



Top Tips for Success in a Slowing Economy: CRM Best Practices

Seven Steps for Moving Customer Service from a Cost Burden to a Strategic Asset

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On the battleground of today's business environment, the customer experience has become the competitive differentiator.

And those that fail to take customer service seriously take the hit on the bottom line:

- The average business loses 50% of its customers every 5 years
- New customers cost 7-10 times more than retaining an existing one
- An increase in retention of 5% can increase profits 25-75%

As the term "customer relationship management" implies, your goal is maintaining strong relationships with customers. It's the feelings evoked during interactions with your organisation that leave the greatest impression.

So, if you're not romancing your customers, who is?

Companies that maximise the customer experience - and keep customers for life - typically follow these best practices:

1. Make support a top priority

Gartner Research stresses that "organisations need to treat customer service as a top business objective - not as a stand-alone department." Yet, many don't look at this function as an integral part of their strategy.

In fact, Aberdeen Group research found that just 45% of senior-level executives report support centre initiatives are critical to their company, product and customer strategy. Based on the stats above, it's clear that, when you give this part of the business the resources and attention it needs, you keep customers, thereby lowering their costs and increasing profits.

2. Personalise service

According to The Centre for Customer Driven Quality at Purdue University, "92% of U.S. consumers form their image of an organisation based on their experience using their call centre."

Every customer wants to feel like they're the most important customer - instead of just a number. Accomplishing that means providing truly personalised service.

Contact centre reps should know what products and services the customer currently uses, the issues and concerns they have had in the past, and who else has talked with the customer and what transpired. With that information, they can respond to each customer intelligently and personally. With a centralised customer relationship management database, with company wide access, organisations track every interaction with customers. That way, everyone interfacing with a customer knows exactly what has transpired in the past and can respond accordingly - improving and expediting resolutions.

3. Integrate all systems

In addition to a centralised CRM solution, it's important to integrate all information systems that might be involved in customer interactions in order to support the total experience. For example, tie your CRM system with your accounting software to ensure that everyone knows of any outstanding accounting issues with that particular customer.

If you have two different applications for support and sales, ensure that those talk to each other. That way, sales knows about pending service issues and support agents are aware of sales in progress. All can then respond appropriately to customers. The latest CRM solutions even include case management capabilities in a single software solution, eliminating the need to integrate separate applications.

4. Be accessible

Because every customer has a different schedule, and varying communications preferences, you must support them when, where and how they prefer. It's all about access. "Access will define those companies who do it best because best is what customers are expecting and looking for, and accessibility is what they want. If you don't deliver consistent, attractive accessibility, someone else will," according to a report by The Centre for Customer Driven Quality at Purdue.

Give them the option of communicating via voice, e-mail, Web or online chat, and access to self-service options like searchable knowledge bases or forums. Also be available for all the time zones that you serve, ensuring that anytime a customer needs help, they have an option that suits them.

5. Be fast and be smart

Customers don't have the time or the patience to be routed around to different people, telling each support rep the same story again and again. They expect rapid resolutions. Lack of integration between telephony and customer relationship management solutions causes such disconnects.

Fortunately, new customer relationship management solutions, integrated with voice capabilities, help dramatically expedite calls and lower the cost of service. For example, the solutions can intelligently route calls to the right (best-skilled) support agent based on the specific customer calling and their issues. Customers are recognised by identifying information in existing databases, or by simply entering an ID upon calling. When agents answer, the customer's call record pops up on the screen, allowing them to immediately begin assisting the customer with their specific needs.

If the customer is routed to another agent, that agent sees the same screen. Such systems can also prioritise calls for VIP customers or based on the urgency of the customer's issue. All this reduces wait and response times - and makes for happier customers.

It also ensures that you use your support resources more effectively. Calls go right to the agents with the skills to handle them.

6. Automate repetitive processes

You can automate a number of recurring, mundane tasks to expedite resolutions for customers and take some of the burden off support agents. For example, let callers create their own tickets or leave voice mails any time of day and then leave it to your CRM system to route them to the right queues automatically.

Inform customers of the status of their service tickets automatically through e-mail or automated phone calls, coordinated through your voice system. Likewise, have tickets close automatically and collect feedback from the customer.

Even automate routine tasks like password reset - one of the most common reasons for calls. Let customers reset their system or domain passwords automatically, freeing agents to handle more complex tasks

7. Analyse support experience and metrics

By tracking support issues in a centralised database, you have a complete record to gain a big-picture view of your performance and identify trends. Use that information to answer some of these critical questions:

- " What's bothering our best customers?
- " What are the top support issues?
- " What issues are occurring across different types of customer, products or geographies?
- " What steps are we taking to reduce the most frequent issues?
- " Are there suggestions for improvement disguised as complaints?
- " Are resolution times decreasing?
- " What's the average hold time?
- " Are hold times and abandon rates decreasing?
- " Is each agent able to process more calls?

By analysing this information weekly or monthly, you'll be able to tweak your support processes and realise continuous improvement - ultimately improving customer retention, reducing the cost of serving those customers, and increasing profitability.

About FrontRange Solutions

FrontRange Solutions USA Inc. provides CRM solutions used by more than 130,000 companies and over 1.7 million users to automate and manage customer-facing initiatives. GoldMine is designed for businesses that want a complete and customizable solution that manages every aspect of the customer lifecycle with a quick time to benefit and low total cost of ownership.

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