

VIEW

Will customer service evolve beyond voice?

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Modern wireless phones have evolved into miniaturized handheld computers capable of delivering complex content and interactions to support conversations, search, messaging, games, videos, music and more. Most customer service operations, however, are only taking advantage of a fraction of these capabilities.

While most operations today are primarily focused on agents communicating with customers over the voice channel, phone self-service has evolved from touch tone to speech interactions. But what about the text channel, Web or even video?

New services are emerging that deliver video-based content and interactions over 3G phones when making a video call. Most of the 3G activity in the US is focused on the data channel for faster web surfing such as the new iPhone or BlackBerry 8320. But in Europe, 3G handsets can be used to place video calls. Services such as the n-tv news service and ViiF in Germany are offering a new video service to watch, record, and share videos over the phone. Access is limited to early adopters of 3G handsets but as more services become available, demand will increase.

More interesting for customer service operations at European mobile operators may be the text channel over the

phone. A standard called USSD which is found in all GSM networks can be used effectively for delivering a complete interface for mobile customers to interact with customer service options.

Using an SMS-like interface they can review menu options and key in choices to top off minutes in a pre-paid mobile account, get minute balances, pay monthly bills or change service plans. Several mobile carriers are experimenting with text applications such as these and expect each interaction to cost 5 to 10 cents as opposed to 50 cents for a voice self-service call. This represents enormous savings over an agent-based interaction and many customers may prefer the convenience of self-service instead of longer interaction with an agent, especially for repetitive transactions.

The other key mobile phone channel for transactions is the mobile Web interface on these devices. Using the XHTML standard which accommodates the small screen on mobile phones, mobile operators can deliver the same kinds of applications for pre-paid and post-paid customers. And now with greater speeds over new 3G mobile devices, performance alone will make these applications more accessible to every consumer.

Mobile communication over faster, more efficient networks offers opportunities for effective and successful customer service interactions. The generation who are using more and more mobile features will vote with their fingers whether today's voice, text, mobile Web or video will dominate customer service interactions in the future. ☎