

delayed or accelerated in the current climate?

The benefits of self-service don't end there. In fact, by presenting customers with highly-targeted and personalised offers while engaged online companies can expect a genuine boost in sales, through highly-targeted cross - and up-selling of products from across the business.

However, to engage customers in the first instance, companies need to build an online community based on collective intelligence that offers an experience similar to those of social networking communities. Interactive gadgets that show account trends and ways of making savings will all add to the customer experience, as will wikis, forums and instant messenger chats with agents.

Even better, is that a self-service ecosystem such as this can be achieved with minimal disruption to the business. The result? A reduction in operational costs, improved communications, increased revenues and ultimately, a vast improvement in customer loyalty – all key ingredients for turning a contact centre into a profit centre.

Tim Vaughan joined Oracle from PeopleSoft where he was the EMEA CRM Sales Director.

He is responsible for driving the Self Service solutions and applications out into the EMEA marketplace and working with the Sales Regions, Product Strategy and Marketing to identify new opportunities and value propositions for customers and prospects.

Tim has more than 18 years experience in the Industry.

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There's no doubt about it, companies that can accelerate investment in customer contact reforms will be those making hay when the sun eventually shines again. That means making changes to build a customer base of staunch supporters, devoted whatever the weather.

The current climate is scary. We're living in a topsy turvy world, making most of us feel insecure in our decision making. It would be all too easy to sit tight and do nothing. But that would be cowardly. Now, while the clouds of recession loom, is the time to make changes and invest for that sunny day.

If accelerated reforms are the answer to customer retention in the bitter winter months of the economic cycle, the questions is: "What exactly are those customer contact reforms?"

Technology can provide great insight into customers. Implementing analytics, for example, is a reform we highly recommend to our clients at Ventura. A good voice analytics programme provides valuable information about what drives customer behaviour, identifying negative language and complaints trends. It can also identify simple problems that contribute to dissatisfaction – such as cumbersome scripts and excessive silent time, both increasing Average Handling Time unnecessarily and detracting from the customer experience.

Not all customers are the same and tailoring service through careful customer segmentation is important. Twinned with intelligent IVRs, self service technology and skills-based routing, you can let fans

of self-serve do just that while routing high value customers, others with more complex enquiries or those with buying potential to the more experienced agent.

While we're busy implementing new technology, we mustn't forget the importance of the human touch. In the current uncertain climate, customers are comforted by familiarity. They need reassurance at every opportunity. Reforms to revert back to good, old-fashioned corner shop principles of customer contact are a must.

That corner shop was a familiar place, like home. The local shop keeper knew you as a friend, knew exactly what you expected from them – and that was why you went back, time and time again. It was the kind of place where, if they didn't stock the product you wanted, they'd order it in especially for you and where process didn't get in the way of doing the right thing for the customer – no matter how long it took. No one worried about AHT and first time resolution was a given. Reforms to accommodate some corner shop principles in your contact centre will engender customer loyalty for the long term.

We need to invest now in preparation for the economic upturn. I'm a great advocate for accelerating customer contact reforms and I'd expect them to come from two ends of the same spectrum – technological advancements at one end and good old-fashioned customer service basics at the other. Be brave. Make the changes and you'll feel the warmth of the summer sunshine.

Erica Swales is Ventura's Operations Director, responsible for the UK and India. As a passionate leader, Erica manages her extensive operations team to deliver exceptional customer service on behalf of our clients, putting their satisfaction at the heart of the business. Erica has worked at Ventura for nine years as General Manager and as Head of Operations.