

Can you run a contact centre in a time of crisis?

White Paper V 1.0

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Issued:	Updated to:
06.04.2020	06.04.2020



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INTRODUCTION

Contact Centres will often be affected when an incident occurs that impacts a business's customer base. I've detailed some of the actions you can take both proactively and reactively to help minimise the impact to your business, customers, shareholders and brand.

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Challenges

Running a contact centre is a challenge at the best of times, throw in a worldwide pandemic and this is going to make it a phenomenal challenge and the reality is no matter how prepared you are for any event, it's not going to be perfect. This is when you find out how effective your Business Continuity Planning has been and how your systems and tools will help or hinder you.

Not many contact centres are geared up for home working, partly due to strict call recording guidelines but for many it would be complex and therefore costly from an IT perspective due to aging systems. Let's be honest it would also be a pretty lonely job if you didn't have the office banter that comes with a call centre environment.

That said I can only see the future for Contact Centres going in one direction as a more tech savvy generation increases, the demand for sluggish channels such as calls, and emails will surely demise. Whilst I still believe there will be a future for Contact Centres (rather than pure Call Centres) I believe they will more and more need to embrace omnichannel, recognising they will need better systems and technology to be able to service customers in the way they want to do business.

Video Conference, Webchat, Twitter, Click to Chat are all likely to be an increasing way in which customers want to connect. Chatbots are starting to pop up more and more as a cost-effective solution, especially for simple transactions but I've yet to see many that do it well for less generic queries. Find one that effectively and accurately handles a decent percentage of queries then this could be a cost saver, not to mention a life saver at a time of crisis. Whatever the future for channels, the key is that they are easily accessible, joined up and provide a smooth customer experience and if they help to continue to service customers when things go wrong, then all the better.

Whether you love them or hate them, Contact Centres play a critical role in enabling customers to speak with a company both quickly and easily via digital, voice or video and at a time that works best for them. Despite in general having a bad reputation, its only when Contact Centres aren't available that people realise how valuable they really are.

Whilst many things can be completed on-line, via an app or even by post, when things go wrong it really is a person that people want to speak to.

When an unexpected event strikes resulting in increased call volumes, staff being unable to work safely in the office or a reduction in capacity your ability to cope really depends on your infrastructure, tools and scale. How quickly and effectively you can respond will depend on the robustness of your continuity planning.

1.2 Focus Areas

Let's explore some of the things you may want to consider when disaster strikes, which I've broken down into four key areas:

- Organisational Design
- Process Optimisation/Improvement
- Digital/Telephony Improvements
- Servicing / Propositional Changes

I thought becoming myself
Was improving each part
Piece by piece

But it was finding
A hidden wholeness
Seeing the fractures
As the design

02

Considerations

2.1 Organisational Design

- Put more resources into the front line. Utilise any staff undertaking non-critical activities either in the back office or anywhere within the business including offshore.
- Cross train other contact centres and route calls to them as an overflow (either internally or externally). Companies offer this as a service, you would take a hit short term to deliver training but is a good option for longer term service issues.
- Implement a triage process so that back office staff can help filter call flow or complete any admin work that enables customer facing staff to focus on speaking to customers.
- Extend your operating hours to help flatten any peaks in demand. Providing more flexibility in working patterns can help bring in resources in the evening that are unable to work during the day due to childcare. (Note this only works if you have more staff otherwise this can reduce your capacity).
- Look at your shift patterns/lunches/breaks, check if you have the most capacity at the times you are now seeing most volume or highest abandonment rates, if not change them.
- Speak to any part time staff to see if they temporarily want to increase their hours or if anyone will cancel their holiday (Consider allowing staff to carry holiday over).

2.2 Process Optimisation/Improvement

- Review authorisation thresholds to shorten calls and reduce management oversight. This is about risk and reward so ensure you understand and accept the additional risk this may present.
- Reducing call lengths enables agents to speak to more customers and reduces wait times. Adding regulatory wording, (normally said to customers on a call) to a recorded message whilst customers are waiting to get through is a great way of ensuring customers are notified of key information whilst they wait to speak to an agent.
- Review call scripts with compliance, stripping out any non-regulatory wording.
- Review your existing or create new selection options when a customer calls, enabling you to segregate calls. Direct basic / low risk calls to staff providing support and the more complex / high risk calls to your most experienced staff.
- Ensure you have effective call volume and abandonment forecasting which takes into account the current spike in volume and your revised capacity.
- Incentivise overtime, be careful staff don't burn out by monitoring overall working hours, but this is a great way especially in the short term to increase capacity.
- Add content to your website that explains what is happening, how it effects the customer, the business and what action is being taken. Advice how best the customer can contact you, get answers or provide instructions and any relevant timeframes.
- Utilise staff working from home to make outbound calls or answer queries via email or secure E-Message.

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Digital & Telephony Improvements

There are many Digital and Telephony tools in the market, having an understanding of what's available, their effectiveness and what will benefit your customer base is key.

2.3 Digital & Telephony Improvements



Technology

Use a call back solution when wait times are long, some companies have the functionality for you to hang up rather than wait on hold and you receive a call when you are at the front of the queue (much less frustrating for the customer).



Wait times

Alternatively have a system that allows customers to understand their expected wait times.



Answerphone

Implement an answerphone service to facilitate call backs (less optimal than the previous options but helps control demand).



Webchat

Promote or introduce web chat as a mechanism for routing contact away from the phone. This could be run from any location and agents can handle multiple chats at once.



Q&As

Place Q&A's on the website or email them to customers at the start of the disruption. Q&A's help but only if they are effective so make sure they are clear and fundamentally answer the question.



Messages

Add a recorded message when the call arrives reminding customers of what can be done online or in writing or any other acceptable channels. Explain that there may be long waits.



IVR

Interactive voice response or IVR, is technology that allows a person to interact with a computer by voice or keypad.

Automate your verification via an IVR.



Propositions & Services

Create products and services customers want.

2.4 Servicing & Propositional Changes

- Consider turning off part of the business, i.e. new business until you can start effectively servicing existing customers which has the added benefit of being able to use staff from new business to assist with servicing.
- Promote secure messaging to move volume away from the call centre as this provides more time to respond and can also be worked by back office or from home.
- Amend your proposition to allow other channels that would be more suited to a situation where you can't handle inbound calls and/or you have reduced capacity or staff working from home.
- Hire temps or even super temps, i.e. highly trained and experienced temps who with minimal systems/product training could hit the ground running.

Things to consider...

The key is to distribute the volume across all available channels to reduce demand on the Contact Centre. Answer any common queries proactively to avoid the need for customers to make contact at all, whilst in parallel streamline processes and increase capacity at the front line.

One of the key things to remember is don't forget to look after your staff because if you don't absence will go up pretty quickly so stay close to your people, if you know what's on their mind you can try and do something about it. At times of crises staff are often asked to be there for their customers and rightly so but someone needs to be there for them as they will have their own worries at times of uncertainty.

Buy staff food, ensure regular thank you messages from managers including senior managers, recognising their hard work, longer hours and dealing with irate customers. Get managers and Coaching staff on the phone this is great for morale and shows that you are all pulling together.

3 CASE STUDY

Having looked at what a selection of companies are doing to support their customer base during the current crises there is one client that appears to be doing the right things.

They are a wealth provider so firstly they have thought about why customers may be wanting to contact them at this current time, i.e. what's the impact to them and what might they be concerned about. They have put a message on their home page asking customers to visit their dedicated Coronavirus page for more information on what this might mean for their products and what they're doing to support their customers. They have specific Q&A's and an explanation of the current volatility in the market to try and avoid people panicking and recommends seeking Financial Advice and provides ways to access this if they are still concerned.

This firm has followed Government advice and asked all their contact centre staff to work from home, so they are not accepting inbound calls. Therefore, they have quickly made several changes to make it easier and more secure to complete any instruction with them. Information on how to contact them, submit paperless instructions and manage their product safely and securely online. All employees are providing support from home and are carrying out all customer requests, just via a different channel.

All forms for all instructions have been put on their website with guidance notes on how to complete each form, a template that can be copied and pasted into each email and a dedicated email address for any queries relating to completing forms, which is a call back request, which staff working from home will respond to. There is also an email address quoted for other queries but a warning message about not being a secure channel and not providing any personal information.

Having an escalation point is critical as there will always be times when customers can't do what they want to do, and the key is that they have a way of telling you so you can do something about it.

They have dedicated staff monitoring and responding to any queries raised via Twitter. Responding to all queries on the same day, directing people accordingly or arranging a call back for urgent cases or where they need to be escalated. This shows they are listening to their concerns and acting at pace to resolve their queries. Most people accept that things will go wrong, or things won't work perfectly especially in a time of crisis but it's how you respond to it that counts.

This is a great example of where they have acted quickly to get messages out to their clients, considering what their concerns maybe, provided a secure and accessible alternative for clients, an escalation point and continued to make outbound calls when they cant receive them inbound. Yes I saw the odd example of customers who were unhappy that they couldn't speak to someone immediately or that it took longer than normal to get a response but you can't please everyone, however, there is always plenty you can do to demonstrate you are doing everything you can.



Planning For The Worst



*PLANS ARE NOTHING;
PLANNING IS EVERYTHING.*

DWIGHT D. EISENHOWER

4 REFLECTION

So, when you are out of a disaster or firefighting mode you will have time to reflect on what went well and what didn't. The key here is to review your learnings, listen to your customers and think about what you can do to be better prepared in case something similar happens in future.

I've detailed a few of the things that you can think about doing to prepare for another event and some of these are useful just for when you experience peak periods such as Tax Year End and don't necessarily need to be considered just for disaster recovery: -

- Have an adaptable call routing system so you can segregate calls and route them to other places/agents if needed.
- Have appropriate call recording messages ready to deploy for various scenarios.
- Set up an overflow so in times of high demand you can route calls to other areas. Are there other contact centres that you can be each other's contingency for basic queries. If you have an offshore presence for processing, then use them as an overflow during peak periods.
- Consider which processes can be completed online or via a form and get them on your website, have clear help guides so that if the contact centre is offline your business isn't.
- Look at secure e-messaging as a tool if you don't have it, this is a quick, easy and secure way for customers to contact you which you can more easily act upon and respond to from anywhere. If you have this functionality already then review your take up rate and if its low then promote it and even consider incentivising customers to activate their account.
- Consider webchat functionality, it can easily be switched on and off but another great way for customers to contact you, this sits nicely in an outbound team and increases their efficiency, its also a great sales tool to capture people browsing your website.
- Engage with companies that maybe able to help you during a crisis, i.e. temp agencies, contact centres, telephony system enhancements such as call back functionality. Find out what's available do any due diligence in advance to speed up the deployment when its needed.
- Agree revised scripts with compliance that shorten call lengths and can be deployed at times of crisis.

5 SUMMARY

I've only listed a few suggestions, not all of these will be suitable for every contact centre and I'm sure many of you will have additional ideas that will be more relevant for your business. However, the key here is start now, think about "what if" and not just from a tick box / continuity plan perspective because you must have one. Really think about if the worst happens then what are the levers you would want to be able to pull and what can you do now, so that the levers are easier to pull when you need them.

There is real opportunity to enhance your brand at a time of major disruption or when things go wrong. Companies that act quickly, communicate with customers proactively, offering viable solutions to enable them to continue to engage with you, will come off best. Its also critical that you show empathy and flexibility, understanding that customers maybe going through a difficult time. This is a good time to move away from "the computer says no" and flex your processes according to the situation.

Whilst it's not always possible to run a call centre in a crises in the traditional sense of receiving inbound calls, there is so much you can do to support your customers when things happen. If you do it well, customers will remember how you supported them during a time of major disruption to their lives and more importantly they will remember how you made them feel if you get it wrong!

If you need help with streamlining your business, finding the best way to service your clients via multiple channels, optimising your processes or reviewing your operating model then please get in touch with Simplify Consulting, it's what we do.

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