

Looking for Customer Feedback in All the Right Places

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Successful Companies Thrive on Customer Feedback and Insight

Customer feedback is oxygen to contact center and voice of the customer (VOC) leaders and managers. Companies use customer inputs for everything from driving their business strategies to fixing a specific customer's problem (see Table 1). Without feedback, the contact center operates in a vacuum, lacking valuable insights and context about what delights customers, what leaves them mollified, indifferent, or unpersuaded, and what ignites their ire.

Contact center and VOC leaders are on a permanent quest for customer feedback, typically from email and phone surveys. But in an age of empowered consumers, traditional sources may

be inadequate and seem outdated. Today's leaders not only need to gather effective, quantitative inputs by asking customers for feedback, but also must gain additional insights by collaborating internally with other business functions and by using technology to mine and listen to information sources throughout the organization.¹

Many customers today possess better technology than customer service staff, who often rely on creaky, outdated CRM systems. To be effective, contact centers must meet the customer's digital power with their own. How? By finding new sources, means, technologies, and techniques to seek out *and listen to implicit customer feedback in addition to soliciting explicit survey data*. This corporate need pushes contact center leaders to locate customer information that may already exist within pockets of the enterprise – from diverse sources such as marketing, sales, field service, operations, IT, and customer experience teams. Even then, political and turf barriers may prevent internal sharing of information, so contact

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center and VOC managers must be prepared to collaborate and draw upon organizational change management techniques to create a new culture of sharing customer feedback across organizational boundaries.⁴

Three overriding factors drive the need for new and expanded approaches to gathering and analyzing customer feedback:

- **Traditional techniques garner low response rates.** Most feedback is gathered via surveys at the point of sale, in a mobile app, on websites, after a phone call or online chat, or post-sale by telephone or email. However, the efficacy of these efforts is debatable. For example, the American Customer Satisfaction Index response rates for paper-based surveys are about 10% and the response rates for e-surveys (web, mobile device, and email) average between 5% and 15%.⁵ Although firms can improve participation with incentives, by shortening the survey, and by personalizing the request, traditional techniques still have limitations. More problematic, “customers are most likely to offer feedback when they have either a really bad experience or a great one — and they almost never say a word when their experience falls somewhere in the middle.”⁶
- **Conventional approaches are losing steam.** Many customers shrug off survey requests or become annoyed because they are bombarded and fatigued by surveys each time they engage with a company via any channel. The perceived time required to complete a survey is also a big deterrent. For example, SurveyMonkey analyzed response rates across 100,000 survey participants to measure how

Table 1
The Value of Customer Feedback

- Offers a direct, measurable way to determine customer satisfaction
- Provides actionable insights for future customer experiences
- Helps to improve a product or service
- Gives insights about what customers like and dislike
- May help with customer retention
- Delivers tangible data for making better business decisions
- Helps to identify customer advocates or “promoters”
- Shows customers that their opinions matter
- Helps to identify market trends
- May provide insights about competitors and partners

Sources: CustomerThink¹ and Client Heartbeat²

the number of questions and pages impacts drop-off rates.⁷ Not surprisingly, the more questions per survey, the higher the respondent drop-off rate. The sharpest increase in drop-off occurred with each additional question up to fifteen questions.⁸ In general, response rates to paper, internet, and telephone surveys have all declined over the past ten years.⁹

- **Too many sources of customer feedback remain largely untapped.** Customers and prospects frequently engage with a firm without the contact center’s involvement or without the information sufficiently captured. For example, in B2B companies, detailed notes about customers may be recorded by sales but not shared across



the business. In B2C firms, the knottiest of customer issues that cannot easily be solved through self-service or in-store interactions typically land with the contact center but may not be well-documented. In both scenarios, these interactions are opportunities for improving customer satisfaction or gaining important feedback – if the incidents were captured, mined, and shared throughout the firm. *It's not that companies are unable to collect this valuable information – it's that firms rarely use it beyond "your call may be recorded for quality and training purposes." Or if they do record customer feedback in specific departments, no one thinks about sharing it with other groups.*

As traditional techniques for gathering customer feedback decline, leveraging customer feedback by listening to internal sources creates a win/win/win situation: customers win, other groups within the enterprise win, and the contact center wins.

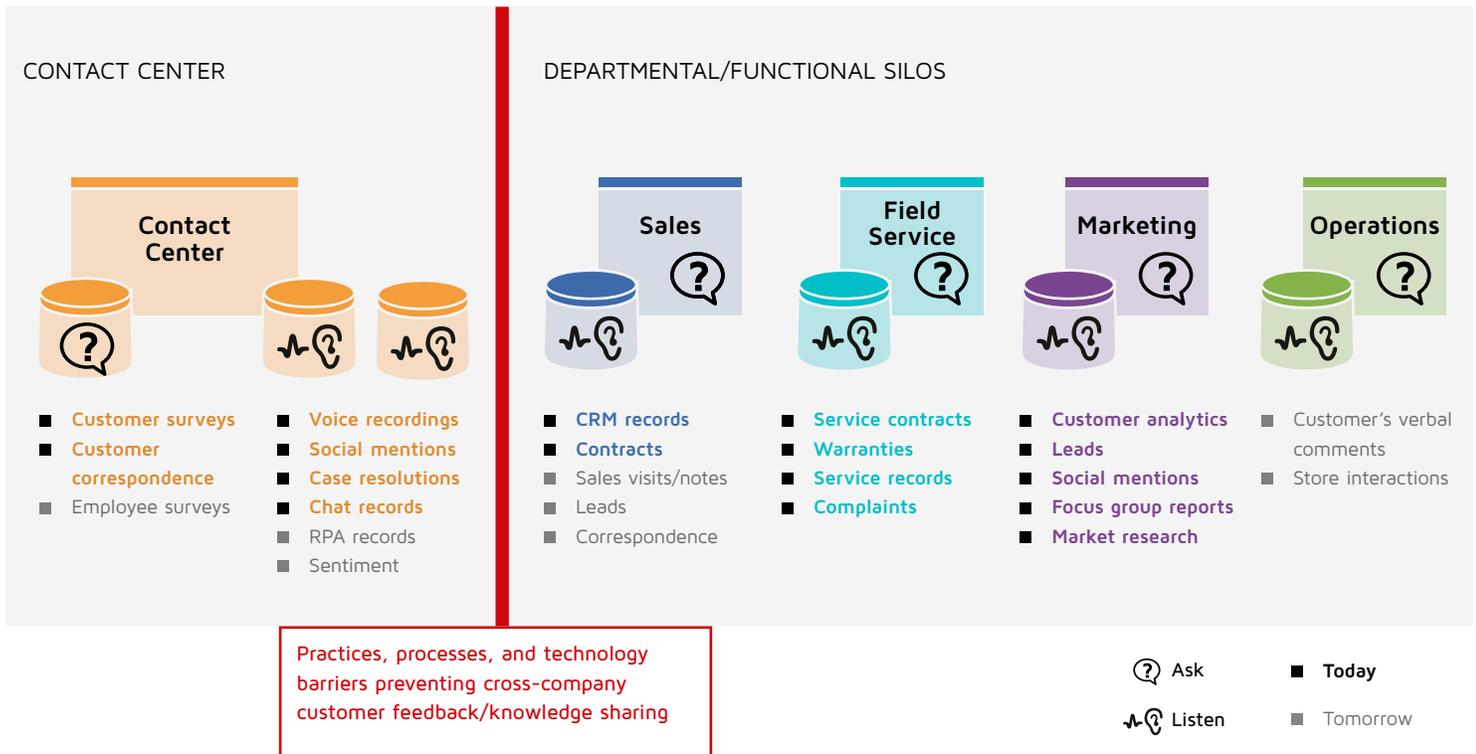
“Ask + Listen” Are Key Skills for Contact Center and VOC Leaders

To gain a 360-degree view of customers and maximize all the information already on hand, contact center and VOC leaders must adopt an “ask + listen” mindset (see Figure 1). Simply “asking” or, alternatively, simply “listening” are by themselves not sufficient; it's the combination of “ask + listen” that develops the greatest understanding of each customer. And, as customer data amasses in more information stores, the organization will miss out

on new opportunities unless it actively listens to new sources.

- **“Asking” skills.** Asking is most comfortable for contact center and VOC leaders because traditional quantitative research techniques – digital and telephone surveys – are familiar and well understood. Most companies already have these activities in place and well honed. The “ask” element of VOC is oxygen to the contact center because it provides insights on quantity, connection, control, coachability, and training.
- **“Listening” skills.** Perceptive insight happens when leaders “listen” to all the relevant information the company already has about customers. “Listening” allows executives to test and validate hunches, surface unknown insights, and identify the effort that customers are forced to make when repeatedly asked for the same data multiple times by siloed departments. “Listening” skills must be developed over time because they are unfamiliar to most contact center and VOC leaders, and new systems (business processes and automation) must often be integrated so that existing information can be routinely gathered and shared across the firm. *“Listening” not only involves digitally sourcing other customer feedback stores within the organization, but also requires greater interpersonal skills and collaboration among executives to create changes among fiefdoms.* “Listening” is also a two-way street; executives in other parts of the organization may want to “listen” to information from the contact center, but just don't know how.

Figure 1
An “Ask + Listen” Customer Feedback Map



The real payback comes when the organization combines both “ask” and “listen” to create an “ask + listen” paradigm for collecting and understanding customer feedback.

Step 1: Extend Traditional “Ask” Approaches to New Areas

Most companies confine their “ask” to traditional survey techniques. While this may provide insights, the value is increasingly diminishing as 1) survey response rates decline, 2) the all-important mainstream middle opts out, and 3)

the insights from short questionnaires are too limiting. Fortunately, companies can gain deeper and different insights by extending their “ask” to the right customers. Companies should look to innovative techniques in speech analytics and customer metadata for triggers. Organizations should also limit survey triggers to targeted samples based on specific types of interactions or the conversation topic, not the shotgun approach that leads to limited results.

Contact center and other executives can also gain significant insights by surveying and interviewing employees who frequently engage with customers.



The advantages of “asking” front-line staff for feedback about customers include the low cost to gather information, the reliability, loyalty, and willingness of employees to share information, and the opportunity to create a culture of everyone listening to customers. Plus, comparing and contrasting customer feedback with employee feedback can lead to completely new insights about customer service and experiences across the board and for specific customers. Yet, all too often, valuable internal knowledge and experience is overlooked.¹⁰

Step 2: Add “Listen” Skills to Your Management and Technology Repertoire

Becoming a “listening” organization can easily be a competitive differentiator because many companies are not yet aware of – or focused on – collecting and listening to information that’s already on hand within the organization. Contact center and VOC leaders must start asking if their firms are “listening” organizations – with the proof being: 1) if processes for listening have been formalized; 2) if employees are trained to listen; 3) if technologies for mining and listening to new information are deployed; and 4) if integration and/or processes are in place to share information across departmental boundaries.

Mortgage loan approval illustrates how employees and technology can “listen” for additional customer insights. Typically, this process is routinely automated using commercial or custom software. But what if financial services firms paid closer attention to collecting more data

points than simply the customer’s interest rate and amortization? In addition to routine review and approval, firms could use dynamic case management to automate the process, handle and track exceptions, and monitor key performance indicators (KPIs) that measure the ease and speed of the approval process for each customer.¹¹ This type of business process management (BPM) software would allow financial services companies to “listen” to or monitor the quality of service each customer receives without (or in addition to) asking survey questions.¹² “Listening” could result in assessing the quality of the online payment system and the bank’s service when answering questions or resolving problems arising over the life of the mortgage.”¹³

“Listening” also involves collecting feedback gathered through recorded interactions in the contact center or elsewhere in the organization. Companies routinely include the phrase “this call may be monitored and used for quality and training purposes...” as part of voice response calls. But random listening is too tedious, inefficient, and time-consuming – plus, important feedback could easily be missed. Instead, more companies now gain employee training and quality insights by filtering voice recordings for attributes such as price, anger, other sentiment, etc. Voice analytics is often deployed as a component within workforce optimization software that manages these types of recordings.

Similarly, companies ignore social media at their peril. Instead of letting a potential firestorm ignited by irate customers go unknown or unaddressed, more companies now use specialized software or

contact center platforms to monitor threads on Facebook, Twitter, Yammer, YouTube, Instagram, blog sites, and other social media. The purpose of monitoring social commentary is twofold: 1) so companies can quickly address incorrect or inflammatory comments in the social sphere, and 2) so the contact center can reach out to upset individuals – particularly customers – to solve their problem, listen to their complaint, or proactively help them in some way. But this could be expanded to also include customer feedback for product development or quality initiatives. Also, this isn't just for irate customers – maybe social media could put the firm in touch with powerful advocates who will gladly promote the products or services. No matter how the social program is envisioned, companies are tackling it across the spectrum, from manual listening and responses to automated listening and responses.¹⁴

Step 3: Combine “Ask” and “Listen” to = “Ask + Listen” Approaches

Clearly, the most effective strategy for gathering and acting upon customer feedback is not “ask vs. listen” but rather the combination of “ask + listen.” The organization will immediately face a technology decision, however, because the solutions for “ask + listen” can be custom developed, obtained from specialist vendors that offer a specific type of solution (e.g., enterprise feedback management, speech analytics), or obtained from mainstream vendors that provide an integrated contact center suite, known as workforce optimization software (WFO). In addition, the trend is toward consolidation of specialty software products into ever expanding, ever evolving suites, so some suites have many or several software modules that have been integrated to varying degrees while others have fewer components. Table 2 provides insights into the technologies available to contact center leaders and other customer experience managers.

Table 2
Customer Feedback Technologies for “Ask,” “Listen,” or “Ask + Listen”

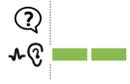
TECHNOLOGY	DESCRIPTION	ASK + LISTEN	CONTACT CENTER	OTHER FUNCTIONS
Agent and manager portal	WFO component for tracking agent/team progress, and work in process		Serves as an administrative tool essential for managing work within the contact center	
Application integration	Custom developed or out-of-the-box software adaptors		Makes it possible for the contact center to access ERP and CRM customer records and/or integrate contact center software and CRM with eLearning	Used by other functions to integrate CRM, ERP or other departmental applications with contact center WFO software or case management tools
CRM suite	Software for managing customer records; may also have content and BPM functionality		Used by some contact centers; could be a valuable source of untapped customer feedback for all contact centers	Used by sales, marketing, and field service to track sales and service leads, contacts, and visits



Table 2 - Continued from previous page
Customer Feedback Technologies for “Ask,” “Listen,” or “Ask + Listen”

TECHNOLOGY	DESCRIPTION	ASK + LISTEN	CONTACT CENTER	OTHER FUNCTIONS
eLearning and coaching	Software for developing courseware and training employees; can be integrated with or part of the WFO system		Used for training and coaching contact center reps	Can be extended to other departments
ERP suite	Software for managing resource planning, financial records, service records, and other back office information		Could be a valuable source of untapped customer feedback for the contact center	Used by service to manage warranties, contracts, parts, etc.
Journey-mapping software	WFO component or standalone tool		Used to manage and optimize customer interactions across touchpoints, particularly in multichannel and omnichannel processes	Could be extended to sales, field service, and operations
Knowledge management system	Contact center software for managing, storing, and mining prior answers to customer requests in support of new inquiries		Deployed as core software in contact centers to catalog prior answers and resolutions and learn from them before or during the next customer request	Could be extended to other departments
Predictive analytics software	WFO component		Used to determine next best action within the contact center	
Quality monitoring	WFO component		Used to measure quality and training needs in contact center	Could be reported to other departments
Queuing and routing software	WFO component or custom software		Used to route customer requests within the organization; could be monitored for exceptions and problem areas	
Sentiment analytics software	WFO component or separate software tool		Used to analyze custom sentiment in text, video, voice, facial recognition, etc.	
Social analytics software	WFO component, custom software, or separate software tool		Used to monitor social threads and sites for words, phrases, sentiment	Could be used by sales, marketing, and field service
Speech analytics software	WFO component		Used to analyze recorded customer calls and identify related calls; can be real-time	Could be used by field service to record and analyze sounds from machine malfunctions
Survey tools	WFO component		Used for telephone, email, web, and physical mail surveys resulting in quantitative and qualitative data	Used extensively for telephone, email, web, and physical mail surveys in marketing; could also be used in sales and service
WFO suite	A suite of technologies that enables call center workforce, performance, and quality management using analytics, coaching, journey mapping, scheduling algorithms, and surveying		Deployed as core software in contact centers; suites have been assembled largely through acquisitions, and functionality varies widely from vendor to vendor	Increasingly used in marketing, sales, service, and operations to support cross-functional customer service processes and manage the customer journey



Conclusion

Envisioning and building an “ask + listen” culture and technology platform is easier said than done because creating a strategy requires contact center and VOC leaders to take the following steps:

- Identify the current “ask” and “listen” styles used in the organization, and determine known problems or shortcomings.
- Identify what kind of new or additional customer feedback (“ask” or “listen” or both) is possible (what are the unknown unknowns?) and which of the missing information would be most beneficial to the organization.
- Consider non-traditional, alternative sources for customer feedback such as from employees, partners, channels, industry associations, etc., plus in-person techniques such as observation and focus groups.
- Identify the existing technology in place for the company’s “asking” and “listening” initiatives – in both the contact center and other departments.
- Assess what information stores that already exist elsewhere within the firm would empower the contact center (and vice versa: identify information in the contact center that would help other parts of the organization).
- Identify if special software is required for new information sources (for example, voice, social media, video, etc.).

- Determine what type of software solutions and integration are required to support the ideal future state, such as whether an integrated software suite is needed for the “ask” and “listen” styles or whether specialized software is preferred.
- Consider any organizational issues, barriers, or boundaries that would thwart the sharing of information across departments or functional groups.

Taken in totality, this information will provide excellent inputs for an “ask + listen” strategy that finds customer feedback in all the right places, and will provide the needed information for developing a road map.

Endnotes

- 1 For insights about customer care center technologies, see “Is Your Organization Ready to Take the Leap Towards Customer Care?” by Digital Clarity Group, <http://www.digitalclaritygroup.com/is-your-organization-ready-to-take-the-leap-towards-customer-care/>
- 2 “5 Reasons Why Customer Feedback Matters More Now Than Ever,” CustomerThink, <http://customerthink.com/5-reasons-why-customer-feedback-matters-more-than-ever/>
- 3 “Stop Ignoring Customers: Are You Making These Costly Mistakes?” Client Heartbeat, <http://blog.clientheartbeat.com/customer-feedback-mistakes/>
- 4 “Organizational Change Management: An (Emerging) Core Competency for Customer Experience Management,” by Digital Clarity Group, <http://www.digitalclaritygroup.com/change-management-competency/>
- 5 “Customer Satisfaction Survey Response Rates – Update,” CustomerThink, Feb. 3, 2015, <http://customerthink.com/customer-satisfaction-survey-response-rates-update/>
- 6 “Are You Listening to Your Most Important Customers?” Harvard Business Review, <https://hbr.org/2013/04/are-you-listening-to-your-most>
- 7 The team looked at 2,000 random surveys with one question, 2,000 with two questions, 2,000 with three questions, etc. up to 2,000 surveys with 50 questions.
- 8 “Does Adding One More Question Impact Survey Completion Rate?” SurveyMonkey, https://www.surveymonkey.com/blog/2010/12/08/survey_questions_and_completion_rates/
- 9 See endnote 5.
- 10 “How to Get Feedback from Your Customers,” Business Know-How, <http://www.businessknowhow.com/marketing/customer-feedback.htm>
- 11 “Tackle Complex Processes With Dynamic BPM Suites and Business-Ready Apps,” Digital Clarity Group, <http://www.digitalclaritygroup.com/tackle-complex-processes-bpm/>
- 12 “Business Process Management: An Emerging Core Competency for Customer Experience Management,” Digital Clarity Group, <http://www.digitalclaritygroup.com/business-process-management-an-emerging-core-competency-for-customer-experience-management/>
- 13 “Running the Business through Your Customer’s Eyes,” Bain & Company, <http://www.bain.com/publications/articles/running-the-business-through-your-customers-eyes.aspx>
- 14 “Why Businesses Are Using Social Media To Listen To Their Customers,” Forbes, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/rogertrapp/2016/11/29/why-businesses-are-using-social-media-to-listen-to-their-customers/#218cc60657c2>

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