Optimizing Voice in the Global Contact Center

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It comes as no surprise to anyone in the contact center industry that the world is changing! Over the past several years, customer service interactions have increased, customers have become more complicated, and support expectations have risen.

And just when it felt like things were leveling off, the evolving world created different ways for new consumers to connect to brands. New platforms like mobile devices and web-based services, coupled with unprecedented purchasing power in emerging markets, introduced a new population to global products. Call centers had to become true contact centers and support customers through multiple channels, in multiple languages and from multiple countries.

According to Forbes magazine, around 70% of world GDP growth over the next few years will come from emerging markets, and that percentage is only going to rise over time. It's not uncommon for these new consumers to be initially introduced to a brand (and the associated customer service) through the widespread reach of social, mobile, SMS, and video platforms.

Multi-national brands are now setting up operations in these new geographic markets, and while they recognize the immense revenue opportunity, they don't always take into consideration the need for customer service and the strain placed on the contact center.

Many contact centers struggle to properly respond to the emerging markets and the newest support channels. They are challenged with defining a a multichannel strategy that also fits the business requirements of all markets.
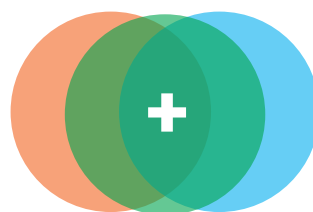
Here's what we know to be certain - a contact center's multichannel support structure is often being externally driven by an uptake of digital channels in their consumer's day-to-day life. It is also stemming from an internal push by other departments looking for cost-savings or shiny new channel differentiators. Unfortunately, this approach is not only reactive in nature, but also short-sighted for the contact center. Global multichannel customer service isn't just about adding new channels in order to appease an early-adopter customer subset, or to create a new marketing tool, or to match a competitor's strategy; it's about providing the support opportunity that delivers the most effective service and provides the highest customer engagement. And in some scenarios that means expanding and experimenting with the more traditional channels.

Now consider this — how feasible is it for a hectic and possibly overwhelmed contact center to not only consider the emerging channels, but to also expand that arguably most important channel — voice? For in order to truly launch phone services globally, an organization must invest in extensive provisioning and management of technology, infrastructure, and telecom. And let's not forget about the need for speed and agility, an understanding of localized language, customs and laws, and most importantly, the individual implementation challenges of each global market.
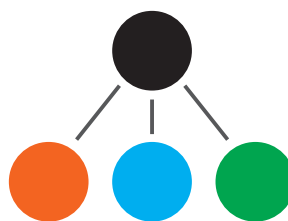
Or, an organization can align with a partner to optimize and manage their global voice strategy. When doing so, a brand should look for a single partner that can provide global coverage and flexible solutions that can be deployed quickly and easily across the world.

The Complexity of Multichannel

Latest industry figures show 74% of consumers use three or more channels to access customer service and over 86% of contact centers now offer multichannel support. In many cases, the contact center is struggling to keep up, trying to determine where, when, and how many of their resources to invest in the various channels. Should the next focus be mobile? Social? Chat? What are customers looking for and what can the organization support? Many acknowledge the role that multichannel support has in overall customer loyalty. After all, the research shows that customers want channel choice and that there is a direct correlation between preferred channel, and a better customer experience which ultimately drives customer loyalty. With that lens, what goes on in the contact center becomes more and more important to the overall health of the organization. Quality customer service means resolving customer issues quickly and efficiently, in whichever channel the customer wants to have that dialogue.

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What's interesting is what happens when any of these emerging channels fail in the eyes of the customer. While customers may try other channels with their initial customer service request, they often turn to traditional voice support when their issue isn't being resolved quickly or efficiently enough. In 2013, Forrester Research found that 45% of consumers will abandon online transactions and switch to voice if their questions or concerns aren't addressed quickly. The International Customer Management Institute (ICMI) discovered that behavior is almost the same for social interactions, as 43% of social care users will transition to voice if their inquiry is not resolved to their expectation.

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Global brands especially acknowledge that they need to be accessible to customers across many channels. And here is where the non-voice channels reign in terms of simplicity. Oftentimes, organizations are able to implement chat, email, and social faster and easier, as they have the help of online or built-in language translation tools. There are also fewer technology or infrastructure nuances to deal with. For example: chat, Twitter or email customer service inquiries rarely incur additional charges based on a customer's location.

In comparison, it can be extremely costly for a consumer to call into a customer service line that is based in another geographic location. In the UK, the use of non-geographic telephone numbers has been a major cause of bill shock to callers and companies alike. Pollster YouGov found that 49% of mobile users have been surprised by how much they have been charged for calling non-geographic numbers and 90% believe organizations should make the cost of these calls clearer, or completely eliminate them. According to Ofcom, UK consumers annually paid around £1.9 billion for calls to non-geographic numbers, which is why there is now a move by progressive companies to Freephone numbers.

In the United States, if a toll-free number is not available, it is common for consumers to try and bypass long-distance fees by utilizing free or online VOIP services. Unfortunately, the call quality of these services can be sporadic and often unreliable. Even though the brand is not managing the call integrity, consumers don't always recognize that. A customer will more often be frustrated with the brand that they are trying to reach, rather than the service they are attempting to connect the brand through. In order to guarantee call quality, maintain brand value, and encourage consumers to engage with customer support, companies need to invest in true global voice services. It is short-sighted for a brand to risk their reputation by allowing consumers to choose a substandard voice product to reach customer support.

While the need for alternative channels cannot be overlooked, the multichannel contact center of today cannot discount the power of voice. Organizations need to ensure that they have the right processes, people, and partners in place to properly support the core of their contact centers — the phone channel.

Voice:
The Heart of the Multichannel Contact Center

COMMUNITY FORUMS · SOCIAL · MOBILE · VIDEO · VOICE · WEB · SMS · SELF-SERVICE · EMAIL · CHAT
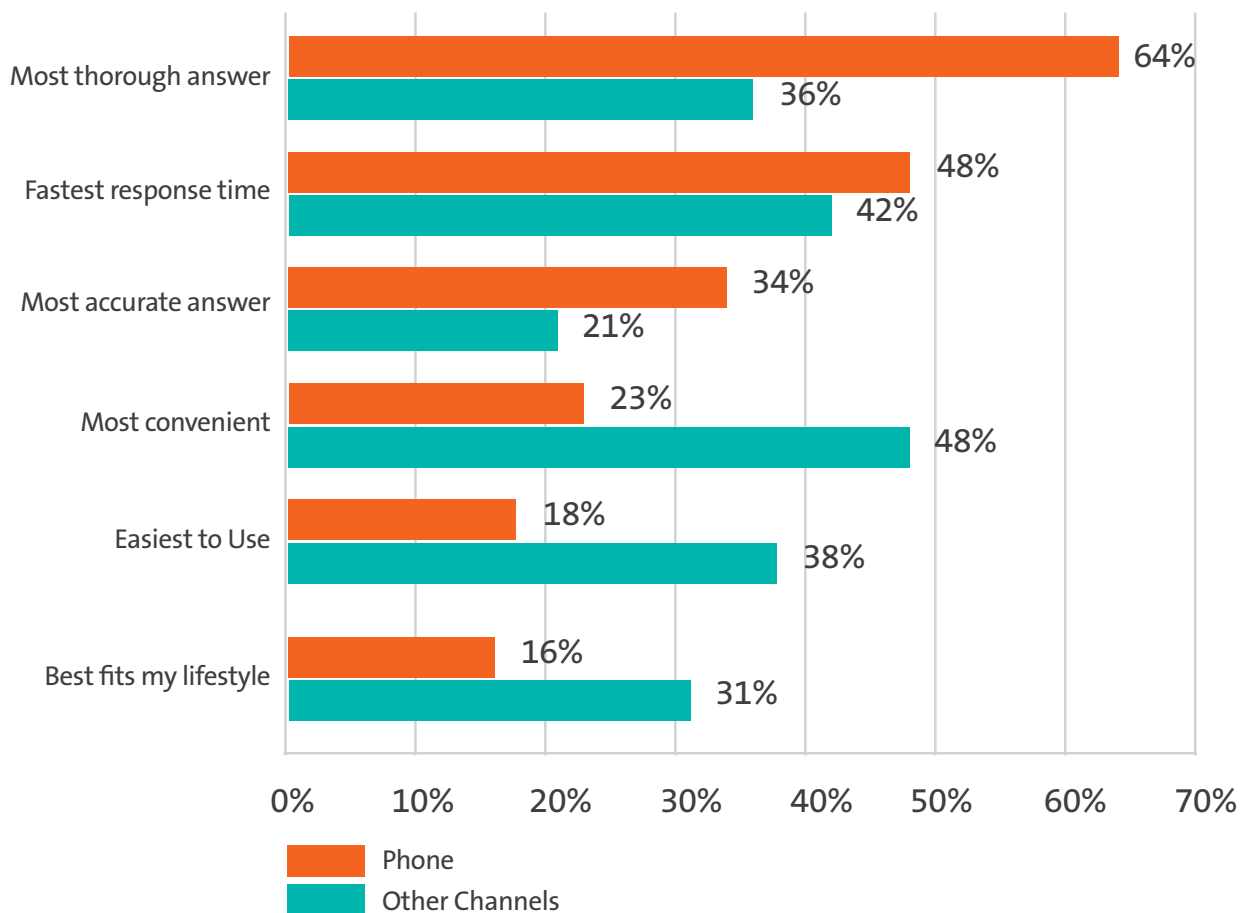
The Power of Voice for the Customer

The multichannel service model has fundamentally changed the role of voice in the contact center. Customers aren't always turning to the phone because it's instinctively their first choice. Instead, it's almost a necessary evil in order to get the responses and information they need. In the past, it was common for a large amount of inbound calls to be routine, low-skill interactions. Nowadays the customer is either faced with a concern that is complex in nature, has already attempted self-service and is unable to progress forward, or has unsuccessfully tried other channels for support and now needs an immediate response. In the last situation, the customer is typically disgruntled at having to transition channels.

The challenging nature of these interactions is also having an impact on satisfaction. According to Accenture's Global Consumer Pulse Survey, customers are increasingly frustrated with the level of service they experience for a few key reasons:

- 89% for having to repeat their issue to multiple representatives in different channels

- 91% because they have to contact a company multiple times for the same reason

- 90% for being on hold too long

When ICMI asked end-user customers why they preferred phone service to other channels, they reported a variety of reasons. What's interesting is they don't say they're choosing phone because it's the most convenient option or the one that best fits their lifestyle. Instead, it's because voice remains the most effective way to get to the best answer:

Reasons Customers Choose the Phone Channel

Reason	Phone	Other Channels
Most thorough answer	64%	36%
Fastest response time	48%	42%
Most accurate answer	34%	21%
Most convenient	23%	48%
Easiest to Use	18%	38%
Best fits my lifestyle	16%	31%

Legend: Phone / Other Channels

And let's be candid, even in our global and developed world, there are still many scenarios where voice is the most reliable and possibly only option to reach customer service. Travelers frequently encounter situations where wifi or internet is unavailable, thus rendering email, chat or social care impossible. And who hasn't found themselves with a dead mobile battery and an unexpected reliance on a landline or front desk phone in order to contact service. Voice offers remains the only guaranteed real-time customer engagement tool.

While companies try to diversify channel offerings, voice still remains a critical piece of the service puzzle. On average, inbound voice represents over half (56%) of overall volume. And for just under thirty percent of companies, voice is actually 80% or more of the total volume. Regardless of the reasons why, brands recognize that voice support can and should be a premium support option and is often necessary for certain interactions.

As Ovum's Keith Dawson states:

"We are still in the early days of what will clearly be a years-long revolution in how companies and customers communicate. But what's clear is that agents are still going to be the focal points for the highest complexity (and highest value) interactions."

Keeping Voice Central to Customer Service

Organizations need to answer some key strategic questions:

- Is it important for us to create direct personal relationships with our customers?

- Is the personal live agent interaction core to our sales or marketing success?

- Is the phone channel currently a preference for our customers?

- Is voice a primary function within the contact center?

If the answer is 'yes' to any of these questions, then voice is a central component to the customer service strategy. And regardless of which geographic markets the company plans to expand to, or what additional channels get added, chances are that voice will remain a priority.

In a May 2013 webinar, ICMI polled the audience of contact center leaders and discovered that 100% were supporting voice as a customer service channel. And in subsequent online surveys conducted between Q3 2013 and Q1 2014, between 88-96% of contact centers say inbound phone is their primary channel. Inbound voice is also the one that is prioritized highest in the organization in terms of funding and resources, followed by outbound phone and email. And it is the phone channel that is still seeing the greatest volume growth! In the next 12-24 months, 55% of contact centers plan to expand or add inbound voice queues to accommodate the expected increase.

"Voice will lose some market share in the coming years from the current 80% of total customer interactions," says Isabel Sanchez Lozano, General Manager of Iberia and Latin America for Transcom. "But voice will stay as one of the most important channels to supply comprehensive answers to the end-user customer. A balanced combination of self-service, online services and voice will undoubtedly increase the financial capacity of companies to improve the quality of the voice channel in the multichannel contact center environment. It will free up funds to invest into new features for this important channel."

CASE STUDY:

For one global internet company, the voice channel became a vital component of their multi-national customer service strategy. During a crucial stage in their growth, they felt they had no choice but to transition their customers to inbound phone services from email and web-based support. While non-voice services had initially worked for them, they realized their growing consumer and enterprise customer base needed live, localized, immediate assistance, and only the phone would do. Their goal was to provide global coverage and a consistent experience to every customer, regardless of location.

Unfortunately, their rampant growth also left them with a myriad of disconnected global infrastructure suppliers, high costs, and poor customer service. Their attempts to deploy solutions quickly across new markets had left them dangerously at risk.

Consolidating suppliers was ultimately the key to turning this internet company's voice challenge around. After partnering with Orange Business Services, they were:

1) Able to merge their 20+ global suppliers into a single platform and a single point of contact

2) Provide localized support telephone numbers to each geographic area they had customers in

3) Relinquish control over the management and reporting of all their inbound calls, which allowed them to focus on their core business, and they are able to use the insight they glean from their call management analytics to make fast decisions on new markets and new product offerings.

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Going Global with Voice

In recent years, organizations have seen their customer base contact them not only through more channels, but also from more locations. Even traditional, native customers are more often on foreign soil these days and needing customer support from their trusted brand back home. For example, if a traveler needs to get in touch with their credit card company to address errant charges or a lost card, they don't want to waste time (or more money) trying various channels to solve their issue or to locate the right number to call. They simply want to talk to someone immediately and get their problem resolved quickly. While this may seem like a small issue, it can have a large impact, especially when you recognize that it may be your higher value clients who are more likely needing service outside their homeland.

It's not uncommon that successful organizations hit monumental roadblocks when they look to expand outside their home country. Companies spend an extensive amount of time learning about their core geographic area, honing their skills to best serve their native customers, and building a robust phone infrastructure that is usually not globally compatible or expandable. Oftentimes, the time and money spent in one location is not transferable to another.

Thus while a contact center may be able to provide customer support locally, or within one other area, the challenges of implementation and management often feels insurmountable when spread across many geographic regions. In order to be successful with global support, a brand must have a flexible solution that can grow with the organization as they enter every new geographic market. Voice support becomes critical during this phase, as it often serves as the backbone for the rest of the support offerings. A nimble technology solution is key to supporting expansion as it ensures that customers around the globe are receiving the caliber of support that they associate with your organization's brand.

Some of the challenges reported by multi-national companies when they first go global include:

- Procuring local phone numbers for each geographic location

- Finding reliable phone coverage in emerging markets

- Negotiating local telecom contracts and navigating foreign laws and regulatory rules

- Providing a consistent customer experience that matches the quality of the products/services in the home country

- Supporting the needs of global customers efficiently and effectively from a single central platform

- Employing global business dynamics like 'follow the sun' support

- Achieving complete visibility and reporting from all phone numbers and countries to aid in future strategy and investment decision making

Focus on the Customer Experience

Companies that achieve strong business growth are often the ones that consider customer service to be of utmost and strategic importance — in large part because they see the connections between the customer experience and brand loyalty. 92% of organizations say that customer engagement is a priority for them and 81% of them are recognizing the linkages between the customer experience and their loyalty to the brand.

Unfortunately, contact center leaders frequently find their attention diverted from the customer experience and focused on other initiatives. In a 2014 ICMI research study on workforce optimization, contact center leaders stressed that the implementation of new technologies was their top 2014 challenge. This was followed by controlling operating costs and then on maintaining or improving customer engagement and loyalty. *(This after 71% acknowledge their customer loyalty could be better!)*

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The reality is, that even with all the other challenges thrown at the contact center; the customer experience must remain paramount. According to Accenture in 2013, 62% of global consumers switched service providers due to poor customer service, up 4% from the previous year. And with over 80% of consumers saying that the greatest factor leading to good customer service is quick issue resolution, it's clear that the voice channel serves its purpose.

As Gartner forecasted in their November 2013 piece, *Gartner Predicts 2014: Customer Support and The Engaged Enterprise*, "Customer service is re-emerging as the core business strategy to create a winning customer experience."

So, how does a busy contact center leader find time to expand on their voice strategy while still maintaining a winning customer experience? For many, that means partnering with a trusted supplier.

The Right Voice Partner

While there are many imperative things that a company should consider when selecting a voice service provider, perhaps the most important one is to ensure global coverage. Even though a brand may only be in two or three countries currently, they shouldn't overlook the fact that more geographic expansion is probably on the horizon. The widespread coverage of a partner must also mean that they have strong in-country relationships and on-the-ground expertise. When a brand is putting their reputation in the hands of a third-party, they are counting on all local regulatory and legislative issues to be handled properly and quickly. A good voice partner has already undergone multiple implementations and understands the specific nuances and complexities of each geographic region, including the emerging markets.

In order for voice to be successful globally, it often needs to be rapidly implemented. And even once it's live in a geographic region doesn't mean that frequent changes won't need to take place. A voice provider must make it simple for a contact center leader to add numbers or cancel numbers without downtime, disruption, or additional cost. The voice service across all numbers and countries must be consistently reliable and scalable.

One of the biggest challenges that multi-national companies report, and that a good voice partner can eliminate, is the multiple contracts and suppliers that are often required when attempting to go it alone. Just the practice of auditing monthly invoices from dozens of telecom and voice infrastructure suppliers across the world can be a daunting task!

When selecting a voice services supplier, ICMI recommends extensively reviewing their routing management and user interface. It is essential that a contact center leader can access all numbers and sites from a web interface, modify the call routing themselves, and be able to manage any spikes in traffic. Even though the voice infrastructure is managed by a sole service provider, the decisions around the actual flow and management should remain with the brand.

Optimizing the Voice Channel

In the past year alone, we've seen numerous occasions when companies were inundated with unexpected call volumes. Sometimes these increases are due to unexpected events like natural disasters or extreme weather; other times there are product issues that drive the increase such as product launches or recalls. In either case, call centers can quickly exceed their limit in the volume of calls they can handle. And while it'd be nice to think that other available channels may offset volume during these times, it's not likely to happen. Consumers continue to indicate that the phone is their preferred channel during times of need like these. An agile environment that can support the addition of phone numbers and agents is crucial.

Organizations need to recognize the critical role that voice plays in the rapidly changing contact center and choose partners and technologies that allow voice to be the core of the multichannel customer service experience.

While multichannel support has become the norm in the world of customer support, phone support still plays a critical role in every contact center. Organizations must not only look at which new channels they should invest in, but grow their presence in voice services.

About This Whitepaper

This whitepaper was made possible by the underwriting support of Orange Business Services (www.orange-business.com) and utilizes best practices and case studies pertaining to their Contact Center Access (CCA) product. CCA allows customers to deliver inbound calls coming in to dedicated telephone numbers to be sent to the right contact center anywhere in the world. This is managed by a single platform, easily deployed across multiple reasons with one point of contact.

Each CCA solution is designed to support the individual customer in their specific requirements, giving them global coverage and flexibility.

About ICMI

The International Customer Management Institute (ICMI) is the leading global provider of comprehensive resources for customer management professionals - from frontline agents to executives - who wish to improve contact center operations, empower contact center employees and enhance customer loyalty. ICMI's experienced and dedicated team of industry insiders, analysts and consultants are committed to providing uncompromised objectivity and results-oriented vision through the organization's respected lineup of professional services including training and certification, consulting, events and informational resources. Founded in 1985, ICMI continues to serve as one of the most established and respected organizations in the call center industry.

About Orange Business Services

Orange Business Services, the Orange branch dedicated to B2B services, is a leading global integrator of communications solutions for multinational corporations. With the world's largest, seamless network for voice and data, Orange Business Services reaches 220 countries and territories with local support in 166. Offering a comprehensive package of communication services covering cloud computing, enterprise mobility, M2M, security, unified communications, videoconferencing, and broadband, Orange Business Services delivers a best-in-class customer experience across a global landscape. Thousands of enterprise customers and 1.4 million mobile data users rely on an Orange Business Services international platform for communicating and conducting business. Orange Business Services was awarded four of the telecom industry's highest accolades at the annual World Communication Awards 2013 – Best Global Operator, Best Cloud Service, Best Enterprise Service and Best Small Business Service. Orange Business Services is the only seven-time winner of Best Global Operator.

Learn more at www.orange-business.com or follow us on LinkedIn, Twitter or Facebook.