

AGILITY FACTOR



Fitting Text Chat into the Contact Center

By Jay Minnucci, Service Agility

Does text chat offer a viable customer communication channel?

A look at the unique qualities of three chat types.

Unless you have been asleep for the past 15 years, you already know that text messaging is on such an explosive growth trajectory that speaking and writing (the old-fashioned kind that includes vowels and is longer than 140 characters) may soon become obsolete. OK, that is a bit of an exaggeration, but the popular news media rarely goes a day without someone producing a piece about how today's "typical teenager" is sending 200 or more text messages a day. Add the Twitter phenomena to all of this, and the amount of information conveyed via these short electronic spurts is truly staggering.

There is so much texting going on right now through so many different devices that it is difficult to find a standard definition of the term "text chat." Some versions limit it to short user-to-user messages over the internet, while others view it more broadly by including messages delivered through mobile devices and social media applications. As it relates to this article, we will explore three versions of text messaging:

- **Web chat.** Text sessions with a customer initiated from a company's Web site.
- **Internal instant messaging.** Text communication between an agent and a higher level resource (technical or supervisory) in the contact center.
- **SMS messaging.** Communication between a company and a customer's mobile phone.

So while that leaves blogging, tweeting, friending and online communities out of the mix, stay tuned to *Pipeline* in future months as we continue to explore

how social media tools may or may not affect the contact center. For now, we will focus on the more traditional forms of text chat.

Web Chat Adoption

The modern-day obsession with text messaging is dwarfed only by the even more explosive growth of the Web. So the obvious killer app for contact centers must be adding text message capability to a Web site, right?

Wrong. While logic would dictate that marrying the two communication vehicles surging in popularity would be a match made in heaven, this has not been the case. In fact, the acceptance curve for Web chat in the contact center has more starts and stops than a drag race. And while a number of companies add the capability every year, other companies have eliminated it after a brief trial run. Even within the same industry, there does not seem to be agreement on how (or even if) to use Web chat (see the sidebar, "Buying a Pair of Chinos," which illustrates how three direct merchandisers handle it differently).

Why has Web chat been unable to cross the chasm of acceptance in the contact center? There are many factors inherent to the medium that work against it:

- A customer needs to be on a Web site to use it. Despite the Web's popularity, there is still quite a bit of business transacted without ever opening a laptop.
- Self-help on the Web has evolved to the point where it is easy for even the less tech-savvy of

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us to find the answers we need most of the time without agent support.

- The availability of Web chat can work against initiatives to move customers to much less expensive self-service help via the web.
- Though interactive, Web chat (like email) lacks the fluidity of verbal communication. That makes it less effective for anything more than a simple straightforward question or two.
- The lack of fluidity coupled with slow typing speeds (compared to speaking) conspire to make Web chat more expensive than what many had hoped when implementing it.

Positioned somewhere between (arguably) more expensive phone call support and less expensive self-help, Web chat is having a hard time becoming a mainstream support channel. There are, and will continue to be, exceptions — most notably Web-centric companies with a moderate level of product/service complexity. For most other organizations, where phone and self-help support options are robust, adoption of Web chat is likely to continue on a slow pace for the coming years.

Key Considerations for Web Chat

For those that have adopted it, or expect to in the future, one of the key questions is: How many sessions at once? One of the benefits of Web chat is that an agent can handle multiple interactions at one time. The more handled at once, the less expensive (and more attractive) the channel becomes. Technology is clearly not an obstacle here, as most products can support six or more simultaneous interactions per agent.

Human capabilities are another story. There is general agreement that when first implementing the channel, the correct number of maximum simultaneous sessions per agent is one. That allows agents to get comfortable with the technology and to focus on quality first, not quantity.

After that, opinions diverge. Some organizations stay at one, having found that multi tasking has a detrimental effect on quality. Others land on two to three at one time, while some will go a bit beyond that. In practice, there are too many differentiating factors to assume that one number is right for all contact centers. Some of the defining factors include:

- The complexity of the products/services supported
- The quality of knowledge management systems and canned responses
- The expertise of staff assigned to Web chat
- The volume of chat sessions received
- Whether or not multimedia queuing is being used

Another consideration for those implementing Web chat is session initiation. Right now, these sessions are almost exclusively started by customers. Yet there is nothing to stop a company from implementing more proactive, agent-initiated text chat when someone enters a Web store. The precedent for this was set by the “Can I help you find something?” greetings from salespeople at brick-and-mortar shops. Early attempts to duplicate this on the Web were met with some consumer backlash, but this happened back when the Internet seemed to have a sense of anonymity to it. Now that our PCs have more cookies in them than a Keebler factory, customers may be more accepting of a friendly, well-placed, “Can I help you?” text message when stumbling around a site. While the agent-initiated chat session is still a pretty rare phenomenon, that will change when companies find the recipe that increases sales without negatively affecting customer satisfaction.

Internal Instant Messaging

Where contact centers are concerned, internal instant messaging is the one text chat application that is seeing significant growth. This is directly related to the increase in the complexity associated with agent-assisted calls. As calls get more difficult, a higher percentage of them require the expertise of a second-level resource to complete. This has led to a trend that started a number of years back in which a helpdesk was established that first-level agents could call to get answers to more technical issues, or to transfer the call if needed. Those that have instituted this have found it far more efficient than the traditional method of having agents line up at a supervisor’s desk for in-call support.

Internal instant messaging takes the efficiency gains a step further. Often, agents can fill out the chat box and send it to the helpdesk while conversing with the customer. On the

Buying a Pair of Chinos

Business -to- consumer direct merchandisers are generally regarded as pretty Web-centric these days, so you might expect them to make greater use of text chat. In order to test that out, I went to three different Web sites where I figured I might be able to find a pair of chinos. Here is what I found regarding text chat capabilities at the time this article was written:

Land’s End: Has text chat capability accessed through a “Get Live Help” box located on the left hand side of the footer on each page. If you click the chat online button, you are immediately connected with an agent.

L.L. Bean: Has text chat capability accessed through a single line text link (“Get Live Help”) at the bottom of the page. The link does not stand out from other links on the page footer. Once you click the link, a session opens that requires you to fill in your name, email address, topic and question before connecting you with an agent.

Eddie Bauer: No text chat capability on the Web site. Clicking on the customer service link provides options for phone, mail and an online email form.

Most consumers would consider these companies to be pretty similar in their offerings to consumers, yet there are three distinctly different approaches to text chat. And for the two that offer chat — Land’s End and L.L. Bean — neither provided a proactive agent-initiated chat regardless of how long I sat on the product page. Interestingly, I had been to one of these stores a week before writing this article, and was approached by a salesperson with an offer for help within 30 seconds of arrival.

other end, the helpdesk resource can handle a couple of different chats at once, so the advice often gets to the agent more quickly.

In addition to the speed advantage, instant messaging creates an electronic record of the inquiries that the agents make and the answers provided by second level resources. That information proves critical to the continual improvement of training and coaching programs in the contact center, and is invaluable when building or increasing the effectiveness of a knowledge management system.

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SMS Messaging

Sending text messages directly to mobile phones is an activity dominated by personal user-to-user messages and Twitter. Those uses fit well with the short commentary that is effective for the informal communication we use with friends, colleagues and acquaintances.

So how does SMS messaging fit with contact center needs? Right now, there is very little of it in use. Technology is not to blame, as it is easy to implement an application that allows agents to send SMS messages to a customer's cell phone. A more substantial roadblock is the 140-character limit, as most customer inquiries require much more than this to resolve (as seen in average talk times that are typically in the four- to seven-minute range in most contact centers).

Beyond the length of message roadblock, a lack of creativity may also be at work here. While I do not foresee a future where SMS messaging becomes a dominant channel in a contact center, there are a number of opportunities to use it effectively (the sidebar provides some examples). Unlike Web chat, SMS messaging utilizes the one device that is always on and always nearby. That makes it a perfect tool for a simple one-line message that needs to get out quickly, but requires no response and will not need to be printed or filed by the customer. Almost every contact center could find some of those messages going out now via outbound calls and emails, and would likely find SMS messaging a more effective way of handling them.

Putting the Pieces Together

With all the different communication channels available now, developing and continually updating a clear and comprehensive access strategy is more important than ever. Customer needs vary greatly, and understanding how to use the different options to meet those needs is one way that contact center leaders can provide competitive differentiation. A great first step is to look at the unique qualities that each channel provides (see the table).

Applying these unique qualities to the types of requests you receive and the communication preferences of your customers is a critical first step in developing an effective access channel strategy. If you do not currently offer any of these text chat channels, this exercise may well help

Chat Type	Unique Qualities
Web chat	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ One-click access from every Web page ▶ Ability to predict the inquiry content based on the customer's location on the Web site ▶ Quicker agent access than using the phone for customers already on the Web ▶ Agents may be able to handle multiple sessions at one time
Internal instant messaging	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Can send a question while talking with the customer ▶ Second-level resources can handle multiple sessions at one time ▶ Records can be kept and analyzed to assist in continuous improvement
SMS messaging	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Utilizes a communication device that is always on and always nearby ▶ Read more quickly than email ▶ Easier for customers to access, manage and recall than a voicemail message

Three Business-Related Text Messages I Would be Happy to Receive

I have a love-hate relationship with my Blackberry. Despite the occasional misgivings about it, I recognize many moments where it has been helpful. I'd like it to be more so, and the companies I do business with could help out. Here are a few examples of some text messages I would like to receive on my mobile device:

1. Directions. Whenever the call involves my traveling somewhere, I'd like an offer of directions sent to me. It is even more valuable when I've just made a hotel reservation for the same night that I am calling, since I'm likely in the car making the call from my mobile phone (hands-free, of course). If you could just send some simple text-based directions via text, I promise I'll pull off the road before I look at it.

2. Reminders. I appreciate the reminder calls I get from businesses that I set appointments with, but I've got about a 50% chance of noticing that I have a voicemail message on my home phone. I've got a 100% chance of seeing a text

message that you send... and if you include your number with the message, I can make an immediate call to you with one push of a button, if I accidentally double-booked myself at the same time.


3. Status updates. For starters, I cannot understand why a four-hour window is the best you can do on the day before our scheduled appointment. It is even more egregious that as the time approaches you do not update me with a more precise estimate. You have GPS systems tracking the technician/installer/delivery person, so why not let me in on some of that intelligence? A text or two updating me with more precision would go a long way in helping me believe you care about my time.

I'm sure I could come up with a few more — how about you? If you have some situations where you would like to see contact centers sending messages to your mobile device, email them to us at: info@ContactCenterPipeline.com.

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you determine where you could begin.

Text chat comes in many different forms, and that opens up a host of options for contact center leaders to consider. While it is not likely to be a dominant communication channel in your center, it may find a niche that helps differentiate and strengthen your operation. Applying it in the right way at the right time will give your customers one more reason to stay loyal to your company. 

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