
Understanding...

How to serve your customers better

A guide to delivering a better experience for customers



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Welcome to 'Understanding... how to serve your customers better', one in our series of guides designed to help smaller businesses get more from their IT and communications systems. We aim to demystify key topics by:

- Explaining the basics of concepts so you can see how they apply to your business
- Outlining key opportunities and benefits so you can see what is possible
- Advising on the best approach to move forward, helping you to make the right decisions for your business and avoid common pitfalls
- Helping you to save time and money, simplifying the way you approach communications

For further advice about technology and what it can do for your business, access case studies and articles or to download copies of the other 'Understanding...' guides, go to BT Business Insight, a unique online resource for small businesses, at www.bt.com/insight

To find out more about how BT can help your company, visit our website at www.bt.com/business

Why focus on customer service?



- As a small business, customer service is intrinsically linked to what you do day-to-day. It is a crucial part of how you work and a key part of differentiation from the competition. Good customer service means referrals, repeat business and a fast-growing reputation. Poor service inevitably has the opposite effect.
- However, unlike large enterprises, where there are often teams dedicated to reviewing and revising how the organisation interacts with its customers, small businesses often don't have the time or resources to take a step back and look at the area as a whole. Consequently, it's all too easy to just continue in the same way without gaining regular valuable feedback or harnessing new techniques and technologies.
- In order to serve customers effectively, it is essential to look at all the ways you interact with the outside world, as well as internal procedures and systems. This will enable you to clearly see where improvements can be made or opportunities harnessed, to deliver an ongoing cycle of improvement.

Better service by being available

- Businesses of all sizes and in all sectors that have staff who travel regularly need to give those team members access to their email, calendar and contact details from wherever they are.
- According to 2006 research¹, employees within UK small businesses spend an average of 40 per cent of their time away from their desks, so it is essential to allow them to be available and productive during traditional periods of 'downtime' such as travel, meetings and commuting.
- Added to this, the increased use of technology means we live in a 'now' society, where colleagues, customers and partners require rapid replies via their preferred communication channel – whether that's email, IM or telephone.
- The importance of being connected during the working day cannot be underestimated. Being out of the office, without access to email, means that you may miss an important email or not respond in time, which could lead to disappointed customers or loss of business. After all, a business is only as good as the impression it makes – and if that impression is of a slow, unresponsive organisation then reputation will suffer.
- Services now exist that liberate small businesses, by enabling them to do business when you're away from the office, giving you access to Windows PC functionality and real-time email, whether you have your own email server or through a hosted service. They also integrate with mobile VoIP to allow seamless communication whether you are in or out of the office.
- Technology of this type gives people the power to work anywhere with real-time access to their calendar, contact information, documents, spreadsheets, email and the internet. So you no longer need to get back to the office to schedule a meeting, send an email, get background information or respond to a call – it can all be done from any location, without the customer realising you were ever out of the office.

¹ Research conducted by Strategy Analytics

Case study: Emergency service is kept connected with BT office anywhere

ESFAC is a private company providing medical training services and emergency medical cover, particularly for corporate and public events. Company co-founder and Managing Director, Kim Coe says: **“As a small company my co-director and I are both heavily involved in service delivery, yet we also need to run the company. With an ever greater reliance on email communication, staying on top of things when we are away from base was becoming more and more of a challenge.”**

ESFAC is a seven-days-a-week business. As well as needing email and internet facilities when on the move, its two directors also wanted to have remote access to the Microsoft Outlook application that stores its events calendar and business commitments. ESFAC had experimented with using a laptop with a data card and also with a PDA device, but had found both to be a compromise and somewhat cumbersome given the nature of its activities. As a long-term BT customer for fixed line and broadband services, ESFAC approached BT to see if there was a more elegant solution.

BT Office Anywhere was a perfect fit and ESFAC contracted for two devices. With BT Office Anywhere users have real-time access to email, calendar, contacts, and documents, as well as being able to make and receive voice calls through a Microsoft® Windows Mobile® 5 Smartphone handset. A cost-effective subscription provides inclusive, any network minutes, and a data allowance for email. It also enables unlimited, hour-long, Voice over IP (VoIP) calls to UK landlines from office, private, or public Wi-Fi hotspots at no extra cost.

Kim Coe comments: **“I am no IT expert but I have found BT Office Anywhere quite intuitive and easy to use. The handheld device has a good-sized colour screen, yet it is still compact and lightweight.”**

BT Office Anywhere made an immediate impact in boosting the personal productivity and efficiency of ESFAC's directors.

Kim Coe continues: **“When we are providing emergency medical cover at events a lot of the time we are just sitting around waiting for a patient. Now with BT Office Anywhere we can use this time to good effect, checking or sending emails, scheduling our staff, or even conducting internet banking transactions.”**

The VoIP functionality of the BT Office Anywhere solution is also helping ESFAC reduce its voice communications costs. This feature is particularly relevant for ESFAC because much of the time the company directors are either at stadiums and arenas that have Wi-Fi access, or in the office, which is equipped with a BT Business wireless hub (ESFAC also have two BT Fusion Wi-Fi handsets for staff). In either case, with BT Office Anywhere voice calls can be made over the internet through a Wi-Fi connection at much lower cost than conventional telephony services. Kim Coe sums up: **“BT Office Anywhere is an absolute marvel. It really does enable us to have the facilities of our office wherever we are.”**

Better service by making calls over the internet

Flexible working is often used in relation to 'soft' HR matters – time savings and better work-life balance. But a flexible organisation is much better prepared to deal with the varied needs of its customers.

- The latest technologies are designed explicitly to help with this and to make a more adaptable, responsive business. Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) is one of them.

VoIP is a technology that allows calls to be made over a high-speed internet or broadband connection. Its benefits are becoming well-known, and are usually associated solely with cost savings. What is not so well understood is the major customer service benefits it can provide.

VoIP calls are directed to a phone, not a location, so it's ideal if you travel or work from home regularly. Incoming phone calls are automatically routed to where you're connected to the internet, so you can make and receive calls using the same number wherever you are.

As VoIP is a digital service, it can also be integrated with other business systems – so in addition to harnessing features such as caller line identification and voicemail, businesses can take advantage of advanced services such as videoconferencing, Instant Messaging (IM) and integration with Outlook. This provides a unified yet diverse range of options for dealing with customers in the way which suits them best.

- Mobile VoIP services are now also available and are ideal for people who are not based permanently in an office or prefer to make calls from a mobile handset. Wi-Fi-enabled VoIP phones combine traditional mobile phone capabilities and wireless VoIP. These services work like a mobile when used out of the office, while calls made from the office or in a Wi-Fi hotspot are routed over broadband. This offers the ability to make and receive calls wherever users are using a single number, as well as cut costs.

According to research by BT Business, around two thirds (66 per cent) of consumers would still rather buy goods and services locally and over three quarters (77 per cent) of people prefer to call a number with an area code close to their location, rather than phone a prefix they do not recognise.

This raises an interesting yet often neglected point. Whether a small business operates locally, nationally or internationally, they shouldn't ignore the comfort factor provided by a familiar phone number.

Some VoIP services offer the provision of additional numbers which reflect the geographic location of the company or the target audience, so a business can project a local presence wherever its people choose to work.



Better service by embracing software as a service

The traditional model for buying software was to pay an upfront licence fee and then ongoing maintenance or upgrade charges.

Over the last five years, however, software has changed and many different types are now available on demand. These “Software as a Service” (SaaS) applications allow you to use the latest business-grade software developed specifically to meet your needs on a subscription basis.

This removes the need for upfront capital investment in terms of hardware and software, as well as upgrade costs, and means that you no longer need to manage and support critical business applications in-house. However the real customer service benefits are in its accessibility and its flexibility.

- Firstly, the SaaS model makes applications which previously would have cost thousands of pounds available on a pay-as-you-go basis, meaning they are now much more accessible to smaller business. Some are even free for basic services, with an upgrade available if it suits the business further down the line.
- The additional flexibility that these services offer also allow considerable customer service benefits. Being web-based, they are available from any location, even via a PDA or other mobile communication device. Users can also be switched on and off according to need, meaning that customer service costs are kept in check and you only ever pay for the number of people actually using the software.

One example of this model is **BT Business Builder**. This is a suite of online tools – from payroll to planning – designed to support basic business administration processes within both start-ups and established businesses.

These tools – free under the basic service – are designed to address the core financial, legal and administrative elements of business management, helping organisations to run an effective, professional and compliant operation, with more time to concentrate on their core business strengths.

These tools are the way forward for small businesses, enabling them to look at software and buy software previously available only to much larger organisations.



Better service by harnessing social media

- To most people, social media means consumer applications and utilities which help people to connect, communicate and keep in touch.
- However, organisations big and small are finding that a more collaborative, community-based approach to business is paying real dividends.
- Social media is a term which covers online services which form connections between like-minded, distributed groups, allowing the sharing of information, views, advice or complementary services. Often referred to as Web 2.0, it is a broad term which is best demonstrated through examples.
 - One such service is **BT Tradespace**. This is an online community that brings small businesses and individual sellers together with potential customers and partners to do business. The service, which is based on social media tools and is free to join, allows businesses to quickly and easily create and post content on the web, and link to complementary businesses.
 - Each BT Tradespace member's page includes space for businesses to add blogs, photos, podcasts, contact information, maps, virtual business card and Click-to-Call functionality; and to join communities – creating a customisable and multi-dimensional site for marketing and interaction. And a tie-up with PayPal now means that Tradespacers can use the service as a marketplace to sell goods to consumers and other businesses.
 - So in short, it offers a virtual presence for companies to market, sell and form partnerships, and as such an additional and compelling channel to market and a great way to serve customers.

Case study: Business blooms online with BT Tradespace

ArenaFlowers.com was launched in September 2006 to provide a more ethical way of buying cut flowers and plants. It also buys its stock directly from auctions in Holland, cutting out the middleman to ensure flowers are not only incredibly fresh but great value.

Will Wynne, Managing Director of ArenaFlowers.com, is no stranger to e-commerce, having worked at eBay prior to joining the company. As a result, the company communicates with its customers and partners primarily online.

In order to extend its reach, it signed up to BT Tradespace – the online trade community specifically designed for small businesses – as soon as it was launched.

BT Tradespace Basic is a simple-to-use free service that offers members unlimited blogging, contact details, two podcasts, five photos, two videos and membership to one community.

For those with more demanding requirements, **BT Tradespace Contact** is an enhanced service where businesses can upload unlimited content and use advanced features, such as Click to Call, as well as join unlimited communities.

Tradespace provides ArenaFlowers.com with another opportunity to attract potential customers and partners to its site.

“Tradespace is our first attempt at business social networking,” says Will Wynne. **“But already it has proved an invaluable tool. We had done a lot with search engine optimisation but we were concerned about our reliance on third party search engines.”**

“Online shopping experiences can become impersonal all too easily,” explains Wynne.

“Being part of the BT Tradespace community really does allow us to add that personal touch, particularly with the blogs and podcasts options. We’ve recently had an interview with BBC London and made a recruitment video to post to YouTube. Both of these have been added to our Tradespace portal and proved really popular.”

ArenaFlowers.com wants to do much more than just take an offline experience and put it online. The competition amongst internet florists is high and it's important for the company to keep customers updated, particularly about new products. Blogging through BT Tradespace has allowed the company to do this, as well as establish itself as a trusted brand.

Will Wynne concludes: **“Much like eBay allows consumers to get into e-commerce very quickly, Tradespace helps businesses involve themselves in social networking right away. As the Tradespace offering grows with new features and functionality businesses can grow with it too.”**

“Tradespace also helps us to improve our business model, given the level of interaction that the portal encourages. Customers, partners and prospects can rate, refer and compare us to other businesses, which gives us further insight into what our customers and partners really want.”

As Tradespace grows, BT will create Community Channels linking buyers and sellers through communities of interest and display the most popular content from all of the member Tradespaces in that community, show top rated sellers, and provide a space for buyers and sellers to converse.

<http://arenaflowers.bttradespace.com/>

Better service by bringing it all together

All of the technologies, applications and approaches outlined in this guide can help businesses to keep customers happy. However, the important thing to remember is that no two customers are alike. Each has their own approach, preferred way of communicating or buying, and a unique personality.

A one-dimensional approach will therefore break down at some point. What's needed is a multi-faceted, integrated customer service which takes all foreseeable preferences into account.

So when looking at how to manage customer service, businesses should always bear the following points in mind:

1. Be fast – ensure that the technology mix and culture of the organisation are geared up for rapid response. Always put yourself in the customer's shoes and judge how quickly you would like a response from a supplier

2. Be flexible – understand that customers have their own ways of working, and consequently their preferred channels for communication. This could be phone, email, IM, even fax, so ensure that you are prepared to deliver a quality service over any of these

3. Be open to new ideas – just because you're used to a way of working, doesn't mean it's always the best way forward. Even if a process or approach works, it may not always be the best it could be for you and the customer, so make sure you review your performance regularly and keep an eye on the market for additional tools and technologies which may help

4. Be responsive – ensure that you offer a consistent service, with an identical customer experience wherever your staff may be – in the office, on a train, at home or on the move

5. Be organised – Use technology to ensure that key customer service data is captured and can be used appropriately, wherever staff may be. Consider Software as a Service as a fast, flexible and affordable way of getting these systems in place



Offices worldwide

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