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How Can I Help You?

Using Headsets to Improve Agent Performance and
Customer Satisfaction

Commissioned by:



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White Paper

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

It is no secret that businesses need to deliver superior customer service and support in order to achieve sustainable growth. Many organizations are making significant investments in contact center technologies with the objective of improving customer satisfaction.

Forward-looking businesses prioritize technology investments based on both evolving customer needs and shifting user demographics within their organization. Voice is the most established and regularly utilized mode of communications for agent interactions with customers, but times are changing. Increasingly, tech-savvy customers are demanding prompt, flexible access to company staff via the communications mode and device of their choice. Inside the business, younger generations of contact center agents are looking to leverage multimedia conferencing and collaboration tools such as e-mail, Web chat, social media and video.

To accommodate shifting agent and customer requirements, voice-centric call centers are evolving into multi-media contact centers. However, business technology investments sometimes fail to generate the anticipated returns. In such cases, the deployed technologies were likely mismatched to user skills and preferences, solutions were improperly implemented, or key elements of the end-user communications experience were missing.

End-user devices are critical for agent adoption of the expanding array of communications tools in the contact center. As business communications endpoints become more diverse and as consumer devices penetrate the enterprise, deploying the right mix of end-user devices can have a substantial impact on technology return on investment (ROI). The right devices ensure that agents are comfortable and confident with the communications tools that can make them more productive and enable them to deliver better customer service.

Communications devices must be matched appropriately to each individual user's role, responsibilities, and environment. Agents in multi-channel contact centers need to multi-task and access communications services in a hands-free manner, and they benefit from the ergonomics and efficiencies delivered by headsets. Newer headsets further enhance agent performance through features such as noise cancellation, mobility and multi-endpoint integration. Contact centers seeking improved agent productivity through unified communications (UC) and multi-media collaboration applications need to consider headsets as means to enhance the way agents connect to these tools. By enhancing agent access and their overall user experience, professional headset devices boost agent utilization of communications tools, thereby enabling businesses to fully leverage their investments to deliver better customer service and gain a competitive advantage.

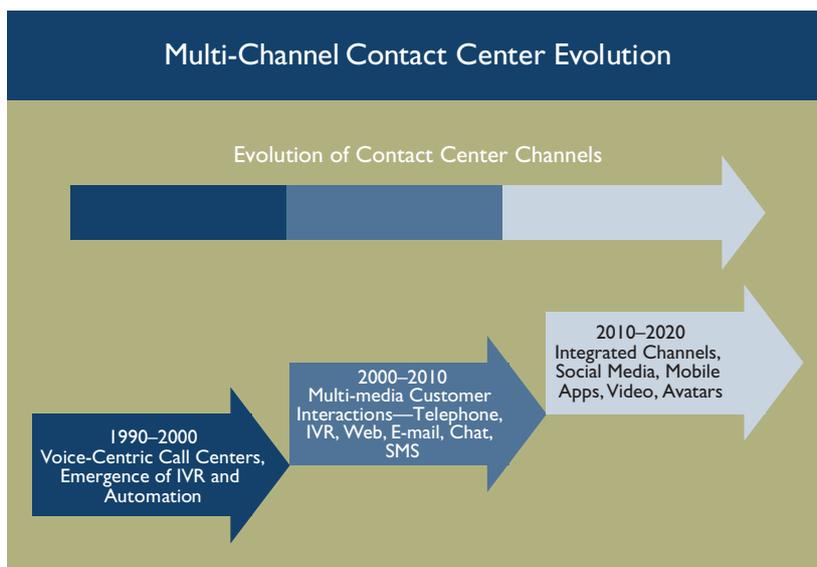
INTRODUCTION

Evolving customer demographics require new approaches to customer care. In today’s Web-connected society, customers are well informed and technology-savvy, and they utilize a variety of devices, including traditional phones, smart phones, tablets and PCs. In addition to voice and video, many customers today also use text-based modes of communication, such as chat, texting and short messaging services (SMS). Many also actively participate in social networking and Web forums to share opinions. Aware of the importance of their loyalty, today’s customers expect immediate and satisfactory service anywhere, anytime, using the media and devices of their choice.

Although not quite an arms race, businesses recognize the requirement to invest in people and technology to accommodate these increasingly savvy, demanding, and vocal customers. Advanced communications and collaboration technologies can equip sales, customer service, and tech support staff to be more agile, productive, responsive and effective in addressing customer needs.

NEW COMMUNICATIONS AND COLLABORATION TECHNOLOGIES REDEFINE CUSTOMER SERVICE

As customers become more demanding and as interactions become more complex, traditionally voice-centric call centers are evolving into multi-channel contact centers. The modern contact center environment is a complex blend of technologies and solutions enabling rich, collaborative interactions between agents and customers. Today, sales and support agents utilize a larger arsenal of tools including voice, video, e-mail, Web chat, desktop and file sharing, streaming media, social media, and various Web 2.0 tools. The richer, collaborative interactions powered by these tools result in more efficient sales transactions and problem resolution.

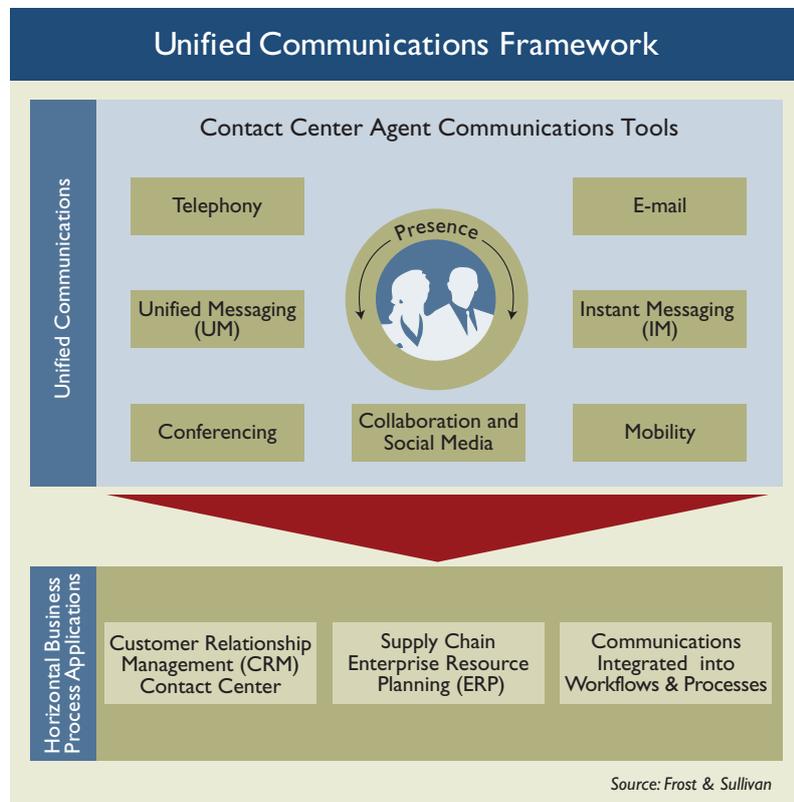


Agents must be able to quickly switch modes with each customer interaction, which creates the need for tighter integration of the communications and collaboration tools deployed in the contact center. Furthermore, agents are increasingly reliant on subject-matter experts within the greater enterprise organization. However, as workforces are increasingly distributed across regional, branch and remote locations, soliciting timely feedback from experts outside of the contact center is a growing challenge.

Accordingly, businesses are deploying UC technologies to facilitate collaboration among geographically dispersed employees and to congeal the siloed contact center with the broader enterprise. A UC solution is an integrated set of voice, data and video communications applications, all of which leverage PC- and telephony-based presence information. UC solutions typically include an advanced desktop soft client that allows users to “click to communicate” over the communication medium of their choice—voice, video, instant messaging, conferencing, or a collaboration tool.

Contact center agents can utilize UC solutions to bring subject-matter experts into a customer interaction, using the following capabilities:

- Integrated enterprise social software tools and teamspace support skills-based search to identify and communicate with appropriate experts outside the contact center.
- Presence capabilities display the availability of experts to join customer interactions.
- “Click-to-communicate” capabilities allow agents to easily escalate phone calls or chat sessions to audio, Web or video conferences in order to more efficiently resolve customer issues.



MATCHING COMMUNICATIONS AND COLLABORATION TOOLS TO USER PREFERENCES IS CRITICAL FOR SUCCESS

Demographic and structural shifts within the organization impact user behavior and ability to effectively leverage advanced tools. Contact centers investing in advanced communications and collaboration technologies need to take user preferences into consideration in order to ensure broader adoption and greater agent satisfaction.

- Voice interactions remain the preferred way of doing business for most agents. Therefore, reliable voice communications solutions and devices are pivotal in contact center infrastructures.
- Employees have specific technology preferences based on their cultural background or technology expertise. For example, anecdotal evidence shows that users in Europe and the Americas are more likely to utilize IM/chat, texting, and SMS than users in Asia.
- Generation Y contact center agents are Web-technology power users and, similar to many of their customers, prefer texting and chat to phone calls. They understand and employ the power of social media to achieve their goals.
- Many agents that are familiar with the benefits of social media, video, and mobility in their personal lives have come to expect similar capabilities in their workplace. Known as the “consumerization of IT,” this scenario is gradually transforming the contact center environment and is causing significant concerns for IT staffs.

Overall, contact center agents expect employers to provide a broad range of communications and collaboration tools. To address evolving user demands, IT departments need to provide secure, manageable company-sanctioned tools that resonate with and empower agents to be more productive.

PROPER TECHNOLOGY IMPLEMENTATION DETERMINES THE QUALITY OF USER EXPERIENCES

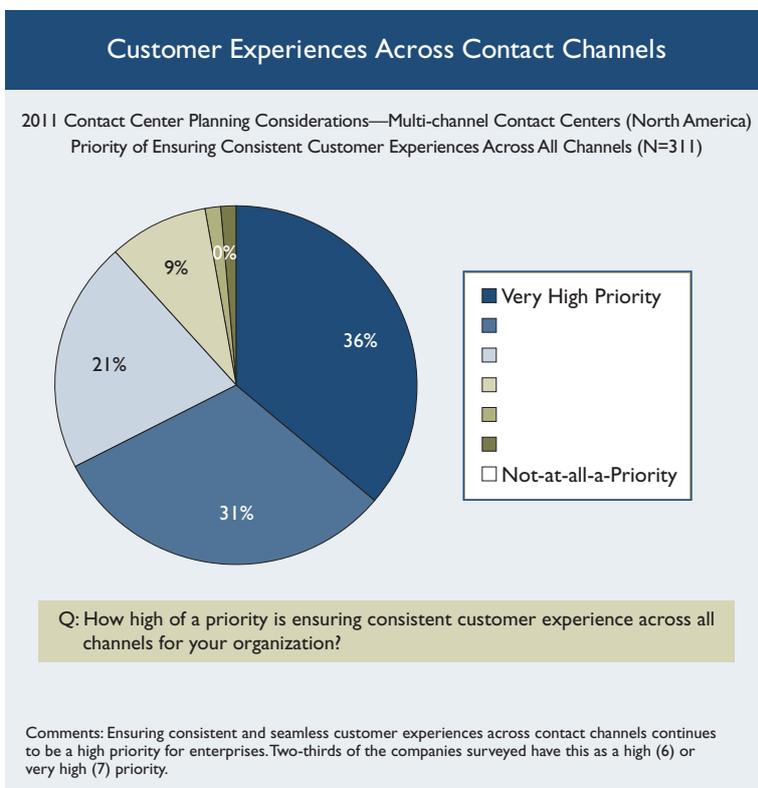
Rapid technology evolution compels businesses to continually update their IT and communications infrastructure, and challenges IT staff and agents to keep up with evolving feature functionality. Further, time and budget constraints can pressure businesses to deploy advanced technologies without properly selecting or integrating key elements of the communications architecture. Complexity and missing links in the infrastructure frequently impede adoption of advanced communications tools.

- UC and Web collaboration transform the PC into a multi-media communication endpoint. It is critical that IT departments understand the challenges and benefits associated with this new experience. The efficiencies of utilizing an integrated UC client to access multiple communications applications are easily outweighed by poor audio quality due to limited bandwidth, insufficient computing power, or relying on built-in PC microphone and speakers instead of a high-quality headset.
- Poor understanding of application functionality may prevent agents from using advanced tools such as Web collaboration or videoconferencing in customer

interactions. Alternatively, the use of inadequate peripherals (e.g., low-end cameras and/or consumer headsets) with a video or Web application may result in a sub-par communications experience.

- The use of communications devices that do not provide the required level of audio quality and noise cancellation can impact both cost (as customer interactions will tend to take longer) and the customer experience (as opportunities for misunderstanding may arise).

Most contact centers consider the delivery of a consistent and seamless customer experience across all channels a high priority. Proper training and implementation can make agents more comfortable and confident with new technologies, driving utilization and enabling them to make the best decision when selecting their communications medium.



COMMUNICATIONS DEVICES DRIVE TECHNOLOGY ADOPTION AND USER SATISFACTION

End-user devices represent a critical element of a communications solution. Even a significant investment in an advanced communications solution may not generate the desired returns if the appropriate end-user devices and interfaces are not deployed. The back-end infrastructure is frequently transparent to the end users. However, user experiences and the ability to properly utilize communications and collaboration features are highly correlated with the quality of their communications devices.

Most users are extremely selective about their communications devices. They care equally about functionality and design. With their experiences based on advancements

in smart phones and desktop clients (such as Skype), they view communications devices as both productivity tools and status symbols. Therefore, workers expect employers to provide communications devices that offer the same productivity and efficiency capabilities, while also fulfilling personal aesthetic requirements.

Users are ever-more demanding about their communications devices. This makes it increasingly challenging for IT departments to deploy the right mix of endpoints in the contact center. IT is already struggling to support a broad spectrum of communications endpoints, including legacy and Internet Protocol (IP) desktop phones, desktop soft clients, wireless phones, and headsets.

Ultimately, communications devices are where the user experience with technology infrastructure and applications begins. The right devices can significantly improve agent experiences and lead to better performance, including improved customer service. IT departments need to consider the following when deploying communications devices:

- Enterprise communications devices need to match evolving user demographics and technology preferences. For example, as users become increasingly mobile in the workplace, support for VoWLAN and DECT phones and wireless headsets is critical in next-generation communications architectures.
- End-user devices should address the requirements of advanced communications architectures. Next-generation back-end infrastructures require advanced endpoints and interfaces to work properly and deliver maximum benefits. Contact center and UC architectures with advanced desktop clients and agent interfaces are best deployed with headsets delivering superior audio quality and hands-free operation.
- Communications devices must also comply with certain government and industry regulations. For example, contact centers and other workplace environments need to observe strict noise control regulations enforced in most countries around the world.
- Different users within the contact center have varying needs. Therefore, device cost and functionality will vary among agent roles. For example, multi-tasking contact center agents can become more efficient using desktop phones with headsets, which allow them to type while talking or to seamlessly transition between text- and voice-based interactions.

Technology adoption and user satisfaction depend on the selection of appropriate communications endpoints. In contact centers, the choice of communications endpoints can have a significant impact on the quality of customer service. Sufficient audio quality is paramount in customer interactions utilizing voice or video. Sales transactions and support calls are highly dependent on contact center staff's ability to clearly communicate with and receive verbal nuances from customers. Additionally, the quality of communications devices impacts user concentration, enabling them to focus on the task at hand rather than on the device.

HEADSETS DELIVER A COMPELLING VALUE PROPOSITION IN NEXT-GENERATION COMMUNICATIONS ARCHITECTURES

Headsets complement and add value to the full range of communications endpoints deployed within the contact center.

Multi-tasking: Headsets have always delivered the best value to contact center agents that need to multi-task while engaged in phone conversations. With advancements in multi-media communications and increasing adoption of Web collaboration tools, a growing number of agents will need to focus on the conversation while e-mailing, chatting, taking notes, or sharing desktops. Therefore, headsets are an oft-overlooked, yet valuable asset to multi-tasking professionals using not just voice, but also advanced communications and collaboration tools.

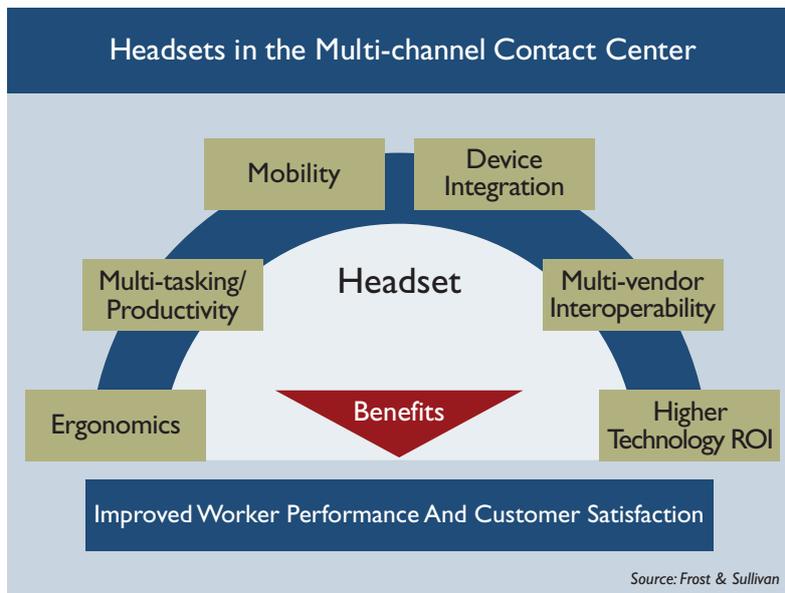
Ergonomics: In addition to enabling hands-free communications, headsets improve ergonomics by enabling agents to shift positions, to take the handset off of their shoulder and to maintain correct posture while talking on the phone. Furthermore, headsets allow agents to sit or stand while in communications sessions, and to stretch during lengthy calls or between back-to-back calls. More natural and less restricted movement can improve circulation, reduce muscle stiffness, and deliver other health benefits that can result in fewer sick days for agents.

Noise cancellation: Noise cancellation is a key value proposition for headsets in contact centers. The shift from a telephone with a handset to a PC client makes headsets a compelling method of achieving high-quality audio. Using PC microphones and speakers dramatically increases the office noise that causes distraction, prompts fatigue and stress, and drains productivity. Noise distractions can significantly lengthen call times, lead to incomplete or incorrect transactions, or lost opportunities. A headset with advanced noise cancellation, on the other hand, helps users leverage the productivity benefits of a PC client without sacrificing call clarity, quality or comfort. Furthermore, headsets help contact centers comply with noise-at-work regulations designed to protect agents from the health hazards of continued loud noise exposure.

Mobility: New models of wireless headsets allow contact center agents to become mobile within the office. Agents with wireless headsets can maintain phone calls while searching file cabinets, retrieving faxes, accepting deliveries, consulting with nearby colleagues, or grabbing refreshments. Mobility is also very important for specialized tech-support agents who need to manipulate sample equipment in order to identify the cause of a technical problem while discussing the issue with the customer on the phone.

Multi-device: Many agents juggle multiple communications endpoints, whether headset, PC client or desktop phone. Agents also commonly share desks during different shifts or use several different desks within their organization. Versatile, multi-device headsets can be used with desktop phones, soft clients, and mobile devices, which gives agents the convenience and flexibility to use a single headset for multiple purposes. Multi-device headsets enable businesses to standardize their equipment and eliminate the need to invest in multiple headsets for each user.

ROI: The improved agent performance and productivity enabled through the ergonomic, mobility and multi-tasking benefits of headsets, as well as multi-device and noise regulation compliance considerations, can variously add up to fast return on the investment for the devices. In addition, improved agent performance and productivity enabled by headsets can provide significant contribution to the payback period for new communications infrastructures and applications.



CONCLUSION

There is a clear and direct correlation between well-equipped agents and satisfied customers. As customers become increasingly tech-savvy and as businesses strive to deliver superior customer service, the channels and media utilized for customer interaction in the contact center continue to expand. Continued investments in advanced technologies can help businesses resolve customer issues faster and more effectively. However, businesses need to deploy the right end-user devices. Headsets are becoming increasingly fundamental to the successful implementation of advanced communications solutions. Headsets improve the user experience and foster technology adoption and utilization, thus boosting user performance. In a contact center environment, well-equipped agents are poised to deliver better customer experiences and greater customer satisfaction.

Silicon Valley
331 E. Evelyn Ave. Suite 100
Mountain View, CA 94041
Tel 650.475.4500
Fax 650.475.1570

San Antonio
7550 West Interstate 10,
Suite 400,
San Antonio, Texas 78229-5616
Tel 210.348.1000
Fax 210.348.1003

London
4, Grosvenor Gardens,
London SW1W 0DH, UK
Tel 44(0)20 7730 3438
Fax 44(0)20 7730 3343

877.GoFrost • myfrost@frost.com
<http://www.frost.com>

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Frost & Sullivan
331 E. Evelyn Ave. Suite 100
Mountain View, CA 94041

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