

Technology

Callbacks ease long wait times

Three years ago, a cold snap triggered a crisis for Atmos Energy Corporation, a Dallas, TX-based utility. With temperatures at a record low and natural gas prices at a record high, utility bills skyrocketed and so did the volume of calls to Atmos's Amarillo, TX, call center. On January 2, 2001, the number of callers reached 25 to 30 times normal levels.

Atmos hired temporary workers to log the overflow calls, then assigned field office staff to call customers back and deal with their complaints. But this solution, while it got the company through the crisis, was expensive and unsatisfactory.

To ensure that the next heating season wouldn't bring more long queues and unhappy customers, Atmos hired additional CSRs and built up its infrastructure. In addition, it purchased a callback system marketed by Virtual Hold in Akron, OH.

Callbacks now or later

Today, when the waiting time in queue reaches two minutes, the callback system kicks in with a message telling callers how long they can expect to wait for an agent. The system then offers three options: continuing to wait, hanging up and receiving a callback when they reach their turn in queue, or scheduling a callback at a more convenient time. If the caller chooses to wait, the callback system interrupts again a few minutes later to repeat the offer.

According to Dave Floden, resource manager at Atmos, about 65 percent of Callers choose to be called back when they reach the

front of the queue. (The callback is automated and invisible to agents.) Another one or two percent choose to be called back at a different time. Customers respond positively to the system; Floden says the typical comment when the customer gets on the line with an agent is, "Wow! That worked!"

Virtual Hold's system works as insurance against the sort of call spikes that Atmos experienced in 2001. But it has also proved its worth in less drastic circumstances, such as when scheduled training reduces the number of CSRs on the floor.

Cost savings

The callback option doesn't just make customers happier; it's a cost saver as well. Calls are shorter when customers don't spend the first 30 or 60 seconds complaining about wait time. "We get more people for our money," Floden says. Also, Atmos no longer pays toll charges for all the time customers are waiting – and when the system calls the customer back, the company can pay lower outbound rates.

According to Eric Camulli, director of technology at Virtual Hold, many companies using callback options cite yet another advantage: they no longer lose calls. For retail companies, every abandoned call may be a lost sale.

Virtual Hold's system isn't the only one available. For example, Voice Callback, which is integrated into the call routing system provided by Genesys Telecommunications Laboratories in Daly City, CA, also offers

queued and scheduled callback options. Joe Heinen, vice president for strategic marketing at Genesys, notes that Genesys's callback option can be a great advantage for multi-site operations. If attendance at one call center is low because of a snowstorm or flu epidemic, calls made to that center can be returned from other call centers, without the customer being aware of it.

Aspect Communications in San Jose, CA, provides Scheduled Callback software as part of its enterprise contact server. As its name implies, Scheduled Callback lets customers in queue schedule callbacks at a convenient time; customers can also initiate callbacks from the company's website. Unlike the other two products, Scheduled Callback doesn't allow customers to hang up and retain their place in queue.

Karen Hardy, Aspect's director of products marketing, points out that, by reducing peak-period queues, the callback option takes pressure off CSRs. "When you're understaffed, you try to finish calls as fast as possible," Hardy says. "These days, it's more about customer relationships, and making sure customers are getting all the information they need."

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