Unified Communications and CRM: The Integration that Keeps on Giving

Capitalizing on new capabilities to increase first contact resolution, satisfaction and savings.

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Executive Summary

The unification trend started on the enterprise side back in the 80's. It was common practice to purchase PBX's and voicemail from point vendors. In later years, it was email and Web servers.

Maintaining and supporting separate systems became problematic for the IT department. It meant sending technicians off to different certification courses and trying to keep track of ever-changing software fixes and vendor-specific release schedules.

If something went wrong, IT found themselves in endless finger-pointing discussions with vendors as they tried to isolate the source of performance glitches. Employees had to learn and relearn different operational procedures. Nothing was easy. As a result the switch vendors integrated more capabilities into the core offering.

About two decades later, the unification trend found its way into the contact center environment with the advent of Unified Communications (UC) and workforce optimization (WFO) suites. The concept was to install a tightly integrated suite of applications from a single vendor.

Going into 2010, we are two steps beyond these solutions. Today's contact centers can reap great benefits from the unification of all major contact center applications architected around a common platform, integrated with a highly advanced customer relationship management application.

In this white paper, we discuss how these technologies have evolved to deliver business benefits, and work together to drive ROI competitive advantages for the enterprise.

Introduction

In today's world we communicate in many ways. There is proliferation of non-real-time communications in our business and personal lives. Dealing with the growing deluge of emails, voice mails, telephone calls, chat sessions, and instant messages has created a strain on knowledge worker productivity. Consider the following:

- 110 billion text messages are transmitted every month - roughly 14 per day per cellular customer

- 71% of US households have Internet access at work or home

- 56% of Internet users send or read an email daily

- The average corporate user sends 34 and receives 99 e-mails a day

- Email accounted for 24% of call center contacts in 2007

In the 90's, switch vendors responded with unified messaging (UM) solutions. Displays on high-end phone terminals or workstations showed voice mail, fax, and e-mail messages in a common inbox. Users no longer had to separately listen to voice messages from their phone, open their PC's to check emails, or walk over to the nearest fax machine.

However, UM did not accommodate live phone calls or instant messages. For the most part, it required users to be at their desktops to retrieve messages. Further, the only improvement was in access. Users were still required to search for answers elsewhere. This usually meant contacting someone else who also was not immediately available. Then, once the answers were in hand, they had to call or message back – not knowing the location of the individual or whether they were in a position to accept the message.

Toward a more unified solution

Unified Communications Suites

This led to the next stage in the evolution: Unified Communications (UC). Unified communications refers to both real-time and non-real-time delivery of communications based on the preferred method and location of the recipient. The primary technology enabler was the advent of VoIP. All messages are converted to the common language of Internet Protocol. This makes it possible to capture real-time calls and messages, check messages from anywhere that has Internet (access over a laptop or PDA), and collaborate with others in real-time. Users can reply in any mode – for example responding to a fax with an email message.

One of the key capabilities included with what we will call "Phase 1" of Unified Communications is "presence management" - the ability to detect whether or not a distant party is actively using their computing or voice device and therefore "present" to accept messages. The more advanced UC systems also incorporate personal preferences so users can select their communications mode and device of choice – and even alter their preferences throughout the day.

This evolved to include other essential components of the contact center suite – the PBX, ACD, IVR, and predictive dialer.

Workforce Optimization Suites

The move to an integrated workforce optimization (WFO solution) has been underway for the past five years. Several vendors have made acquisitions or added new products to position themselves as full-suite providers. While the definition of "workforce management optimization" is fluid, it is generally considered to include call recording, quality monitoring, workforce management, performance management, analytics, e-Learning, and customer surveys.

After some early hesitation, contact centers are embracing the unified WFO model. The main advantage is tight integration. Each application shares the same data and works in unison with other applications. For example, a quality monitoring (QM) application may spot a deficiency in an agent's sales skills.

The QM triggers a message to the eLearning application to send coaching material to the agent. The workforce management system examines the agent's schedule and slots the learning session at a time when the agent will be available for the required period. This level of integration is only possible when all systems share the same core platform and technology.

Integrating UC and WFO

The next stage—Phase 2 of product unification—brought together the features and benefits of a robust IP-PBX (pre-equipped with the core WFO application suite) plus the ACD, IVR, and predictive dialer. **The numerous benefits of a solution that integrates UC and WFO capabilities are summarized in Figure 1.**

Beyond the obvious economic benefits of purchasing and supporting one communications platform with harmonized applications, there are many operational benefits. This reduces training intervals and improves morale as agents and administrators no longer have to struggle with user interfaces that each has their own look and feel.

Figure 1

Phase 2 Product Unification: Unified Communications and Workforce Optimization
Contact Center Features and Benefits

	Feature	Main Benefits	Results
UNIFIED COMMUNICATIONS	IVR Self-Service	No agent intervention	Lower labor costs, lower network costs, faster service, 7X24 service
	Intelligent Call Routing	Multi-channel queries are directed to most qualified agents	Faster answers, higher FCR rates, balanced workloads, higher customer satisfaction
	Presence Management	Detects Subject Matter Expert (SME) availability to accept questions and preferred channel	Reduces burden on SME's, improves FCR
	Call and File Transfer	SME's share access to common data base	Faster resolution, reduced time demands on SME
	Unified Communications	Consolidates real- and non-real-time communications	Facilitates consistent cross-channel service levels
	Predictive Dialer	Eliminates manual dialing	Increases live contacts per hour by 200%
WORKFORCE OPTIMIZATION	Interaction Recording	Captures voice and screen interactions	Helps assure compliance, enables supervisors to evaluate call quality
	Workforce Management	Creates schedules that optimize workforce productivity	Cost savings, bolsters agent satisfaction, helps assure achievement of targeted service levels

Taking Unification to the Next Level: Integrating Unified Communications with Customer Relationship Management

When tightly integrated with an advanced CRM solution, unified communications adds a whole new dimension of functionality and ROI. The CRM becomes a tightly woven extension of the entire solution—extracting information from the call server and other applications—and delivering the information agents need when they need it.

Productivity improves because the agent works with only one application rather than the three to five normally required to process a query. Screens automatically appear in the precise sequence of workflow. Metrics can be tuned to the unique needs of each contact center. **When all systems work in harmony more good things happen, as outlined in Figure 2.**

Figure 2

Phase 3 Product Unification: Unified Communications and CRM
Additional Contact Center Features and Benefits

Feature	Main Benefits	Results
Integrated IVR	Using IVR, text-to-speech and speech-to-text capabilities, customers can seamlessly access real-time information in the CRM database such as their case or issue status, order status, HR information, and more.	Increased use of IVR, greater FCR via IVR, lower labor costs, lower network costs, faster service, 7X24 service.
Screen Pop with Caller Information	After an automatic search for customer data, or using customer-entered data in the IVR, the application pops customer contact information and pre-populates fields for the agent accepting the call. Less time is spent collecting background information.	Shorter handling time and increased customer satisfaction.
Advanced Routing based on Customer-Driven Criteria	Supports multimedia interaction routing based on customer-driven criteria, such as subject matter, account relationship, or the customer's open issue.	Increases efficiency and first contact resolution. Improves satisfaction.
Embedded Call Controls	Agents gain call controls and presence management within their desktop. They can make calls, transfer, conference in managers or subject matter experts, and more within the CRM application.	Increases efficiency, reduces dropped calls.
Case Management	Consolidates contact history and documents in one customer file.	Faster case resolution, improved customer satisfaction, increased FCR
Complete Interaction History	Tracks contact history, so agents know what has been done in the past.	Lower handle time, increased FCR.
Knowledge Management	Fast access to essential information. Control over information quality and access.	Reduced turnover, faster handle time, increased FCR. Supervisors can identify knowledge gaps.
Workflow Automation	Auto-populates forms, assures consistency in work processes and adherence to business rules.	Reduces wrap-up time and data entry errors, and achieves savings in labor costs.
Combined Case-Interaction Transfer	Transfer case and contact information together, providing next agent all the details they need to pick up right where the previous agent left-off.	Reduces handling time, reduces data entry and errors, improves speed of issue resolution, increases agent productivity, and enhances customer satisfaction.
Remote Agent Support	Enables at-home agents, remote and seasonal workers to have a complete set of interaction and case management tools on their desktop PC or laptop.	Reduced operational costs.
Auto-Attachment to Case Records	Attaches voicemails, recordings, and surveys to the case record in the CRM system. Ensures a more complete record of the customer's history for record keeping, compliance, litigation, and satisfaction measurement.	

Improving First Contact Resolution

Consider how the presence feature can improve first contact resolution (FCR) rates. First contact resolution is one of the few key performance indicators (KPI's) that is empirically related to customer satisfaction. **According to a study by the SQM Group, customer satisfaction drops 15% with each callback. About 30% of inbound calls are not resolved during the initial contact. If an agent handles 1200 calls/mo at $7.00/call and 30% are follow-ups than the cost is $2520/agent/ month.**

The main cause of low FCR rates is not providing agents with to up-to-date information. All too often information about new events—like price changes, policy changes, and new promotions—occurs without the agent's prior knowledge. Consider this familiar example.

Agent: Hello, this is Your Friendly Cable Company. Can I have your account number and the last four digits of your social security number?"

Caller: (After reciting the account number she had just entered on the IVR), "I'd like to upgrade my cable service to the "Ultra Select" package."

Agent: "That's fine. We can have that up and running for you in two days. Your new rate will be $109.95 per month."

Caller: "Excuse me. There is an ad running in our local paper that says if I sign up by the 15th of the month the price will only be $79.95 for the next six months."

Agent: "I'm sorry. I don't have any information about a promotional price in your area but if you will hold for a few minutes I will look into it." (At this point, the agent first calls her supervisor – and got voice mail. She then calls the marketing department. The administrator did not know who was in charge of the promotion and in any event all of the marketing specialists were at a trade show and she did not have anyone's cell numbers)

Agent: (Back on the line with the caller) "Mrs. Customer, I was unable to confirm the promotion you mentioned. Can you call back in three days? By then we should have some information. Anyone here can help you."

Caller: (Getting angry) "Miss, I have been on hold for 10 minutes while you tried to chase this down. I have the newspaper ad in my hands and it clearly states that the promotion is over on the 15th. That's tomorrow. I need to sign up now. Don't you know what's going on in your own company?"

Agent (apologetically): "Again, I'm sorry but we serve a lot of communities and the call center is not always notified of all the local promotions. You will have to call back."

Caller: "No I do not have to call back. I also have a promotion from the local satellite company. They are offering free installation and a free 3-month trial of their premium package. I'll just call them instead. The next time you hear from me will be to cancel my cable service!"

If our harried agent with Your Friendly Cable Company had access to the presence feature she could have consulted a directory of subject matter experts. She could tell from her desktop which SME's were available and their communications channel of choice. In this case, she would have learned that the Assistant Marketing Director was at his workstation and could be contacted via instant messaging. The agent would have alerted the SME to the question.

The Assistant Marketing Director could have replied with a message and even attached a copy of the newspaper ad. The whole interaction could have been completed in less than a minute, thus salvaging the customer as well as the agent's pride.

Improving customer satisfaction

Contact centers have multiple missions. Which objectives take priority depends on the nature of the call center (inbound, outbound, service, tech support, sales, etc.) and the type of enterprise. However, the one overriding goal of all contact centers should be to delight customers.

A common misperception is that it is OK to provide "satisfactory" service. Not so. Consumers expect to be satisfied. Customers do not expect to be delighted. Besides, there are pragmatic business reasons to strive for customer delight:

- Eighty percent of customers that ceased doing business with a company were "satisfied" at the time they switched.
- Customers that are extremely satisfied—even delighted—with service quality are not only more loyal, but also will pay a premium to receive markedly superior service.
- Satisfied customers are good ambassadors—highly satisfied customers will tell five others about your great service, while highly dissatisfied customers will tell nine others. These numbers grow, exponentially, as customers voice their feelings via social media.

The primary drivers of customer delight are speedy response and a complete and accurate answer on the first contact. Politeness, professionalism, empathy, voice clarity and the like are all important factors, but are secondary to resolving the issue at hand. The technology included in a comprehensive communications-CRM solution shortens handle time and increases the proportion of queries resolved on the initial contact.

Improving response times

By "speedy response" callers mean the time it takes to get to an agent, not how quickly the call is automatically answered and placed in queue. Time-to-answer is a function of staffing levels, call volumes, and other factors. A well designed **self-service feature** at the IVR can fully resolve the most common queries and basic transactions by leveraging data in the CRM system.

In addition, the **intelligent call routing feature** directs the query to the first available agent with the requisite skills and knowledge, based on identification data and associated customer information archived in the CRM system.

Knowledge Management
Providing agents with essential customer information ensures timely information delivery to your customers

Astute Solutions' ePowerCenter™ CRM solution with integrated communications and Agent Assist knowledge engine.

Assisting agents with timely information

Quickly directing the call to the right agent and providing that agent with essential customer information is a good start but resolving the query requires knowledge. Training can't possibly address every query agents are likely to encounter.

Research on human learning shows what we all discovered in high school—only a fraction of the knowledge gleaned from lectures and reading is retained over time. Most of it finds its way to the deep recesses of our minds where it takes some stimulus or reminder to draw it out. That's why we preferred multiple-choice over essay exams.

It's much better to have the answers at your fingertips. The **embedded knowledgebase** that is an integral part of the CRM system can deliver the right information the agent needs.

Understanding the customer's history and needs

Modern CRM systems capture a contact history for each caller. This is great for the contact center or help desk, but what if the query needs to be escalated or the agent needs to consult with an SME?

With a unified communications solution, the agent can quickly consult an **active directory** that lists SME's by expertise or job function. Associated with the individual's name will be a **presence indicator** that shows if they are available and indicates their preferred communications mode. When the connection is made, the agent can share the customer history file with the SME. The original caller waits on hold for a few short minutes while the agent obtains the required information. Callers much prefer to wait a little longer to get the correct answer versus calling back a second or even third time.

Ensuring consistent cross-channel service levels

In IP-based environments with unified communications all queries are treated the same regardless of the channel over which they were received. Data

Contact History
In IP-based environments with unified communications all queries are treated the same regardless of the channel over which they were received.

Astute Solutions' ePowerCenter™ CRM solution with integrated communications .

and voice calls that bypass the IVR are routed to the appropriate agent or queue based on business rules. This is different from the common practice of routing emails, fax, and text messages to special queues where they are handled only when agents have downtime from the phones.

While the level of email queries has grown over the years, it is still far behind initial projections. The main reason is the tendency of contact centers to apply different service levels to real-time vs. non-real time contacts. According to research conducted by ICMI (International Customer Management Institute), the accepted email service response time for over 60 percent of contact centers is 24 hours or more. There is little reason to believe that email messages are less important than telephone calls. Unified communications empowers the contact center to apply the same service levels to all types of queries.

Automating workflows

An important advantage of a tightly integrated call server/CRM solution is that work processes are sequenced with agent actions. Forms are pre-populated with basic customer information. There is no need to access multiple data applications and data bases to complete standard agent work processes.

Service levels and productivity improve without additions to headcount. Errors are reduced as all employees in the enterprise have permission-based access to the same data bases and updates. Corrections are automatically applied to all customer data bases.

Supporting remote agents

With IP-based communications networks, contact center agents can work just as effectively from their homes as from large centralized offices.

A 2006 ICMI research project showed that 28% of the call centers surveyed used home agents in some form and that another 15% had a pilot program in place. Home agents tend to be better educated and more committed to their jobs then on-site agents. As well, the process opens up new labor pools such as stay-at-home moms, students, disabled, persons, and military spouses.

Access to remote agents provides greater flexibility in handling seasonal surges in call volumes and providing emergency relief in the event that a brick and mortar site has to be closed due to weather, illness, or technical problems. It is important that service quality be consistent with remote and facilities-based agents.

Since all contact center applications are launched by servers on a common VoIP backbone, remote agents are seamlessly and securely connected to the

same compliance recording, quality monitoring, workforce management, and CRM systems that are used in physical sites.

Remote agents can send and receive multimedia messages and access the same knowledge base and network of SME's. Coaching and eLearning tools are extended in the same way. The end result is consistent service level performance from all agent groups.

The Business Case for a Unified Solution

The main economic advantages of integrating communications and CRM applications are listed in Figure 3.

Figure 3 does not itemize every source of savings, nor does it address the larger scale impact from increased customer retention and the upside revenue possibilities.

In fact, one of the biggest contributors to customer churn is poor or inadequate customer service. According to McKinsey & Co, the well-known management consulting firm, a five percent reduction in the customer defection rate can increase profits by 25 to 80 percent.

Based on the capabilities outlined previously, unifying CRM and communications can improve retention and reduce the defection rate. Even by moving the needle a percentage point or two, the impact on revenue and profitability is significant.

Final Comments

With the alliance of Interactive Intelligence and Astute Solutions, companies benefit from an all-in-one communications platform augmented with a highly advanced customer relationship management application. While it is not our role as a consulting company to endorse any specific vendors, we do applaud the leadership exhibited by these companies in pioneering what will surely become a continuing trend going forward. ■

Figure 3
Economic Benefits of a Unifed Communications Platform Integrated with CRM

Category	Source
Lower interaction costs	Lower average handling time Increased use of lower cost self-service channels as a percentage of total interactions Reduced escalations and transfers Streamlined processes
Increased customer retention	Consistent cross-channel service Increased first contact resolution Increased customer satisfaction
Lower customer acquisition costs	Increased customer loyalty Improved word of mouth Increased repurchase intent
Lower solution acquisition cost	Only one call server to purchase No need for costly separate CTI integrations Less need for separate servers and applications for the contact center. Fewer license fees
Single vendor advantages	No need for separate contracts with multiple vendors Fewer SLA agreements to negotiate and administer Single point-of-contact accountability
Reduced implementation time and expense	"Out of the Box" functionality sharply reduces installation time and associated service costs Common enterprise-wide features and user interfaces reduced training needs.
Simplified administration	Centralized administration tools, available across the network More accurate data bases Fewer configuration errors
Lower product support costs	Common software release schedule for all applications Fewer application servers to maintain Reduced technician training/certification requirements
More efficient use of network resources	Intelligent call routing reduces hold times No toll charges for internal calls and messages routed over the IP network Faster handle times and higher FCR reduces demand for network capacity
Lower training costs and faster ramp-up	Common look and feel of all applications Desktop, features, and screen pops can be configured for each agent
Lower operational costs	Lower cost to support and enable remote users Capitalize on non-traditional, at-home and remote workforce Lower facility costs and office space requirements

About the Author

Dick Bucci is Senior Consultant for The PELORUS Group (www.pelorus-group.com) where he specializes in contact center technologies. He has authored in-depth reports on interactive voice response, workforce management, performance management, and interaction recording. Dick's articles and observations have been published in CRM Today, Contact Center World, Customer Interaction Solutions, CRM Magazine, Call Center Magazine, Contact Professional, Call Center News, Speech Technology, Workforce Performance Solutions, and several other trade and business publications. Dick is also managing director of Technology Marketing Associates, a marketing consulting firm. He has over 30 years of experience in the telecommunications industry.

About Astute Solutions

Astute Solutions delivers CRM, knowledge management and multi-channel contact center software and services that enable companies to create significant value through customer interactions—in the contact center, on the Web and in the field. Astute's award-winning solutions enable you to:

- Build exceptional relationships with your customers through high-value, personalized interaction experiences
- Improve interaction efficiency and effectiveness by empowering representatives with the right information at the right time
- Reduce service costs and complexity
- Quickly identify and respond to critical issues
- Gain actionable insights that drive continuous improvement, profitability, and growth

By partnering with Astute Solutions, leading companies across a variety of industries achieve exceptional ROI by reducing overall costs, improving productivity, retaining more customers, delivering market-leading products and services, and increasing revenue.

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