SPECIAL REPORT :: **Multichannel Survey**

Companies Dive Deeper Into Multichannel Customer Contact

By Lori Bocklund and Maren Symonds, Strategic Contact

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FIVE THINGS WE LEARNED FROM THE SURVEY

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

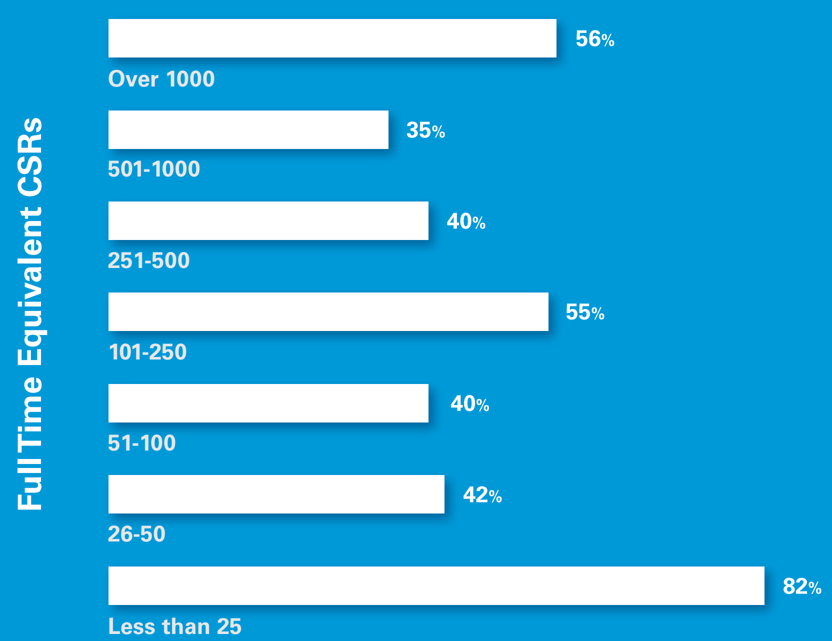
2) While web self-service outpaces IVR self-service, both channels show room for growth.

3) The projected time lines for integrating new channels into the contact center are optimistic. Adoption will proceed more slowly.

4) The action in social media and mobile applications continues to happen largely outside of customer service.

5) Contact management tools are prevalent—although far from ubiquitous—across traditional and emerging modes of contact.

PARTICIPANTS BY SIZE OF CENTER



WHO ANSWERED THE SURVEY?

Industries represented:

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

Survey results reveal forward progress on emerging channels.

By Lori Bocklund and Maren Symonds, **Strategic Contact**

It has been a little over a year since we tapped the wellspring of customer contact professionals to find out what they were doing—or planning on doing—with multichannel customer contact. While traditional modes of contact (voice, fax, email, voicemail) and self-service (IVR, web) were well-established within most centers, the quality and quantity of information stretched thin as we ventured toward the frontier—proactive alerts, social media, web chat and mobility. We couldn't be sure how long it would take for these channels to gain momentum.

In late 2011 and early 2012, we reached out to the community once again to give us an update on their progress and plans. Three hundred fifty of you answered the call. In addition to your full-throated support for traditional channels, you demonstrated clear progress in pursuing new modes of contact.

TRADITIONAL CHANNELS

Inbound, outbound, fax, voicemail, and email are mature channels that the vast majority of centers support. (See Figure 1 on page 4.) While real-time voice traffic typically accounts for the bulk of interactions, customers like having a full range of communication options from which to choose. As such, centers support their established channels even as new ones are brought on board.

The Web continued to have the edge over IVR for self-service. Users can navigate a web-based user interface faster than the phone-based counterpart and perform more complex and varied transactions. The economics of web-based design and development are especially attractive for smaller operations. Yet, both survey data and our experience suggest that IVR remains a valued member of the customer contact team.

EMERGING CHANNELS

As noted earlier, the jury was out on emerging channels as of the November 2010 survey. An optimistic view on web chat, social media, outbound alerts and mobile apps suggested that we'd pass the "tipping point" at which most centers will offer such services by the end of 2012. The outlook for texting was less certain. The 2012 survey provided a fresh look at the present and future of these channels. (See Figure 2 on page 4.)

A quick glance at the survey data reveals a gap between what participants think they can accomplish in a 12-month planning horizon and what they're actually able to achieve. That so many participants place channel expansion on their radars suggests that they take these options very seriously. They have plans and ambitions to move forward. It's likely that the reality of having too much to do, too little time and money, and too many fires to put out thwarts the best of intentions. Nonetheless, forward progress has been made.

Social media came the closest to meeting implementation expectations and emerged as this year's leader of the pack with nearly 55% of participants reporting active support. In truth, it takes very little effort to establish a corporate presence. Most companies have Facebook and Twitter accounts, and roughly one-third take advantage of company-sponsored forums, blogs, and video. The challenge lies in providing appropriate content, attracting visitors, and responding to their input. Not surprisingly, the marketing

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***Figure 1:* Traditional Modes of Contact**

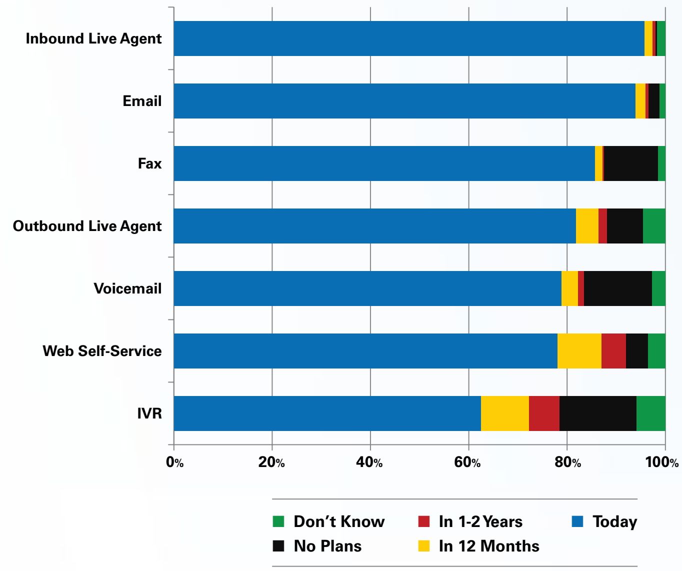
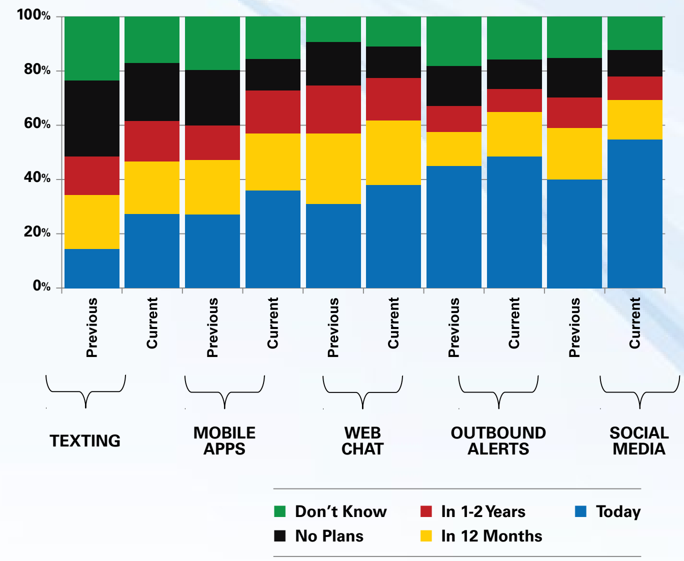


***Figure 2:* Emerging Modes of Contact**



department is most often associated with social media (61%), their agenda figuring prominently in its use. (See Figure 3 on page 5.) The contact center should play a role in the management of this channel to the extent that a critical mass of visitors pose service-related questions or use this forum to resolve issues. The contact center has the scale of operation and the processes to respond properly.

Proactive outbound communications gained ground, although not nearly as much as was expected. These solutions anticipate customer needs, reach out with appropriate information, and execute transactions that serve customers and the company. They have the capacity to increase customer loyalty while delivering hard dollar costs savings. (See "Proactive Outbound Contact," *Pipeline,* July 2011.) The barriers to entry from the cost and implementation perspectives are relatively low, so the next step is for companies to bump this project up the priority list.

Web chat displayed steady progress toward adoption albeit with less aggressive implementation than was suggested by the earlier survey. It is a "natural" for companies that are serious about realizing the maximum value from their web-based services. It affords the opportunity to convert casual browsers into paying customers and provides a convenient avenue for assistance to those who opt to self-serve. To date, larger operations have been the trail blazers; two-thirds of centers with 500-plus agents use this channel. We continue to believe that customer experience with web chat with these leaders will set the bar for their expectations of others.

Thirty-five percent of American adults own smartphones; one-quarter of them use these devices for most of their Internet browsing (source: "Smartphone Adoption and Usage," Pew Internet & American Life Project, July 22, 2011, Pew Research Center). It stands to reason that 38% of our survey sample supports **mobile apps,** up from 31% previously. IT, marketing, and customer service are in the driver's seat with 35%, 22% and 21% participation, respectively. High-use applications include tech support, account inquiries, responses to outbound alerts, and order placement/status. To the extent that the mobile service providers continue to be successful in creating an allegiance to and dependence upon their devices, we can expect an uptick in expectations for customer service applications.

Texting has nearly doubled during that past 14 months with 27% of centers adding this channel to the mix. Seventy-three percent of American adults use this channel. Ninety-five percent of young adults (18-29) use texting with the median user sending and receiving 50 texts per day (source: "Americans and Text Messaging," Pew Internet & American Life Project, Sept. 19, 2011, Pew Research Center). Teenagers

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***Figure 3:* Focus of Social Media Strategy**

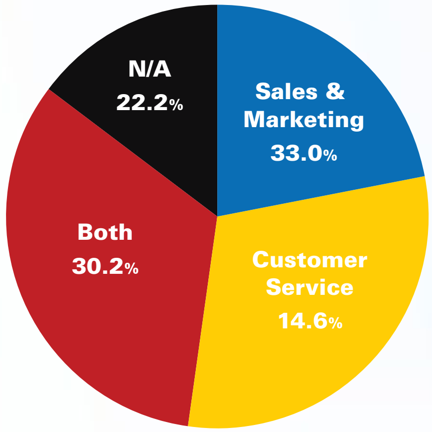
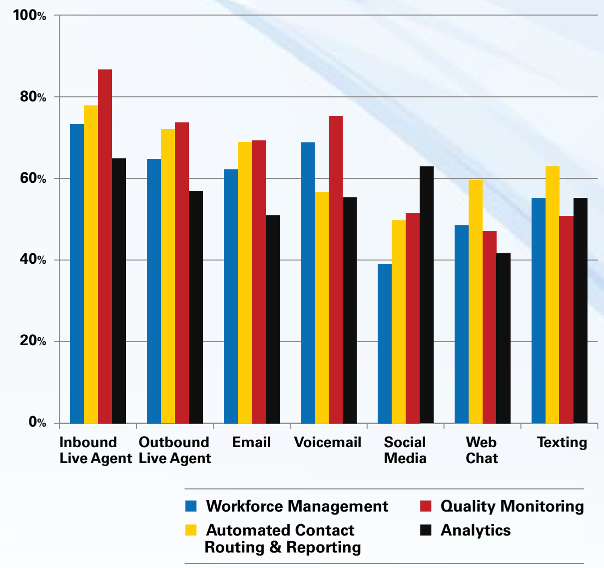


***Figure 4:* Contact Management Tool Usage By Media**



demonstrate a clear preference for texting over voice calls and consider the latter more suitable for adults (source: "Talking, Texting, Poking and Dating: How Teenagers Are Using Technology in Their Social Lives, Ericsson ConsumerLab Report, 2011.) As the up-and-coming generation continues to gain prominence as consumers of goods and services, companies will need to give due consideration to this channel.

As a final note, we asked participants to assess their positioning in social media and mobile apps. They responded as follows:

	Industry Leaders	Middle of the Pack	Lagging
Social Media	5%	38%	57%
Mobile Applications	5%	34%	61%

This input is consistent with the early stage of development for these channels. Most centers are trying to figure out what—if anything—these channels mean for customer service. And it will take time for consumer behaviors and usage patterns across these channels to mature. For those who feel as though they're behind the power curve: You are not alone!

MULTICHANNEL PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT

Through years of managing high volumes of inbound live agent calls, contact center professionals have leveraged tools and the associated processes to strike an optimal balance between efficiency and quality. Our 2012 survey investigated the extent to which these tools were applied to all modes of contact. (See Figure 4 above.)

Though nearly all of the 350 survey participants support inbound live-agent calls, reported usage of workforce management (WFM), automated routing and reporting, quality monitoring, and analytics fell short of full participation. Outbound, email and voicemail usage is slightly less. Analytics has yet to achieve parity with other tools, suggesting an opportunity to realize greater efficiencies through use of insights that analytics provide.

We are encouraged by the degree to which management tools have been factored into operations with emerging channels. The relatively high adoption of analytics within the social media channel is not surprising given the availability of affordable monitoring tools. These applications 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. Marketing has a clear interest in keeping an ear to the ground for purposes of protecting the company's image. Best practices call for coordination between marketing and customer service to ensure that specific customer inquiries and issues are addressed appropriately.

Our survey did not investigate the nature of the tools employed for contact management. While vendors have made a vast array of sophisticated tools available, the degree to which these tools are used is unclear. In our practice, we find many and varied ways in which spreadsheets play a role. We hope to explore this question further in a survey scheduled for mid-year.

GETTING YOUR MULTICHANNEL ACT TOGETHER

Multichannel customer contact is a reality. Centers of all sizes and industries routinely handle voice, fax, email and voicemail, as well as IVR- and web-based self-service. Web chat, social media, outbound alerts and mobile apps are moving toward the "tipping point" at which most centers offer services. Texting will become more prominent as younger generations mature into major consumers of goods and services.

In an ideal world, the company presents a single "face" to the world no matter which channel one uses for communication. Few organizations have attained that level of consistency. Organizational silos are common impediments to delivering the optimal customer experience. Before your service delivery mechanisms become overly fractured, take the time to forge relationship with the other "channel managers." Use our March 2011 article, "Pursue Strategy and Governance to Ensure Multichannel Technology Optimization" to start the conversation. All parties will have interesting perspectives to share and much to learn in the process. In the end, both the company and its customers will benefit.

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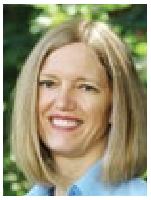

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