



Sprint shares its best practices in text chat

By Barney Beal, News Editor
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Text chat is no longer just a tool for social, cyber-savvy teenagers. Enterprises are starting to harness the technology as well -- and some are seeing real benefits.

In fact, a new report from Jupiter Research reveals that from 2001 to 2005, the number of users who made use of text chat (when available) was on the rise, and of those who used text chat, 58% indicated they were satisfied with it (up from 45% in 2001).

For Sprint, the Reston, Va.-based telecommunications company, text chat has already proven its value, and the company is planning to expand chat on its Web store. Currently, Sprint uses both proactive and reactive chat. Visitors to the company Web site can hit the "click to chat" button when they need help, and predefined business rules can trigger a session. For example, if a visitor has clicked on three similar cell phones, a window pops up asking them whether they need help evaluating the products.

Sprint uses an outsourcer for its chat capabilities -- Connexions Inc., an Orlando, Fla.-based company, provides roughly 50 agents who handle Sprint business. Those chat agents are given sales goals and their progress is tracked through promotional codes.

"For us, it's very much sales focused," said Drew Broderick, director of virtual business operations at Sprint, during a session at the Call Center Demo and Conference held last month in Orlando. "We're starting to expand into e-care and Spanish, which will require skills-based routing."

With e-care, Sprint is moving beyond sales and into online service, but chat can be a tricky communication channel, particularly on the proactive side, Broderick warns. Pushing pages can be a valuable sales tool, but it can also be off-putting if done incorrectly.

"You don't want them thinking, 'They're driving my computer -- what else are they doing?'," he said.

Chat, in fact, gives people a greater sense of control than if they're on the phone, Broderick said. For example, they're more willing to do the equivalent of hanging up.

ROI something to chat about

Chat is paying off for Sprint. Its Web store grew from 3% of total sales to 4% between 2004 and 2005, and the company attributes 15% of that growth to chat, Broderick said.

Bozeman, Mont.-based RightNow Technologies Inc., an application vendor focused on customer service, has been offering chat technology for several years. But according to CEO Greg Gianforte, the real uptake in chat has come over the past year because of a growing trend -- customers are increasingly taking control of relationships.

"It used to be viewed as a real niche capability," Gianforte said. "We've seen if you put a chat icon next to your phone number on the site, your phone calls go down 30%. But chat in the absence of a multichannel approach doesn't do any good."

Broderick and Tracey Ayres, president of Connexions, offered some best practices on chat deployment during their session in Orlando.

- First of all, companies should determine whether chat is a competitive differentiator, understanding the length of time it takes to complete a transaction on a Web site. More complicated or time-consuming transactions are best handled via self-service or email. Also, firms should use chat to offset traditional inbound support costs.
- Agents should limit the number of simultaneous chats to between three and five. With co-browsing (following customers as they navigate a Web site), agents should be limited to two simultaneous chats because it requires more attention.
- Companies need to approach chat differently from telephone communications when it comes to response times. Customers are expecting an instantaneous connection, and providing typical response and handle times can hinder upsell and conversion rates. Contact centers should prioritize their most valuable chat customers based on whether they are shoppers, repeat buyers or loyal customers.
- Chat must also be measured. Broderick and Ayres suggested surveying customers after the chat session is over to solicit feedback and offer a chance for promoting loyalty and the company brand.

Broderick also recommends following up the session with additional materials and supplemental information.

"[The email of the transcript] is one of my favorite features," Broderick said. "It's a nice tool to have to document the transaction."

Chat can also come in handy when customers are looking for a personal assistant, helping them to find the product they're looking for or suggesting similar items. And Sprint is leveraging its chat agents as a sort of front line for what customers are saying and asking about, Broderick said.

Chat has been popular with the agents as well, according to Ayres. Agents can earn another \$100 to \$400 in incentives through cross-selling and upselling. Chat agent candidates actually conduct interviews via a chat session, Ayres said, and agents who had been handling email response were the first ones moved over to chat positions.