

9 Must-Have Contact Center Features

From VoIP to Social Media Management



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Customer satisfaction can make or break a business. Consumer surveys demonstrate that two-thirds of customers have hung up the phone during a customer service call, with more than 70 percent experiencing significant frustration during a call.

In today's highly communicative world, one unhappy customer can have a devastating effect on a company's reputation. One dissatisfied customer can become a PR nightmare very quickly. Fortunately, technological innovations address many of the standard customer service challenges.

The Basics of Hosted Contact Centers

The contact center is the epicenter of customer service provision. While the traditional call center was designed primarily to handle telephone-based communications, today's contact centers are equipped for multi-channel communications, including e-mail, text messaging, live chat, and social media. Customers expect to access companies through all of these channels, so it is critical that businesses make it easy for them to do so. And thanks to innovations in CRM software, companies are better prepared to respond to inquiries and complaints.

Yet utilizing multiple channels of communication adds complexity to customer service operations. It is not uncommon for companies to incorporate so many new applications into their workflows that customer service agents have to utilize six or more applications just to respond to a single customer request. To save money and simplify contact center operations, many companies are now turning to hosted application suites.

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Hosted application suites provide users with access to a multitude of applications through the web, all based in the cloud. Traditional contact centers are based on-premises, requiring companies to expend significant resources on hardware, software, and maintenance. Like all technology products, these investments eventually require upgrades and replacement.

A hosted contact center solution circumvents these problems, providing companies with an array of tools to use in optimizing customer relations. Many providers utilize a pay-as-you-go model that saves money in the long run. With a hosted solution, businesses enjoy the latest contact center applications without the hassle of constant software updates.

CRM integration is a critical consideration when selecting a hosted contact center solution. While many CRM applications include basic contact center functions, and some contact center software solutions include basic CRM functions, best practice is to utilize two separate, fully featured programs. Look for contact center software that provides out-of-the-box integration with your CRM.

There are many hosted contact center application suites on the market. When selecting a hosted solution, these nine features are mandatory.

1. VoIP

Voice over IP technology is a necessity for contact center operations. While there is a learning curve for transitioning to VoIP, the cost savings and other benefits are well worth the effort. With VoIP, companies can move locations more easily and allow agents to use mobile phones or personal computers to answer calls. These capacities allow many

businesses to create an infrastructure for a remote call center, cutting the costs traditionally associated with an on-premises call center.

Warning! VoIP systems that rely upon a working Internet connection will not stay operative during a power outage.

There is one major disadvantage to VoIP as compared to a standard PBX system, however. While regular phone systems stay operative in the event of a power outage, VoIP systems that rely upon a working Internet connection will not. In order to make sure your contact center remains functioning during a power outage, make sure there is a backup plan in place.

2. Auto Number Identification (ANI)

ANI is a must-have feature for toll-free phone lines, serving a similar function as caller ID for personal phones. With ANI, users can see the telephone number (or Directory Number) for all incoming calls in real time. However, users should note that the underlying technology for ANI is different than that of caller ID. ANI works by transmitting information about Digital Tone Multi-Frequency (DTMF)—the auditory signature generated by pressing the keys of a phone. Unlike caller ID, ANI cannot be blocked. AT&T developed and patented ANI technology.

Agents at contact centers benefit from knowing callers' geographic location. This information allows them to transmit region-specific information or to forward the call to another agent who represents that region. ANI also assists with customer authentication, making it more difficult to steal a customer's identity.

One potential limitation of ANI is that the technology cannot identify individual extension numbers. This can make the authentication process more difficult if a customer is calling from work. To address this limitation, ask new and potential customers to provide multiple phone numbers—and use a CRM program capable of storing all contact information.

3. Dialed Number Identification System (DNIS)

DNIS informs the recipients of incoming calls and the number that the caller first dialed. This feature is indispensable for contact centers, where calls from multiple 800 and 900 numbers often route to a single destination. Like ANI, DNIS relies upon DTMF technology.

For contact center agents, information provided by DNIS is vital. For example, a business might have separate toll-free numbers for sales inquiries and technical support. When an agent knows which number a caller dialed, they are better prepared to assist the caller with minimum frustration on both sides of the interaction. DNIS can also be utilized to route calls to particular agents or locations, or to set up a queue that prioritizes the most important calls.

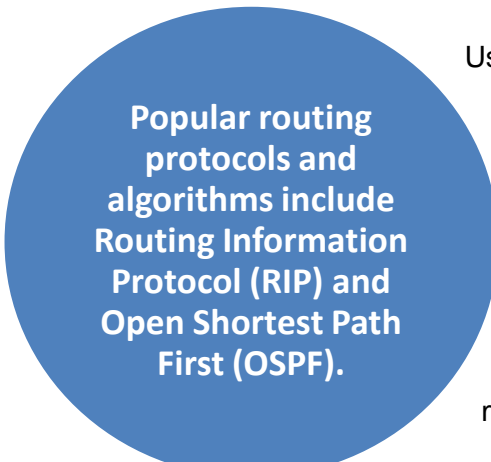
High-quality contact center software automatically records information about every call. Information about which phone number the caller dialed should be included in all records.

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4. Dynamic Routing

Dynamic routing enables optimized call routing by monitoring network layout in real time. The routing protocol will automatically determine the best path for all incoming calls. Information is shared between different routers to maintain an optimized routing system. Changes within the network are automatically relayed to all network routers as soon as one router receives updates. In contrast, static routing requires system administrators to manage routing functions manually.

There are numerous routing protocols and algorithms available. Popular choices include Routing Information Protocol (RIP) and Open Shortest Path First (OSPF).



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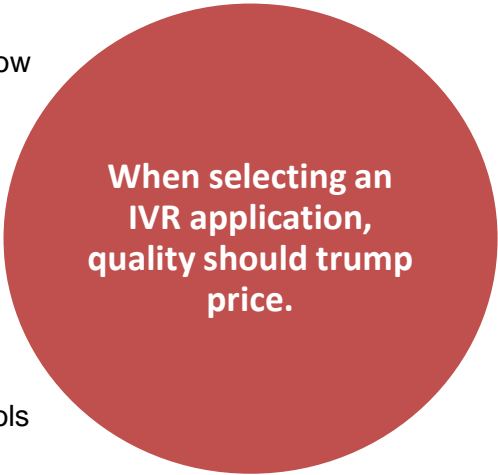
Using dynamic routing can save costs and reduce customer wait time. However, there are a few disadvantages. Dynamic routing consumes more bandwidth, increases the load on individual routers, and presents new security challenges. However, while you may have to reconfigure your network to accommodate dynamic routing, it is a must-have feature for a successful contact center.

5. Interactive Voice Response (IVR)

“If you are calling for technical assistance, please press ‘one’ or state ‘technical assistance.’” Whenever you’re on the phone and hear a menu of options, IVR technology is at work. IVR systems use caller voice input and/or touch-tone key selection to lead

customers to the proper channel for their request, whether it's a voicemail, speaking to a live representative, or something else.

Today, companies commonly use IVR to allow customers to input identifying information. With Computer Telephone Integration (CTI), IVR applications can forward a call to a human representative, who then has full access to all customer information. Know that if you are asking sensitive personal information, such as a bank account number, proper security protocols must be in place.



When selecting an IVR application, quality should trump price.

IVR can also be used to facilitate self-service. Using IVR to walk customers through solving common problems reduces the workload for customer service agents. However, don't make it too difficult for customers to reach a live agent. Today's customers want to know that they are being listened to and supported.

When selecting an IVR application, quality should trump price. Customers become extremely frustrated when IVR systems fail to understand their voice commands, so a poorly implemented IVR system can actually cost your business more in the long term.

6. Automatic Call Distributor (ACD)

An ACD is a system that works with IVR and CTI to answer incoming calls and route them to the correct location, using a specific set of pre-programmed instructions. ACDs can help balance phone line usage patterns and gather usage statistics.

In conjunction with DNIS and ANI features, ACD can provide Automatic Customer/Caller Identification services that automatically identify customers on the line. ACD systems can also identify VIP callers and automatically route them to an appropriate party, or place VIP callers at the head of a queue.

There are several different methods to distribute incoming calls. One common method is uniform call distribution, which automatically routes a new incoming call to the agent who has been idle for the longest interval. Alternatively, some businesses implement skills-based routing systems that route calls to agents who are well suited to handle particular types of calls.

One exciting new benefit offered by ACDs is the ability to offer customers the option to join a queue and then hang up.

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This feature can reduce customer frustration considerably.

7. Predictive Dialer

Predictive dialers are useful for outbound calls, such as sales outreach to prospective customers. Other common applications include surveys, appointment confirmation, and follow-up calls.

Using a list of phone numbers, a predictive dialer automatically calls numbers on the list. However, some of those numbers will be busy, or go straight to voicemail. According to some estimates, anywhere between 10 and 25 percent of agents' time is dead time. The

automatic dialer calculates the odds that a particular call will be answered, allowing agents to work with greater efficiency. Advanced predictive dialer systems can even adjust the speed of calls depending on agent availability, skills, call time, and success rate within area code or time of day.

While predictive dialer hardware (such as a telephony voice board) is available, many contact centers are increasingly relying on predictive dialer software. Software solutions can work just as well as hardware, and requires less investment and maintenance. Predictive dialer software is also indispensable for setting up agents in remote work environments.

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8. Workforce Management Dashboard

Technology isn't the most important component of your contact center; customer service agents are. But software helps to optimize the workforce. When using contact center software, you are collecting huge amounts of data. A workforce management dashboard allows contact center managers to view data in both real time and historically, with a user-friendly format.

Historical data should be used to plan employees' work schedules. Contact centers need to have the right number of agents available at any given time. Too many agents on duty at the same time wastes money, but too few runs the risk of infuriating customers with longer wait times.

Data can also help contact centers make strategic decisions about its future course. Here are some Key Performance Indicators to pay particular attention to:

- First call resolution (FCR)
- Average time in queue
- Average abandonment rate
- Average speed of answer
- Average handle time

KPIs can also be utilized to evaluate the performance of individual agents, when done thoughtfully and with an eye towards helping agents to improve performance. Implementing hard and fast rules about average handle time, for example, can actually be counter-productive if agents are incentivized to be overly brief with customers. Employee turnover rate can also be affected by evaluation procedures.

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Contact center software provides more than just historical data. Now, managers also have access to real-time data through the workforce management dashboard. Armed with critical knowledge such as average wait time, managers can make in-the-moment decisions that benefit call center operations.

9. Social Media Management

Scenario: An unhappy customer bypasses direct contact with the company and instead takes to Twitter with complaints. For many businesses, this situation has become all too

common. That's why an effective contact center solution needs to include applications for managing social media.

With a system in place to monitor social media, agents can respond to potential problems quickly. A fast and well-considered response can actually enhance a company's public reputation, instead of acting as an albatross. To respond effectively, however, businesses need to incorporate social media into their contact centers and train agents in effective response tactics.

A fast and well-considered response on social media can actually enhance a company's public reputation, instead of acting as an albatross.

Running a contact center successfully can feel like juggling knives. But with the right tools, businesses can construct and maintain a contact center that operates like a well-oiled machine and keeps customers happy.

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