



Customer Service NEWSLETTER

July 2009

The authority on managing the customer contact center

Technology

Southwest customers can now opt for a callback instead of waiting on hold

If customers' on-hold time before speaking to a rep is one of the metrics your company tracks, or if customer venting over on-hold time is something your reps have to deal with regularly, than it may be time to consider virtual queuing.

Southwest Airlines recently implemented a queue management technology from Virtual Hold Technology that allows its customers to hang up the phone, keep their place in the queue, and get a callback from the system when an agent is available.

How virtual queuing works

Eric Camulli, chief technology officer for Virtual Hold, explains: "After the call has been segmented through an IVR and we know what it is the customer wants to speak to us about, the technology simply checks with the Virtual Hold system to see what the wait is in the queue or for the skill group that the call is going to be routed to. If the wait is for less than two minutes, the call is simply put through. If it's more than two minutes, the system tells the caller,

'Sorry, but your current wait time is three minutes.' Then we empower them with the options of staying on line, knowing what their wait time is, or hanging up, and the software will save their place in line with a virtual placeholder and call them back in the time promised."

Southwest uses the technology for all of its inbound, toll-free numbers. "We feel that this is a really good fit for Southwest because we've always tried to handle our customers' concerns over the phones with people," says Lance Morton, director, operational support, customer support and services, at Southwest.

And rather than use technology to avoid those calls, to deflect them and to avoid talking to people, Southwest is trying to make it easier for customers to talk to an agent. "We have plenty of self-service options on Southwest.com, and we figure that if someone's calling, it's because they want to speak to us," Morton says. "The Virtual Hold product shows our commitment to

our customers and how we value their time. Rather than keeping them prisoner on hold, we free them up to do other things, and then we will reach out to them when we have a rep available. That's the challenge for any inbound call center — to match that supply to demand, and sometimes there's a mismatch. This is an effective way for us to realign those curves and better service our customers."

It's all in the timing

The technology is designed to fit as seamlessly as possible into the inbound call routine. "The process is predictive in nature, so it is looking at when a rep is going to be coming available," says Morton, "and then it places the outbound call and will be bringing the customer into the ACD at about the time we have the rep becoming available. There might be a few seconds involved in that coming together, but for the most part, and from what we have heard from our customers, the connection is instantaneous."

If the customer isn't available when the callback occurs, the system will retry in a couple of additional minutes for a set number of

"We figure that if someone is calling, it's because they want to speak to us."

www.CustomerServiceGroup.com

Reprinted from Customer Service Newsletter

© 2009 Alexander Communications Group, Inc. All rights reserved.

DO NOT EDIT OR ALTER REPRINTS • REPRODUCTION NOT PERMITTED

times. Southwest can set these parameters.

“There is a little bit of math involved in the application,” says Camulli, “in that Virtual Hold is calculating the rate at which agents are becoming available in the contact center, and what we do is compare that rate of agent availability to where the virtual placeholders are in the queue. That’s what triggers the system to dial, get the party online, and transfer them to the head of the queue. And this is an important part of the process, because to the agent it’s a seamless process, and it feels to them like another inbound call. They don’t have to make any special preparations, and they can continue to be efficient with their call-handling capability.” Reps do hear an announcement, however, so they are aware the call is one that has been queued virtually and has been out-dialed.

The Virtual Hold technology also includes an option by which customers, instead of getting a callback when their place in the queue comes up, can schedule a callback for anytime up to seven days in advance. Southwest hasn’t implemented this option, “but we could, and we are evaluating it at this time,” says Morton.

Not a replacement for call forecasting

One of the great advantages of the technology is the cushion it provides when handling sudden spikes in call volume. “We have known that irregular operations can sometimes increase our call volumes beyond expectations — as can a schedule opening or the kickoff of a new sales promotion,” says Morton. “And with the volumes that we are talking about for inbound calls, there are times when we are unable to meet demand as quickly as we would like. When virtual queuing showed up on our radar, it was an obvious solution. It’s good for us, and it’s good for the customer. That’s a win-win.”

But that doesn’t eliminate the continuing need to match occupancy with call demand. “When we were putting together the business case for the technology I was very clear to say that this does not replace our forecasting and planning processes,” Morton says. “This just provides us with a little forgiveness or cushion when we may not have forecasted as accurately as possible. It doesn’t replace your day-to-day or intraday forecasting.”

A double benefit

Southwest says it has gotten positive feedback from both customers and from customer service reps on the new technology. From the start, Southwest has seen a rate of about 40 percent of callers accepting the Virtual Hold callback option instead of waiting. “The customer, of course, enjoys the time he or she has had without having the phone cemented to the side of his or her head,” says Morton. The company has also been monitoring a significant amount of positive feedback via social networking sites such as Twitter. Morton also points out that the call center’s call abandonment rate has also gone down significantly as a result of the technology.

That 40 percent acceptance rate is pretty consistent, as well, says Morton, “though there are days that it swings around a bit based on what might be driving the calls.”

Reps are also very positive about the technology, in part because the venting by customers that can sometimes take place after a lengthy delay has largely disappeared. “So that’s a benefit as well,” says Morton.

Contact: Eric Camulli, Virtual Hold Technology, (877) 886-8187, www.virtualhold.com. For an interactive demo, dial (888) 412-2214. Lance Morton, Southwest Airlines, www.southwest.com.

Customer Service NEWSLETTER

712 Main Street — Suite 187B • Boonton, NJ 07005-1450

Phone: (973) 265-2300 • Fax: (973) 402-6056 • Email: info@CustomerServiceGroup.com

Website: www.CustomerServiceGroup.com

Customer Service Newsletter® is published monthly by the Customer Service Group, which provides management and training materials for customer service executives, managers and representatives through its newsletters, books, support materials, and website.



© 2009 Alexander Communications Group, Inc. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying or otherwise, without the prior written permission of Alexander Communications Group.