



Interaction Management:
Making your customers sing

How do you provide your customers with a superior contact experience? In the world of the contact centre, it's all about connecting your customers to the right people with the right information as quickly as possible. It's called Interaction Management (IM) – and although it is nothing new, it has taken on a new strategic imperative in the modern contact centre.

Simply put, Interaction Management is about providing the appropriate capabilities to customers based on the way they choose to interact with your company. This means managing and optimising all the different ways customers prefer to interact with your organisation to ensure a consistently high standard of service in an integrated, cost-effective manner.

“Today’s spectrum of customers can (and do) expect to communicate with your company through many different channels and media – email, phone, Internet chat, online ordering/service systems, traditional mail, catalogue or any combination of these – and you need to provide the flexibility to move between these types of interactions without re-entering information already provided,” says Dimension Data principal business analyst Grant Leader. “Integrating these customer touch-points is crucial to enabling companies to better manage the customer experience, maximising loyalty efforts and retention.”

Good interaction management systems do what they say on the box: they manage every aspect of a contact – whether that be a phone call, IVR technology with speech recognition, an email, a fax or even a web chat – from the point it arrives to the ultimate goal of successfully resolving the customer query. Thanks to technology, this is not as difficult as it used to be. Telephone, Web and other communications channels can now be fully integrated with business and customer relationship management (CRM) applications, creating a true “customer interaction network” that goes far beyond the traditional call centre.

“Any time a customer contacts a company’s service centre, it’s a main interaction point that’s critical to ensure customer satisfaction. Mismanaging these ‘moments of truth’ can impact future revenue, customer loyalty and your company’s reputation,” says Leader.

“Each and every customer interaction is a test of not only customer service, but the entire organisation and the brand as well. The outcome of one customer service experience can leave a lasting imprint – negative or positive – on the entire

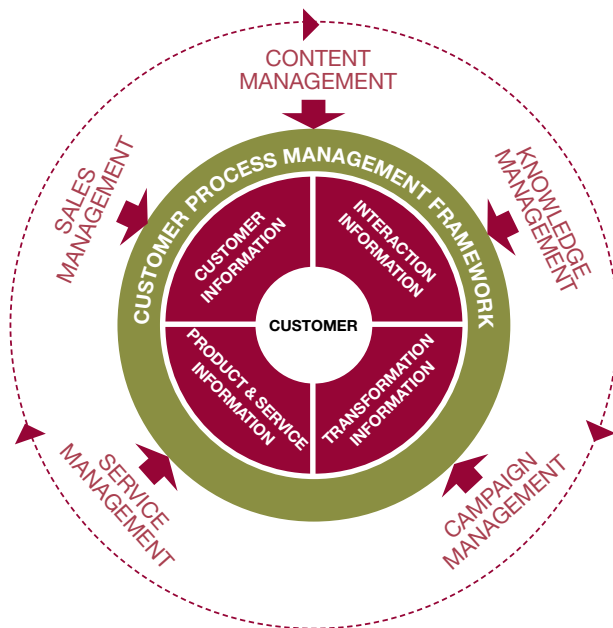
customer relationship. That’s why it’s more important than ever to improve customer-centricity, satisfaction and loyalty by committing to improving touch point performance so that customers receive maximum value out of each interaction.”

It sounds straightforward, but as Leader points out, good IM takes a bit of thought, as it combines business processes, business intelligence and technology.

The benefits of a well-implemented IM system are immediate and far-reaching. For a start, the agent’s job is greatly simplified by having only one interface to deal with the contact – the mythical single view of the customer. This does, of course, mean that comprehensive customer information must be available to customer service agents immediately, regardless of where they are located.

As Leader points out, a good IM tool will draw the relevant customer information from multiple sources and present it to the agent in a single easy-to-interpret screen. What this means is that there is no longer the need to try and consolidate all the information that could conceivably be required into a single database – the downfall of many such projects in the past.

This single interface allows the contact centre to impose a process onto every interaction – which not only cuts the amount of time needed to be spent on training, but also reduces the likelihood of human error bedevilling the interaction. The process tells you who the contact is, what their history with the company is, and even what you are going to do with this customer – what information you need to capture from the customer, where you go to answer their queries and what you need to do to successfully wrap up the interaction as quickly as possible. The agent is practically driven through the process, as it were, and prompted at every step of the way. They can’t move on until they have completed a section, which means they can’t get it wrong.



INFORMATION ANALYSIS AND BUSINESS INTELLIGENCE

Quick call resolution means only one thing: more calls handled at lower cost. And less training time means the same thing - lower costs. Using a process-driven IM approach, training time can be slashed by up to 75%, which means agents can be active and effective on the desk as fast as possible. By improving the quality and effectiveness of customer interactions, companies are able to differentiate themselves from their competitors with higher levels of customer retention and satisfaction, growth and profitability.

It sounds straightforward, but as Leader points out, good IM takes a bit of thought, as it combines business processes, business intelligence and technology. When in place, these basic components of IM allow companies to understand their customer base far more intimately in terms of preferences, profitability, past interaction history and satisfaction. This in turn allows a company to tailor their contact centre around the fundamental objective of attracting the best customers and holding onto them for a long-term relationship.

The success achieved with several of Dimension Data's blue-chip clients in South Africa is proof that IM is here to stay, although there is no standard approach to its adoption yet. Installing one of the big enterprise resource planning (ERP) packages available in the marketplace can prove prohibitively

expensive, so many players are experimenting with their own customised and developed applications. However, the rewards are more immediate than most, with some companies seeing their efforts repaying themselves in less than a year.

One financial services institution has consolidated its various customer service departments, including credit cards and online banking, onto a single IM platform. The move has proven so successful that it is now trying to drive the system into its branches as well, to manage face to face interactions more effectively.

"Good Interaction Management gives contact centre managers an excellent view of what is happening within their operation," says Leader. "They are able to see exactly what processes are being used, and how those can be refined. Suddenly workforce management models become more accurate, there is more control of agents; there is more value for money all round."

Ultimately, though, the understanding and control gained through IM enables the contact centre to maximise the value of the experience to the customer. Providing first-class service to customers, regardless of how they choose to contact the centre, is no longer an option, but a necessity in today's ultra-competitive market.

And being able to provide the most effective and efficient customer interaction experiences are fundamental to survival in a business environment that is extremely competitive and increasingly commoditised.



About the Author: *Grant Leader* is the principal business analyst for Dimension Data CIS MEA. He is our authority on the Interaction Management applications from a business perspective and assists and oversees all the application design projects for these technologies. Grant has been with Dimension Data for two years and has designed, documented and assisted with the build and deployment of a number of Interaction Management projects.



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