

White Paper

One Source, Many Solutions

IUCS - the factory direct approach to improving customer experiences

Introduction

For some utilities - especially those with customers who over time have come to expect live agent interaction - the ever-increasing pressure to deliver better service more affordably makes the balance between increased customer satisfaction and greater operational efficiency a delicate one. Automation has made the task of doing more with less only slightly more achievable through cost reductions, faster service delivery and increased agent productivity. Ironically, though, it's the personalized touch of a skilled call center agent that is the key driver behind the move toward a more automated operation. For those companies that do not recognize the value of being both efficient AND effective, it can mean the difference between a satisfied customer and a delay in collecting revenue.

For many utilities, limited budgets and the lack of on-site IT resources have significantly impaired their ability to quickly respond to technology advances. Oftentimes, they are forced to endure inflexible, unsupported and ultimately expensive hardware and software upgrades that are unresponsive to the immediate and future requirements of an ever-changing industry. In this down economy, questions about the cost-effectiveness of the traditional IT acquisition model; discarding and replacing components over time, only to come back a couple of years later and do it all over again, are causing companies to take a closer look at where costs are allocated and where efficiencies can be gained.

This white paper examines the challenges that utilities face when considering technology upgrades and explores the many advantages that the combination of automation and human interaction can provide.

Trend: From call center to customer satisfaction center

Figuring out how to handle calls more efficiently and automating to save money have long been top-of-mind issues for contact centers, regardless of their size. In an attempt to differentiate themselves from larger competitors, however, many smaller entities have turned their attention to the experience that they provide to their customers.

Gone are the days of the traditional call center model, conjuring images of row upon row of service agents frantically answering calls. Today, companies are looking for ways to interact with their customers. After all, it is difficult to up-sell or build a good relationship with a customer if their only methods of contact are through an IVR or a website. Therefore, the ability to strike that balance between automation and human interaction is critical.

The availability of contact options such as IVR, email, chats and SMS messaging have made customers more willing than ever to use automated self-service rather than interact with a live agent. Some utilities - especially those that have traditionally provided

agent contact as a first option - cannot afford to ignore the fact that customers will only self-serve if those options represent a better, easier alternative.

Industry experts suggest that customer loyalty is a direct by-product of customer satisfaction. When a customer feels their issue or need is being addressed both courteously and efficiently, they are much more likely to walk away from the interaction with positive feelings. Through the creative deployment of technology, many companies are experiencing these same outcomes without ever personally interacting with customers. Proactively communicating with customers through outbound calling represents a chance to provide a satisfying and branded customer experience.

The difficulties of automating a call center

Doing more with less is a challenge most businesses face in a sluggish economy. That's never been truer for the customer contact center. Proving its worth in the enterprise is a constant source of concern. For example, how can positive revenue streams be generated when budgets are being cut? Or, how can customer satisfaction be increased and services improved with a dwindling head count?

Today's savvy consumer lacks the time and patience to deal with a self-service application that isn't intuitive. Typically, a user wants to get in, conduct business quickly and get out. A poorly designed touch-tone application is a common and well documented source of customer frustration. Forcing a customer to sit through a lengthy list of options that do not address their needs means they probably will not be a satisfied customer.

Broken, inefficient processes such as these aren't just wasteful; they can also be quite costly. Frankly, it's a cost that few mid-sized utility contact centers can withstand for any extended period of time - neither from a satisfaction nor cost savings standpoint.

Because of these potentially negative impacts, it's important for contact centers to refrain from making snap judgments about the technology to best suit the needs of their business. Standard IVR applications that are rigid and ineffective can pose significant problems. Typically, there's been no common process across channels, which ultimately makes the customer service agent's job of managing multiple, simultaneous contacts that much harder.

For the high performing call center, service improvements, cost reductions and revenue generation are important factors to consider. In addition, they should look for technology solutions that also will enhance the overall experience for customers, allow proactive communication with customers, and accommodate changing customer preferences by enabling agents to seamlessly interact with customers across a variety of channels like telephone, email, voicemail, fax, and web chats.

Companies that do not accommodate their customers with a flexible, feature-rich self-service solution may be missing an opportunity to reduce operating expenses and improve customer satisfaction.

The solution: One box, many channels

From the moment a customer enters the IVR until they exit, the system processes in a

customer contact center are essentially the same. True differentiation occurs if the agent is able to utilize the technology to seamlessly interact with customers across a variety of channels like phone, email, voice mail and web chat without experiencing any process delays.

Contact centers should look for a solution that offers integration, versatility, modularity and a unique set of benefits like:

- Cost effectiveness
- Ownership
- Portability
- Single point of contact for interface upgrade and support
- More efficient interconnection with back-office applications
- One connection for multiple channels
- High redundancy

Lafayette Utilities System (LUS) finds the perfect blend between automation and interaction

The high-quality customer service that Lafayette Utilities System (LUS) provides to its 65,000 customers has long been a source of pride for the municipal utility. The Lafayette City-Parrish, which receives its electric, water, sewer and telecom services from LUS, is a close-knit community where “please” and “thank you” is the rule; no exceptions. So, it wasn’t unusual for customers to hear a live voice when making billing inquiries. Over time, many had grown accustomed to it.

Increased customer satisfaction was just one of the intangible benefits that the utility enjoyed because of direct interaction with its customers. In reality, though, it was the bottom line that was most impacted, but negatively. Phone calls were coming in randomly. Conversations tended to be lengthy as agents tried to determine each customer’s need on a case-by-case basis. And the billing system was far from intuitive.

“The decision to upgrade to a self-service solution represented a huge culture change not only for us, but for our customers,” said Andrew Duhon, Customer and Support Services Manager. “Improvements to our processes were critical, but we didn’t want to alienate customers who had come to expect a certain level of personalized service.” LUS had a dilemma: how could automation help handle calls more efficiently but maintain high levels of customer satisfaction? A partnership with CTI provider Centurion, developers of the Centurion CARES (Contact Center Automated Resource System) proved to be the answer.

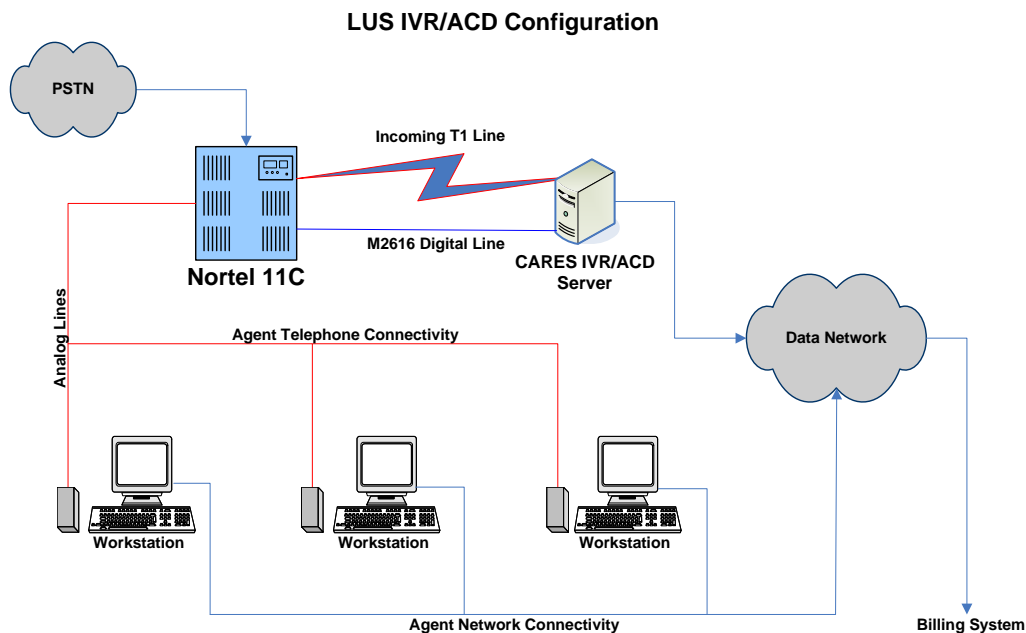
The solution that Centurion provided, Integrated Utility Communication System (IUCS) - a fully integrated implementation the CARES ACD system and its utility-focused IVR - not only allows customers to self-serve a variety of their own needs through multiple contact points, but allows those who still prefer to interact with an agent the opportunity to transfer out of the IVR on the front end.

“We wanted a vendor that could provide us with a flexible, functional, friendly multimedia contact center solution and we found one,” said Lisa Chiasson, Customer and Meter Services Administrator. “Centurion has a deep understanding of their product, which in

our case, made for a very smooth implementation. They followed through on their promise after the initial installation and they still support us today to make sure the efficiencies we gained will be long term.”

Since the initial implementation in 2007, LUS has improved its overall efficiency by 41%. The average call time is now well below three minutes and customer abandonment rates have dropped to zero. Prior to the implementation, roughly 25%-30% of incoming calls were customer service related, all of which were handled by an agent. In less than two years, that number has dropped to 10%.

Figure 1: With Centurion CARES, LUS customers have the ability to self-serve a variety of needs on their own, including paying their utility bills over the phone.



The Centurion Advantage

While there will likely never be a “one size fits all” technology solution, for customer contact centers seeking a fully integrated approach to saving both time and money, some critical factors that should be considered are:

Flexibility: Having multiple contact points means upgrades made in response to changing customer preferences can be completed at a lower cost and without major operational interruptions.

Ease of use: The more intuitive the application, the more likely it is that the customer will simply choose to help themselves, saving time and money for the contact center.

Maintenance and Support: Ensuring that the quality and integrity of the system will not be compromised over time is a major benefit of contact centers with limited IT support.

Figure 2: CARES provides features and functionality other ACD systems can only deliver with multiple server platforms and vendors.



Since 1981, Centurion, Inc. has provided in-house solutions to help companies better serve their customers. Centurion, Inc. does not outsource, but rather provides the tools to help companies better build relationships with their customers.

With thousands of federal, state and local government agencies, public utilities, financial institutions and other business customers worldwide, Centurion's extensive library of Interactive Voice Response (IVR), Automatic Call Distribution, CRM, Screen Pop and Recording applications are custom designed to enhance every aspect of an organization's online and real-time interfaces. Committed to "doing what we said we would do," Centurion is positioned to deliver the very best hardware, software and post-sale support to increase an organization's efficiency, reduce costs, and improve interactions with existing and potential customers.

To find out more about how Centurion can help improve the efficiency and effectiveness of your utility's customer contact center, contact Larry Wallace at (727) 431-5208 or via email at lwallace@centonline.com.