

"Technology-assisted self-service interactions need to be just as personal as human interactions."

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ELECTRIC CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE

**STANDING OUT IN A COMPETITIVE
MARKET WITH A NATURAL LANGUAGE
VIRTUAL ASSISTANT.**

By Susan McDaniel, Execs in the Know

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TXU Energy customer care receives over
10 MILLION
calls per year.

EIGHTY PERCENT OF CONSUMERS ARE STILL USING TRADITIONAL SERVICE CHANNELS (PHONE, EMAIL AND IN-PERSON) TO CONTACT A BRAND FOR CUSTOMER SERVICE, ACCORDING TO THE “2014 CXMB CONSUMER REPORT,” RELEASED BY EXECS IN THE KNOW AND DIGITAL ROOTS. Of those interactions, 63% were via a phone call. That accounts for a lion’s share of contacts—a fact that is sometimes dwarfed by the excitement over the smaller (yet fast growing) emerging channels, such as chat or text. It’s easy to become distracted by the planning for these new channels and to feel like you have exhausted processes to enhance the traditional service channel.

Although the phone channel is the most widely used, it is unfortunately the most “unloved” channel. According to the “Accenture 2013 Global Consumer Pulse Survey,” customers are increasingly frustrated with the level of services they experience: 91% of respondents are frustrated that they have to contact a company multiple times for the same reason, 90% by being put on hold for a long time, and 89% by having to repeat their issue to multiple representatives. Think of your own experiences with phone service. First, there are the long dreaded layers of the IVR, followed by an exchange with an agent who you may not be able to understand, followed by multiple transfers with the (fingers crossed) hope that your customer service question is actually resolved at the end of it all. Unfortunately, there are copious opportunities for problems to arise and, therefore, satisfaction issues to occur.

When it comes to discussing call center technology, the IVR is probably one of the least sexy items on the list. With a distinctly negative connotation, they are often regarded as a necessary evil, and an antiquated one at that. Virtual assistants have breathed new life into the conversation by creating a less frustrating, and more productive call. However, customers today desire a personalized interaction, leaving many companies reluctant to adopt the technology that, at first glance, appears to be very rigid and structured.

This view was echoed by Tim Hickler, vice president, WW Customer Service at Amazon, at the Execs In The Know Customer Response Summit, held last February in Miami. Hickler stated, “Technology-assisted self-service interactions need to be just as personal as human interactions.”

Also present at Customer Response Summit Miami, was Jeff Camp, VP Contact Center Operations, at TXU Energy. Camp presented a case study which demonstrated that, with the right strategy, partner and roll-out, virtual assistants can lower customer effort and deliver a customized experience in a highly competitive, cost-conscious environment.

A High-Volume Environment

TXU Energy is a Texas-based electricity company and a subsidiary of Energy Future Holdings. The company powers the lives of more Texans than any other electricity company, making them the No. 1 choice in the state. Texas is the largest electricity market in the United States (the 11th largest in the world), with a hyper-competitive electric retail landscape that has more than 50 competitors and 5.5 million competitive households. To stand above its competitors, TXU Energy offers straightforward pricing, innovative products and tools, and a genuine approach to customer experience. “Our CX philosophy is pretty straightforward,” said Camp. “Our commitment to customer experience is that we treat customers as they expect to be treated—by listening and connecting with them to deliver solutions.” Customer centricity is at the center of all things they do and they measure their CX based on three main pillars: convenience, how quick and



JEFF CAMP
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easy the experience is, and personalization. “We never want our customers to be treated like a number or to feel processed. We want to serve them in a personalized way,” added Camp.

TXU Energy receives over 10 million calls per year on a variety of issues ranging from paying a bill to requesting a service move, making voice the most used channel for customer care. Due to such high call volumes, TXU Energy wanted to ensure high customer satisfaction levels in the channel, which led them to investigate IVR technology. The company has had a self-service enabled culture for six years, investing in IVR, web, mobile and digital technologies. Their IVR platform had been successful since 2009 and, over the course of four years, it saw an increase in adoption rate improvements from 23% to 38%. Although they were satisfied with their current technology, TXU Energy still felt something was missing, and in 2012, decided to start the process to replace multiple legacy IVRs.

“We knew that technology had fast-forwarded and that consumer behaviors were different,” said Camp. “Our adoption rates had plateaued and we just weren’t seeing any growth at that point. Although customer satisfaction scores were good (the low 80s), we really wanted to create a ‘wow’ customer experience.”

Introducing Personalized, “Humanized” Self-Service

TXU Energy selected natural language speech solution provider Interactions to help them achieve their goals. In addition to having a pure, natural language solution, Interactions also offers non-prompted, free-form dialogue, eliminating the need for menu-driven automation. The combination of superior technology, supported by great people, made the solution stand out. Interactions uses a human-assisted approach to speech recognition, which includes Intent Analysts that interpret garbled sound bites, allowing customers to continue in the self-service platform, for a longer period of time. “Interactions commits to making the application better, to either increase customer service scores, or the adoption rates,” said Camp. “They’re the kind of partner that puts their money where their mouth is.”

With the help of Interactions, TXU Energy introduced IVY, a trusted advisor to humanize self-service. A great deal of research went into the creation of IVY, to ensure that the personalized, natural language speech solution system would deliver a unique customer experience. Everything from gender, pace of speech, inflection and language use typical to the industry were carefully analyzed. It took nine or 10 voice auditions to select the voice talent that ultimately became IVY.

The solution was implemented easily, with very few obstacles to overcome. Camp admitted that the biggest challenge was a mental one. TXU Energy had been very set in their approach to their old IVR system and its structured menu setup. Camp said the key to overcoming it was for the team to change their mindsets early and embrace the new technology. “With natural language, you really have to free yourself from that structured thinking and let the application do what it’s supposed to,” said Camp. “Let the customer speak to the IVR and trust that the solution and the Intent Analyst will guide the customer down the right path.”


You may be wondering, what do their customers think about IVY? In short, they love it. With IVY, customers are able to get more done in less time and there has been a 32% reduction in call time in the IVR. Customer satisfaction rates have also seen an increase. “We measure customer experience, post interaction, across our business. Our old platform had an 82% satisfaction rate, but the new platform constantly runs at 92% to 93% satisfaction,” said Camp.

Increasing Bottomline Results While Reducing Customer Effort

TXU Energy has also embraced Customer Effort Score as a key driver of measuring CX, and IVY is the lowest effort channel, as rated by their customers. The company also wanted to see an improvement in adoption rates to hit their ROI targets. Once at 38%, adoption rates have jumped since the introduction of IVY. “We’re currently sitting north of 53% for containment or adoption rate, which is a huge win for us,” said Camp. “Hundreds of thousands of calls are handled in the IVR that never used to be, which also translates into agent savings.”

TXU Energy sees IVY as one of the many things that give them an edge on the competition, and well worth the effort and expense. “We think it helps set us apart as a provider in the space, that’s going to deliver the best experience,” said Camp. “The solution itself may be an investment, but it produces bottomline savings.”

Customer Success Executives are always looking for opportunities to create loyalty in their customer base and, ultimately, create brand advocates. Every touchpoint on your customer experience journey must be evaluated to identify opportunities to reduce customer effort, increase customer satisfaction, and in due course, create brand advocates. Statistics are clearly telling us that traditional calls for service are not diminishing and, in turn, we need to continue to find ways to help make the phone a pleasant, effective experience for our customers, and a cost efficient channel to the business.

Whether it is IVY or Siri, online or on the phone, companies need to look for ways to marry service interactions, to customer wants and needs. Once you have checked all of the boxes of fast, accurate, easy, fun, personal and effective, it will be time to look for new ways to enhance the service experience. 

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