool, giving them more control over their service plan and increasing their service satisfaction," notes Rawling. "New applications are now available to them which can compare them to other users on similar plans and see how they differ, as well as highlight alternative call plans which they might be better suited to."

#### Gross sales impact

Omar Tellez, executive vice president and chief marketing officer, **Synchronoss**, agrees, pointing out that best of breed cases in the US have shown that the online channel can generate up to 40% of gross sales for service providers.

"One of the things we have really seen as driving stickiness to eCare sites is providing value in the first page; having a status report upfront of where you are with comparisons, whilst on the side providing very actionable activities to upgrade their personal life," he says.

"If you provide considerable and actionable value - and I realise carriers are a long way from there - to customers it can be a very sticky page and

reduce your customer calls to order," he adds.

That said, many consumers find the journey from paper to portal a daunting one, according to Michael Lightfoot, director of Business Development and Strategic Alliances, **CTI Group**. He explains that the company is using dynamic push technologies to bridge that gap, offering the convenience of information delivered to the customer plus the benefits of portal integration.

"Interaction with your billing data via this route is an excellent way to cross the chasm between paper and portal," he adds.

With revenue assurance of utmost importance to telcos, billing and prompt payment are two basic principles that must be adhered to.

Lightfoot believes that savings gained from the reduction in billing queries to call centres typically provide a prompt return against spend on an e-billing solution. This, when coupled with the environmental benefits of reducing paper, impacts significantly on the bottom line.

#### Exceptionally good experience

Most of this comes back down to providing exceptional customer experience though, explains Alice Bartram, vice president, Marketing, Billing & Active Customer Management, **Comverse**.

"Service providers must deliver rich interaction regardless of the channel that the user chooses, with complete, up-to-date and consistent information available via web-based self-service and all other touch points," she says.

Those industries maintaining high Web-based, self-care adoption rates are associated with both straightforward service offerings and a customer base that is widely comfortable with handling customer care issues and ordering services over the internet, adds Kirill Rechter, CEO, **LogNet Billing**.

"Companies in industries with complex services have succeeded with Web-based self-care, such as ►



Mark Chodoronek, Verizon: Dashboard led to vast improvements

airlines and car rental companies, by organising information gathering and ordering into a structured and easy-to-follow process," he says.

He believes that the Web-based self-care experience delivered by such companies provides consumers with the confidence that they are making well-informed buying decisions and are getting the best available price.

"Likewise, by making service offerings and packages easier to understand and the ordering process more organised, communications service providers can expand the usage of self-care among customer segments already inclined to use self-care and reach new customer segments," he adds.

However, as Jeff Kagan, industry analyst and speaker reminds us, automated customer service is key, but is only one part of the mix. "Sometimes customers want to call a customer service number and talk to a real person, while other times they prefer to go online and handle it themselves. Some things are easy and others are more complicated.

"The thing is every customer requires multiple methods. Companies that are available to customers the various ways the customer wants, rank much higher in customer minds," he says.

#### Working for Verizon

Integrating voice with Web self-service can, according to eGain, offer enhanced phone self-service, benefiting operators as well as customers. Andrew Mennie, general manager, eGain EMEA, says: "Like any successful customer service strategy, self-service shouldn't exist in silos. Integrating into eGain Self-Service solution for the web, eGain IVR can simply extend the interactive process and knowledge base content of your web self-service to your IVR system.

Avoiding the notorious 'IVR black hole', eGain IVR offers intelligent dialogues driven by patented case-based reasoning (CBR) technology. Following interactive dialogues that simulate human reasoning, operators can offer intelligent phone self-service to resolve complex interactions that would usually need the costly intervention of an expert. By applying web self-service best practices in this way, such as CBR-guided interactions, seamless escalation and unified cross-channel content to IVR, self-service becomes part of a unified customer service strategy, enabling service providers to offer exceptional IVR and cross-channel customer experiences in the most cost-effective manner.

Verizon has clear evidence that its self-service programme is working though. Its Enterprise Center, an online tool supporting over 100 applications and links globally and 24/7, enables mid-to-large enterprise and government customers to manage voice, data, Internet and wireless services, from virtually anywhere.

Mark Chodoronek, executive director for E-Commerce and Digital Customer Enablement, at the company, explains that this dashboard-based solution has led to vast improvements in adoption and electronic transactions.

"We have seen a 108% jump in the Verizon

Enterprise Center and eBonding connectivity users over the past two years," he adds. The number of users taking advantage of its Dashboard product has also grown more than 500% since 2007.

"This fully integrated portal provides users with access 24/7 to support mid to large multinational customers in 12 languages, including training on the portal and the billing applications which support multiple currencies," he adds. "We have also deployed click-to-chat, and are investigating virtual agent and social media or professional networking alternatives to provide more personal contact with Verizon and our other customers to improve their self-service experience."

Additionally, Chodoronek says that the company's move towards online has seen a 51% increase in adoption of paperless billing services over the past 12 months as companies strive to reduce costs and meet environmental targets.

In the consumer space Orange has reaped the benefits of self-service through its work with Comverse. In the first year of using the Comverse One self-service system it saw adoption rates top 1,000%, something which deflected more than 25,000 calls away from its call centre per week.

Such figures are not to be sniffed at and telcos are trying to cleverly mirror the portal sites developed by key consumer retailers and banks, according to Valerie Peay, head of Customer Experience and Transformation, BT Innovate and Design. "Here the focus is to enable a customer to select how and what they want to have access to with some open source tools to create a very personalised portal and information repository, she says.

"A lot of the strategy that we are creating is to look at things from a customer's perspective," adds Peay. "I like the Forrester approach of considering whether the interaction we provide is useful, easy and enjoyable. That last piece is important."

BT itself is launching a new billing platform before Christmas this year to provide greatly enhanced facilities for customers. It is also aiming to remove significant millions in call handling and operational costs by enabling customers to transfer to e-billing and manage their billing themselves.

"Today we are trying to provide a joined-up look and feel with easy navigation," says Peay. "The next phase of this in development is to provide something beyond the functional that really makes a customer want to do business with us online.

In between BT is busying itself with bundled product purchasing with its new BT Broadband Fibre, so that consumer customers can go online and buy a whole package of BT Vision, super-fast broadband and value added services at one time.

As Ferris Bueller once said, "Life moves pretty fast. If you don't stop and look around once in a while, you could miss it."

I have a feeling telcos know exactly what he is talking about. ☺

"Consider whether the interaction is useful, easy and enjoyable."  
 - Valerie Peay, BT



Omar Tellez, Synchronoss: Online channel can generate 40% of gross sales