

Industry makes significant steps towards customer-centric websites that increase incentives to register.

The Customer Respect Group, an international research and consulting firm that focuses on how corporations treat and respect their online customers, today released findings from its Fourth Quarter 2009 Online Trends in the Telecommunications Industry.

Summary of key findings

Despite the fact that the industry is experiencing significant change, competitive online pressure within the industry is now starting to produce significant benefits to customers. There are two critical enabling technical areas of investment:

1. Backend integration which when completed will be almost transparent to customers but will result in the elimination of inconsistent and fragmented user experiences across products and functions.
2. Third-party tools and facilities to help customers self-serve in all aspects of the customer experience.

These investments are leading to a more frequent and productive experiences for customers. Some of the specific trends found were:

- Online chat, supporting an online session, is now the rule rather than the exception
- Consolidated multi-product billing and drill-down analysis is increasingly available, covering television, telephone, internet and in some cases wireless phones
- Personalized upgrade recommendations and ordering has become more sophisticated to increase ARPU (average revenues per user)
- Enhanced techniques to mine deeper and more comprehensive self-help knowledge bases are now offered including natural language-based virtual agents and whole-site search
- There is greater use of company and third-party operated forums to nurture customer-to-customer service to broaden support options
- Content portals are adding substantial new functionality with video and on-demand entertainment options
- Increased use of social media functionality including Twitter and Facebook

Trends

Personalization

Account management is leading the way in personalization. Customers are able to view a single consolidated bill covering all services with the same level of enhanced detail. Customers can amend, extend or review their services at the lowest level of detail enabling easy upgrades (such as in Verizon account management). This provides both a reason to review the account on a regular basis, going beyond the paper bill, and a way to suggest upgrade options to increase ARPU.

The trend is to include account management summaries and functions with 'daily activity' features such as email, call logging, television listings and voice mail. This provides a 360-degree view for the customer (as illustrated by the new optimum.net site from Cablevision).

The full role of video and on-demand television has yet to be determined. Some companies have developed content outside of customer portals such as Comcast with www.fancast.com and the business model of subscriber versus ad-supported content is not complete. This could drive more demand for personalization with favorite show options and integration to reminder messaging.

Self-help

Support with account management is a key focus for self-help. Strong self-help provides the customer with sufficient information to resolve their technical or account issues. Information is made available in multiple formats to match different needs, learning styles and sophistication of customers. Charter illustrates this by providing extensive video content. Companies provide setup guides for first-time users as well as automated tools to complete common tasks. Verizon has a tool to setup wireless networking as well as programming TV remotes. Many sites provide natural language query tools to side-step navigation through sometimes complex support systems. Comcast, Charter, Verizon and AT&T all offer such services. More sophisticated customers are reaching out beyond traditional channels for help and forums have grown substantially. Many companies, as well as providing forums, provide staff to third-party forums such as those hosted by www.broadbandreports.com.

Multi-channel communications

Although the phone remains the primary channel, dialog is expanding through multiple channels. Chat is present in some form on all sites covered in our annual benchmark. Chat enables an online session to continue with some assistance, whereas a telephone conversation tends to switch the channel. Chat was found in all areas including support, new orders and account management.

Social media has expanded in the past three months. Forums effectively expand the support staff by enlisting advanced customers. They are very useful in providing work-around solutions suggested by users which may not be fully tested by companies. Twitter is being used to provide an outreach service to locate and direct customers. Volumes are comparatively low at present but expectations are for this channel to grow. Many companies are in some form of learning mode. Other social media channels will be expanded in the next year including Facebook as it is embraced more by companies to market products.

Quote:

According to Anthony Naylor, Director of The Customer Respect Group, “Industry websites are fast moving away from being necessary but non-critical business functions into primary service and marketing tools which attract, educate, sell to and service customers. The growth in website functionality does not come without significant effort and expense as well as legacy restrictions, which means we are seeing sites improving at different rates across the industry. But they are now all clearly travelling in the same direction.”