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Pulling the plug on call centres

May 8, 2013 - 11:09AM Mathew Hall

Is the traditional call centre finished as a customer service platform now that social media and crowd help are the new fashion?

Strutting the floor at a promotional event for Salesforce.com in New York earlier this year Marc Benioff, the cloud computing company's founder and chief executive, declared landline call centres antiquated, if not entirely deceased.

Benioff would say that – Salesforce sells products enabled by social and mobile technology. That aside, he also has a point. As communication technology rapidly develops, Benioff said businesses must rethink how they approach servicing customers.

Significant numbers of customers today will turn to online FAQs, email, instant messaging, online forums, and virtual agents rather than pick up a phone.

Research from industry analyst Forrester suggested that while a majority of customers in the US at least still use the telephone for customer service, that number is declining. Forrester's research indicated Twitter was the least-used but fastest-growing channel for customer service.

"There is so much change, there is so much happening today in the world, that the ability to listen to customers, empathise with them and understand them, is the single most important thing that we can do," Benioff said.

More than 4.5 billion people are connected on social networks, according to Forrester, and each is connecting through social media with friends and colleagues both at home and at work. That's not only a big audience for enterprise customer service it is a huge platform for customer relations. The market is also growing - more than 1.7 billion touch devices were shipped in 2012.

Research in Australia, however, suggests that while businesses are trying to use social media for customer service, consumers are slower to use those channels for their own benefit.

A report on Australian customer service trends by Fifth Quadrant found that businesses and customers were looking for each other in the wrong places.

Australian consumers consider Facebook to be their number one choice for customer service engagement, followed by online forums and communities, and YouTube.

Networks like Twitter, LinkedIn and blogs were the least popular options. Tweet this - according to Fifth Quadrant, more than seven in ten consumers claimed they "rarely" or "never" turn to Twitter, LinkedIn, or blogs for customer service.

Yet Twitter is used by more than three quarters of Australian organisations and businesses, perhaps tweeting at themselves rather than customers. Company blogs, websites, and online communities were ahead of Facebook, YouTube, and LinkedIn as preferred tools for businesses.

"Simply creating a new service channel then standing back and waiting for the customers to come won't work," said Chris Kirby, Fifth Quadrant's head of research. "If organisations want to offer customer service through social media, they need to go to the networks that their customers use."

Anecdotal evidence is inconclusive for the merits of social media over a traditional telephone. For every customer that says an issue was resolved through Twitter, another claims their tweet to a company was ignored.

There may, however, be some firmer evidence that call centres have a short term future. Reaching out to the Philippines, US and Australia, no call centres or industry organisations, including the ATA (previously known as the Australian Teleservices Association), responded to requests for comment on this story.

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