The Last Mile (Energy and Utilities)

Recognizing, understanding and closing the gap in customer interactions
Learn how to address the six impact points of customer experience in the contact center in “Delivering Superior Customer Experiences in the Contact Center”.

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In general, a regulated utility is constrained to treat all customers the same with an exception for customer accounts that provide “life support” or “critical infrastructure” such as police, fire and ambulance services. Beyond these factors, the customer experience should be predictable, and quality monitoring should be tied back to processes and case disposition to ensure similarity in treatment. Although regulatory compliance may dictate that a common customer experience is the outcome, it is the Customer Service Rep (CSR) that will ultimately determine the customer’s experience at each interaction.

Even regulated utilities that are not part of deregulated markets still desire strong customer-advocacy programs. The most practical reason is to reduce complaints to regulators; but there is much more. In today’s market, utilities are given regulatory goals to achieve with related jeopardies—some of which can only be achieved in partnership with their customers. Regulations such as Renewable Energy Certificates (RECs) are a relatively new challenge for utilities, but others such as outage management are core to customer-experience goals.

This e-book discusses how focusing on the Last Mile—the final connection between your customers and your company—is where you can move customers from being merely satisfied to loyal advocates.

*Satisfied customers are not the same as loyal customers—
and are certainly not the same as “advocates.”

According to *Harvard Business Review*, increasing customer retention rates by 5% could *increase profits* from 25% to 95%.
The Last Mile is a constraint that has been identified and discussed for many years in the context of network communications. It refers to the final leg of delivering connectivity from a communications provider to a customer. If that last connection is weak—even if the rest of the network is powerful—then the connection is still going to be weak.

Within the context of customer interactions, we can see an analogous type of “Last Mile” problem. Most organizations have made huge investments in technology to enable better interactions with their customers. However, even with these investments, the reality is that the ultimate success of the interaction relies on what transpires during the interaction itself. It’s that final connection when the customer and your employee are in conversation or when a customer is navigating a self-service portal. This is where the rubber hits the road. This is the “Last Mile” in customer interactions.

According to a survey conducted by American Express Global Customer Service Barometer, Americans spend 9% more with companies providing excellent customer service.
Much of the utility industry believes that they currently provide “excellent customer service.” In fact, they have the J.D. Power Award to prove it. But in reality, it is a challenge to understand what it is like for your customers to interact with the organization. You may know what you want the customers’ experience to be, but do you actually know what is the experience?

A key component of the Last Mile is understanding and addressing how your customers experience your organization—not at a single interaction level, but from a holistic view. For instance:

- Is each “touch” (phone call, email, chat, fax) an entirely new disconnected experience—or is it an extension of the last interaction?
- Can your customer-facing employees easily resume where the last interaction was suspended—regardless of the channel used previously?
- Or more likely, do your customers feel like they are starting over each and every time?

Customers want to view organizations as one seamless entity, almost as if they have their own personal concierge who knows and understands everything about them and ensures a great experience, regardless of what they need. A critical component of the Last Mile is the ability to compassionately guide the interaction to the best possible outcome for the customer and the organization. Customer-facing employees need the capability to guide smarter interactions with the customer across all touchpoints.
Strengthening the Last Mile through Smarter Interactions

Any customer-facing employee—regardless of the channel they are managing—needs to be able to re-engage with a customer at the point where they left off in a previous interaction. This is an important consideration since most transactions are not accomplished in one interaction, but rather over time and across channels.

While a company must be confident that its customer-facing employees can do their jobs well, the reality is that the majority of the employees typically have limited knowledge, education, training or experience. This is where technology can help move the company to a more customer-centric way of doing business, empowering your customer-facing employees to:

• Correctly and consistently apply ever-changing policies, procedures and regulatory mandates (and know when to make proper exceptions)

• Quickly assess issues and concerns and make educated recommendations that serve both the customer and the organization

• Provide personalized follow-up that delivers on the commitments of the interaction

Addressing this Last Mile constraint transforms interactions with customers. Employing Intelligent Guidance leads your customer-facing employees to better experiences and better outcomes. It effectively drives first-call resolutions achieving a deeper emotional customer connection. This customer bonding has a direct cause-and-effect linkage to those success metrics the organization is so desperately seeking: cross-/upselling, lifetime value/profitability, retention/loyalty and advocacy. Smarter interactions transform transactions into conversations that customers enjoy and value.
Experiences that produce emotional bonding achieve much greater loyalty and advocacy.

Organizations that were successful in creating both functional and emotional bonding had:

- higher retention ratios: 84% versus 30%
- higher cross-/upsell ratios: 82% versus 16%

*Source: OgilvyOne worldwide™ analysis of the annual Millward Brown study of 28,000 worldwide brands (BrandZ™)3 sponsored by WPP.*

Smarter interactions should be conversational and:

- Create an emotional bond with the caller
- Connect to their personal situation—including their unique needs and preferences
- Valuable to the caller, not just the organization
- Leave a lasting memory—a positive experience so powerful that it burns a memory of your organization’s brand into the consumer’s mind
Intelligent Guidance allows you to personalize every experience by leveraging the insight you have about each customer, in the context of each interaction. With real-time Intelligent Guidance, every member of the Last Mile is well-equipped to perform consistently and correctly every time. With Intelligent Guidance, you can insulate employees from processes and workflow that don’t add value to the interaction while simultaneously presenting value-added guidance, personalization and expert recommendations. This enables employees to respond quickly and appropriately to each customer for better, faster, more effective interactions. Using Intelligent Guidance, it is typical to free up 50% to 80% of the existing interaction time.

Value-building activities can then be added into that freed-up time to boost the value delivered to the customer and the organization. And when the process changes—possibly due to strategic, competitive or regulatory requirements—every member of the Last Mile will be led to execute the new process as soon as the changed interaction guide is published into action.

What’s the secret to greater customer loyalty and advocacy?

1) The large amounts of wasted time (in red)
2) The things that the customer may not value but are mandated to be done (in yellow)
3) The limited amount of valuable time (in green)

Audits, Design and Business Transformation:
Removing Waste and Adding Value to Enable Exceptional Customer Experiences

- Efficiency gains
- Cost reduction
- Little revenue increase
- Greater efficiency and effectiveness
- Greater cost reductions
- Significant revenue increase
Businesses that present “one” organization to their customers and are able to quickly and seamlessly “pick up and go” from the last interaction, stand to deliver much better experiences and outcomes.

**One Customer—Two Very Different Experiences**

**The Problem: No Ability to “Suspend and Resume” the Interaction**

Consider a utility customer who is looking to reduce their energy bill.

- He may start on the web researching available programs and possibly starting an application. (So far so good.)

- Realizing he needs more information, he abandons the application and calls or emails the utility regarding a question he has with the application. Here he must explain to the agent what transpired on the web as a result of his search and possibly provide the same information to the agent up to his stopping point.

- Once his questions are answered, he must now return to the online application and start the process over again from the beginning.

In this example, each time the customer interacted with the utility, his inquiry was treated as a separate, distinct interaction. More importantly, the utility company was unaware of the previous interactions and could not proactively pick up where the previous interaction suspended.

How do you think this made the customer feel about his experience? He may proceed with the application, however, how likely do you think it is that the customer will recommend his experience to friends and family as a unique and “pleasurable experience”?

According to Richard Snow at Ventana Research, “Excellent experiences include having the (contact center) agent recognize you, know all about you (including your past interactions regardless of the channel of communication) and personalize the response (such as making a special offer).”
Does your customer see one organization?

Poor customer service costs UK businesses £15.3 billion per year.

The Solution: Using the “Suspend and Resume” Capability

Now consider the same utility customer, looking to reduce their energy bill, but this time with the “suspend and resume” capability in place.

• He may start on the web researching available programs and possibly starting an application. (So far so good.) Realizing he needs more information, he abandons the application and calls or emails the utility regarding a question he has with the application.

• When he calls the utility for information, the agent can see what has transpired. The customer does not have to repeat his information. The agent can now not only answer the customer’s questions, but complete the application where he left off and submit it.

• Plus, because Intelligent Guidance with the “suspend and resume” capability is powering the transaction across all channels, it doesn’t matter how the customer chooses to interact. Now the application process can progress even faster. The application is submitted and Intelligent Guidance automatically triggers the approval process.

What a difference! From the customer’s perspective, researching and applying for the discount was a more streamlined, cohesive and pleasant experience. From the utilities point of view, it was able to track and monitor the customer’s activity and interest and respond to his needs much more quickly—thereby ensuring a happy, loyal customer who will share his experience and recommend the process to his friends and family.

With Intelligent Guidance powering the transaction across all channels, it doesn’t matter how the customer chooses to interact. Any customer-facing employee—regardless of the channel they are managing—can re-engage with the customer at the point where they left off in a previous interaction—without missing a beat.
Set Them Free to Drive Revenue and Nurture Advocacy

Customer-facing employees are asked to do much with little:

• At a high level, they are expected to deliver your brand promise, drive revenue, build loyalty and nurture advocacy. In order to do this, they must engage with customers at a personal level and exhibit excellent people skills.

• At a product level, they must understand your offerings and your promotions. They must be skilled at accessing the information needed in the many supporting applications that drive the business, and diligent at recording and documenting the conversation. They must know how to follow processes and be compliant throughout.

Your customer-facing employees are the consummate problem-solvers; they are the prolific up-sellers. They are your face to the customer, and what happens in conversation with them is what the customer will remember and tell others about.
Your Customer-facing Employees Shape the Customer’s Experience During the Last Mile

Your people have the power to either strengthen your brand experience—or destroy it. To deliver in the Last Mile, organizations need to focus not only on their internal 360-degree view of the customer, but more importantly, on the customer’s 360-degree view of the organization. When an organization can finally present a single presence to the customer, and not a multitude of distinct channels with distinct experiences, we begin to see a transformational impact on loyalty and advocacy.

Much can be done to streamline and design the customer interactions to ensure better outcomes for the customer, the employee and the organization. Similar to the Last Mile in network connections, if the final connection between the customer and your employee is weak—even if the rest of the infrastructure is powerful—the end-result of the interaction is going to be weak. Smarter interactions empower your employees to consistently, efficiently and confidently engage with customers in the Last Mile.
Cincom recognizes that it is your people—your customer-facing employees—who represent your brand. And in each conversation, it is the experience that they deliver to your customers that either builds value for your brand or destroys it. It is a powerful role to play.

Since 1968, Cincom has helped thousands of clients worldwide by solving complex business problems with its software and services. Cincom is an IBM Premier Business Partner and has been integrating IBM technologies and leveraging IBM services for over 10 years.

Cincom’s Customer Experience Management initiative is focused on helping companies and their employees consistently deliver experiences that not only build your brand, but are valuable to both your customers and your organization. Cincom does this through its Cincom® Synchrony™ offering that guides employees to deliver smarter interactions.

For more information about how Cincom Synchrony enables smarter interactions, visit www.synchrony.cincom.com, or email Brian Flagg at bflagg@cincom.com.
Will she build your brand or destroy it?

Every customer touch with the contact center is a test of your brand and your promise to the customer—and the stakes are high. A recent study shows that 87% of customers stopped doing business with a company after a bad customer experience. When a customer picks up the phone, your agent is the brand and possibly the only human voice that customer will experience with your business. It pays to make that experience great.

Learn how to address the six impact points of customer experience in the contact center in “Delivering Superior Customer Experiences in the Contact Center”.

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