

Taming the many-headed beast

Paul Bray looks at how the confusing muddle of multi-channel communications can be tackled with a step-by-step business strategy.

When it comes to communicating with their customers, businesses today are not just spoiled for choice but spoiled by choice.

The more communication channels that become available – phone, email, voicemail, text message, web site, web chat, social networking, not to mention letter and fax – the more difficult it is to maintain accuracy and consistency, control what's said and how, and keep accurate records of communications. The business doesn't put out a consistent brand message, costs grow unchecked, and above all customers don't get a consistent experience.

"Multi-channel communications have been treated in a very fragmented way," says Barry Osborne, a consultant for customer communications management (CCM) specialist Pitney Bowes Business Insight. "Often communications are only seen by the business operations that use them at an output level, they're something that happens as part of a process. Rarely are communications managed in a proactive and joined-up way across the organisation."

What's needed, argues Osborne, is a unified, business-wide strategy for managing customer communications. The first stage, he says, is to step back from the delivery mechanism and define the business outcomes desired, such as customer strategy, customer objectives or operational cost efficiencies. You might, for example, want to convey highly personalised messages that vary with the stages of the customer lifecycle, or to be more proactive and increase revenues through cross- or up-selling.

Having defined the business aims, you need to understand how customer communications are handled currently, which

can mean everything from electronic and web based communications to traditional post, billing and contact centre voice calls. "Many communications processes have grown up piecemeal," says Osborne. "They're often complex and ill defined and rarely does someone within the business function have ownership over the way in which they're managed, changed and delivered."

Once the desired outcomes and communication processes are understood, the detail of the customer communications

work in practice. Business process definitions may need greater scrutiny at this stage: just saying "agent completes questionnaire" may not be sufficient if there are many variations and dependencies. The increased level of understanding this brings may enable significant efficiency savings, says Osborne.

The other key ingredient of a successful CCM strategy is measurement, says Osborne. This could include how long a process takes, how quickly changes can be made, or the specific return on investment. Accurate

measurement is the final link in a continuous loop that ensures that the CCM strategy is constantly updated and kept aligned with business aims.

"Having a CCM strategy can assist in improving customer retention, maximising the lifetime value of customers, personalising marketing communications, and maximising the customer experience across all touch points," Osborne says. "And it affords a huge opportunity for business improvements and cost savings. The typical return on investment period is pretty impressive: even through small, incremental improvements, CCM can pay for itself in three to six months."

In summary, says Osborne, "Communications strategy is about aligning the right communications, for delivery to the right people, with the right message at the right time, in a co-ordinated way across the business. This enables communications to deliver the needs of the customer voyage, and optimise the customer experience in a consistent way across any contact channel.



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strategy can be designed. It's only at this stage that you select the actual media. Thus you don't say, "Web chat is the latest technology, we have to offer it", but, "We want to reach very keyboard-literate young people, and web chat is more effective than email and cheaper than phone".

A major part of this design is what Osborne calls the "business architecture", a combination of the business processes and the technology needed to enable the way they

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