

Sector must not byte off more than it can chew

Industry efficiencies will not be driven by wholesale new technologies, but by tweaking its existing systems, writes **Andrew Collier**

ONLY a decade or two ago, contact centres were much less functional than they are today. They mainly handled phone enquiries or postal queries. In the days when many households were struggling to log on to the internet with dial up modems, e-mails were rare and web transactions virtually unheard of.

The advent of broadband has brought huge changes. E-mail contact is now routine and so many transactions can be carried out via the web that none of us really ever need to step outside to buy anything. Even telephone contact has changed dramatically, mainly due to the use of interactive voice response (IVR) systems to automate calls or route them directly to the relevant operators.

The contact centre has always relied on evolving technology and that is not going to change any time soon. The arrival of web 2.0 has led to an explosion in blogging and social networking: it seems certain that the industry will find intelligent ways of exploiting opportunities and developing customer relationships in this area too. But many efficiencies in the contact centre industry will not be driven by wholesale new

technologies, but by tweaking existing systems to make them more productive. As systems have expanded, for instance, so they have tended to sprawl.

Existing databases have to be incorporated into modern front ends; disparate networks have to be able to communicate with each other; calls have to be distributed smoothly. There is sometimes more of an element of a wing and a prayer in all this than many outside the industry – or even in it – recognise.

Guy Tweedale is senior vice president of Europe, Middle East and Africa for Jacada, a leading technical enabling company working within the sector. He says that in a downturn in particular, there has to be a strong focus on technical optimisation and on customer retention, but this process can be hindered by inefficient systems.

"For instance, there can be a lot of chaos on the desktop," he says. "Agents will try to help the customer figure out what their problem is, but they will often be faced with a morass of legacy systems, applications, pop up windows and so on. If you can reduce that chaos, things will speed up pretty quickly."

Integration, he says, is vital: get it right, and you will deliver better



The growth in use of mobile devices such as wireless laptops has led to fewer phone and more e-mail enquiries. Picture: Ian Rutherford

responses, leading to happier customers. Another advantage is that you will improve figures for resolution of a problem on a first call, which again drives cost reduction and efficiency.

Efficient management of networks lies at the core of most contact centre technology. The danger is developments in internet protocols can mean these networks end up being the master rather than the servant, dictating processes rather than enabling them.

"Voice-over-IP means you can put your agents where you like, but it might make sense for calls to come back

Alex Noble is a leading executive with global network company Cisco Systems and a regular blogger who writes about the industry. He points out that transfer of call centre work to countries such as India was driven by the ability to switch networks and do so cheaply, but it has not automatically led to customer satisfaction.

"Voice-over-IP means you can put your agents where you like, but it might make sense for calls to come back

onshore, while areas such as IT and the back office move abroad," he says. "A website can also be built anywhere, as long as it is slick and well tested. But if you are simply using IP to drive the lowest cost of service, what does that tell your customers about your brand?"

He believes the industry will see better distribution of calls, with queuing taking place across the entire network rather than at a particular site.

This obviously leads to faster responses. We are already starting to see outsourcing companies being automatically switched in to provide support at certain times of day or when there are high call volumes as part of efforts to bring smoother distribution, and this trend is certain to continue.

Will we see more traffic being handled via the web? "I don't know," says Noble. "Nobody knows. One of the things we have learned is that most

people who predict how customers will use technology tend to get it wrong.

"But I do think that there is only a small amount of growth potential left in the home-based web. But mobile devices are becoming more intelligent and I think we will see more usage in areas such as 3G and wireless-based laptops."

Heads: "We will see all traffic placed on to the network and distributed as appropriate. That could mean, for

instance, that call centres are placed into bank branches, with customers directed to appropriate staff according to their worth.

"It's a case of using up-to-date technology to engage in business process liberation. Until now, how you run your business has been determined by technology, which in turn has determined a particular operating model. Now we have the flexibility to change."