

The Next Big Thing To Hit

Call / Contact Centers and Customer Service

Predictions

Over the next 5 years the call / contact center industry will undergo enormous change. Consumer and business customers will no longer have to deal with accent problems and call queue waiting. The cost of customer service, technical support, telesales and telemarketing will be greatly reduced while being enhanced with more efficiency and control. Today's labor intensive environment will change dramatically and will be augmented by Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology.

Within the next year a few early adopters, mostly savvy outsource vendors as well as self-source companies will implement the use of AI within their call/contact centers and will expose the industry to its true power and capabilities. Within two years 25% of call/contact centers will be employing some level of AI. Within 5 years, the industry will become reliant on AI as a resource for servicing customers. Yes, there will still be the need for human agents; however, AI will reduce that number greatly from today's market size at a much reduced price and cost. And most human agents will be providing back up to the AI front end contact systems versus being on the front end today. Yes, the AI system won't provide for all calls, so back up to a human agent is required for a portion of the contacts. But in time, the AI system will learn and be modified to accommodate a majority of the calls through fruition.

Today's Environment

The technology and practices employed today for servicing customers is not much different than what is was 15-20 years ago. Yes, technology has evolved and the systems employed are more advanced, but still it's basically the same. This holds true for operational practices as well. Bottom line, we're still completely reliant on human labor forces to deliver customer service for most of the industry.

There are Interactive Voice Response systems (IVR's) which provide a low percentage of coverage beyond traffic management, but these are limited in function and restricted by how far they can maintain required customer satisfaction levels. Most IVR's only provide front end

traffic management to a human agent today and the percentage of full customer service is very low for IVR-only support.

The Internet also offered some advancement in operations and technology but we're still doing the same basic things that we did 15-20 years ago. Internet, or Voice Over IP (VOIP) has lowered the cost of communications, but this still has not changed the industry.

There has not been a "Next Big Thing" in the customer service and call/contact center market within the past 15-20 years. Some would argue that off-shore, springing forward some 8-10 years ago was a big thing, but it didn't really move the market forward into a changing evolution. Off-shoring merely lowered the cost to a degree but also introduced problems related to accent, attrition and control. Bottom line, the customer service and call/contact center footprint hasn't really changed much during the past 15-20 years.

The Next Big Thing

A definition of a Next Big Thing would include something employed on a grand scale which would change an industry completely. **Current AI technology which is available today for call/contact centers and customer service will do just that.** This technology has been under development for decades for various other reasons, such as national defense, national intelligence, national security and some commercial applications.

Today, there is an offering available which is designed to replace the human agent in a multitude of applications in the customer service arena. This technology is basically an Avatar which sounds, speaks, listens, thinks and reacts much like a human. Designed to function like an agent or rep within a call or contact center, this technology can perform at amazing levels today for a fraction of the cost of a human agent, while still providing acceptable customer satisfaction.

AI goes way beyond IVR's and Interactive Virtual Communications (IVC's), which are basically script oriented and deal with fixed responses. Even the smartest IVR's today can't match up to the AI solution available now. AI passes the IVR by speaking, listening, thinking and reacting to the responses outside of standard fixed scripting and responses. AI does this within conversational modes and does not sound like an automated IVR or recording.

AI also resides in a cloud and eliminates reliance on high cost communications, which eliminates standard clogs in an Automated Call Distributor (ACD), eliminates most metric problems in a call center and can eliminate most brick and mortar costs associated with human labor. AI can eliminate most Key Performance Indicators (KPI's), including abandonment rates on an inbound queue, average speed of answer (ASA), average hold time (AHT), etc. because it

resides in the cloud and can answer almost any number of calls coming in at the same time without hold time. This also applies to outbound calls, as AI can make thousands of calls at the same time versus having to trudge through an agent available queue to do an outbound call. AI can be used in a mixed inbound and outbound scenario within the cloud or within an ACD, where outbound calls can be made during light inbound periods according to scheduled time zones. Most important, AI can solve most of the unpredicted inbound call waves which can bury a call center in an instant.

AI will also eliminate the need for workforce management systems at the level required today, as well as workflow management as this can be “trained” into the AI system and modified more easily than training a huge human work force. The AI’s modifications can be a fraction of the cost of training human agents as well as much less time to train hundreds or thousands of agents. Human Resource expenses, recruiting costs and attrition management costs will be greatly reduced due to less human agents required, as well as customer satisfaction management, or quality control, as AI can record every session and literally learn from its experiences with guidance, approval and modifications from management. Current AI technology can also communicate over various channels, such as voice, chat, e-mail, text and IM.

Summary

AI will be the **next big thing** in the call/contact center and customer service industry. This is not Star Wars, nor some other fictional high tech dream. It’s here today and is growing like wild fire. Like most unusual technologies, it will start out slowly but will take the market by storm once the early adopters prove its true value. *These adopters will be the big winners in this technology infusion, getting a jump on their competition. Especially in the outsourcing industry.* It is already being used by many of the early adopters in the self-sourcing community and has proven itself quickly. The capabilities and cost savings will drive this new technology forward on a natural course. This will only take one to two years from today to get established and within five years will encompass the entire market.

About the Author

Tom Topolinski has been in the technology and customer service business for over 35 years. He has held positions in Gartner, Inc. as a lead-CRM analyst for 5 years and has held executive positions in major BPO companies, including Sutherland, Sitel and Digital Equipment Corp. He has also been a Senior Advisor for the Outsourcing Institute. Mr. Topolinski has also been

sought out by major publications such as Time, Inc., Business Week, Reuters and many others for his opinions and writings. Mr. Topolinski has won the IT Thought Leadership Award in 2008 from the Outsourcing Institute for his article on customer care. He is now a consultant and can be reached at www.topoenterprises.com for more information on AI applications.