

Quarterly Industry News

Volume 3: Issue 3

MESSAGE FROM THE CEO

PROVIDING FIRST-LINE CUSTOMER SUPPORT TO ENTERPRISE VOIP CUSTOMERS: WHAT TO CONSIDER

To date, no service provider has discovered how to fully automate interaction with the Enterprise VoIP customer – though some have tried. Whether it is because of user preference (“I want to hear a human voice”), the required immediacy of response or the complexity of the questions, there are always situations where service providers need to manage the first line of interaction with their customers. Many companies, and specifically telephone companies, have been built on one central idea: great customer interaction differentiates the service provider as a leader among peers. What, though, is great customer interaction in the Enterprise VoIP space?

Developments in software-based automation of the past 20 years have made customers more inclined (and willing) to find online assistance and, therefore, Communications/VoIP service providers more interested in providing online assistance and automation in lieu of direct human interaction when possible. In the brief words below I will offer you my thoughts on what comprises a good package of first-line customer support. The opinions are based on my experience watching numerous Enterprise VoIP operators deploy and conduct business. For an insider’s perspective, please read Jim Kaiser’s article in our [Voice from the Industry](#) section of this newsletter. Jim is President of J-Curve Technologies and brings the perspective of someone at the forefront of the communications service provider first-line customer support market.

A service provider needs great systems, great processes and a conscientious in-house department or outsourced group of support professionals. As usual, there is a lot more to be said about these items than space permits, but I’ve tried to address the most important considerations. For more detailed information, see our forthcoming white paper on Enterprise VoIP Customer Support to be released in 2012.

Great Systems

As you plan how support will be performed, it is crucial to understand what information will be required to assist customers immediately. Customers are growing accustomed to certain self-service tools like bandwidth continuity testing, bandwidth speed testing, phone registration data, account upgrade/downgrade capabilities, etc. If a conversation/IM session is required with a live CSR (Customer Service Representative), that person will require access to call detail records and current network technical information in order to field question intelligently. The CSR also needs the ability to adjust complex technical settings, the ability to kick off multi-step RMA procedures and beyond.

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In aggregate, it takes considerable effort, and potentially, considerable cost to standup the OSS/BSS that can deliver the information that is expected in a professional communications offering. To efficiently use capital, it is best to understand the support levels required and prioritize the systems in order of necessity. Further, as the service offering gains traction and you want to maintain momentum, it is good to allocate incremental budget to maintenance and improvement of your support systems.

Great Processes

If you are going to run a customer support organization, it is time to break out your flow-charting software. A well-organized support organization translates into customer satisfaction. Processes are important for two reasons: first, to maintain quality control (essentially replicate the customer experience irrespective of who answers the phone/IM/email; and Second, to document information in an accepted format and location so that there is continuity to rectify any issue that is not immediately resolved. This process should start with an initial email you send to your new customers and that includes all communications and interactions in the customer lifecycle. It is imperative to document how interactions should proceed, when hand-offs between first-line support and more experienced technical or managerial organizations should occur, and how specific diagnostics should be performed to isolate the issue. Suffice it to say, a well-functioning customer support organization should have 90-95% of all potential issues documented, scripted and understood before any live interaction occurs. There will always be outliers; that is why the last category is the most important.

Great People

Customer support requires smart, dedicated, empathetic people. These CSRs range from being friendly and constructive in phone and written communications to those CSRs that understand the technology well enough to make minor technical changes or to diagnose underlying problems. If you read customer feedback comments for a retail product or service, you will see that customers respond very positively to intelligent assistance with a smile, professional presentation and intuitive interfaces (5 stars) and very negatively to incompetence, disorganization or a non-intuitive approach to resolving business issues (1 star). While great systems and great processes are important, these are largely invisible to the customer. When all is said and done, though, a customer with a support issue forms an impression based on the person or people with whom they interact. It's all about the people. Your goal is to hire the right person and train them to be great.

First-line customer support is an opportunity to impress your customer, which then creates strong word-of-mouth and growth. Do a consistent great job and referrals roll in. Do a poor job, and you miss opportunities for growth, and you end up with a high churn rate. Of course, success in this arena is dynamic as you craft or re-craft your support organization to meet the increasing expectations of customers and the increasing support 'table stakes' available from competition. Assuming the other parts of your business are working, an investment in support systems, planning and people is an investment in the future success of your Enterprise VoIP service business.

Micah Singer, CEO

Customer Corner

A Conversation with Ian MacIver, CEO, Stour Marine

Who is Stour Marine and what is your offering?

Stour Marine is a UK Mobile phone service provider that sells to retail customers through its brand Greenfone.com. Stour Marine also has an international wholesale minutes business.

Where are your headquarters located?

Suffolk, England, UK.

Please explain how your business is unique (i.e., your market differentiation). Our readers always enjoy any “out-of-the-box” nuggets about your Company that you’d care to share.

Stour Marine provides both wholesale direct international routes with presentation of Calling Line ID (CLI) and international grey routes where CLI is seldom available. As a UK Mobile MVNO, we provide full 3G coverage across the UK through a national roaming agreement. Our interest is to merge environment sustainability with communications. We have our own sustainability web site www.biggreenbang.co.uk.

Can you prognosticate about the future and/or describe any current and key industry trends to which you are responding.

There is always talk about how the value chain is moving from voice to data. There seems to be a lot of concern from large operators that the voice sectors of their business are shrinking and that they should charge more for IP Ethernet services. After spending over 30 years in the industry, I have heard this argument many times and we still have strong voice traffic between international destinations. From a carrier network operator’s perspective, the big shift has been from direct bi-lateral routes to the grey markets – movement completely facilitated by the improvement in technologies (like VoIP).

How has VoIP Logic been of service to Stour Marine?

VoIP Logic allows us to manage our Wholesale minutes business without the worry or cost of running a support and hosting team or running and maintaining the VoIP technology infrastructure. They save us money in the way they offer their service to us.

Stour Marine is an independent UK company which provides complete wireless access installations to public venues, commercial and educational premises and private homes.

Stour Marine is also a new UK mobile operator providing our customers with the ability to make phone calls from their mobile devices which support SIP.

VoIP Regulatory Issues

ANDREW ISAR, PRESIDENT OF MILLER ISAR, INC.

FCC Shifts VoIP Access Paradigm

We have touched on the narrowing of differences between VoIP and conventional voice telephony regulatory here before, and do so again as the FCC has ruled that interconnected VoIP (iVoIP) and voice telephony traffic will now be subject to the same interstate per minute access charges paid to network carriers. Under its October 27, 2011 Connect America Fund & Intercarrier Compensation Reform Order and FNPRM, the FCC resolved a long standing debate over what, if any, access charges should be imposed on iVoIP traffic by network carriers. According to the Commission's Executive Summary, released pending a final order, the Commission stated that "toll" VoIP traffic transported over the public switched telephone network "will be equal to interstate rates applicable to non-VoIP traffic, and default charges for other VoIP-PSTN traffic will be the applicable reciprocal compensation rates." Though details will be in the final order, the FCC clarified that current per minute telephony access charges will apply to iVoIP traffic. The Order, which also tackles a host of other intercarrier compensation and universal service issues, will be implemented through a transitional period during which time intercarrier compensation—access charges—will decrease and eventually be eliminated altogether. iVoIP providers have already been subject to conventional access charges by many network carriers for years, despite challenges, in some cases successful. Nevertheless, the FCC's order now establishes a definitive framework—or FCC-termed "glide path"—to reform the entirety of intercarrier compensation consistent with its goals to promote broadband development.

iVoIP providers will need to adjust to this new reality of initially higher interconnection costs in the short term. Over time it becomes clear that in removing the distinction between iVoIP and telephony intercarrier compensation methodology, the FCC is further narrowing, if not nearly eliminating, the broader regulatory distinction between iVoIP and telephony as we move ever closer to a purely digital broadband world.

Andrew Isar is President of Miller Isar, Inc. www.millerisar.com. He may be contacted at 253.851.6700, or via email at aisar@millerisar.com.

Founded in 1991, Miller Isar, Inc. concentrates on the telecommunications industry. Headquartered near Seattle, WA, with offices in Philadelphia, PA, Miller Isar focuses its practice on Regulatory Compliance, Public Policy, and Business Practices, as they relate to Regulatory obligations.

www.millerisar.com

Industry News and Trends

IBM's Annual Tech Trends Report 2011

How business analytics, mobile, cloud and social business will affect skills development

<https://www.ibm.com/developerworks/mydeveloperworks/files/app/file/110ccd08-25d9-4932-9bcc-c583868c9f31?lang=en>

Cisco solidifies cloud strategy, launches CloudVerse

<http://www.zdnet.com/blog/btl/cisco-solidifies-cloud-strategy-launches-cloudverse/64709>

Consumer VoIP services grow in Q3: But cable operators' success with VoIP may have peaked

<http://www.networkworld.com/newsletters/converg/2011/1128/11convergence1.html>

Visualizing the Global Digital Divide By Mapping Internet And Population

http://vis4.net/blog/posts/mapping-internet-and-population/?piwik_campaign=rss&piwik_kwd=2927

28% of American adults use mobile and social location-based services

<http://pewinternet.org/Reports/2011/Location.aspx>

Google+ Hangouts Enable Free Phone Calls

<http://www.eweek.com/c/a/VOIP-and-Telephony/Google-Hangouts-Enables-Phone-Calls-820529/>

Voice Search arrives in the Middle East: Voice Search in Arabic and Hebrew for Android and iPhone users.

<http://googlemobile.blogspot.com/2011/12/voice-search-arrives-in-middle-east.html>

Americans Viewed 42 Billion Online Videos in October

http://mashable.com/2011/11/29/online-video-views/?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+Mashable+%28Mashable%29

Portugal Telecom, Sonaecom and Vodafone win in Portugal's 4G auction

<http://www.telecoms.com/37383/portugal-telecom-sonaecom-and-vodafone-win-in-portugals-4g-auction/>

Researcher's Video Shows Secret Software on Millions of Phones Logging Everything

<http://www.wired.com/threatlevel/2011/11/secret-software-logging-video/>

Android dominates as U.S. smartphone ownership hits 90M

http://www.fiercemobilecontent.com/story/comscore-android-dominates-us-smartphone-ownership-hits-90m/2011-12-05?utm_medium=nl&utm_source=internal#ixzz1fgNMVi9v

AT&T to offer free mobile VoIP app for international calls

<http://www.networkworld.com/newsletters/converg/2011/1107/11convergence2.html>

The Future of VoIP: Regulatory Storm Clouds on the Horizon

<http://www.tmcnet.com/voip/features/articles/234390-future-voip-regulatory-storm-clouds-the-horizon.htm>

App users to grow 31.9 million over 2012

http://mobilesquared.co.uk/news/App%20users%20to%20grow%2031.9%20mil.%20over%202012_178

Voice from the Industry

CUSTOMER SERVICE IS THE NEW SALES: WHY CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE MATTERS IN THE MOBILE AGE

By Jim Kaiser

Many hosted VoIP providers are so focused on acquiring customers and investing in their front-end sales processes that the Customer Experience is often neglected or treated as an afterthought. In order to create a successful business, you need to acquire customers and already have in place a strategy for how you will deal with them when there is a problem. This has always simply been the natural order of things, right? Well, here's another way of looking at this issue....

Many of the most successful companies in the world have figured out that Customer Service is the New Sales! In the Information Age, customers are more sophisticated, the Sales environment has changed, our industry is highly mobile, and you can really distinguish your business specifically through the Customer Experience. In essence, when you craft your Customer Service strategy, don't think of it as your goalkeeper. Think of your CSRs as your mid-fielders—they can score (close an up-sell) but they are also well versed in protecting the goal (fix problems). Doing both in a single organization seems to be tied to success in today's communications services market. Here are my thoughts on why this is the case.

Customers Have Changed

Today's sophisticated customers are not easily impressed. They demand value beyond the features of a product or service. Due to the competitive environment, they want a business partner that is willing to take risks, provide solutions and invest in the relationship with them by providing great tools and exemplary customer support. Customers demand that their provider understands their specific industry, business model and even end-user customers. To add complexity to the relationship, customers are impatient. Instead of allowing time for your sales professionals to meet them in person, present beautiful charts and generally wow them, now communication services are sold with little or no face time, responses are expected to be rapid and the cost expectations are aggressive. Customer support personnel are well positioned to perform this 'always-on' sales role.

The Sales Environment Has Changed

The Sales environment has also significantly changed. Sales professionals have been required to evolve from activity-based cold-calling product sellers to "solutions" sellers who can solve complex business issues much like a service consultant. For add-on sales, up-sells and even for fielding initial inquiries, the economical thing to do is to make sure your customer support team is well versed and can provide more than just the traditional interaction with internal technical departments. They must also interface comfortably with sales and around sales issues. With such a fierce competitive landscape, this serves as an expansion of your sales team and matches the reality of where some selling has started to occur (in this interaction between End Users and first-line customer support personnel).

Reduce Churn

Your customer support organization is the most important part of your company when it comes to reducing churn. If you figure that on average it costs seven to ten times more to acquire a customer than to keep one, then the math suggests that it makes best sense to invest in keeping existing clients. The sales effort only begins when you sign a new client. The vast majority of interaction between the End User and their Service provider occurs post sales and via first-line customer support personnel. Rather than considering the job done at the point of the sale, consider that investments in Customer Support will pay rapid dividends if you do find reduced churn rates.

Opt-In Selling

There is a growing trend that allows potential customers to opt into conversations or IM sessions with sales support personnel. This trend means that customer support personnel must be better versed in some of the points of sales merely because they are an easy way for the end user or potential end user to get in touch instantly. Opt-in selling mixes very nicely with a 24/7-customer support organization that has had cross-over training in inside sales.

In these many ways, customer support and inside sales / sales support are merging. As a provider of value-added customer service at J-Curve, we frequently see questions on the topic of supporting up-sells, answering the phone when leads call and other sales-focused tasks. I believe that with the changing consumer and the increased value that a consumer places on a live person's voice, IM or email, customer service is well positioned to become either a requirement of every service offering or a truly effective way to differentiate a 'white glove' service from the rest.

Jim Kaiser, CEO

J-Curve Technologies

J-Curve, based in Phoenix, is a leading provider of technical and customer support services for the VoIP and Cloud Communications industry.

VoIP Logic: News & Notes

CONFERENCES

VoIP Logic will be attending the following trade events:

January 15 – 18, 2012

PTC 2012

Honolulu, HI

<http://www.ptc.org/>

February 1 – 3, 2012

IT EXPO 2012

Miami, FL

<http://itexpo.tmcnet.com/east12/>

March 27 – 28, 2012

Channel Partners 2012

Las Vegas, NV

<http://www.channelpartnersconference.com/2012/vegas/exhibit/>

April 15 – 18, 2012

CompTel Spring 2012

San Francisco, CA

<http://www.comptel.org/>

May 8 – 10, 2012

CTIA Wireless

New Orleans, LA

http://www.ctia.org/conventions_events/wireless/

May 14 – 16, 2012

ITW

Chicago, IL

<http://www.internationaltelecomsweek.com/>

June 19 – 22, 2012

CommunicAsia

Singapore

<http://www.communicasia.com/>

October 14 – 18, 2012

Gitex

Dubai, UAE

<http://www.gitex.com/>

Key Contacts

Sales:

sales@voiplogic.com

Technical support:

support@voiplogic.com

Careers:

jobs@voiplogic.com

Partnerships:

partners@voiplogic.com

Press inquiries:

press@voiplogic.com

