



The Contemporary Contact Centre – The CRM Laboratory for the Enterprise

Back in the 70s strategic marketing thinking and creativity ran light years ahead of technology's ability to deliver the 'vision'; or the intended direct marketing results. With the advent of 'database marketing', the best that our IT colleagues could come up with was to print out adhesive mailing labels from their mainframe databases. 'Segmentation' was a major issue and a print run split by language and gender and later, by postcode, was considered a major breakthrough. Late in the 70s and into the early 80s some degree of 'personalization' could be achieved by robot-typewriters (who can still remember Jock Falkson and Effective Letters?). And down in the basement where the mainframes lurked, some 'matched-in' personalization with a wonky typeface could – at a push – be achieved by over-printing pre-printed form letters on continuous stationery. The point is; technology lagged way behind strategy and creativity.

So too into the 80s and 90s, the heydays of 'Lifetime Value Marketing', the first of the 'Loyalty Programmes with the likes of SAA's Voyager and the incredibly large (500,000+ member) Mike's Kitchen Birthday Club; not to mention the vast Ster-Kinekor Kiddies Club. Massive as these customer programmes were, it is hard to comprehend the challenges involved in setting up mainframe data extracts to achieve high levels of customization and personalization that were demanded by the advertising and direct marketing gurus of the time.

Then in the 90s came the mad scramble for organisations to climb up onto the bleeding edge of early CRM solutions. One word ... Eina ! (A South Africanism for One Big Ouch !) Again, the strategic marketing intent and the communication concepts that drove early CRM were fundamentally sound. The problem was that despite the early promises of the technology developers and vendors, achieving the Utopian state of actually having a single view of customers and a 'relationship' with them eluded many despite the massive investments in actual solutions and systems integration. Also in the early and mid 90s, in the world of contact centers the early promises of CTI (Computer Telephony Integration) were an appealing adjunct to the CRM concept but this too was fraught with truckloads of technical challenges as technology struggled with the concept of merging voice and data.

We have seen the Millennium and the Y2K paranoia come and go. We have seen the meteoric growth of the internet and how IP telephony has so rapidly achieved its maturity. We are watching the massive up-take of hosted contact centre and IT solutions and services along with SaaS (Software as a Service) and dare we even stop to consider the realities of the tsunami-like impact that social networks and social media will have on our contact centres and, for that matter, on the organization as a whole.

Continued/...

Today, technology, strategic and marketing thinking and communication creativity have truly converged. Now, if the strategists and the creative marketing gurus can conceive it, by-and-large, technology can deliver it. The time has come (The Walrus said..) for the contemporary contact centre to move into the space right next door to the CEO's office and the contact centre executive to find his or her place in the boardroom. The contact centre of today has become the laboratory for organization-wide, customer centricity. Today the contact centre is where the science of customer management will be perfected. It is a place where concepts and business models and processes can be thoroughly tested, experimented on, analyzed, refined, deployed, monitored, constantly improved and perfected. It is here in the customer contact centre that customer satisfaction and service quality can be conscientiously measured using technologies that enable us to monitor and analyze every single customer interaction using real-time, event-driven feedback mechanisms. It is here that we will conceptualize and create slick new customer-centric policies and processes and even develop the very products and services that customers are demanding. It is here that we will truly listen to the voice of the customer; that bellowing, demanding voice that's coming at us loud and clear from all channels – including the social networks.

Rod Jones

11 August 2011 : Lonehill, Johannesburg. South Africa

© Rod Jones rod@rodjones.co.za www.rodjones.co.za