

Adobe solutions for eLearning

Transforming customer service in the telecommunications industry

In this document

- Executive summary
- Evolution of customer service
- Challenges for managers
- Improving performance and effectiveness through eLearning
- eLearning best practices
- Adobe eLearning solutions for rapid, real-time training and development
- Conclusion

Because every interaction is an opportunity to win or lose business, customer service representatives play a vital role in customer engagement.

Executive summary

For any company in any industry, the mandate is clear: Provide exceptional customer service. For technical support, account updates, or new product information, the customer service representative (CSR) is the primary point of contact. The effectiveness of the CSR, therefore, is critical to the overall customer experience and ultimately to the success or failure of a business.

The Internet and technology have fueled the growth and improved the effectiveness of online self-service capabilities and other new tools for customer service. But for telecommunications companies, the relationship with customers is still centered on person-to-person interaction, whether on the phone, on the web, or in physical retail outlets.

Poor customer experience often results in resistance to upselling and cross-selling opportunities and in many cases can cause customer churn. According to an August 2003 J.D. Power and Associates study, the percentage of wireless subscribers who said they were likely to switch to another provider nearly quadrupled among those who rated their carrier's customer care below average. And a February 2006 Amdocs study revealed that consumers are more likely to stay with a telecom provider based on the quality of customer experience rather than the cost of its services.

To boost CSR effectiveness, education is critical—from new product training to sales skills development and more. But the benefits of education must be balanced with the cost. Adobe eLearning solutions enable enterprises to deploy rapid, real-time training for CSRs while helping them correlate training effectiveness with business results.

Evolution of customer service

The customer service function has evolved into a critical frontline sales tool for lead generation and qualification, order processing, and a number of fulfillment options. It is no longer a loss leader within the corporate structure, but an opportunity to increase company presence and sell new services. CSRs must still lend traditional technical support to maintain customer satisfaction, but now they also drive and close new business during the course of a tightly timed interaction.

Increasing use of technology

With the increasing use of electronic communications, such as websites, e-mail, and online chat, customer interactions that once focused exclusively on problem resolution now include meaningful business-related content.

Expanding role of CSRs

An October 2004 survey conducted by Best Practices, LLC, found that more than half of surveyed companies expect CSRs to assume some cross-selling role and responsibility.

Investing in CSRs

Cutting Edge Information in July 2004 estimated that companies spend an average of US\$15,000 for every new CSR. With attrition so expensive, retention stands out as a great way to save money.

Consider the example of a customer calling in to inquire about service plans. Guiding the customer through detailed information available online, the CSR can educate the customer about the benefits of a more expensive plan.

In the case of a retail outlet, a customer may walk in to ask questions about his or her phone. The CSR then has the opportunity to upsell accessories or maybe even a new phone.

Or in another increasingly common scenario, the customer has done extensive research on the company website but still has a few concerns. Using the online chat feature, the CSR can close the deal by providing the personal touch that helps consumers feel comfortable with their purchase decision.

In these and other cases, there are two common threads:

- Customers expect that their interactions with the CSR will be personal, compelling, and productive.
- The CSR must utilize a diverse array of interpersonal skills, selling skills, product knowledge, and sales tools to provide an engaging customer experience.

While the way CSRs interact with customers may be changing, the bottom line remains the same: Companies must deliver high-quality service to satisfy customers while keeping operating costs low and customer relationships profitable in the long term.

Challenges for managers

Given the strategic importance of customer engagement and the expanding role of CSRs, managers of customer service centers face some daunting challenges.

- **Keeping CSRs happy and on the job.** Industry statistics show that CSRs within call centers talk on the phone or otherwise interact with customers more than six hours each day. These interactions can be stressful, requiring the CSR to exercise tact while also trying to solve problems. As a result, companies experience a high rate of attrition for this position and correspondingly high replacement costs.
- **Educating and informing staff.** Telecommunications products and features are constantly changing, and the underlying technologies are complex. Sales strategies and problem-solving techniques vary, depending on the situation. On-the-job collaboration and communication tools, business applications, and other support systems are frequently updated and enhanced. For all these challenges, CSRs need education to obtain knowledge and develop essential skills. Further, they need to be informed regularly of updates to technologies, policies, and promotions and must have real-time access to product information and customer intelligence.
- **Balancing the bottom line.** According to a story in *The Indianapolis Star* (May 2004), a Cornell University School of Industrial and Labor Relations survey of 350 call centers across the United States found that centers that focused on quality—giving operators more training and time per call—had half the number of employees quit and twice the sales growth of centers that focused on cost containment, including speed of call processing.

To keep pace with new demands, the learning environment must be transformed to maximize and accelerate knowledge retention. On-the-job, contextual learning opportunities allow agents to quickly absorb and immediately use new skills to benefit the business and advance personal career goals.

According to the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD) Benchmarking Forum, companies with comprehensive learning programs that benchmarked learning results against corporate success metrics from 1991 to 2005 outperformed the S&P 500 in total return on investment and portfolio value.

Impact of eLearning on business goals

- Enhanced customer satisfaction
- Reduced employee turnover
- Increased first-call resolution rate
- Decreased average call-handling time
- Higher upsell and cross-sell rates

This transition must occur even as aggressive cost reduction efforts strain to keep pace with declining voice revenues in telecom. In other words, the cost-effectiveness of the training will be determined in part by the amount of time required to design and produce it, in addition to delivering the training when, where, and to whom it is needed most.

The best way to balance both—effective training and a time-constricted environment—is to take full advantage of advanced eLearning tools.

Improving performance and effectiveness through eLearning

eLearning is a method for delivering faster, contextual, and cost-effective training when and where it is needed. In the case of a call center, CSRs can use quiet call times to participate in self-paced training at their workstations. CSRs at retail outlets might use a kiosk on the sales floor or a computer in the break room. In both cases, CSRs can keep abreast of the latest offerings, learn about new sales and communication tools, and put new knowledge and skills into practice immediately.

Because eLearning content is centrally archived, it can be updated immediately and made current for all users. With the use of networked technologies, it is relatively easy to systematically roll out new eLearning programs and to update existing programs. Organizations can also track which CSRs have completed which learning assignments and measure individual progress.

eLearning best practices

For organizations interested in pursuing an eLearning initiative, here are some best practices to consider.

- **Enable individual contributors at any skill level to develop content.** Nontechnical subject matters experts can more easily contribute compelling learning content when they work with familiar content creation tools. While Macromedia® Dreamweaver® from Adobe is the most frequently used tool to create eLearning content, a 2003 Bersin & Associates study of eLearning professionals found that Microsoft PowerPoint was the second most popular tool. It's practically ubiquitous, familiar to nearly everyone, and quick and easy to use.
- **Incorporate rich content to accelerate and enhance knowledge retention.** Many usability studies show that when used appropriately, multimedia presentations can maximize knowledge mastery in less time than single-mode presentation formats, while achieving higher retention and recall rates. Multimedia learning content such as videos, simulations, and animated illustrations can be particularly effective when the subject matter is complex or technical (such as telecommunications technologies and service pricing schemes) and when training goals extend beyond simple information sharing.
- **Make learning content easy to find, retrieve, and use.** Training content should be readily accessible regardless of browser, platform, or operating system. Factors such as client requirements and interoperability limitations can significantly affect how quickly and broadly rapid training initiatives are adopted and accepted by learners, managers, and executives. In addition, companies must consider the recurring cost for IT to support tools and technologies required to drive learning programs.
- **Measure and tie achievements to the business.** The eLearning investment is often easiest to justify when investments in people and IT can be correlated with business success metrics. Since eLearning is dependent on technology, it's easy to track learner participation and performance and to report metrics to key stakeholders. Managers can also benchmark and track learning and business milestones in parallel over predictive times, illustrating long-term and recurring business value.

Adobe eLearning solutions for rapid, real-time training and development

Adobe eLearning solutions help training professionals and customer service managers meet business objectives by reducing the time and cost associated with creating, managing, and delivering learning resources that everyone can access. Adobe solutions enable individuals at all skill levels to create and share rich eLearning content, self-paced courses, and live online sessions that incorporate multimedia content such as simulations and videos.

- **Adobe Acrobat® Connect™ Professional.** With this software, trainers can conduct live virtual classrooms and meet instantly with colleagues or learners to share real-time information from presentations, applications, and multimedia content.
- **Adobe Connect Training.** With this module, training professionals can deploy custom training programs that mix and reuse a variety of training activities, including self-paced Adobe Presenter courses; third-party content; and live, instructor-led training. In addition, they can easily administer formal assessments, knowledge retention exercises, or surveys, or use question branching with audiovisual feedback to guide users and tailor learning paths. Using wizards, training professionals can also create progressive learning tracks and easily define course prerequisites, optional and required modules, and completion requirements.
- **Adobe Presenter.** This module can be used to rapidly create standards-compliant presentations and eLearning courses in PowerPoint, complete with voice-overs, videos, and animations. It enables subject matter experts to leverage their existing familiarity with PowerPoint to create personalized, narrated, on-demand presentations. Or they can take advantage of Adobe Presenter wizards to guide them through the process. In addition, subject matter experts can embed formal assessments and knowledge retention exercises, choosing from seven standard question types—including short answer, fill-in-the-blank, true/false, matching, and Likert rating scale—and use question branching to tailor learning paths or solicit feedback.
- **Adobe Acrobat.** Using Adobe Acrobat software, instructors and students can create and share Adobe PDF documents, enabling anyone who uses free Adobe Reader® 7.0 software to actively collaborate with one another. Team members can collect and compare comments and keep sensitive information more secure. And they can embed animated 3D designs of key equipment and parts with point-and-click access to detailed technical, ordering, and troubleshooting information.
- **Adobe Captivate™.** To enhance knowledge retention, training professionals can use Adobe Captivate to create interactive simulations and demonstrations that include narration, quizzing, scoring, branching, text entry fields, checkboxes, and more. No programming knowledge is required, and Adobe Captivate integrates with Adobe Presenter, Acrobat Connect Professional, and the Adobe Connect Training module.
- **Other eLearning products.** Flash is acknowledged by the eLearning Guild, the Masie Learning CONSORTIUM, and other leading eLearning associations as the de facto standard for creating interactive content for learning. Macromedia Flash Lite™ software is used to create and deploy flexible learning content on telephone handset and game consoles. Macromedia Dreamweaver®, Authorware®, and Director® continue to be the products of choice for professionals who create learning content. And for incorporating digital photographs, illustrations, and videos in distributed learning settings, eLearning professionals depend on Adobe Photoshop®, Illustrator®, and Adobe Premiere® software.

Adobe eLearning solutions leverage ubiquitous Adobe Flash Player, resident on over 97% of Internet-connected desktops, so students and teachers can participate instantly from nearly any operating system, platform, or browser without installing client software.

These Adobe solutions work with existing training and eLearning infrastructure investments like Plateau and SumTotal learning management systems, and can be deployed with core platforms.

Conclusion

Technology must always be balanced with person-to-person interaction to avoid dehumanizing the customer experience. Most technology adopted by customer service organizations has focused on addressing and improving internal processes and procedures to meet and streamline a broad range of customer needs. But technology also exists to enhance communications within the customer service team, and it can be used to improve CSR skills and knowledge, which helps transform customer service into customer engagement.

Customer engagement contributes to the corporate bottom line by driving short-term sales and long-term customer loyalty. An educated and confident team of CSRs is needed to interact with an increasingly sophisticated and demanding customer base. Customer service managers need to keep these valuable CSRs content and on the job by offering rapid, real-time training that's informative, useful to career advancement, and even entertaining.

With Adobe solutions for eLearning, managers can share knowledge with their CSRs to create a culture of supportive, engaging, and continuous learning.

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