

Intelligent dialogue in the contact centre: Tearing up the script?

15-Sep-2008

Talking to a call centre agent with a script can seem like you're talking to a robot. So how can organisations make their agents seem more human? Louise Druce investigates the training and technology that is being adopted to enable intelligent dialogue in the call centre.



By Louise Druce, features editor

When calling a contact centre, you can't help feeling like you're talking to a pre-programmed robot who is more interested in flogging you more expensive products and rattling off the legal stuff than dealing with your problem. It's a situation that doesn't make call centre agents feel too enthused with the role either, which is why the major companies are moving off script with intelligent dialogue.

Lloyds TSB, Virgin Money and First Direct are among those who are challenging the way staff and customers interact with each other. In the case of Lloyds, this move was prompted by research that revealed 90% of people get annoyed by call centre workers being constantly prompted by their technological understudy. Amongst the gripes, 60% felt staff working from a script failed to answer their questions, while 55% felt they didn't listen.

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-- Jo Thomson, Procter Consultancy

It's not all their fault. According to verbal communication expert Phillip Khan-Panni, human nature means almost nobody can read and listen at the same time. And to add to the challenge, he believes you have around three seconds to capture a customer's interest – no mean feat for the outbound call desk. "We have been conditioned by our environment to screen out and switch off because every single day we can receive as many as 3,000 different messages from newspapers, magazines, TV, radio, the internet and emails, telephone calls, advertisements and slogans, etc." he explains. "You need to understand how people listen, how to connect and establish two-way dialogue."

But this also means moving away from old-school practices. For example, Jo Thomson of Procter Consultancy, which provides training and support in service delivery, says companies in the past have been obsessive about call handling times. This pressures agents into a quick but not necessarily satisfactory call resolution. "The more leading edge, forward-thinking contact centres have radically turned it on its head and are saying it's more important to resolve the enquiry on the customer's terms," she says. "Do it right and you get less call backs and happier customers. But to do that you have to empower agents, which is a scary leap of faith to take."

How may I help you?

CRM technology is stepping up to the plate to advance intelligent dialogue, mainly combining real-time data capture, analytics and agent training. One of the most hyped steps forward is decisioning technology. This includes [next best action marketing](#) (NBA) which, in a nutshell, bases decisions about a person's interests on the purchases they make to find the right proposition for that individual, which appear as pop-up prompts on the call handler's desktop.

This means the agent makes the most appropriate offer at the right time, which may not be a sales or marketing activity at all, but just having the right conversation with the customer. Proponents of the technology believe that such decisioning technology represents a significant step in empowering agents to become informed advisers.

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Nevertheless, Guy Tweedale, senior vice president, European Operations, at process optimisation software provider Jacada, cautions that as more applications and communications are rolled out, call agents will increasingly have to deal with complex dashboards to rival the Starship Enterprise – some already deal with as many as 20 applications per call.

In all, research by Sieman suggests that just 29% of an agent's time is spent talking to customers, with the remaining 71% split between entering data, making notes, seeking advice and reading from information screens. To further compound the problem, there have also been occasions where the technology created to help can be more of a hindrance and interrupt the unscripted conversational flow – for example, when distracting pop-up prompts appear at the wrong moment.

"No one is happy with the resultant robotic dialogue that is only focused on obtaining customers information as quickly as possible," says Tweedale. "However, it is difficult to see how training agents in building intelligent dialogues – and the plethora of other band-aid initiatives – will do anything other than create greater complexity and pressure in the already over-pressurised environment."

Other experts might not agree. Aside from the technology overload issue, Annette Mitchell, who rolled out the NBA strategy at O2 and is now responsible for implementing it at Orange, believes changing agent mentality is vital for the programme to work as they better understand why products are relevant to the customer. "We offer additional training in the different products and services, as well as training to help staff understand why our customer strategies have pushed them up to the top of the list on the screen in front of them, and then help them to identify the right point in the conversation to introduce it," she says.

"If you pay [staff] to manage calls to an average handling time, then that's what they will do. If you pay them to manage the call and add value through x, y and z, then that's what they will do. But if you try to get them to change without training it's going to be very difficult."

Are you talking my language?

Khan-Panni also believes training techniques are important in intelligent dialogue and should marry understanding good communication skills with understanding the process of persuasive communication. "The on-screen prompts will get in the way sometimes, but it depends on how much information you put on there in the first place and how many words are used," he says. "If, for example, you were talking to a customer and the screen fills up with 150 words, how are you going to read it and listen at the same time? If there were four words on there, such as 'ask permission to proceed', your brain instantly understands what it's about."

He also believes intelligent dialogue is not just about vocabulary but a sequence and form of persuasive language that takes customers to the next step. For instance, you wouldn't walk up to a stranger, tell them a product costs £500 and then ask if they want it or not. "If I want you to buy something, first I have to get your attention. Your mind isn't empty. You are always doing something at every given moment," Khan-Panni explains. "Next, I have to build your interest in what I am saying so you perceive an accumulation of benefits."

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-- Sara Chapman, Converso Contact Centres

"I have to take you to a point where you say you like the idea, it makes sense and you want the product. Once I have taken you to that point, I can tell you what you need to do to get it, but not earlier."

Sara Chapman, call centre manager at Converso Contact Centres, says she has found customers are generally warmer and more receptive if they sense agents are not working to a script but also admits to its downsides, mainly the amount of training investment it involves. The company manages out-of-hours orders on behalf of a major high street shirt retailer where a script would be "too stilted" to meet differing customer requirements. The focus is on staff building substantial product knowledge and giving agents the confidence to not rely on prompts by conducting as many test calls as possible before they 'go live'.

Chapman says agents not only have to know the product inside out, they also need to be aware of what the company's compliance and customer experience standards are. However, she recognises that contact centres have to have the right talent pool available. "It's sometimes a lot easier to go for a scripted campaign because the calibre of agent experience required is not so high," she admits. "You need to assess whether you have the resources and time to develop staff to the level needed to succeed. You will also need constant, on-going coaching and supervision."

As well as taking a lot longer to train staff, compliance is a major factor for industries such as finance, so some scripting may be needed to make sure legislative rules are met. "You can't underestimate the fallibility of staff when working without a script because they may simply forget to mention important information," she says.

On the plus side, though, Chapman believes while scripts may give conformity, unscripted campaigns allow salespeople more freedom to tailor their conversation to suit the customer. This can mean flexibility to apply different hooks and closes if current ones are falling flat

and being able to go for the sale when the customer is ready, rather than when the script tells them to.

“Although scripted conversations often give you more consistency in terms of overall performance, unscripted techniques are more productive in the long run,” she adds.

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