Omnichannel Customer Service: Buzz Word or Business Driver?

Omnichannel customer service can help companies reap real rewards from revenue to engaged customers—provided they have the right strategy.

Like many companies, Seattle-based pet insurance provider Trupanion started out small. When it relocated to the United States from Canada in 2007, the 16-year-old company had fewer than 50 employees. Just seven years later, it has more than 300.

Part of Trupanion's growth can be attributed to the rapid expansion in the U.S. pet care industry, which grew approximately 250 percent from $17 billion two decades ago to more than $250 billion today according to the American Pet Products Association. Trupanion, however, credits much of the company's growth to its sterling reputation for great customer service.

"We constantly talk about serving our customers and trying to delight them," says Vice President of Customer Service, Denise Connors. According to Connors, who oversees a customer service department of approximately 100 people, Trupanion sees customer care as a major

differentiator. In order to fully exploit it, Connors says, the company must interact with customers not only whenever they need assistance, but also wherever they need it.

"From both a sales and service standpoint, our customers touch us in multiple ways," continues Connors, who says Trupanion offers customer service by phone, online chat, email and social media. "To cater to that, we recently adopted a platform that allows us to see how our customers access us through different channels, and move customers seamlessly from one channel to another. If a customer starts out on the web and has a question, for example, they're likely to start an online chat. When they do, we might realize that their question is very complex, so we can turn that chat into a phone call."

Like Trupanion, many businesses are adopting an integrated cross-channel – or omnichannel approach – to customer service. The

perspective is not only smart: it reflects an emerging practice within corporations committed to good customer service.

Defining Omnichannel

In its 2013 report, Understand Communication Channel Needs to Craft Your Customer Service Strategy, Forrester Research Inc. found that U.S. consumers have used multiple customer service channels to interact with companies in the past 12 months including:

- Phone (73 percent)
- Email (58 percent)
- Instant message/online chat (43 percent)
- Text message (24 percent)
- Twitter (22 percent

A company that offers more than one of these channels to its customers offers multi-channel customer service. A company that offers them in an integrated way, like Trupanion does, offers omnichannel customer service. The difference is subtle but important: While

multi-channel customer service gives customers choices, omnichannel customer service gives them flexibility.

The latter gives them not only the freedom to choose which channel best suits them, but also the freedom to change their mind, navigating from one channel to another without losing the quality of their experience or the content of their inquiry.

Omnichannel Customer Engagement Delivers Results

For skeptics, the argument against omnichannel quickly collapses under the weight of evidence. Take for example the findings from the 2013 Aberdeen report, which surveyed 305 companies, 20 percent of which had omnichannel customer engagement strategies. The report found that companies with omnichannel customer service had superior customer retention rates – 89 percent, versus 33 percent for the 80 percent of companies without an omnichannel strategy. Furthermore, companies with omnichannel strategies experienced an average 9.5 percent increase in annual revenue, compared to 3.4 percent for those without omnichannel customer support in place.

"Businesses that adopt an omnichannel [customer experience management] strategy far outpace their peers that lack this strategy," reads Aberdeen's report. Indeed, a consistent, coordinated customer experience across multiple channels yields numerous benefits, both for consumers and for companies.

Why Omnichannel Works

Omnichannel customer care offers several distinct benefits. One of the most important is tipping and queuing. In traditional Traditionally, "the next available agent" answers a customer's call. With an omnichannel strategy, however, the best available agent answers it. A customer who has a billing question, for example, can be routed to an agent who specializes in billing while a customer who wants to place an order can be routed to an agent who specializes in sales. Similarly, a customer who calls for phone support can be routed to an agent whose strength is verbal communication, while a customer who seeks support via Twitter can be answered by an agent whose strength is social media. Matching the right customer to the right agent within the right channel results in a better overall customer experience.

Equally important is the fact that omnichannel provides agents with context. Because the core of an omnichannel experience is an intelligent contact center solution—a single application that tracks and routes customers across multiple channels—agents receive a holistic view of customers. They can see not just what their problems are, for instance, but also their preferences. They can see their transaction history, their most recent channel interactions and numerous other insights that allow them to provide personalized—and in some cases even preventive—customer service.

The same intelligent contact center that creates context for agents facilitates data-based decision making for the enterprise, courtesy of big data analytics. By aggregating information about customers' journey within and across channels, companies can identify and repair weak links in the customer-care chain.

Smart queuing, personalized service and data analytics are tools companies can use to resolve customers' problems more quickly and more completely. That increases customer satisfaction, the result of which is increased customer retention and revenue.

Getting Started

Omnichannel customer care requires not only the will to integrate multiple channels, but also the technology and expertise to do so.

Step one is determining the channels that you should leverage. Despite the word omni—from the Latin word for "all," *omnis*—omnichannel doesn't require that you use every channel available to you. Rather, it demands that you be in the channels that your customers are using. Surveys and web analytics can help you determine what those specific channels are.

Next, you must choose a contact center solution. Look for vendors who not only support the channels you want to be on, but also those who offer critical omnichannel functionality, such as intelligent routing and CRM integration.

Finally comes implementation, which requires investments in both infrastructure—for example, space, equipment, data storage and bandwidth—and talent, including customer service agents who are experts in the channels you intend to leverage. If your company lacks the capital or in-house expertise to execute against these requirements,

an outsourcing partner can likely fill the gap, allowing you to focus limited financial and human resources on your core competencies.

Although no company can be everything to everyone, the business that can be the right thing to the right person—at the right time and in the right place—ultimately will surpass its competitors in every respect, Aberdeen's research suggests. With an omnichannel approach, that business will be yours.