Driving Contact Center Productivity Amidst Challenging Economic Times

Contact center solutions for public agencies

Introduction

The current economic climate is putting immense pressure on public agencies tasked with providing critical assistance to a burgeoning number of citizens. Government agency contact centers with unparalleled call volumes are seeking new solutions to serve constituents. In this economy, it's not practical for these organizations to invest in costly infrastructure overhauls.

In this paper we'll discuss alternative means for achieving productivity gains across the contact center, without the need to replace existing hardware. This paper will address commonly held misconceptions that hold agencies back from realizing new efficiencies, and explore Verizon Business's holistic, analytical approach to solving tough contact center challenges. By assessing and enhancing an agency's call centers, Verizon Business can often help reduce or eliminate the need for staff augmentation. Through real-world case studies, we'll illustrate the steps that agencies across the country are employing to serve constituents quickly and cost effectively.

Challenges in wake of economic downturn

Human/economic impact

Unemployment is at its highest in 25 years, causing unprecedented demand for government assistance. In April 2009, the U.S. Department of Labor announced that an estimated 5.1 million Americans have lost their jobs since the recession began last year.

To stay afloat, they need fast access to an array of benefits, including unemployment coverage, job training, COBRA insurance, and more. Yet at this traumatic time, the ability to access necessary benefits may be severely hampered. People who file unemployment claims may wait weeks or even months to receive much needed benefits. Moreover, the sheer volume of claims can make it extremely difficult for agencies to spend time rooting out falsified claims. Overloaded agencies are seeking more efficient ways to quickly deliver sorely needed financial support.

Public agency impacts

A large volume of calls can cripple any agency, slowing the flow of information—and the delivery of critical assistance. When an agency's contact center infrastructure lacks the ability to scale appropriately, callers experience jammed phone lines and extremely long hold times. Residents without Internet access must resort to waiting in these phone queues or standing in line at an agency office. Worse, government agencies are being strained due to budget cuts, which can result in further degradation of service levels.

As a result, contact center staff members may be stressed out and bombarded by demands from angry, distressed constituents all day long. Moreover, if an agencies' web infrastructure is overloaded and difficult to navigate, even more constituents request live phone support. This poor performance can cause agencies negative press and increasing legislative pressure.

Yet ironically, many agency contact centers have been found to be running at below peak performance. They simply lack visibility into why the system isn't supporting their needs.

Common contact center misconceptions

Often contact centers feel they are placed in an untenable situation. They're under immense pressure to lower wait times and eliminate dropped calls, yet they lack the capital funds to invest in new contact center infrastructure. Moreover, in these extreme economic conditions, they don't have the luxury of time to shut systems down to fix them.

Fortunately, there is no need to do either. Contact centers needn't "rip and replace" existing technology to realize productivity gains nor do they need to shut their systems down to improve performance. In fact, adding new hardware isn't necessarily going to fix the problems at hand. If they don't first identify the root cause of the problems, adding new hardware will just be a "band aid" fix.

Another common misconception is that agencies must add new staff to manage increased call volumes. Doing so might only serve to be a stopgap measure if the underlying causes of system overload aren't addressed. Augmenting staff may seem like the logical solution. After all, high unemployment rates result in huge numbers of new calls. Yet there are numerous inventive ways to manage these calls efficiently without overburdening live agents.

A better approach

Verizon Business has long helped state and federal agencies to improve contact center performance without a major overhaul of existing operations. The company's distinctive consultative approach to analyzing and resolving contact center challenges has proven successful at rooting out bottlenecks and other obstacles to enhancing contact center efficiency.

Root cause analysis

To truly move the productivity needle at public agencies, it's critical to uncover the root cause of problems. For example, seemingly minor kinks in contact center systems can cause processes to go awry. Even one unclear menu prompt may compel callers to opt out of an automated system and request live assistance. Since the key to reducing agent overload is automating calls, such problems can have a huge impact on contact center performance.

Organizations need to capitalize on the efficiency of automation techniques to help reduce the number of routine requests handled by live agents and streamline call times. The more that can be accomplished without engaging an agent, the more requests the agency can process and the more constituents it can serve. To that end, Verizon Business serves in a consultative role, conducting an in-depth analysis of agencies to uncover issues such as:

- Where are calls coming from?
- What are the most frequent types of inquiries received?
- Are speech prompts set up properly?
- Is the system routing calls to the appropriately skilled agent?
- Are workloads being balanced between agents properly?
- Are existing processes/workflows working appropriately?
- How are the calls distributed over business hours?
- How many call attempts occur outside of normal business hours?

Before making any recommendations, Verizon Business utilizes tools that reveal the actual workflows and behaviors occurring across call center interactions. For example, the company gathers near real-time operational data to identify hold times, queue depths, agent availability, and associated system performance. This provides insight into the factors that may be impeding productivity.

This investigative process also involves gleaning knowledge from agents as they field inquiries, analyzing call flow designs to determine how callers are expected to navigate existing menus, listening to actual recordings of calls to identify frustrations voiced by callers, and reviewing call detail records to analyze how callers are actually navigating through menu options. There are usually opportunities to streamline these interactions to improve the caller experience.

The team further employs call recording system audio files to identify the best opportunities for agent training, development, and performance management. Additionally, the consultants learn about post-call wrap-up activities to identify additional opportunities for efficiency gains. By analyzing this combination of factors, Verizon Business is able to assess the best path forward to solve the agency's call center challenges.

Further, for those highly complex tasks requiring a live conversation, Verizon Business consultants identify the best use of resources based on varying agent skill sets. Then they're able to employ intelligent software to route specific calls to agents with a matching skill set. This way if a constituent has a specialized need (such as assistance in another language or help tracking down a missing benefit check) they're directed to the person best suited to help them. This helps agencies reduce per-call handling times and achieve the goal of one-call resolution. This benefits callers and contact center agents alike, eliminating the frustration of multiple transfers of a single call, increasing agent productivity, and serving more callers.

A holistic approach to improving performance

Preparing agencies to tackle inordinate call volumes requires a keen understanding of the contact center and network environment. Verizon Business understands the multiple facets driving the communication network and how to implement a strategy to improve performance and reliability, without compromising other areas of the organization.

Transforming contact center performance means understanding both technological and human elements of the contact center. This involves addressing call center challenges from four primary focal points: customer experience, agent experience, operational performance, and technological infrastructure. To that end, Verizon provides the tools and visibility to manage resources effectively. For example, its Quality Management Consulting team provides recommendations and implementation plans for centers facing excessive abandonment rates, high labor costs, and other quality issues. This may involve solutions such as redesigning contact queues, creating effective training programs, or building staffing forecasts and scheduling with Workforce Management software solutions.

Additionally, its Workforce Development team focuses on the human side of the operation, tackling issues such as skills training and high attrition rates. Rounding this out is the Technology Assessment Consulting team, which helps agencies overcome excessive call wait times and service complaints. The team exposes and resolves technological issues such as information and telecommunication system disconnects. Consultants analyze computer telephony integration (CTI), integrated voice response (IVR), speech recognition, automated call distribution (ACD), predictive dialers, and customer relationship management (CRM) system interfaces to verify that all system components are interacting together as smoothly as possible.

For example, a seemingly innocuous change in the contact center could add cost and complexity to the IT infrastructure. Knowing which contact center issues overlap with other areas of the business is critical to streamlining processes while improving efficiencies. To that end, Verizon Business doesn't simply look at the agency from a contact center standpoint. Its consultants bring a comprehensive approach that achieves contact center goals without impeding activities elsewhere in the organization.

More importantly, taking this holistic approach empowers agencies to build on the contact center for more unified communications. This means extending the caller experience beyond the contact center walls. For example, caller queries often necessitate new actions to be performed "behind the scenes" within other areas of the agency. Connecting these processes and associated knowledge sets enables agencies to deliver the best possible service.

Stellar professional services team

As one of the leaders in the network hosted IVR market, Verizon Business is adept at helping agencies solve tough challenges, without requiring large capital expenditures. Verizon's world-class integration and customization teams are adept at building upon existing infrastructures with new capabilities—enabling agencies to improve call center operations.

Its consultants leverage this experience to bring fresh ideas and solutions for resolving today's complex contact center issues. It is these in-depth insights and dedication to enhancing performance that earned Verizon Business the Frost & Sullivan Market Leadership Awards in 2007 and 2009 for Hosted IVR Contact Center Services and 2007 Market Leadership Award for North American Hosted Contact Center Services.

Technology independent approach

As a solution provider offering a choice of network-based, premises-based, and hybrid solutions, Verizon Business has access to a wealth of options to solve unique agency challenges. This vendor independent approach frees Verizon to provide innovative options that meet the specific needs of each agency. Its numerous vendor alliances put Verizon Business in a position to deliver a broad spectrum of capabilities while making the most of its customers' existing investments. And as a one-stop shop, Verizon Business has a wide pool of experts to draw upon for improving contact center and network efficiency.

Security expertise

As unemployment rates have risen, agencies may see the number of fraudulent claims and identity thefts increase sharply. Combating these problems requires a two-fold solution: securing the data that passes through the network and verifying the identity of benefit applicants.

Positioned in the Leaders Quadrant in Gartner's April 2009 Magic Quadrant for Managed Security Service Providers (MSSPs), North America, based on its ability to execute and completeness of vision, Verizon Business delivers both network security and identity solutions. Its security solutions go beyond the network layer and span the entire information technology stack, including the network, data, applications, and users. These products and services include email and web content filtering, data loss prevention, and identity and access management solutions.

Adding these critical layers of security can increase the opportunities for automation. For example, the ability to automate the process of authenticating benefit applicants' identity without being connected to a live agent can free-up operators for more complex calls.

Scalability

Agencies need the flexibility to not just handle huge traffic spikes but adapt when this volume tapers off. If agencies simply invest in costly new hardware to address this problem, they must add enough capacity to handle their highest volumes, and this added capacity will be underutilized during non-peak call periods. Alternatively, Verizon Business offers network-based solutions that are nimble enough to scale up and down based on agency needs with flexible pricing that includes usage-based options, so there's no need to invest in new infrastructure that will languish when call volumes begin to subside. This eliminates the need for large capital expenditures to deal with spikes occurring today.

For specific customer requirements, Verizon Business can also augment agency staff and facilities. Through agreements with top-notch outsourcers, Verizon Business can give agencies the flexibility to scale resources up or down at will. The company also provides call center outsourcing options to agencies that don't have the physical infrastructure or facilities to house additional staff during peak demand periods.

User Stories

Example #1: Federal agency offering complex services

When a federal agency began offering new benefits in 2004, it faced surges in call volumes to its outsourcing contact centers. With more than 70 contact centers nationwide, each with its own infrastructure and CRM system, it was extremely difficult to distribute agent workloads properly. Callers complained of long wait times and lengthy discussions with agents before they could obtain benefits. The agency tried to implement alternative call routing plans but since everything was performed manually, they weren't able to adapt fast enough to keep up with the ever-changing call volumes.

By creating a virtual contact center, Verizon Business provided one central point of contact for incoming calls, while still enabling the individual centers to operate independently with their existing technology. Verizon Business then implemented intelligent call routing to automatically direct calls to the most qualified agent, regardless of location, based on real-time call volumes and available agent skill sets.

The agency chose the Verizon Business network-based IVR solution so that it could handle surges in traffic without having to add costly port capacity. By simply integrating its IP network solution with the outsourcers' switches, Verizon Business helped the agency reduce hold times and manage traffic spikes without investing in expensive new hardware. The agency has reduced average speed-to-answer (ASA) and average hold times (AHT) while fielding millions of calls per month. Verizon Business also employed computer telephony integration, helping to shorten the front end of each call.

Example #2: Employment development agency

In the wake of the economic downturn, a large employment development agency began receiving vast numbers of new queries. This quickly became a problem. Soon they were deflecting a large number of calls each day due to lack of contact center capacity. The agency didn't have enough live agents to answer the phone, putting a burden on its existing staff. After waiting a long time on hold or making repeated calls to initiate a claim, many callers were frustrated, and responding agents were understandably under increased strain. With this tremendous workload, there was also little time to tackle the growing number of fraudulent claims.

Verizon Business discovered the primary source of the problem was the agency's inability to balance calls across multiple locations. Because each location operated as its own entity, the agency had no way to shift workloads appropriately based on call volumes or skill sets. It also lacked real-time reporting capabilities to staff appropriately for current workloads.

By enabling multiple agency locations to operate as one virtual enterprise, Verizon Business brought significant productivity benefits. Today, the agency can automatically route calls to available agents, regardless of their location. By receiving real-time reports about the number of callers in queue, the number of abandoned or dropped calls, and length of time to complete particular transactions, they're able to proactively tackle bottlenecks and speed call processing.

To further alleviate the burden on its call center staff, the agency adopted Verizon's fully integrated Contact Center solution, including Hosted IVR, which enables callers to apply for benefits and authenticate their identity, all through voice prompts without engaging an agent.

Example #3: State economic development agency

A community organization dedicated to fighting poverty provides home energy assistance to low-income families. However, the agency lacked an 800 number for the utility program, so callers from suburban areas incurred local toll fees. The call volume was also creating difficulties.

The agency's phone system provided no insight into how many calls were waiting to be answered and for how long or how many were being dropped. Without insight into daily call volumes and inbound spikes, the agency lacked the ability to staff appropriately. At system capacity, calls would busy out because no voice mail option was available.

To tackle these challenges, Verizon Business employed a network-based Automated Call Distributor to control incoming calls and manage traffic fluctuations. The system provides visibility into the number of calls and their status, enabling the agency to make staff adjustments to handle peak times. The network-based platform allows for call management adjustments to be made on-demand, a key requirement given resource limitations and the seasonal nature of some of the agency's programs. In addition, flexible menu routing allows application rules to be preset, fostering more use of self-service and freeing agents to focus on more complex queries.

With these changes in place, the agency is now able to handle tens of thousands of calls per month with peaks of more than 10,000 calls per week. Despite the significant growth in new queries, the agency is able to answer more calls, route them more efficiently, and help get program benefits to constituents. Going one step further, the agency has the ability to automate outbound calls to provide program updates, freeing agents to focus on inbound queries. These changes mean the agency can reach out to more families and provide much needed benefits.

Conclusion

In this tough economic climate, agencies need creative solutions to achieving more with less. Agencies are understandably worried about the costs to serve escalating call volumes. But throwing more people or hardware at the problem isn't necessarily the answer. It's critical to understand how citizens are interacting with self-service menus, websites, and call center staff. Streamlining navigation paths across web and phone options can substantially improve self-service functionality and reduce the burden on contact center staff—helping to control operating costs and prevent dropped calls.

Moreover, Verizon Business's consultative approach offers an alternative to large capital spending to solve complex contact center challenges. By treating the contact center in a holistic manner, Verizon Business can drive significant performance gains, without the need for major infrastructure changes. Agencies appreciate having the ability to take incremental steps to gain major improvements. This can control costs while helping to improve call center operations.

Verizon's aptitude and experience in leveraging existing infrastructure is beneficial for maintaining continuity while enabling agencies to capitalize on emerging technologies. This approach is particularly advantageous for agencies today that face unprecedented demand amidst severe budgetary constraints.

Next steps

Moving at a frenetic pace, most agencies don't have the time or resources to stop for a minute to determine the best move forward to manage excessive call volumes. Verizon Business has the professional expertise and contact center acumen to provide objective insight into quickly resolving contact center challenges. A good place to start is by having a consultative session to identify opportunities to streamline both operations and application performance, and evaluate the network, contact center, and IT infrastructure. For more information about Contact Center Solutions, please contact your local Verizon Business account manager or visit www.verizonbusiness.com.

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