

Q&A

## Why mobile is a silver bullet for customer care

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The most obvious advantages of mobile are immediacy, intrusiveness and interactivity – all crucial in a customer-care context, according to a senior executive with history in direct and interactive marketing.

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Text messages, in particular, are near instantaneous, get noticed – with a more than 90 percent open rate – and allow for a two-way conversation to resolve the customer care issue at hand, said Message Systems chief marketing officer Dave Lewis.

“These are the qualities that make mobile so powerful when applied to customer care, deliver the cost savings and customer experience benefits, and tee-up the bridging opportunity,” the San Francisco-based Mr. Lewis said.

In this extensive Q&A, Mr. Lewis discusses the mobile’s edge for customer care, trends in mobile usage and the evolution of the communication between brand and consumer. Please read the interview:

Not too many marketers are focused on the customer care advantages associated with mobile. Any idea why?

This reaction is not surprising. Marketers always tend to focus on the shorter term,

revenue-generating opportunities first.

I think that's why short codes, apps and even geo-fencing are all in vogue right now and get the most ink in the marketing pubs.

But what I've observed is that marketers are struggling with how to transition from one-off uses to broader, deeper customer relationships with mobile interactions at their core.

I'd suggest the customer care uses of mobile might be the answer.

Properly applied, customer care notices delivered via mobile not only reduce costs but also improve responsiveness and the overall quality of the customer experience, while setting the stage for any number of follow-on opportunities.

Aside from the brand loyalty dividend, these kinds of mobile interactions with customers can predispose them to interacting with companies on other topics too.

In other words, initiate the mobile experience on issues that are truly important to them and then bridge to marketing uses.

Of course, this needs to be carefully done and relevancy is the key, but fundamentally it's about applying event-triggered marketing rules we're all familiar with to a new medium – mobile.

While I don't see many bridging from customer care to marketing yet, there are more instances of companies leveraging mobile for customer care than you might suspect.

I think the airlines, financials and telecom carriers are out in front on this score.

How does customer care on mobile differ from other channels?

The most obvious advantages of mobile are immediacy, intrusiveness and interactivity – crucial in a customer care context.

Text messages are near instantaneous, they get noticed – over 90 percent open rate – and allow for a two-way conversation to resolve the customer care issue at hand.

These are the qualities that make mobile so powerful when applied to customer care, deliver the cost savings and customer experience benefits, and tee-up the bridging opportunity I mentioned earlier.

Yet, there's another compelling reason for mobile-enabling your customer care that shouldn't be overlooked – coverage.

Mobile is where you'll likely find your customers as smartphones and tablets rapidly displace laptops and tethered devices.

Recent studies show that nearly 40 percent read email on their mobile devices now, and that segment is much higher in some age groups.

And, of course, SMS text messaging is growing at a very rapid rate.

So mobile-enabled communications are the future, and that future is coming on fast.

But let's face it, as more and more vital customer messages are delivered to mobile devices across multiple channels, it's not enough for companies to simply communicate via mobile.

They've got to mobile-enable their customer care in ways that empower CSRs to readily access information about those messages to efficiently respond to customer inquiries and complaints.

That positive customer experience we all seek – and that customers increasingly demand of their favorite brands – depends on both the communication and support capability being in place.

Providing for this dual capability has been difficult up to now, but fortunately solutions are emerging that make it very doable.

Are we seeing effective integration of customer care and marketing in the mobile space yet?

As I pointed out, we're seeing inroads here.

Some of the bigger airlines now are smart enough to collect detailed messaging preference info from customers and act on it in value-added ways.

When my flight got delayed recently, the airline sent me a notification via both email and SMS – which dramatically upped the probability that I'd get that important message.

Also, my wireless carrier is beginning to understand the possibilities with mobilizing customer care and integrating it with their marketing processes.

Recently I went over my plan minutes for the month, so the carrier texted me: "Dial #MIN to get the details." I dialed the code, then an automated operator told me to check for a text.

This second text arrived with a bunch of numbers I didn't understand. They should have had a click-text option here taking me to their site, but they didn't.

When I got back to the office, I went to the carrier's Web site to see what's going on with my account, and briefly IM'd with a customer service rep.

She explained that I'd incurred around \$50 in overages, and provided some options. Pay the penalty on my next bill, or – here was the upsell – upgrade my account for around \$20 more per month.

I accepted the offer, and then she walked me through the account upgrade process – which will lock me in at a higher monthly rate, but save me money over the long haul by avoiding overages.

Now if the carrier had gamed this out with a little more foresight, the transition from the initial SMS text notification to the IM-based customer care interaction – and the resulting upsell – would have been seamless.

The short code call only resulted in a second text, which I couldn't really decipher, so that didn't need to be part of the conversation.

In fact, the whole exchange could have – and should have – been all been message-based, or message- and browser-based, and occurred entirely on my smartphone.

If the conversation had transitioned from SMS text to IM as quickly as possible –IM really seems to be emerging as the go-to channel for customer care scenarios like this – there would have been no issue of whether I was paying for the SMS text alerts and the call.

Which, since the entire exchange was about the carrier charging me more money, should have been top of mind on their part during both the customer care and marketing/upsell parts of the exchange.

Given the choice of media and messaging options, consumers toggle between different channels with the same brand. And yet there seems to be little effort to link the dots here, don't you think?

Yes, the gap between customer communication behavior and company communication capability is troubling.

Increasingly, customers are engaging in real time, two-way communication and hopping from one channel to the next to suit their changing needs and circumstances. And they're doing all this on their mobile devices.

This is becoming the new communication norm, at least for customers.

By contrast, most companies can't communicate the way their customers do. They're locked in their silos and still attempting to conduct one-way communication as they did in the off-line world, albeit now by digital means.

And if they've got multichannel capabilities, they're as non-integrated point solutions locked in silos too. Hence, the capability gap.

What's really troubling to me is that the customer behavioral changes are coming with heightened expectations and greater control.

This means that customers expect the brands they do business with to communicate with them how, when and where they want.

And customers can readily disconnect from them if they don't. That doesn't bode well for their customer loyalty and future profitability if companies can't close the gap.

I don't want to get too esoteric about this, but there's a symbiotic relationship between technology and customer behavior that most brands don't fully appreciate yet.

It's an accelerating, tight-looped relationship where one feeds on the other – that's what is driving the massive shifts in customer communication behavior and the attendant changes in expectations and control.

So I'd suggest that if the communication behavior/capability gap has been caused by

technology – and I believe it has – then the solution for closing it lies there, too.

Smartphones, proliferating channel choices and wireless and mobile networking have fundamentally changed the way people interact.

Enterprises and service providers haven't been able to keep pace not because they don't recognize what's going on, but because they're trying to accommodate mobile customers with legacy infrastructure.

Or they're bolting on an IM or SMS text capability without regard to integrating those channels with their existing email and Web presence. That approach won't work and needs to change.

This isn't to say that business processes and practices, metrics and measurements and even organizational structures don't need to change as well. But even if those changes were made, without the right technology you'd still be nowhere.

As I've spoken and written about it, message convergence is a customer engagement strategy for the kind of real time, interactive, cross-channel world we're entering. Yet, at its core, it's a technology-enabled strategy.

So my belief is that if we provide companies with right technology solutions to communicate in this world and achieve message convergence, the rest will follow.

Message Systems' new Mobile Momentum and Message Scope products were meant to serve a need. Can we go into some detail?

Well, I appreciate you giving me the chance to make a plug for our company and products. I'll try to be brief since most of what I want to say ties to what I've already said.

As an industry leader, Message Systems is committed to providing companies with messaging technology solutions that enable them to effectively interact with their customers regardless of what form that interaction might take.

In short, we're committed to enabling our clients to achieve message convergence and realize the marketplace advantage it will afford them.

Mobile Momentum and Message Scope are two foundational components of that solution.

Mobile Momentum is a mobile-enabled, single platform solution for cross-channel communication. It allows companies to interact with their customers in an integrated, intelligent way across their channel of choice – email, SMS and MMS, with more channel capabilities on the way soon.

With Mobile Momentum, companies can write customer engagement rules for generating or responding to messages across multiple channels based on customer preferences and company policies, and then integrate those rules into their back-end business processes and applications to create message-driven workflows.

Plus, messages can be dynamically transformed from one channel to another to suit

changing customer needs, preferences and circumstances – automatically and in real time.

Now companies can mimic changing customer communication patterns in their messaging to keep the conversation alive.

Multichannel and cross-channel interactions are already happening between customers and brands, yet they're nearly always of a choppy, stop-start nature.

Interactions might start in SMS and then resume in email or IM, but context has to be restored in each new channel.

With Mobile Momentum, the idea is to ease or facilitate message-based conversations as customers hop from SMS text to email, or the other way around.

We believe the net benefit of all this is a richer customer experience that translates into greater brand loyalty and lifetime value.

Message Scope is a similar solution that focuses on the flip side of the customer experience – customer care.

A long-running problem for enterprises, carriers and service providers is that message disposition data – the information needed to answer customer questions about email and text problems – is stored in transactional log files that bridge multiple systems.

This has meant that resolving messaging problems – spam complaints, missing messages – required IT/Ops administrators to manually slog through these log files to retrieve the data.

Message Scope changes this equation by providing a way to take message issue resolution out of the IT/Ops department and letting it be handled through regular customer service processes.

With its Web-based interface and fast search capabilities, Message Scope empowers customer care reps with precise insight into the origination, delivery and disposition of email and text messages.

It's easy to access information about individual messages or specific topics, and pull up messages by type – email, SMS or MMS) or across a date range to determine if they have been delivered, blocked, bounced or misdirected. It's easy to resend messages too, if needed.

With more and more critical communications taking digital form, we believe that the capabilities of Message Scope are essential to building any mobile-enabled business and fostering the kind of customer experience that will permit it to thrive and prosper.

You've said in the past that, increasingly, the mobile experience is becoming the customer experience. Do brands get that?

Unquestionably, some brands get the mobile/customer experience connection, and some

simply don't.

But I'd say the majority appreciates its importance even if they don't quite know how mobile fits into their business models yet and are merely experimenting with it on the fringes.

It's with this group of brands that publications like Mobile Marketer can accelerate mobile's adoption by evangelizing its importance to the customer experience and socializing successful use cases.

Another critical factor to adoption is messaging technology solutions that integrate mobile into communication infrastructure and core business processes of companies.

That's what we're working toward with our suite of integrated multichannel solutions that address all elements of the mobile customer experience.

It's also where I find mobile point solutions to be counter-productive.

While perhaps fulfilling a startup need, they tend to foster the isolation of mobile and don't lend themselves to the level of integration required for broad use across the enterprise.

And like other messaging point solutions, they can further fragment the view of the customer and inhibit the coordinated, cross channel communication central to the mobile customer experience.

As a veteran in the direct marketing and digital space, you've seen the evolution of interactive marketing transform the dialogue between brand and customer. How is mobile changing that relationship?

I appreciate your "veteran" reference – it's a nice euphuism for "old," which undeniably applies.

But if veteran means having earned a few battle scars, then that term applies, too.

Yes, I've seen our industry evolve a lot over my 20-plus years, remembering that my DM career began in the offline world – the direct mail data and list business, to be more precise.

The terms "interactive" and "dialogue" have been in our lexicon for a long time. But to be perfectly honest, I think they've been more aspiration than actual.

Only now are we on the cusp of true interactive marketing and real customer dialogue in our communications, and that's thanks mainly to mobile.

Most everything prior has been "slow mo" interactive, at best, and company-controlled monologue.

The reason I see mobile having this transformational effect is its real time, individualized, interactive and increasingly cross-channel nature.

Without a doubt, the kinds and patterns of communication it enables are profoundly

changing the brand/customer relationship and a lot more.

For one thing, control is irrevocably shifting to customers with their ability to segue, continue and terminate conversations, or prevent them altogether.

For another, companies are discovering that the technologies and processes that served them well in a company-controlled communications environment don't work in this one.

Those proficient in data management, for example, are challenged by the requirement to now capture, interpret and apply data in making real-time messaging decisions.

And assuming they can make the right decisions fast enough, they're further challenged by disconnected messaging point solutions – typically built on old technology, often redundantly deployed – that are simply not agile, responsive or smart enough to act on those decisions.

These are kind of challenges that only a new generation of messaging technology solutions built for a new communications environment can overcome.

I don't doubt that we'll achieve true interactive marketing and customer dialogue. The motivating risks and rewards are too compelling for us not to. But I also don't doubt that we'll all be "veterans" by the time we're done.

How do you see mobile evolving in the overall marketing ecosystem?

I'd provide the following observations but with the caveat that none of us have a clear view on how some unfolding megatrends may play out.

Mobile apps: With development of mobile Web, the need and appetite for mobile apps will diminish. Brands will also learn how to extend the customer interaction with a single purpose app into richer conversations on other topics that involve marketing.

Short codes: Like mobile apps, brands will begin to leverage short codes as entry points for multiple customer interactions. For both apps and short codes, mobile-enabled messaging technology deployed across the enterprise and embedded in business processes will be key to their evolution.

Carrier/brand partnerships: This is where you'll likely see the most interesting new developments in the marketing ecosystem, as both carriers and brands seek to evolve their business models to suit mobile-enabled marketing.

When thinking about who owns the data to effect "right message at right time and place" results, you arrive at a convergence of interests that will spark some mutually beneficial partnerships.

Brands have the data for "right message" while carriers know "time and place."

We already see this budding partnership between carriers and brands at play with geo-based mobile uses.

This will definitely expand into other areas, such as customer product and service



preferences, as carriers seek to monetize their data assets and subscriber relationships, and become active participants in ecommerce, not just providers of the pipes through which it occurs.

Marketing mix integration: Clearly, mobile outbound messaging, response and interaction options will increasingly become part of every marketing campaign.

Clearly too, accommodating the interactive, real time nature of mobile will require some retooling at companies.

As mobile becomes more widely and deeply deployed at companies, its individualized nature will also open the door for marketers to gain control of transactional, service-related notices for event-triggered upsell opportunities.

Customer trust and data security: It's hard to imagine a future for mobile marketing or any mobile-enabled messaging without the effective use of data.

In fact, the quantities and types of data required for interactive, real time and cross-channel communications will be much greater than today, as will be the speed with which data is captured, manipulated and applied and the hands that might touch it.

It will be most obviously a data-driven and data-dependent ecosystem. This will make customer trust crucial to our continued access to the data we'll need to make that future ecosystem work.

So keep a watchful eye on what's happening on the data security front and be a good custodian of the customer data that's entrusted to you. We all have a huge stake in the outcome.

What do brands and service providers need to do fully adopt mobile into their businesses?

In many respects, the future is ours to make of it what we will. I see us on the cusp of fundamental change that will re-write the rules for how online communication and commerce get done.

It will certainly change the marketing ecosystem as we know it today. Mobile will be both a catalyst for change and beneficiary of it, and it's in the new ecosystem that emerges that mobile will find its place.

I'm optimistic that brands will fully awaken to where digital communication is headed, how their customer behaviors are changing, and take the actions to meet their expectations and thereby capitalize on the opportunities and avoid the risks.

Full adoption of mobile is certainly one of the actions that brands should take.

I believe the steps to achieving full adoption of mobile are:

Reinforce the centrality of mobile to the customer experience with brands, especially as it relates to communication and commerce;

Socialize success stories as they emerge across the mobile landscape so brands see the creative uses to which mobile can be put.

Make mobile second nature for companies by integrating it into their communication and business processes, but move beyond one-off applications and point solutions in doing so. And don't forget the customer care aspects of the mobile-enabled customer experience.

Many of these steps are inter-related, even dependent on each other.

While technology will be a key driver in all that's done, it bears repeating that the overarching objective must be centered on improving the customer experience by integrating mobile into and across the enterprise. So my advice is to look for technology solutions that achieve that.

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