

Call Centre of the Future

At this year's ICSA-TC Conference on May 14, Dave McDougall, President of custom software developer and systems integrator VisionMAX, gave his view of what to expect in the Call Centre of the Future:

- Seamlessly integrated databases (that probably allow the Customer Service Representative to know more about the caller than the caller's own mother!)
- Advanced self-serve applications that allow customers and other authorized users to inquire and update their records themselves (in these seamlessly integrated databases)
- Multi-channel delivery (web browser, telephone IVR, mobile, satellite TV) that allow users to interact with the data through whatever channel they prefer
- Interactive video training clips that show users *how* to do something (if a picture is worth a thousand words, then a video is worth a thousand pictures!)
- Expert systems (with seamless human backup) that enable users to have a "conversation", without knowing whether communication is with a computer or a human
- Software as a Service to allow companies to treat computing (both hardware and software) as a utility, and pay a monthly fee only for what they need

Although some of the ideas might have seemed like science fiction, all the examples were based on systems that VisionMAX has implemented or is currently implementing for clients in Canada, the US, and the Caribbean/Central America. What's even more important is that they all had the following results in common:

- Improved customer satisfaction
- Increased Customer Service Representative productivity
- Cut company costs

Here's a summary of each area, for those who were not able to attend the conference.

Seamlessly integrated databases

Over the last several decades, companies have each invested hundreds of thousands, if not millions of dollars, in automating many areas of the business. In many cases, they have created wonderful applications to handle Credit Check, Sales, Accounts Receivable, Marketing, and so on. Unfortunately, in many cases, these have been created as standalone applications that don't communicate with each other. Thus, something as simple as updating a customer address can be a nightmare when the information is stored in multiple databases, and there is no single process to ensure all the data is synchronized.

Fortunately, an alphabet soup of technology (ECM, SOA, MQ, J2ME, etc.) now exists to tie together and synchronize data kept in mainframe computers, mid-range computers, UNIX/Windows servers, personal computers, and even mobile devices. Adapters are available to get access to the data, and updates can be made in batch mode, real-time, or anywhere in between.

Companies have realized that the actions that employees take are only as good as the data they are working with. In a Case Study, Dave described how a large Canadian retailer had warranty information spread across five different legacy systems. Customers

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discovered that CSRs often didn't have full access to their records, so if the first CSR they called wouldn't give a full refund on an item bought many months ago, they would keep calling back until they found another CSR who didn't know the customer history and would agree to provide the full refund. Once VisionMAX tied together the data from the multiple systems and presented the information on a single web browser screen, this "CSR shopping" was no longer possible.

Advanced self-serve applications

Many of us in our 40s, 50s, and beyond take it for granted that if we need to inquire into our account, make a change, order a product or service, or check status, we call an 1-800 number, wait several minutes, then finally speak to a CSR. What does the CSR do in response to the call? They are busy typing away on their computer screens to get access to the customer data. Well, why not let the customer do it herself?

Perhaps as part of a generational shift, those in their teens, 20s and 30s take it for granted that if they have to contact a company, they *expect* to be able to go online and take care of what they need themselves. Why bother speaking to a CSR when you can save time and do-it-yourself? If anything, they now look negatively at a company that doesn't provide self-serve options!

In a Bell ExpressVu (Bell TV) Case Study, Dave showed how VisionMAX created applications that allowed subscribers to update their account to add a receiver, suspend/reactivate service for vacation, swap out a security smart-card, and change their channel package. This increased customer satisfaction for their 2M subscribers (who didn't have to wait on hold) while saving 10's of millions of dollars for Bell through avoiding calls to their Call Centre.

Multi-channel delivery

As described above, today's customer wants to get access to their account directly, without going through an intermediary. What's more, the bar has been raised so that companies have to allow access through multiple delivery channels, not just IVR or web browser access. For example, the "don't-leave-home-without-it" technology of today is the mobile phone. Today's consumer wants to take action right now and not wait until she gets home and boots up a computer and access a company web site. Why not take action using the mobile phone while waiting in line for a coffee and doughnut?

Companies therefore have to provide self-serve access to these seamlessly-integrated databases via multiple delivery channels – telephone IVR, web browser, mobile (text message, e-mail, built-in application), satellite TV set-top box, etc. This was the approach that VisionMAX took for Bell ExpressVu, in which VisionMAX was the first supplier to Bell to create an application that made use of all the delivery channels that Bell Canada supported – traditional telephone (IVR), Internet (Symptaco), mobile (Bell Mobility), and satellite TV set-top box interactive TV (iTV - Bell ExpressVu).

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Interactive video training clips

When these customers start accessing these self-serve applications over their web browser or smartphone, they may need instruction as to how to perform a function. Rather than trying to explain a function using “Help Text”, perhaps supplemented by some diagrams, why not show the MTV generation a short video clip? The company could have a library of short video clips showing screen captures of commonly-done tasks, which could be played back to customers if they need help in a particular area.

Dave showed an example of this that VisionMAX is creating as part of a new Point of Sale application for T-Mobile’s mobile phone store network in the US. If a sales clerk needs to know how to switch the POS screen to work in left-hand mode instead of right-hand mode, or how to process a discount coupon, after asking for help the system plays a short video of a screen capture showing how to do this, complete with a voice-over.

Expert systems

In what was probably the most “science fiction” part of the presentation, Dave showed an application that VisionMAX is building for Digicel and T-Mobile and some large Canadian customers to automate the ordering process. It allows a customer to interact with the system through an Instant Messenger interface to place an order. The system and the customer go back and forth with questions and answers (Are you still at 123 Main St.? What would you like to order today? Pick up or delivery?). At any point, if the system is unable to figure out what the customer wants, the conversation (along with the transcript of what has been said so far) is passed to a live CSR to handle the tricky part. The CSR can continue the interaction using the IM interface, and once the problem is resolved, the conversation can be passed back to the automated system.

VisionMAX is working to transfer this Instant Messenger text conversation to work in a voice mode as well (speech-to-text and text-to-speech). So, if the system receives a call from a customer in Conception Bay, Newfoundland, the computer will be able to take the order with an authentic Newfie accent!

Software as a Service

The final concept that Dave presented had almost a back-to-the-future feel for those of us old enough to remember time-share computing services offered through companies like Canada Systems Group and Datacrown. Back when computers were large behemoths that existed in glass-enclosed air-conditioned computer rooms with raised floors, most companies could not afford to get their own computer. Computer service bureaus had their own computers, and offered to run applications for smaller companies on these large computers and only charge them for the resources they used (CPU cycles, disk space, printing). In this way, these smaller companies paid only for the computer resources they needed, and didn’t have the headaches of running their own computer.

Now, fast forward to the 21st century. The cost of computing power has dropped a thousand fold, but the headaches of running the computer have probably gone up a similar percentage. Companies have come to realize that their applications can run just as well (and probably cheaper and more securely) on the computer system of a company

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that specializes in this area, while users can access the application from anywhere in the world over a web browser. This has led to the rise of Software as a Service (SaaS) applications, in which a company's business applications can run on the computer system of an outside company that specializes in outsourced computing. If the application is generic enough that it can be shared with other companies (such as the Customer Relationship Management programs offered by Salesforce.com), then the cost of the software as well as the cost of the hardware can be shared by many companies, driving the average cost per company down considerably.

VisionMAX is building a Point of Sale, CRM, Supply-Chain Management and Financials ERP application that will be accessed by 10,000 T-Mobile cell phone stores in the United States in a SaaS manner.

Summary

At author Thomas Friedman pointed out, today's technology means that the world is flat. Taking technology that is readily available today and applying it to the world of the Call Centre will result in the Call Centre of the Future. In this world, fewer calls will be coming in (because of self-serve applications); users will be able to get information from across the company and beyond (because of integrated databases); and the whole system will run on some computer who-knows-where but be accessible by users anywhere/anytime through multiple delivery channels.

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