

Why e-commerce companies need to reassess the 'traditional' call centre

For both new and established e-commerce merchants worldwide, customer experience and customer care have become key to survival. While online stores can beat out their brick-and-mortar competitors on price, gaining a competitive edge over other online merchants has become about excellence in customer experience. And nowhere is customer experience more important than in the call centre. Indeed, for online customers, the only real point of contact is the call centre. Sadly, it often represents a pain point and last resort, according to Jed Hewson, Director of 1Stream.



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Despite the strategic importance of the call centre, however, many e-commerce companies don't take a critical look at how their call centre functions - and the technology it uses. E-commerce businesses pour resources into their website, shopping cart, look and feel, etc., but fail to ensure that the call centre upholds the same high standards. The call centre should be in sync and closely aligned with the merchant's brand and business strategy, so that the customer feels that the call centre is a seamless extension of the business - not a clumsy and inefficient outside service.

Amazon, for example, places customer experience and customer care at the very core of its offering - and clearly understands that phenomenal customer care is the only way to retain existing customers, and gain new ones.

Rethink the approach

To survive in an increasingly competitive playing field, e-commerce merchants need to rethink their approach to call centres. Part of this rethink undoubtedly needs to involve technology, and the way in which it is being leveraged (or failing to be leveraged). As it stands, the local call centre industry still hasn't made the shift to the digital era. Call centres are generally still geared for voice calls, at a time when many customers - and particularly those customers shopping and transacting online - prefer to make use of digital channels before picking up the phone.

The challenge is that most local call centres rely on operational staff that lack the know-how and expertise to respond adequately via email, live chat or social media - which reflects very poorly on an e-commerce company marketing to tech-savvy Millennials, for example. Today's time-strapped customers are ultimately looking for convenience - which translates into real-time assistance and problem solving. Our call centres are not equipped to meet this need for convenience, which puts local e-commerce players at a huge disadvantage.

Particularly for small and medium-sized e-commerce companies (which represent the fastest growing part of the market), cloud computing technology represents a timely opportunity to shift their call centres (and customer experience) into the digital era. It also represents an opportunity to finally take control of their own IT systems and processes.

In previous years, the purchase, management and implementation of key technology platforms and services were the sole domain of the IT department, making it difficult to spot the problem areas and inefficiencies. Technology was not regarded at the strategic level - it was merely seen as a business driver.

Leverage the cloud

Now, with easy access to cloud computing services and platforms, small and medium-sized e-commerce players can take on the technology aspect themselves - and leverage the cloud on a pay per use/scalable model in their call centres. Instead of relying on legacy systems, they can leapfrog into a more agile, cost efficient and digitised approach to call centre management. Instead of being a mere centre for voice calls, the local call centre can thus transition into more of a communication hub for merchants that leverages the shift to multimedia.

The key to this model, however, is ensuring that the chosen cloud computing provider can offer the specialised expertise and knowledge that will enable companies to reap the benefits fully. All too often, the right technology is put in place, but the right expertise is lacking - resulting in missed opportunities and wasted resources.

With the right cloud-computing provider, technology can be used to transform the traditional call centre - and ultimately transform the all-important customer experience.

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