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Tech Line

Setting the Bar for Multichannel Customer Contact

By Maren Symonds, Strategic Contact

New survey results reveal progress and plans for contact centers.

Multichannel customer contact has been getting plenty of air play at industry events and in countless webinars, articles, blogs and analyst reports. It's a familiar tune for those of us who have followed the evolution of traditional call centers to multimedia customer contact operations. Instant messaging, social networking and mobile applications are adding refrains as pioneering contact centers and solution providers improvise with new modes of contact. While we enjoy listening to both new and familiar voices in the multichannel chorus, we can't help but wonder: How many real, live contact centers are singing along?

In November 2010, 357 contact center practitioners from a broad range of industries and center sizes helped us to separate hype from reality by weighing in on what their organizations were doing—or not doing—in multichannel customer contact. We found that traditional modes of contact (voice, fax, email, voicemail) and self-service (IVR, web) are well-established within most centers. (See Figure 1.) But as we probed for answers on the customer contact frontier—proactive alerts, social media, web chat and mobility—both the quantity and quality of information stretched thin. The data suggests that the jury is still out on whether they'll be added to our list of "classics" or will simply be passing fads.

Traditional Assisted Service

Inbound, outbound, fax, voicemail and email are mature channels that the vast majority of centers support. In our experience, real-time voice traffic accounts for the bulk of all customer interactions. Voicemail augments real-time voice by providing overflow treatment for customers who opt out of lengthy call queues, as well as after-hours call coverage. Email tends to be tied to web-based applications, often related to support issues and/or requests for call-backs. While email has edged out fax over the past decade, fax is a mainstay in certain industries (e.g., insurance, healthcare) and for selected uses (e.g., documents requiring signatures).

As centers added media to their operations over the last decade, vendors unveiled products to integrate these varied streams of communication into their multimedia routing and reporting engines. Few embraced the technology, in part due to the challenge of bringing all of the organizational silos together to craft a cohesive solution with all of the associated business processes. We're finally seeing movement toward organizational and operational integration with the formation of inter- → page 2

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disciplinary planning teams and multichannel governance committees driven in large part by a concern to deliver a more uniform customer experience. These changes bring the technology and operations together in an optimized environment.

Self Service

Though interactive voice response (IVR) paved the way for self-service a quarter-century ago, web-based applications are more prevalent today, especially among smaller centers. (See Figure 2.) We find several compelling reasons why web self-service has captured the lead:

- Users seem to prefer the web to IVR when it comes to self service; when they pick up the phone, it's because they want to talk to somebody.
- Users can navigate a web-based user interface faster than the phone-based counterpart and perform more complex and varied transactions.
- Web-based application design and development is less complex and costly than IVR.
- Web-based applications can avail themselves of superior authentication protocols for application security.

Despite the web's substantive applications development edge, IVR still has a lot of life in it. The telephone remains the more ubiquitous device with a capacity to access targeted bits of information extemporaneously with minimal setup. It also stands ready to serve as an overflow answer point when calls back up at the center. It may not have the ability to complete a transaction, but it can certainly pre-screen callers to make sure that they get to the right answer point, have the right information available to present to a live agent, and/or qualify for a particular product or service offering. And a number of Software as a Service (SaaS) providers have stepped up to assume the burden and risk of application design and development while their prospective clients reap the benefits.

Emerging Channels

Proactive outbound communications leads the pack among the new kids on the block. A proactive solution does exactly what is expected: anticipate needs, reach out with appropriate information, and execute transactions that serve the customer and the company well. Automated agents keep calls out of the center through self service, or bring qualified calls into the center for improved assisted service. In either case, they reduce the cost of the interaction (for efficiency gains), deliver better service to the customer through proactive information management, and create time for CSRs to focus on the most important, high-value transactions. Moreover, automated agents can work through the media of choice for the customer—phone, email, PDA—for personalized and intelligent information delivery and access. High-use applications include:

- Making customers aware of payment obligations before they accrue late penalties or lose service.
- Providing appointment reminders.
- Delivering status updates—e.g., order shipments, flight changes.
- Reducing fraud by reporting on suspicious transactions.
- Sending alerts about impending events—investment maturity, service contract expiration.

Social media scored second in the overall applications ranking, but only 24% of respondents noted involvement by the contact center. The marketing department is most often associated with this channel (61%). As a result, roughly a third of our survey participants skipped questions that probed for details on social media strategy. Among those who responded:

- Facebook, Twitter and blogging were reported as being the principle social media delivery mechanisms.
- The top three reasons for pursuing a social media strategy were improving the customer experience, protecting or promoting the corporate brand, and increasing market share/market presence

5 Things I Learned From the Survey

01 Most centers are multichannel with support for voice, fax, email and voicemail at a minimum.

02 Web self-service outpaces IVR self-service.

03 Proactive outbound contact and web chat are the channels that are most likely to be the next additions to a contact center's services.

04 The action in social media and mobile applications is happening largely outside of customer service. Contact centers have yet to establish a clear role within these channels.

05 Most participants feel that they are lagging in adoption of social media and mobile applications.

- The top four applications currently in use include responding to customer questions and issues, soliciting customer feedback, monitoring company-related mentions, and monitoring user ratings and reviews.

Social media monitoring tools are available to search millions of public websites—e.g., online news publications, blogs, forums, photo/video sharing, social networks—to find and extract content based on mentions of defined keywords. An accompanying contact or workflow management tool can assign individual posts to team members for action and response. Some argue that this technology and its associated "charge" clearly belong within the realm of the contact center. But as a practical matter, contact centers don't have responsibility for brand protection, they've got tons of other stuff to do, and they're not sure that the business value merits an investment in time, talent, and dollars. Most are content to wait and see what develops.

As we look 12 to 24 months out, web chat holds the greatest promise of becoming a standard in the contact center playbook. Three-quarters of respondents either supported web chat or had plans to do so in the next two years. Larger centers (more than 1,000 agents) are leading the way with 57.6% supporting that capability today. We believe that customer

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Figure 1: Multichannel Customer Contact Implementations and Plans

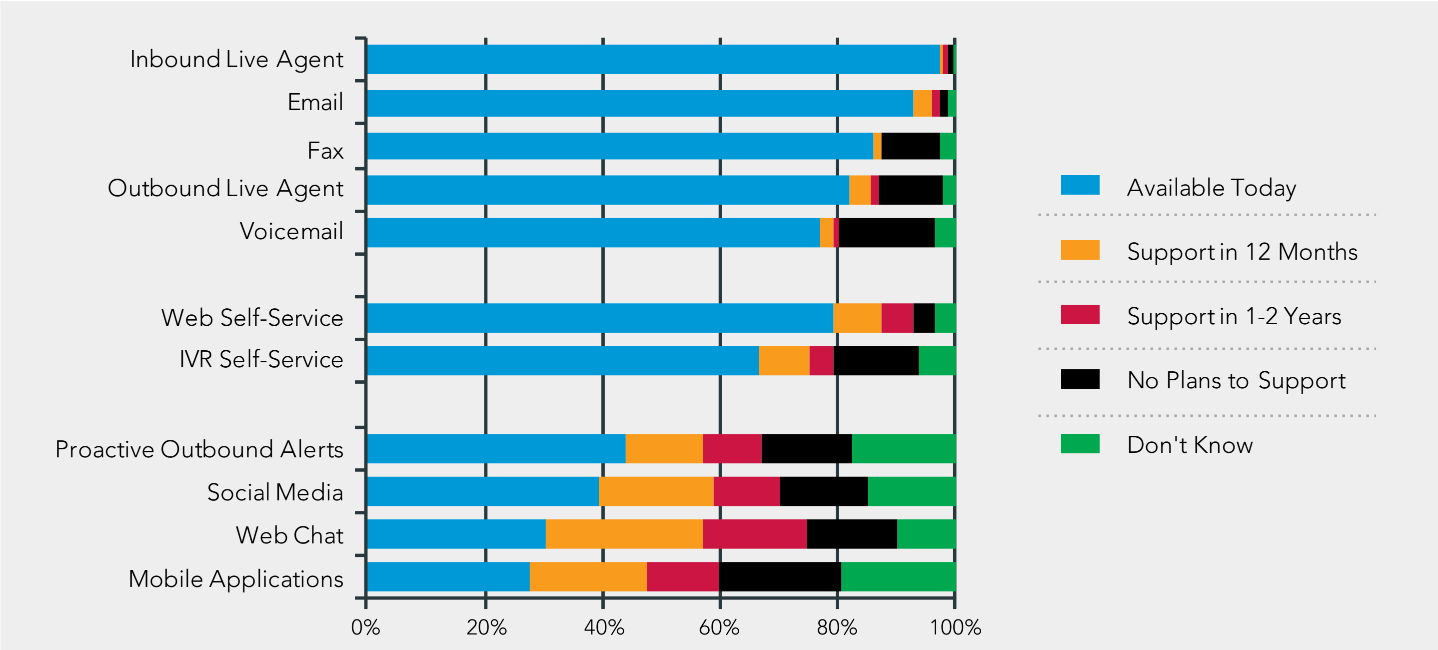


Figure 2: Self-Service Penetration By Size of Center

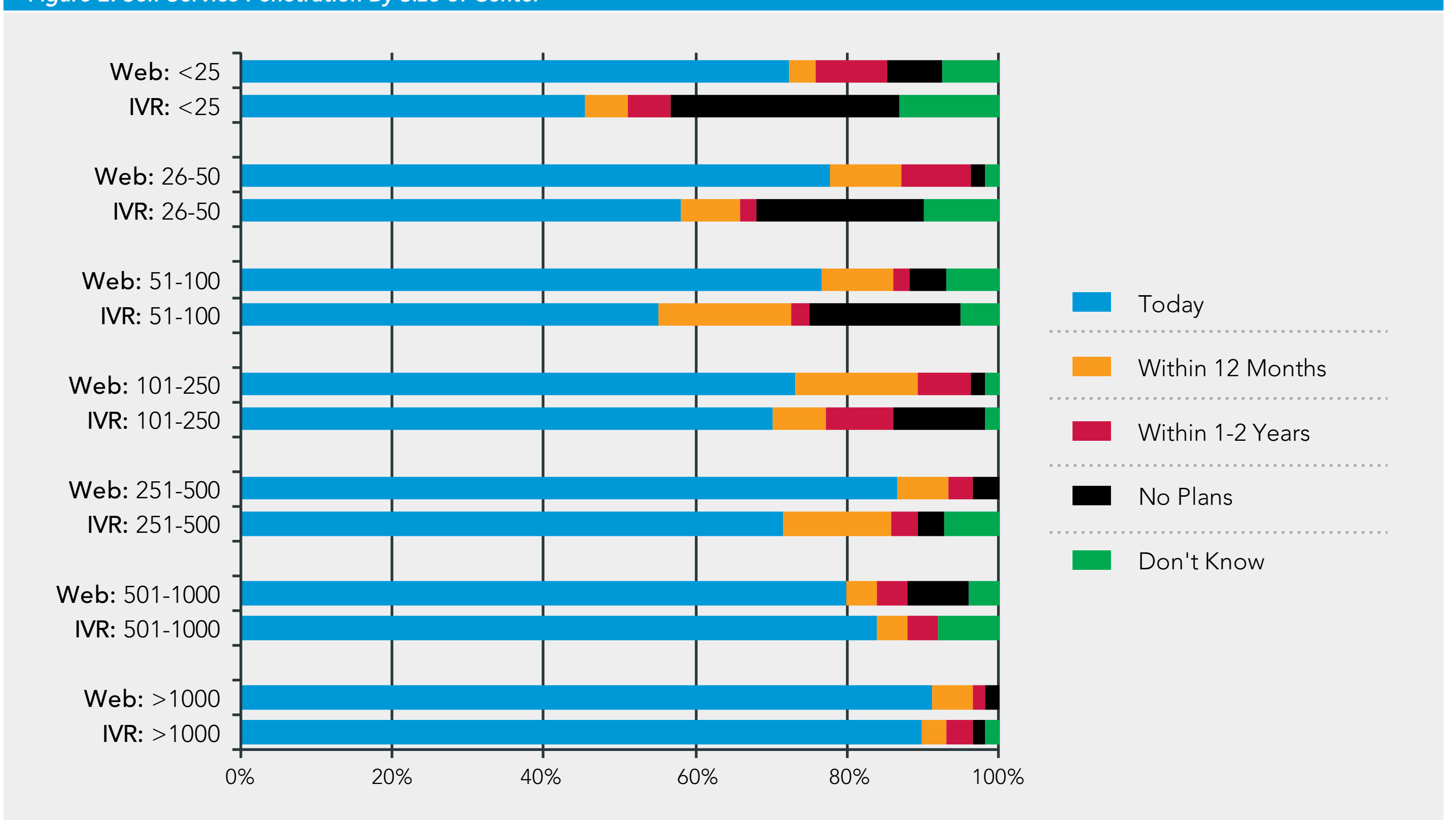


Figure 3: Multichannel Customer Contact: Present and Future

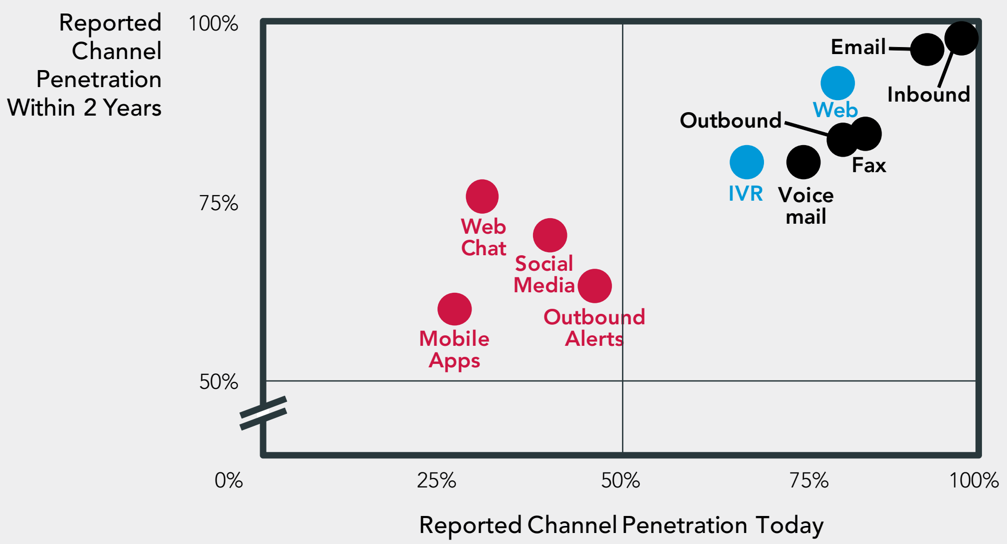


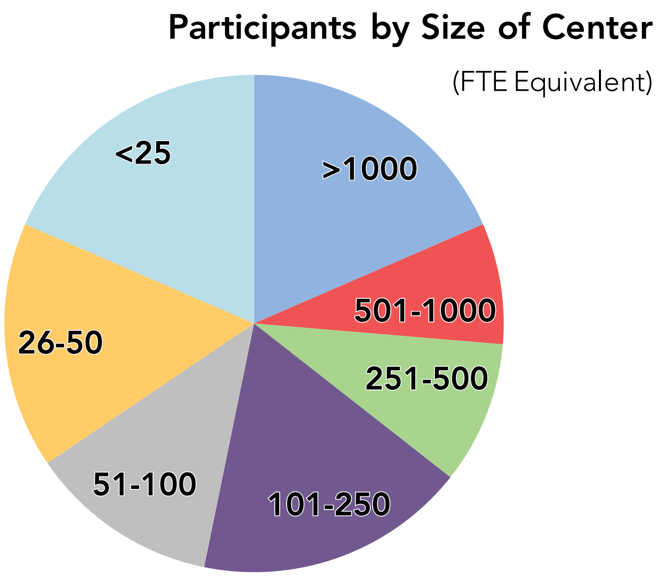
Table 1: Adoption of Social Media and Mobile Applications

	Industry Leaders	Middle of the Pack	Lagging
Social Media	8%	39%	53%
Mobile Applications	9%	30%	61%

Who Answered the Survey?

Industries represented:

- Consumer Products
- Education/Nonprofit/ Association
- Financial Services
- Government
- Healthcare
- Hospitality/Travel
- Insurance
- Manufacturing
- Services
- Telecom/Cable/Internet
- Utility



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experience of web chat with the major players will set the bar for their expectations of others. Over time, mid-size and smaller contact centers will need to follow suit.

As mobile phone providers load their products and services with an array of useful and entertaining applications, it's reasonable to wonder when and how they might find their way into the contact center. For the moment, IT and marketing (with 37% and 30% participation, respectively) are in the driver's seat in mobile apps development. Account inquiries, tech support, outbound alerts and order placement are among applications mentioned by the early pioneers. It is still too early in the life cycle to predict where and how customer service applications might evolve. To the extent that the mobile service providers are successful in creating an allegiance to and dependence upon their devices, we can expect an uptick in expectations for customer service applications.

Reality or Hype?

If we ask ourselves whether or not multichannel customer contact is a reality, our survey puts forth a resounding YES. Centers of all sizes and industries routinely handle voice, fax, email and voicemail, as well as IVR- and web-based self-service. If we shared in the optimism that our participants' two-year plans will come to fruition, then we'd reasonably surmise that web chat, social media, outbound alerts and mobile apps will pass the "tipping point" at which most centers will offer such services. (See Figure 3.) Web chat and proactive outbound alerts seem the safest bets to realize this potential based on their clear link to contact center operations and proven application success. Social media and mobility remain largely outside the center's organizational purview. Neither has clearly identified a "killer app" to drive usage and demand engagement by the customer service team.

As a final note, we asked participants to assess their positioning in social media and mobile apps. You can see their responses in Table 1.

This input suggests that hype leads reality when it comes to the hearts and minds of our participants. Most feel that they are lagging in adoption. In reality, we're simply in an early stage of development for these channels. The preponderance of plans in the 12- and 24-month time horizons could be an attempt to "catch up" with industry norms. We expect a longer time table to allow for consumer behaviors and usage patterns to mature while products, processes and organizational structures form to support them.

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