

## Customer Experience Management in Call Centers – what about seeing it with the customer’s eyes?

By Silvana Buljan, Buljan&Partners

When it comes to defining CEM in Call Centers, most executives think of achieving a unique customer experience with qualified and friendly personnel, quick access to data, and resource optimization by using new and efficient technologies. The better we are, the better the customer will feel when interacting with us! Is it really like this?

Best practice processes are being designed based on internal improvement recommendations, compliance with mandatory KPI’s to measure Call Center performance to show nice and colourful charts, and industry-average comparisons with the competition. Hardly any companies try to put themselves in their customers’ shoes, describing processes from the customer perspective and improving on convenience, simplicity and responsiveness towards customers – because this is what customers want!

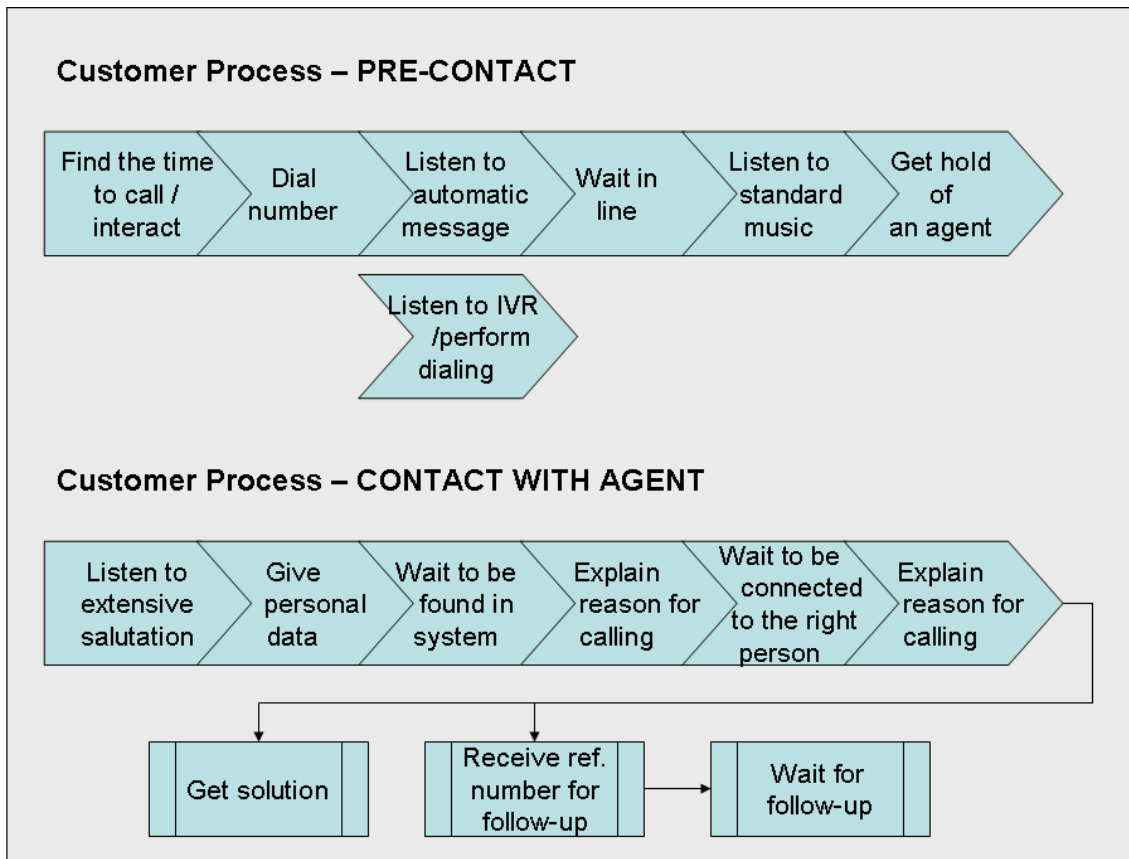
I just had a terrible experience with a major European airline that had 5 different phone numbers for customer service. I dialled one of them to communicate my easy request: add my 18 month old daughter to an existent booking from Madrid to London. First, the agent did not understand what I wanted (and I’m sure this was not due to my Spanish language skills), then she stated I would have to call the next day because my booking was done online and the online reservation hotline was not available anymore. Due to my insistence (I was actually travelling within 48 hours), she passed me to a more experienced agent who gave me an unjustifiable price for adding my daughter to the reservation – considering that she even wouldn’t have an own seat because she’s a toddler! I decided to call the next day and talk to the online reservation staff, who actually resolved my request with no major issues and did not understand their colleagues behaviour.

So what is my total customer experience around this simple reservation process if you see it with the internal company perspective? It would be evaluated well, I called only twice, received the resolution of my request within 24 hours and the interaction is – probably – tracked in the airline’s CRM system. Now you ask me, and I give you a complete different picture of the situation: First of all, too many phone numbers were communicated to me to interact, secondly no clear distinction of the “scope” of the different phone numbers was available, thirdly an incompetent agent who had absolutely no idea of what she was doing attended me, and needed to get help by a colleague, and last but not least, an unacceptable offer of closing my request was submitted. Where does this information – or better said the customer’s evaluation - appear in the call center report? Nowhere, on the one hand because processes are not defined well with a customer-centric view, and on the other hand because we are human beings, and are trying to do our job, and we don’t like to be transparent about our insufficient behaviour towards customers.

Executives only get informed about incidents like this if the customer happens to be a friend or business contact with direct access to executive level. And then top management seems to be helpless, because reading reports and taking part in evaluation presentations shows a completely different picture. So what can executives do to improve this situation?

In a first step, customer-related business processes need to be defined from a CUSTOMER perspective and not from the COMPANY perspective. It’s not about “inside out thinking” and showing how good we organize activities in our company, it’s about how the customer feels about interacting with us. Customer don’t know – and don’t care about – which sophisticated CRM software is being used, how call center agents’ workplaces look like, and whether the scanning process of documents is automated. Customers care about those basic things we start to forget when optimizing processes from a business perspective, e.g. having an easy and quick access to someone to listen to their problem when calling.

Here goes an example for designing an interaction with a Call Center from the customer's viewpoint:



In a second step, identify those process steps that can be influenced positively in the customer experience. Looking at our example, practically all process steps can be influenced - except of the "find the time to interact" process step.

Then, a target customer experience for each one of the process steps should be defined, putting ourselves in the customers' shoes and not thinking of costs, benefits, profitability, etc. - that can be done later when we have to evaluate the implementation and present it to the board for approval. And the easiest way of doing this is using our own experience as customers! Why do most people change attitudes once they enter the door to their office? We seem to have a double life: customers in private life, employees without sense for customers in our business life, always defending the company's interest without engaging too much with customers....

Once the target customer experience for each process has been defined, a dry-run for approval can be done with a selected group of customers (test group, focus group, etc.), and improvements can still be identified and included into the target customer experience. For instance, if we were just thrilled about reducing waiting times by implementing IVR and at the same time could ensure that the customer would talk to the right person, but the test group emphasizes that they just hate to follow the instructions of a machine and prefer to talk to a human being from the beginning, we are not delivering the expected target customer experience - and still can eliminate IVR. It hurts, but this is what customers think. We can save lots of money in projects just by involving our customers in helping us to improve.



The final step would be the implementation of the target customer experience, starting with training the customer facing staff in the “new” processes and guidelines defined for assuring a unique customer experience, and – if infrastructure and IT adjustments need to be performed – the realization of those adjustments.

The benefit in the longterm is a true customer-centric internal performance of processes, delivering a positive customer experience in our call center example. In my personal experience described above this would mean that I probably still would fly with the airline, something I decided not to do after the target customer experience they have delivered to me.