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A Call for Change

New technology is helping companies beef up phone support

By Malia Wollan

SOMETIMES it seems that customer-support lines get just about everything wrong. Callers must endure long waits on hold and then navigate robotic voice-system mazes, only to end up talking to ill-informed agents.

Now a batch of pioneering technologies are offering relief to peeved customers—and to businesses weary of getting hammered for bad customer support. Some of these products let phone reps search through company manuals more quickly and efficiently to find answers. Others let agents more easily share answers to frequently asked questions with other agents across the globe.



Some companies, meanwhile, are recording customers' calls and searching them for key phrases to figure out who's getting good and bad service, and how to improve the customer experience. In some cases, companies can even use software tools to take over a customer's problematic machine remotely to solve a problem.

"For years, customer-support investment has been focused on the Web to the detriment of call centers," says Sheri Teodoru, program director at CFI Group, an Ann Arbor, Mich., customer-service company. "But the tide is starting to turn."

Right the First Time

One type of new software product tries to save time by giving call-center agents quicker access to reliable answers.

At Foremost Insurance Group, of Caledonia, Mich., a member of **Farmers Insurance Group**, call-center agents frequently have to look up policy details for busy insurance brokers on insuring everything from hot rods to motor homes. In the past, that meant searching for keywords in thousands of the company's electronic documents and printed manuals—a process that brought up accurate answers just 28% of the time, according to the company. Agents ended up scribbling hard-to-find answers and tricks

for getting around the system onto sticky notes and pressing them onto their monitors.

To make things easier, last year Foremost installed a search-engine tool from **InQuira Inc.** of San Bruno, Calif. The system uses a method called intelligent search that better understands the nuances of language. For instance, the system is built with concept dictionaries that vary by industry so that the definition of "stocks" would differ for retail and financial businesses. The search will also recognize variations in terminology, recognizing "personal water craft" as another term for "jet ski." The improvement has been striking, according to Foremost; the new system returns accurate search results 85% of the time.

Another tool that's increasingly important for improving call-center performance is the "knowledge base"—essentially, a storehouse of content and frequently asked questions that can be accessed by entering search terms or questions. Because it's irksome for customers to encounter agents with varying degrees of knowledge, and because call centers have notoriously high turnover rates, knowledge bases are essential for maintaining an up-to-date source of information.

New knowledge bases allow companies to update them easily to meet customers' current concerns. Xerox Corp., Stamford, Conn., recently found that its customers were calling in with questions about how to switch from "scan" to "fax" on a new multi-function printer. A call-center agent submitted the question to a team of company experts, who entered the information into knowledge-base software from **Kana Software Inc.**, Menlo Park, Calif. The answer was then available to agents globally who supported the product. Xerox also used the caller feedback to rewrite and clarify portions of the printer's user manual.

The software allows Xerox to keep its information easily updated in multiple languages. Xerox operates in more than 160 countries and has more than 1,000 call-center agents answering customers in 12 languages. Until 2003, each language had a separate knowledge base, so answers weren't shared. Now Xerox has one shared knowledge base across all 12 languages, using a combination of manual and auto-

matic translation. So if a Chinese customer calls with the same printer problem a customer in Detroit had a few days prior, the call-center agent in China would have access to the answer generated in the U.S. call center.

Like Xerox, many companies are tapping their call-center knowledge bases for valuable intelligence about their products and services. The world's largest power-tool manufacturer, **Black & Decker Corp.** of Towson, Md., detected a malfunctioning 30-cent washer on a tile saw by monitoring the frequency of customer complaints to its call centers.

In February 2005, tile-laying contractors started calling Black & Decker's customer-support lines with complaints about the washer. Using knowledge-base software from **RightNow Technologies Inc.** of Bozeman, Mont., to automatically report product-design complaints, Black & Decker was able to quickly make changes in the saw's manufacturing, saving the company from handling thousands of returned products.

A Close Watch

Some businesses are monitoring customers' phone calls to get useful information. Anyone who has made a customer-service call has heard the familiar refrain, "This call may be monitored for quality-assurance purposes." For more and more companies, that means recording the entire interaction (even while you're yawning or talking to yourself on hold) and digitally searching the audio for key words and phrases—a process called audio or word mining. Companies then use that information to pinpoint struggling call-center agents, catch problems on newly released products and analyze customer behavior for marketing purposes.

Take Atlanta-based Internet service provider **EarthLink Inc.**, which has more than 4,000 call-center agents serving more than five million subscribers. When John Bowden, vice president of customer service, wants to spot poorly performing call-center agents and get them up to speed with new training, he queries the server. He'll look for instances where a customer says, "I want to talk to your manager," "You're not helping me" or "I've been on hold too long."

EarthLink's speech-analytics software, from **Nexidia Inc.** of Atlanta, will search 1,000 hours of audio for those keywords in just 17 seconds. Mr. Bowden then coaches the floundering agents by playing them exemplary customer-service calls mined from the recorded audio.

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Sometimes, though, customers just want someone else to fix the problem for them. New software lets some companies do just that—although so far it's mostly used in business-to-business technical support.

For instance, **PracticeWorks** Inc. of Atlanta provides information-management technology to dentists, orthodontists and oral surgeons. These systems are complicated, dentists are busy, and troubleshooting over the phone is difficult. "In the U.S., dentists' offices are very small, mom-and-

pop-oriented businesses with little technical expertise on staff," says Brian Denton, PracticeWorks' vice president and chief information officer.

So PracticeWorks provides call-center agents with remote-support software from **Bomgar** Corp., Ridgeland, Mass. When an orthodontist X- raying a patient's molars can't get a discernible image from the X-ray sensor, he calls customer support. A PracticeWorks call-center agent directs the orthodontist to a Web site where a remote-assist

session is initiated. The agent takes control of the desktop, fixes the problem (with the orthodontist following along) and signs off.

The entire session is archived, providing an audit trail, and the Bomgar remote-support software automatically uninstalls itself—offering added protection to the orthodontist's records and protecting the patient's X-rays from curious hackers.

"Remote support saves time for our customers and our technical-support staff," says Mr. Denton. ■■■