Making Choices: Empowered Agents or Script Junkies?

By Richard Stevenson

There has been little argument that outsourcing a contact center can have a significant financial impact - if one looks only at the direct expense and headcount. From an "everything else" point of view, however, there are many reasons not to outsource and/or offshore your customer support functions.

Ignoring for a moment how customers might actually respond to such a move, think about the loss of opportunity to cross-sell and up-sell; the almost-certain dilution of your intellectual property (IP); a failure to capture meaningful feedback; and a lessened ability to drive revenue-generating customer loyalty and referrals.

This article, though, isn't so much about making a case for or against outsourcing support as it is about empowering people - and what you stand to lose in the longer term if you don't (empower).

Take the enterprise contact center. I'll be honest, if you're a customer in North America or Europe and the person at the other end of the telephone line has a thick Indian or Asian accent, then their name isn't likely to be "Jason" or "Jennifer" as they may have professed. Likewise, an American corporation with a presence in Asia may have to really work at getting the trust of customers if they only employ Americans for support.

With such glaring cultural differences, we also know there's only so many times and places in their canned scripts from which we can deviate before the conversation is going to come to an end. Such an end will have one of two possible outcomes: we come away as the customer and give it up, or we get angry and frustrated and seek other channels for resolution. Personally, I think we'd be surprised at how many companies still seem to love these "but that cuts my support costs" results.

Until circa 2010 and the widespread adoption of social media, there wasn't much we could then do as customers (after making that first call) unless we wanted to invest considerable time and our mobile-plan minutes, chasing our tails trying to fix the problem. Now, one can simply construct an appropriately worded 140-character message ("tweet") and share our grievances with the world via Twitter, the fervent hope being that the perception of ensuing shame would be enough to jolt the company into trying to make things right.

Skip for a moment the irony of role reversal here, the much-talked about and not-so-subtle shift in customer service. Consider instead the affect on sales and brand perception of the company that you're trying to communicate with. Long gone are the days of making a sale and walking away, the days of "all sales are final". One might be tempted to make a case for the benefits that globalization offers, but at the end of the day, companies should primarily operate in the language(s) and culture of its customer base. This is quite possible with software that enables both regional and central support services in parallel, whether voice or web self-service. Unfortunately, the temptation is always there to make another dollar or shave one more percentage point off some nebulous key performance indicator (KPI) at the expense of the customer. Especially true in today's touchy-feely world, this is a short-sighted and ultimately self-destructive strategy.

It's our impression at CobbleSoft that not many companies actually connect their metrics such as "First Contact Resolution" to their "Customer Satisfaction" or "Customer Experience Management" data? Was the problem really solved, is the customer really happy, will they purchase again? The problem with black and white KPIs and outsourced contact centers is that you'll get disjointed analysis and rarely be able to promote constructive goals. If "Jason" ends a frustrated-customer telephone call with a perceived outcome of No Further Action required, the transaction will be classified as resolved on first contact. The outsource contractor will be happy to meet Service Level Agreements (SLA), and the CIO or COO will report positive KPIs at the next board meeting. The CMO or CCO (Chief Customer Officer) at the same meeting, however, will be demanding answers as to why there's a public backlash against the company going viral on the Internet.

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The 2010 story involving a US airline and a musician demonstrates admirably.

The airline had good KPIs for this flight because it flew the passengers to their destination and on time. The musician, as one of the passengers, however, created a song and ultimately-viral video on YouTube about the airline and what he perceived as farcical service. You see, while the COO was reporting great statistics, what he didn't know was that the musician had been seated by a window on the plane prior to departure – and watched as the airline baggage handlers threw his guitar case around and between themselves in fits of laughter as children may with a toy.

The airline, each time the musician contacted them to request compensation, continually refused to acknowledge there was a problem and resolutely stood behind its blanket policy of "we're never at fault". So the savvy musician employed plan B – using social media and people power to make his case (no pun intended). If I recall correctly, the airline finally bowed to what inevitably became public ridicule and settled with the musician. The point is that the airline should have used common sense and decency with customers in the first instance, and in the last instance, to ensure everyone was happy with the purchase of their product. Responsibility; accountability; and respect.

I digress, so let's get back to Jason and Jennifer, and me. I happen to be a several-decades-old British white male, complete with accent, living in the USA for roughly 15 years. Instead of using the telephone, imagine if I were to walk into your office tomorrow with a script that pre-determined how our conversation would go. I introduce myself as Pradeep or Raj and tell you I'm there to solve all your problems. You would most likely laugh me all the way to the nearest exit before sharing the experience on Twitter! What's important to realize though, is that I wouldn't do it because I had a warped/British sense of humour, I would do it because it was my job. I would be paid to lie to you. I'm outsourced, likely offshore, and paid pennies on the dollar to take Voice of the Customer (VOC) away from you. I'm paid to disguise my real name and location to your customers probably a highly paid guru told my manager it's meant to make customers feel better.

Certainly organizations have to consider financials, yet these gurus tend to care ultimately only about dollars, not customers, and there's rarely any quality assurance (QA) done on the post-sales and support process. Very often the problem is that organizations tend to think of QA only for products, not for processes. If you're wondering exactly what kind of QA you could do for a support process, then imagine for example, each of your executives masquerading as mystery virtual shoppers with different scenarios, calling the support line to gauge customer / employee experience at first hand. Too often, the people at the top never realize or experience the chaos they've imposed on their own customers and employees.

Is there ever really any genuine solicitation and subsequent evaluation of customer feedback or is it just a story frequently suggested in industry magazines? Your product has been designed, created, tested and sold to

customers. You've created scripts with canned answers to problems you think might arise and then hired a third party to handle customer support. It really doesn't matter whether you did this because it's cheaper than increasing headcount or simply because the third party persuaded your CEO that it was a great idea. The end game is, somewhere along the line we have to understand what our customers saying and thinking about our products - before a competitor takes our place.

The biggest, most important question we should be asking is: Who is empowered to take care of the customers, to address employee needs, to resolve the issues never envisioned via canned scripts? Is the contact center or the helpdesk? Is Jason, Jennifer or their supervisor? Are you? Certainly the quicker a resolution is reached, the greater the likelihood the customer will retain loyalty to you or the more productive an employee will be. Who has the power in your organization to instantly transform a bad customer experience into a truly positive one? How many people, and at what level in the organization?

Empowered employees ultimately make an absolute difference to your bottom line. Allow me to demonstrate through three very different personal experiences.

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1. When I bought my first personal laptop from one of the world's biggest manufacturers many years ago, nobody was empowered to correct a simple error made on my online credit application. Despite making many phone calls that routed to an obviously offshore call center with agents who could not understand my accent or my problem. I ended u with a 16% interest rate when the company promised zero percentage for somebody with my excellent credit rating. The bottom line? While I still believe Dell offers great value for money on personal computers, their offshore financial and support centers were absolutely dire and I always mention this when asked to recommend solutions. (As a footnote, I understand they have recently taken the decision to reverse their offshore strategy, citing continued customer complaints as the reason).

2. We've all had run-ins of one kind or another with airlines. I recently chose a major US airline to fly from Nashville TN to London, to England after my mother passed away, yet it took 48 long hours to get to where I needed to be. My outbound first leg was cancelled for no apparent reason and they casually and automatically rebooked me for one whole day later. Despite spending time on the phone and later at the airport desk, the airline agents claimed they did not have the power to prioritize or upgrade me – or even to switch me to another airline. By the time I persuaded them they did in fact have the power, it was too late in the day to fly. The bottom line? I travel a lot and they had an opportunity to make good, to make me feel they were at least trying to make things better. The airline is now my last choice where multiple airlines are available, for both business and personal travel.

3. I firmly believe that the better the quality of the food we eat, the healthier we can become. When checking out a few months ago at a well-known organic grocery chain, I mentioned we were trying a certain product from their own brand because a competing grocer was out of our normal choice. Without further ado, the cashier put a special promotional sticker on the packaging, telling us that this was now a free sample and he hoped we would come back for more. The bottom line? An empowered employee's

action, for less than $5, now has us shopping there almost exclusively for our groceries, a significant return on investment for that grocer, particularly when multiplied with our enthusiastic referrals to friends.

The experiences above aptly demonstrate the impact on a customer when an employee is, or is not, empowered to make a decision or to take an action. The most simplistic of philosophies would have an employee meeting the request or fixing the problem within reason and within a reasonable timeframe – even if that employee has to collaborate with others. Once completed, capture the experience for future reference and the knowledge base and move on.

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It's unfortunate that knowledge offered by customers is often knowledge lost when communicated to an outsourced provider, to script junkies, to people only concerned with fixing the problem and then starting over the next time it happens to someone else. Consider instead the impact of a knowledge base, of capture and sharing between your employees; the subsequent sense of involvement and responsibility, of achievement. So many people make the clichéd statement that knowledge is power. I always believe that knowledge requires action to be truly powerful. We've always tried to use that at CobbleSoft as a foundation in our software to help our own clients be successful.

Collaboration; empowered employees; direct access to customers, vendors and partners; soliciting feedback and subscribing to knowledge distribution: all of these actions play a role in making your products more competitive, ultimately adding value for both existing and potential customers. Courageous is the company that moves in this direction, yet the rewards are out there for the taking.

Empowered employees ultimately make a positive difference, sometimes immediately, sometimes over a period of time. Jason and Jennifer may be very, very good at what they do for their employer, wherever they may be, but ultimately it's likely to be a negative move for your business. If you disagree, may I suggest you ask your customers for their preference?

Richard Stevenson is the co-founder and CEO of CobbleSoft International, the pioneer of web-based, self-service collaboration software for helpdesk and service management since 2002. British by birth and now resident in the USA, Richard has more than 25 years working with international systems at all levels, the last 15 exclusively with an Oracle focus. His concepts for excellence in software have enabled CobbleSoft to realise customers in more than 120 countries.

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