The New Knowledge Management Required for Customer Service in the COVID Era

"Due to overwhelming demand for service, we are not able to take your call."

"Our wait times for customer service may be longer than usual due to COVID-19."

These caveats are typical of what you get these days on business websites and IVRs, even as the pandemic shows signs of plateauing.

COVID-19 has triggered a tsunami of demand for customer service. A flood of questions about payment deferrals, paycheck protection programs, COVID-19 infection, stay-at-home directives, shipment status, and more, are overwhelming contact centers, which are struggling to keep up. For example, I called a retailer's customer service , and was pushed to voicemail. I left a message, but never heard back. I then sent an email to them. Same result! No wonder customers are getting frustrated with many switching to competitors, something businesses can ill-afford at this time of economic uncertainty.

FAQs and legacy "knowledge management" don't cut it anymore

COVID-19 questions come in all "shapes and sizes". They fall into three main types: Informational, transactional, and situational. Here are some examples.

INFORMATIONAL QUERY

‣ Is the stimulus check eligibility based on my income in 2019 or 2018?

‣ Is there a size restriction for my business to qualify for PPP (Payroll Protection Program)?

TRANSACTIONAL QUERY

- How do I apply for mortgage refinancing and get approved online without having to visit a branch?

- How do I change the beneficiary to a trust in my account?

SITUATIONAL QUERY

These are queries that entail problem resolution, purchase advice, etc.

- Should I refinance my home loan, given my profile, financial situation, and the new income tax laws on deducting mortgage interest?

- I live in XX county in YY state. I had some COVID symptoms and have been self-isolating for two weeks. The symptoms are still there. What should I do next?

Many websites have FAQs or basic keyword search that put the burden on the consumer to read reams of documents or process hundreds of search results to find answers for themselves. Others have deployed chatbots that can "meet and greet" but get stumped even at the slightest hint of complexity in the customer query. The result? More angry calls to add to the tsunami.

Moreover, customer service agents have been dislocated due to stay-at-home orders and offshore contact center shutdowns. These lockdowns, coupled with the fear of infection, have led to agent absenteeism, forcing many companies to take an all hands on deck approach to meet the demand for service, pulling employees from other departments as well as gig agents to pick up the slack. And these employees, real and virtual, are not as familiar with company policies, processes, and service knowhow. The result? More customer frustration and defection.

COVID calls for a new kind of KM

To be able to handle the range of queries in the pandemic era and beyond, businesses need a new kind of KM, not FAQs, basic keyword search, clueless chatbots, and document repositories. The new KM needs to be able to do the following.

- Guide the search

- Guide the conversation

- Centralize and publish

- Integrate and embed

1. Guide the search

While plain keyword search has been improving to some degree, it puts the onus on the knowledge consumer to process hundreds of "hits" to find literal matches, which may or may not answer the question. Moreover, knowledge authors need to anticipate how a user might phrase the question (recently, Machine Learning (ML) has helped modern KM systems better understand user intent). More complex searches may call for a conversation with the customer to home in on the search intent and serve up the answer. Infused with AI reasoning, KM can help guide such searches.

2. Guide the conversation

Complex questions require a dialog to be carried out, whether it is with a self-service system or with a human agent or sales rep or a frontline healthcare worker. The best domain experts know what question to ask and what step to take next. Also, government regulations dictate conversations and actions for compliance.

This conversational expertise and regulatory steps can be captured into a next-gen KM system in the form of rules and AI reasoning, and can be served to the customer directly through self-service systems (automation) or through agents in a human-assisted scenario (augmentation). Unlike brittle scripts and decision trees, reasoning enables adaptive conversations that avoid cul-de-sacs and dead ends in the dialog.

3. Centralize and publish "everywhere"

One of the challenges of COVID times has been the rapid change of information, whether regarding the disease, government relief programs, stay-at-home directives, or business policies. Businesses are struggling to publish this information to employees and consumers in a quick and consistent way. The answer lies in an omnichannel KM system with a single-sourced content publishing capability to disseminate information to customer service channels, tailored to those touchpoints.

4. Integrate with or embed in systems of record

Customer-facing employees often use systems of record such as CRM to get a transactional view of the customer—who they are, what products they have bought, when they bought them. These tools lack modern KM capabilities. Many enterprises have, therefore, embedded next-gen knowledge capabilities into these systems or added an engagement layer to them to bring together context from multiple systems of record to inform knowledge search and guidance. For this bimodal model to work, the KM system needs to have an open architecture for easy embedding or integration with systems of record.

The new KM at work

Here are some examples from our blue-chip clientele.

A major tax prep services organization helps taxpayers at scale with a chatbot-fronted, omnichannel digital service and sales process, including human-assisted chat (text and video) and cobrowse, all connected for context and journey continuity. In a way, this company safe-guarded itself against coronavirus more than 18 months ago!

A large insurance provider handled a 700% increase in customer service demand, while improving FCR (First-Contact Resolution) by 10% amid the COVID-19 crisis.

A multinational bank has been able to empower any employee to handle any call, the holy grail for any contact center, while reducing training needs by 50% with conversational guidance, powered by our AI knowledge solution. The bank vaulted to #1 from #3 in NPS (Net Promoter Score) at the same time!

A leading telco improved FCR by 37% and NPS by 30 points, while speeding up agent time-to-competency by 50% across 10,000 agents and even 600 retail stores.

Final word

We all know the saying that in every crisis lies a great opportunity. COVID-19 has presented an opportunity to elevate customer service with next-gen KM and leave competitors in the dust. Why not get going now?

About eGain

eGain customer engagement platform automates digital-first, omnichannel experiences across all touch points. Powered by AI, machine learning, knowledge and analytics, our top-rated software optimizes customer journeys with virtual assistance, messaging hub and desktop to serve customers, reduce cost and improve compliance. To find out more about eGain, visit https://www.egain.com.