Executive summary

Websites are widely recognized as the service channel of choice for consumers, who increasingly demand instant gratification, whether that is to solve a problem, provide an answer or just get further information on a product or service. But today’s consumers are impatient and their loyalty is, at best, tenuous. So how organizations react when consumers come to them is an event which can make or break the relationship.

Your website MUST be up to this task. By forcing your customers off the website, say, by making them phone a contact center, you are ignoring the fact that they chose the web as their channel of choice. Strike one.

Strike two can then come in very short order after, for example if the call center is closed, or they are put on hold. Or the adviser simply doesn’t know the answer.

Strike 3, and you’re out.

Read this white paper to learn how intelligent email forms can help you avoid being struck off the list by your most valuable asset – your customers. READ ON...
It is widely recognized that our websites have become the service channel of choice for an increasing number of our customers and prospects. People prefer to visit websites as their first point of call when they need to solve an issue, gather information or make a purchasing decision. Speaking to an organization on the phone is often a last resort.

It is therefore crucial that your website has the relevant content to provide the answers they’re looking for. But what if your customer cannot navigate their way through all this content to find the answer to their query? It doesn’t matter how much information is available, the end result is a negative experience or worse, a lost sale. And, in these social web connected times – an unhappy customer can damage your brand reputation and future sales.

Unfortunately many websites fall short in fully satisfying the visitor’s needs. When a customer visits your website for help and advice, they want that information to be available quickly and clearly. Yet so many sites present visitors with an FAQ assault course - a series of hurdles to overcome to find the information they need. And the result? Well often, all they are offered is a telephone number and the prospect of going through a further set of automated questions before they eventually get to speak to a customer service advisor.

Alternatively the visitor may have found the ‘contact us’ form which is a way for your visitor to fire off an email then continue their search online. Of course, based on past experience, the visitor’s expectation at this point is for a long wait before they get a response to their email enquiry.

In addition, this shift in contact channel, from self-help using online resources to a customer service advisor responding to the email, presents a significant risk factor to maintaining customer satisfaction, as well as being very expensive.

So, nobody wins – as the organization spends money giving the visitor an experience they don’t want. There is, however, another way, and this paper explores how Natural Language Interaction can be employed to delight these visitors, by recognizing and satisfy their needs at the point they reach the contact form.

Websites – the service channel of choice
You are shopping online, you have chosen a product, you have put it in your basket – but you are not sure if it quite fits your needs.
It’s midnight.
Or you are in a noisy crowded office.
Or you are on your iPad on the train.
How do you find that critical bit of information that’s going to reassure you that you should click the ‘buy’ button?
There are plenty of reasons why consumers reach for the web to research a product or solve an issues and the great advantage of your website is that it’s always open.

Giving good service over the web is also good business – estimates vary, but most industry professionals and analysts will tell you that a telephone enquiry costs around $5 to give some simple information, whereas the same could be served on the web for less than 10 cents.

Websites are an ideal opportunity to efficiently and cost-effectively give our customers great service, when, where and how they want it.

But, what happens when our online consumer fails to find what they need?

The cross-channel challenge
So, the website has failed – this visitor has not been able to complete their mission - assuming that the visitor hasn’t already decided to leave the site and look elsewhere. Your potential customer is now faced with two choices; to call you or fill in a ‘contact us’ form.

And remember, that choice to find somewhere else online to get the information isn’t available to everyone. A current customer that just needs to figure out how to pay their bill, find your opening hours or some instruction on a product they’ve just bought has no choice. Having no choice makes this customer unhappy.

So, it’s time for your customer to take the cross-channel challenge as they move from the web to another customer service channel. But beware; this transition poses a huge risk to damaging the experience your customer has of your business. The very fact that they came to your website first demonstrates that they had a preference to self-serve, so forcing them into another channel can easily lead to customer dissatisfaction.

The scale of this, as an opportunity to both save costs and improve customer satisfaction is illustrated by our experience with our clients who tell us that before implementing our software, between 50% and 60% of their customers visited their website, prior to calling the call center.

Speaking in forms
There is of course, an alternative – in order to keep this conversation conveniently online the consumer may reach for the ‘contact us’ page.

Typically the power behind these forms is email and it’s a great solution to the issue of linking the digital interaction with a human agent, and yet the ‘contact us’ form has a terrible reputation with web consumers for responsiveness and is often seen as a last resort.
For organizations dealing with website-generated email, it’s hugely inefficient. Each email can certainly cost as much, and often more, as resolving the whole issue by phone as emails often require lengthy bespoke replies and the agent can get drawn into a succession of back and forth emails.

Organizations could also learn from these interactions, which are full of insight into why their consumers’ preferred channel (the website) failed them, and how they can improve their content and online engagement strategy.

The challenge for organizations is therefore how can we turn this ‘last resort’ from a threat to customer satisfaction into an opportunity to engage, delight and inform web visitors – whilst in turn reducing the overhead of dealing with website-generated calls and email?

They are trying to tell us something
Once a site visitor starts typing their query into a ‘contact us’ form you can really start to get an insight into what they want, why they are on your site and what they are trying to achieve. Also, the terms people use in these forms will help you understand the way your audience think about, describe or refer to your products and services.

So capturing and analyzing all this new insight is clearly incredibly valuable in helping shape our digital marketing and online service strategies – but what if we could react to this immediately, before the visitor hits ‘send’ and starts the long wait for a response?

React and transition
Imagine a large university website that has the objective of attracting students from overseas. These students need to find somewhere to live while they are studying, so in a small corner of the website the university provides a library of this content neatly filed under ‘accommodation’.

A potential student arrives on the site, maybe doesn’t share the university’s first language and can’t find this content, searches for ‘acomodation’ (misspelling it) and after getting zero results decides to contact the university through a ‘contact us’ form stating “I am looking for somewhere to live”.

The perfect solution for this potential student and the university would be for the student to find all that content filed under ‘accommodation’. The potential student satisfies the objective for visiting the site and the university cheaply and efficiently deals with a potential customer service request.

But, this hasn’t happened, so how do we help this visitor? The ideal experience for this visitor would be for the website to learn that “acomodation” means

Endless customer service email loops are frustrating for customers and costly for companies. Dissatisfied customers take their business elsewhere.

Jodie Monger, Ph.D. President of Customer Relationship Metrics  

1 The Contact Professional – a web publication that covers customer service - www.contactprofessional.com
accommodation to some of its site visitors and that once they started completing the contact us form, for it to recognize that they are looking for accommodation (through the phrase “looking for somewhere to live”) and immediately, dynamically offer the student links to the content already available.

Making an intelligent website through Natural Language Interaction enables this to happen – Natural Language Interaction applies artificial intelligence to learn these new visitor contexts and make these connections.

So... search, right?
Having an intelligent form that recognizes an issue or enquiry and proactively offers a solution that the visitor did not know was there is an entirely different experience for the visitor than searching – however good the search engine is.

The search engine experience requires the visitor to drive, to know that the content is ultimately there somewhere and enter the correct combination of keywords for it to appear. It is now the visitor’s responsibility to solve their problem – and unless they can unlock the magic keyword combination – they end up dissatisfied.

eMail Optimizer – an opportunity to delight
eMail Optimizer is part of suite of products from Artificial Solutions that uses Natural Language Interaction to provide a proactive customer service experience. As the visitor types the details of their enquiry eMail Optimizer scans and analyzes the text – providing instant answers before the user presses send.

This experience is significantly different from the one the visitor was expecting, delighting them as it serves them the information they were looking for straightaway.

It’s also proven to reduce inbound email and telephone enquiries – our customers have seen 30% decreases in email volumes alone.

Case study
The Swedish Social Security Agency has reduced inbound email enquiries by over 30% since implementing eMail Optimizer.

By simply adding the functionality to their contact form they have reduced inbound email enquiries by over 30%.

Having had over 350,000 email enquiries in the year preceding implementation, Försäkringskassan has calculated that eMail Optimizer has saved them over 10,000 man hours in the contact center, based on an average email handling time of 6 minutes.
Furthermore, the enquiries which cannot be answered automatically already contain a lot of the basic information needed by the agency to process the inquiry. This means that emails which need the attention of a member of staff are easier and quicker to deal with, as much of the information gathering ‘back and forth’ has been eliminated.

Conclusion

We’ve established that the web is increasingly the service channel of choice for customers, citizens and prospective buyers of your products and services. It’s ‘always on’ and presents a fantastic opportunity for organizations to inexpensively deal with enquiries.

Unfortunately the experience does not always meet the visitor’s expectations, as they run the FAQ assault course or try and figure out the magic keyword combination that will unlock the right results from your search engine. And eventually, your exasperated visitor will have to run the cross-channel challenge and pick up the phone or contact you by email, fully expecting to run the gauntlet of repetitive voice menus or delayed responses.

There is another way. By making your websites proactive and intelligent, you can better leverage the website as a customer service asset that delivers genuine help, advice and support to visitors.
The benefits of this approach are proven, by simply implementing eMail Optimizer, organizations have seen an incredible return on the investment and significantly increased customer satisfaction levels.

Squeezed between the competing pressures of the current economy and rising customer expectations, these benefits make a critical difference to organizations.
About Artificial Solutions

Artificial Solutions develops and implements software-as-a-service based virtual assistants that allow intelligent conversations between people and computers to be held in 23 different languages across multiple channels including the web, mobile (smart phone), SMS, email, social networks and live-chat. Utilizing its natural language interaction technology, Artificial Solutions helps organizations improve customer experience and reduce the cost of online queries. With its development centre in Stockholm, its employees represent 30 nationalities in offices in Sweden, Spain, UK, Italy, France, Slovenia, Germany, Denmark, Japan and the Netherlands. For more information, visit www.artificial-solutions.com