

Tech Line



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Make the Right Technology Choices to Hear the Voice of Your Customers

Maximize the value of your customer feedback by using the appropriate tools to analyze the input and deliver on your VoC strategy. By Lori Bocklund, Brian Hinton and Lori Fraser, Strategic Contact

Service quality is an important means of competitive differentiation. For years, contact centers have gauged their performance using internally generated quality monitoring scores. A growing collective of service-conscious companies also measure quality using voice of the customer (VOC) tools and practices and integrate this external “voice” with internal quality and other performance measures. With a broad array of choices to capture and analyze customer perspectives, it’s a good time to define an effective quality service strategy. This article describes the technology options to deliver on that strategy and provides guidance for making effective choices.

Strategy and “Best Practices” Set the Stage

The first step in technology planning and selection is building a strategy. In this case, strategy contemplates business goals, media channels, customer segments and preferences, response criteria and key performance indicator requirements. It also considers best practices that include:

- Developing a contact center-focused approach that secures targeted feedback on

the customers’ interactions with agents and/or self-service applications. For the results to be meaningful, the center needs actionable commentary on the center’s and agent’s performance, not simply general opinions on the corporate brand and/or product and service offerings.

- Collaborating with teams that are interdependent with the contact center. Involving upstream and downstream departments (e.g., marketing, product design, field, fulfillment, etc.) commits the whole delivery channel to the customers’ feedback and reveals issues or opportunities beyond the contact center that impact the overall customer experience.
- Tracking survey participation to honor customer preferences to opt out or avoid repeat requests to those who have contributed amply in the past.
- Surveying customers in their preferred media of choice, where possible. Using the preferred media boosts the response rate. Standardize survey questions across media types to enable

Continued on page 2



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Continued from page 1

comparison between channels.

- Establishing triggers or escalation points based on survey results. Build business rules into the VOC process to facilitate timely action on customer input. For example, if a survey score is excellent, send it to the appropriate agent to reinforce good behavior. If the score is poor, escalate it immediately to a supervisor for coaching or other action.
- Establishing a closed-loop process to track VOC performance to baseline and target KPIs. Forge links with other performance metrics, coaching, and eLearning processes and applications for continuous improvement. Compare VOC with other results, such as quality monitoring and productivity scores, to identify disconnects between internal company and external customer perspectives. This holistic view helps companies focus on quality to make a difference in customer experience rather than just reporting a metric.

Choices for Seeking Customer Input

The contact center market offers many choices for collecting customer input, analyzing it, and putting it to use in line with the strategy you define. The array of options spans technology tools and media. The most prevalent means of obtaining direct customer feedback are:

- **IVR.** Your IVR is a great tool for short surveys immediately following the phone interaction, and enables a direct connection between the feedback and a specific contact and agent.
- **Email or Web.** An email or Web survey can gather more information while still linking the input to a specific contact and agent. You can forward the email survey or Web link after every interaction or based on business rules (e.g., every 10th interaction).
- **Outbound calls.** Outbound call surveys are easy to outsource to a third party. You can also use an outbound dialer or the IVR depending on whether you want a live call or an automated call. This approach must consider the difficulty in reaching the right person.
- **Mailings.** Contact centers do not use direct mailings often due to the cost, low response rates, lack of immediacy and difficulty in connecting the response with the specific interaction and agent. However, direct mail is easy to outsource and can be a first step in gathering customer feedback.

Table 1 details additional considerations for pursuing the right technology to fulfill a voice of the customer strategy.

Go a Step Further with Analytics

Some contact centers are beginning to realize that surveys are only one way to hear the voice of the customer. Speech analytics is taking hold as a way to hear the customer through analysis of the customer audio interactions. Analysis of this audio data is valuable in categorizing calls and understanding the call purpose but by focusing on customer feedback, you can also get valuable input on your customers' views on your service, products, competitors and more.

Speech analytics is another option that you may add on to an exist-

Table 1: Voice of the customer technology considerations

Considerations	Comments
Contact media	The survey media you choose to offer will exert the biggest influence on your technology needs, including sourcing strategy.
Current technology	Your VoC program may not require significant investment. Explore your current technology to see if it can quickly put you in the VoC business. Some of your vendors may have a VoC component as part of their product suite. Your IVR, performance tool (QM/WFM) and CRM vendors are good places to start.
Integration with other performance data	Whatever path you choose, you lose value if you can't see the external quality scores compared with internal KPIs. Make sure your solution providers become acquainted with your internal systems and practices.
Immediacy	Your surveys will be more valuable when you deliver them to your customer as soon as possible after their interactions. Your ability to react appropriately to the feedback is also dependent upon timely feedback. Real-time media, such as the IVR for a phone contact, supports immediacy.
Neutrality	To avoid skewing the results, avoid programs where the agent "offers" the survey. Also avoid situations where the customer can opt in or out based on their frustration level during the interaction. These requirements can strongly impact your technology approach.
Survey flexibility	Different technology offers varying ability to alter the questions and/or customize response formats. While consistent questions and response formats enable trending over time, flexibility allows for quick reactions to find out what your customers think about recent changes to your service approach.

ing performance tool suite, leveraging existing call recording technology. However, it requires appropriate staffing to have the time and resources to dig deeper into the analytics. Mining the contact data can extend to emails and chat sessions with the right technology. The bottom line: Any company considering speech analytics should consider the role it can play in understanding the VOC, and anyone considering VOC technology should look at speech analytics as a powerful tool to do more than just survey customers.

Whatever means you choose to secure customer feedback, you'll maximize the value of that data by using the appropriate tools to analyze the input and identify actionable outcomes. Load your VOC data into a data-mart to identify trends and anomalies, relate outcomes to other events within the contact center or company, and track through balanced score-cards. Data analytics helps keep quality and productivity key performance indicators in balance. Companies with an enterprise or contact center business intelligence capability and analyst resources are more likely to reap the value from the customer feedback. Regardless of your analytics capability, maximize VOC value by analyzing and comparing external and

Continued on page 4

Table 2: Sourcing considerations for VOC technology

CONSIDERATIONS	PREMISE	HOSTED	MANAGED
Role of IT	Requires high IT priority.	Requires limited IT involvement but application administration can be a business operations responsibility.	Requires limited IT involvement (except for integration) and relationship can be completely managed by business operations.
Integration with other technology	Requires IT involvement for internal development.	Requires access to interfaces and databases.	Requires access to interfaces and databases.
Ease of feedback integration	Might require IT involvement for internal development.	Requires access to data sources.	Minimal access as vendor may provide reports based on requirement rather than direct data access.
Best fit	Experienced with VoC surveys and technology and adding a survey component to a performance optimization suite or IVR.	Varied technology environment. No specific technology strategy to fit within. Few internal resources or low on IT priority list.	No experience or internal resources available but want to pursue the value of VOC as soon as possible.
Key strengths	Control – no third party for operations and administration. Integration – access to other applications and data.	Speed – typically faster implementation. Expense – versus capital investment. Minimal internal resources – for hardware/software support but may be required for administration. Flexibility – pay as you go.	Same as hosted but with even fewer internal resources required. Vendor expertise – take advantage of the vendor’s experience with survey structure and reporting/analytics.

Social Media Is the New Frontier

The contact center has an opportunity to participate in hearing the voice of the customer in social media. Social media provides the unsolicited voice of the customer and many companies are beginning to use this data as another perspective on “How are we doing?” The “tweeters,” bloggers and Facebook fans are a non-stop, volunteer, free “focus group” (albeit a self-appointed one that is likely comprised of those that are either very cranky or very pleased). Anyone putting information out to the world offers potential “VOC” input that might include customer interactions and service.

The market is beginning to offer tools to mine these public information resources. For example, many CRM applications now offer social media search engines. Once an issue is identified, these applications can turn the search results into a case within the CRM application for contact center resolution, which could trigger a targeted response to the individual, as well as a public response. The goal is to turn a potentially bad bit of public information into good and contain the risk of viral negative publicity. Such interactions assume those publicly talking about the company would welcome a response.

But the question remains: Is it all hype, or a true resource for the contact center? At this point, centers need to engage and observe; the momentum is too great to ignore. Watch, listen, learn, and then act.

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Continued from page 2

internal quality views.

Choices for How You Source VOC Technology

Along with the many options for the technology tools, today's market offers several implementation sourcing options. These options include traditional premise-based solutions that more readily integrate with other in-house systems, and hosted or managed services that can bring results more quickly, often with value-added services such as analytics or follow-up contacts. We detailed sourcing options and tradeoffs in our "Contact Center Technology Sourcing" article in the February 2010 issue of *Contact Center Pipeline*. With the high demands on IT time, survey technology can be low on the IT "to do" list. Thus, hosted applications or managed services provide an alternative to pursue VOC without waiting for IT to make it a priority.

There are some characteristics specific to VOC technology that you should consider in sourcing decisions. The survey application might need to integrate with your IVR, email routing or your Web site. Best practice suggests consolidating VOC input with internal metrics comparisons and balanced scorecards, which could also trigger other technology integration needs. You also need to integrate VOC with contact center processes so that results lead to appropriate actions in coaching, training, process change, etc. Table 2, on page 3, presents the considerations for each sourcing choice.


Your strategy may include phases with different sourcing approaches at each phase. For instance, you may want to start with a managed or hosted service to implement VOC sooner, to determine the value of the VOC or to pilot a specific media. A premise solution is a more long-term approach, leveraging a component of one of your contact center

technology vendor's suites. And keep in mind, vendors offer hosted and managed services for speech analytics, as well, enabling you to extract the voice of your customer from your recordings on a one-time basis to support targeted needs.

Now Is the Time for VOC

Sometimes too many choices are a bad thing. When it comes to seeking and understanding the satisfaction customers have in the interaction with your company, choice is a good thing. With the right strategic context and a careful look at goals, requirements and the existing environment into which the VOC technology will fit, you can find the right option to pursue.

Keep in mind that several departments have a stake in the customer relationship, so collaborate with others in defining how to gain and use customer satisfaction information. Never assume marketing is doing it, or that what they are doing will meet the center's needs. Marketing does not gear its (likely infrequent, more general) surveys toward providing a real measure of contact center service quality.

As you plan for your VOC technology, keep in mind the importance of breaking down the silos to share information and leverage enterprise efforts to get the biggest bang for your buck, especially if you will be mining verbatim VOC information or using speech analytics. As you advance in your use of VOC tools, you will see how the contact center can keep marketing informed of significant product and/or service concerns that affect the brand, and show the field, support, billing, product management or other areas important insights that can help the company to collectively respond to the voice of the customer. 

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