



OPTIMIZING CUSTOMER COMMUNICATION IN A MULTI-CHANNEL WORLD

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Voice. Email. Text. Web Chat. New technologies increase customers' appetites for the ways in which they communicate. They expect companies to accommodate their channel choices and provide seamless interaction handling. At the same time, companies struggle with limits on time, money, and resources, as well as diverse departmental ownership of channels and the customer experience. This combination creates an environment in which an "optimal" multi-channel customer service experience is difficult to achieve. It's time to address the potential dissatisfiers that can drive customers away.

START WITH STRATEGY

Strategy is the key to creating a cohesive approach to service and sales across channels. It begins with a clear understanding of the corporate strategy and how it translates into business drivers and operational goals for customer contact. It examines all modes of customer contact, including venues that are beyond the purview of the contact center. And it considers the technology requirements and constraints that might influence decisions for the near term and long term, while keeping a clear focus on the customer. See Figure 1.

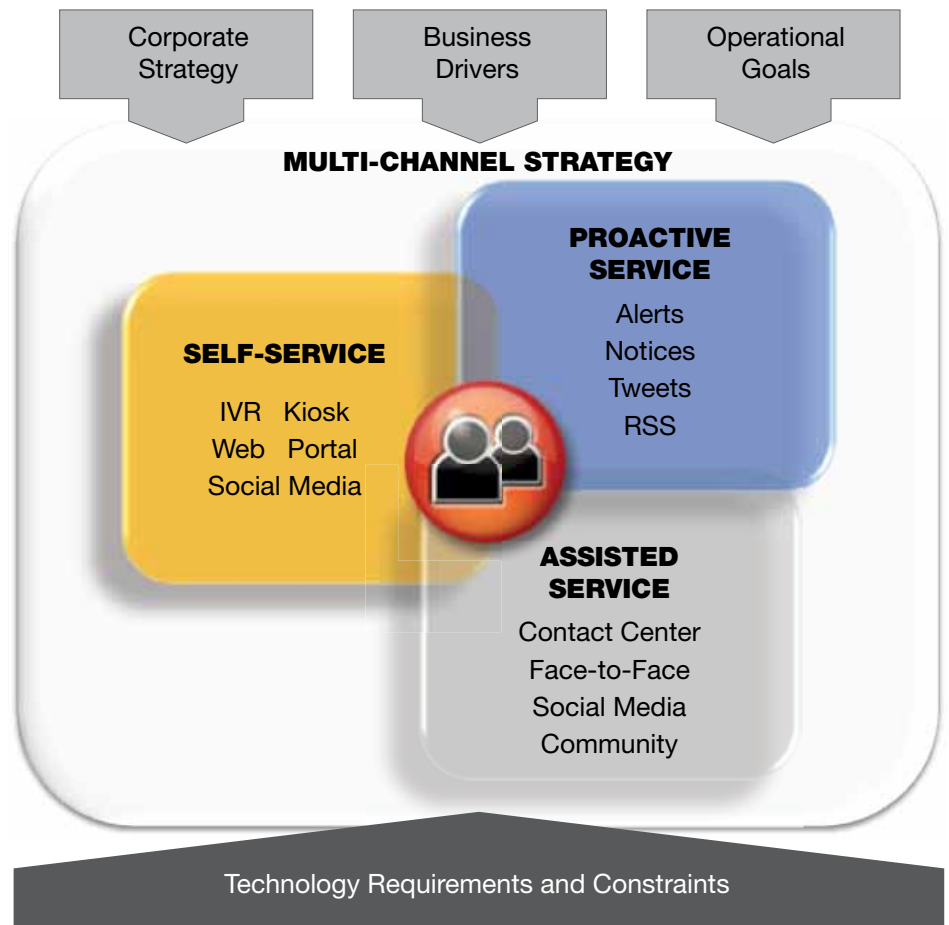


Figure 1. Considerations in Multi-channel Strategy Development

A baseline audit of existing modes of customer contact – both inbound and outbound – is a useful launching pad for the planning process. At a minimum, it should include:

- Walk-ins, field offices, and other face-to-face venues
- Traditional contact center operations such as phone, email, and fax
- Self-service via the phone and the web
- Emerging modes of contact, including web chat, SMS, social media, mobile applications

This exercise gives you a sense for the breadth of customer “touch points” as well as the range of players who need to participate in strategy development. As indicated in Figure 2, cross-functional participation and collaboration are prerequisites to success. The multi-channel strategy needs the silos to come together and work on behalf of the customer and the company.



Figure 2. Multi-channel Strategy Planning Process

Once the starting point is clear and your team is engaged, define the vision for how your customers want to interact. Look at your demographics and customer contact experience to assess the interests and needs of your customers and the situations that trigger interaction. What channels do they want to use, for what interactions, when, and why? Consider which channels are best suited to each type of contact. Table 1 maps selected transaction types to channels for a representative sampling of industries. This list is neither exhaustive nor prescriptive, but may stimulate your thinking as you characterize your distinct environment.

Industry Examples	ASSISTED SERVICE		SELF-SERVICE		PROACTIVE SERVICE
	Company Representative	Social Media Community	IVR	Web	Voice, Text or Email
Airline	Complex travel arrangements	Tips for booking travel	Flight arrivals and departures	Reservations	Flight change or upgrade notification
Financial Services	Disputed credit card transaction	Best available interest rate	Account balance	Monthly statements	Fraud alert Balance or transaction updates
Healthcare	Medical consultation	Physician ratings within HMO	Prescription refill	Detailed claims status	Appointment or prescription reminder
Utility	Establish/ change service	Troubleshoot cable modem problem	Bill payment	Review energy consumption over past year	Payment past due, possible loss of service

Customer contact applications in the “real world” are significantly more diverse than the sampling shows. For example, the proactive flight change notification may be part of a fully functional self-service application that gives customers options for adjusting their travel plans and/or opting out to speak with a representative. Your “vision” won’t be constrained by “siloesd” channel definitions and your customers will often pursue a cross-channel experience on an interaction.

In addition, your channel/transaction mapping may leverage new capabilities available in emerging channels. Mobility offers service possibilities tied to location such as finding the nearest "store front" along with directions to get there. Social media can deliver one-to-many messages tied to events or triggers. For example, notices of service outage and expected restoration time can be shared with the community. Be sure to factor information security, potential brand impact (positive or negative), and fit with the overall customer service strategy into your high-level design.

DEFINE SPECIFIC REQUIREMENTS FOR EACH CHANNEL'S CHARACTERISTICS

With a strategy defined, it's time to drill down into the specific requirements of the defined channels. Inbound channels are a typical starting point as they are the common, reactive interactions that companies expect from customers outside of specialized functions, such as collections and telemarketing. Dive into the requirements for your various **inbound channels** and note their alignment with other channels.

- Do customers have the option to complete the same transaction(s) in several channels? Are back-end support systems in place to provide the same responses in each channel? Are your business processes set up to deliver consistent response rates?
- Do customers start with one channel and then transfer to another – e.g., self-service to live agent? If so, do your systems and processes support a clean hand-off between the two?
- Do all points of contact have visibility into activity across all channels?
- Do all points of contact have the means to educate your customers on the available options for communicating with you?

Outbound dialing operations may also have a strong need for alignment with multiple modes of contact. Like their inbound counterparts, they need visibility into the breadth and depth of customer relationships and their transaction history across all channels. For example, a telemarketer would not want to "introduce" the company to someone who has already launched the business relationship through another channel. Callbacks based on customer voice mail and email need to be scheduled and tracked for completion. And IVR applications can serve as screening tools for outbound campaigns.

Proactive communications can deliver value for you and your customers. This service delivers "just in time" communication that carries a "wow" factor by giving customers a "heads up" on great opportunities (e.g., special offers), suspicious account activity (e.g., unusual transactions), or potentially frustrating experiences (e.g., flight cancellations). Triggers for proactive communication may be set by the company and/or the customers, with the latter having control over the mode, events, and timing of communication. Such notices generally provide links to self-service applications and/or live agent assistance.

Considerations as you Build a Multi-channel Strategy

As you build your multi-channel strategy, consider the following factors and the impact they have in your environment.

- **Identify the right channel(s) for each function/application** by considering the level of effort for the customer to use them and the corporation to develop and support them.
- **Assess your current technology** and its limitations and level of integration to support multi-channel efforts.
- **Assess the total costs** including technology, design/development, process changes, and one-time and ongoing resource demands.
- **Consider skill demands on agents**, factoring in the complexity and diversity of contact types and channels.
- **Prepare for the cultural impact** by applying a structured change management program to ensure changes are effective, consistent and sustained.
- **Think about your customer segments** and consider whether you will steer different groups toward different media or respond differently (e.g., faster) based on cost, value, or other factors.
- **Carefully review legal or regulatory requirements** that can impact written communications.
- **Consider outsourcing, hosted, or managed services** for specific functions or channels.

Multi-modal communication is becoming commonplace. In these scenarios, a customer interaction may occur across multiple media types, triggered by the customer, event, or situation. These cross-channel interactions may be set up to happen:

- **In parallel:** For example, I may have my credit card notify me of a potential fraud situation via a phone call and text message simultaneously. The situation is time-sensitive, and I want to optimize my chances to receive this critical information quickly.
- **Serially:** I may move directly from a notification on my phone (voice or text) to a discussion with a live agent to address the issue. The outcome of that conversation may trigger an email or fax, or even a mailing. Such interactions don't always mean a person gets in the loop: if my airline calls to tell me about a flight change while I'm unable to write it down, the system could capture my request to send an email or text message for later access.

We've also got to think about opportunities for **one-to-several or one-to-many communications**. A customer may want multiple family members notified of an activity of interest – for example, both my husband and I get the payment reminder. An important event may trigger notification to a company's "fans" or "followers" for a given product or service, or launch timely internal communications to management or staff. These services need to address unique requirements by channel based on the nature of the interface, the timeliness required (real-time vs. non-real-time), whether it's spoken or written communication, and any technical limitations in length or presentation.

CHANNEL COMPLEXITY AND DIVERSITY DEMAND EXPERTISE

With complexity and diversity in multi-channel interactions, it's tough to get it all right and relatively easy to get something wrong. Channel differences and characteristics, varied channel ownership within the organization, and the learning curve and changing demands of new channels all combine to present challenges well beyond what the traditional call center faced in servicing phone calls.

Many companies turn to the "experts" to ensure proper multi-channel communications. These experts help optimize the **interface and customer experience** – what to say, how to say it or present it. They also pursue the "what ifs" of what could – or should – happen after the initial contact, whether in subsequent communications with the initial customer or in sharing information with a broader audience.

Expertise also comes to bear in gathering, populating, and maintaining proper **contact information and customer preferences** for channel communications. "Best-in-class" companies go to great lengths to use customer information and preferences accurately to optimize and customize the customer experience. Such capture and maintenance is non-trivial in a world that is increasingly moving to mobile devices with varying applications and services, and a growing array of contact points and identifiers. Astute companies tap third party resources such as databases to distinguish cell phone numbers from land lines.

Gathering and maintaining preferences is critical for proactive communication as you can't communicate with a customer on a channel they don't have or want to use. Moreover, communications preferences may vary by contact type and could entail notification of more than one channel, person, and/or contact for various events. Information has value when delivered and consumed, not simply when sent.

Another area where expertise plays an important role is in **reporting and analysis** of all channels, individually and collectively, and on the outcomes of interactions. Companies must use the right technology and design and develop applications properly to capture the right information. Once that data is captured, it must be analyzed to know what's happening, what's working, what's not working, and the trends that are emerging. Only then can companies optimize opportunities and properly target budgeting and resources for the next steps or phases in channel use.

The final consideration in tapping expertise in channel strategy surrounds compliance with **regulatory issues**. Unless you make it your business to stay abreast of all of the current and proposed requirements, you can unwittingly run afoul of the latest rules and requirements. Experience and expertise can play a big role in "getting it right."



KEYS TO SUCCESS IN A MULTI-CHANNEL WORLD

The opportunity for companies to go beyond traditional channels to deliver value while potentially decreasing costs through increased self service, optimized assisted service, and new modes of proactive service is enticing. The "winners" will be the ones who create a cohesive enterprise view of the customer experience while delivering cost savings through channel optimization and incremental revenue through loyalty and retention. Well-designed, multi-channel services can truly differentiate one company from another.

As you look out on the planning horizon, don't let cost, time, complexity, and resource availability be stumbling blocks to responding to customer needs and optimizing interactions. Manage technology complexity with approaches that prioritize your goals and phase in high value, low complexity channel enhancements first. Consider specialized services for select channels to improve speed to delivery and manageability with low internal resource demands. Hosted options, especially for specialty channels such as proactive outbound notification, can skirt resource and capital availability hurdles, making multi-channel interactions a reality for your business today.