



VoiceCon 2009: It's All About the Users

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The National Association of Call Centers | Volume 4, Issue 23, November 13, 2009

I've just returned from VoiceCon 2009, one of the key events of the year for IT, telecom and networking professionals. While the conference isn't all about contact centers, much of the technology under discussion impacts centers and their customers. *Unified Communications* – spanning an array of technologies including Voice over IP and SIP, presence and instant messaging, multimedia and collaboration tools – and *Social Media/Web 2.0* seemed to attract a lot of attention. In fact, VoiceCon was co-located with Enterprise 2.0, giving ample opportunity for voice gurus to mingle with their Web 2.0 counterparts. While this conference was, on the surface, about technology, the resounding theme from conference chairs, vendors, analysts, consultants and practitioners was “it's all about the users.” [*The corollary: It's not all about the technology and technologists.*]

While many sessions lamented the economy's impact on technology purchases and deployments, a sense of optimism about what technology can do for users permeated the sessions.

- Attendees were enthusiastic about *what technology offers* with a HUGE focus on business value – not just productivity and better service, but cost savings as well. Incremental change is IN; “big bang” style technology change is OUT. You'll leverage what you have, not “forklift” your way to improvement.
- Many sessions turned the spotlight on *what companies have accomplished*. There were several examples of centers using presence (perhaps the most fundamental enabler in UC) and IM to tap experts. The conference also showcased integration of desktop clients with social media tools to further collaboration and communication across the center or the enterprise.
- Folks talked about *what companies will be able to do* as they deploy the next generation architectures, rich applications, and integrated solutions that vendors offer. Vendors will integrate through open architectures, “cloud” based applications (aka hosted or SaaS), SIP, and federation (linking together systems, such as presence and IM, across organizational boundaries, with appropriate security).

From my realist seat, I tie some specific implications to this user-focused theme:

- Far too often, technology-based initiatives focus more on the tool than the community of users for whom the tool is built. Unfortunately, contact centers are littered with underutilized, overbought, underperforming investments as a result. This has to change! We need a renewed focus on the culture, processes, and organizational roles and responsibilities that surround technology.
- Technology must be designed such that users don't have to think too hard (or get extensive training) to use it successfully. *Flexible yet simple*. That's a tall order, but one that vendors seem prepared to fill. And with a growing cadre of applications, tools, and interfaces that require integration to enable communication across the enterprise, contact center, and customer/prospect base, vendors will have to break down their competitive walls and work together.
- Users have to get more invested in technology. The average contact center user may not care much about architectures, standards and protocols, but must take responsibility for engaging with vendors, IT and others across the enterprise to learn what's possible and why it matters. Users need to be strong contributors to technology planning, decisions and deployments.
- In-house technologists need to treat users as customers and measure performance based on the business units' success. This means taking time to understand the business and operating environment in which their “customers” work. They need to visit the center, observe calls, and ask for feedback on



the tools and services they provide. Routine meetings to discuss business needs and technology possibilities are a critical *best practice*.

- Vendors need to really deliver on “consultative selling,” with the end users’ best interests at heart. This concept has been in vogue over the years, and its track record has been... well, spotty. It’s time to get it right. While IT/telecom/networking may be the buyer, vendors need to focus on – and bring along – the users.

What does this all mean for you? With the large potential changes coming, the time to start learning is NOW. Nearly every vendor presentation and every booth on the floor addressed Unified Communications and social media. In my experience, many contact center professionals don’t know or care about UC (or UCC – adding collaboration), but the concept is taking hold. While some of the applications and benefits are targeted at the enterprise, the contact center aspires to be – and needs to be – more connected with the enterprise. In addition, the social media “train” has clearly left the station. According to Nemertes Research, users are driving the train, often without IT’s knowledge. So whether you tweet, share your knowledge, connect to others through groups, collaborate using Web 2.0 tools, or just start plugging in to observe and learn, it’s time to get on board.

With a little effort, we can all will work together to ensure these new technologies are applied in ways that show it’s truly “all about the users.”