



Present and Future of Airline Contact Centers

- A TCG Digital Article

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Summary

Recall how many times you have called up an airline's contact center and left with grievance, either due to improper/insufficient service quality, or because the quality of information provided did not suffice your need. Not to mention the long wait times. It has been as long as 275 minutes for a customer, in 2021, as reported by New York Times^[1]. While there are factors ranging from management's non-prioritized attention, insufficient funding, attrition, other Human Resource factors, technical inabilities et.al, we believe the greatest of problems has been a lack of holistic understanding of both the problem set and the possible solutions, tied in one thread.

In this article, TCG Digital tries to prescriptively lay down some points of views as to how a simple framework of 'Modernization', Engagement' and 'Optimization' can alleviate lot of these problems, sometimes even before they occur. These definitely do not encapsulate all solutions possible, but an appreciable number of use cases that can differentiate whether the brand is exposed as magic or misery to a customer.

Laying the foundation

There are 2 elements to the contact center experience for customers. One has to understand that the contact center experience cannot be treated in silos, rather as part of a value chain of holistic Omni channel attributes. The elements of customer experience today comprise of both physical agents and technology capabilities, e.g. chat bots, automated personalized call routing etc.

Contact Centers need to be treated as part of the value chain of **Omni channel attributes**.

In order to understand the true essence of how contact centers should aim to operate, we need to understand an overall Omni channel strategy. According to research, a perfect Omni channel strategy can help a brand retain 89% of its customers. Today, when customers use multiple devices right from the inspiration phase of the purchase funnel up until they share their experience, an Omni channel strategy is all but obvious.

Relentless efforts have to be undertaken by airlines to uplift excellence in the contact center experience through

- Seamless connected channels
- Intelligent routings
- Well integrated applications
- Constant information gathering across all touch points

Blend of high touch and high tech

Customers still want to talk to a live agent.

82% of customers calling contact centers, in general, still want to talk to a live agent. This has become skewed further with the pandemic. Research^[2] states that AHT became more than 10 minutes and abandonment rates increased by 10% due to increased call volumes.

While this is true, a great contact center experience for airlines (given it is high tech and high touch product and service experience) today is a perfect blend of online, offline, Omni channel and human centric touch points and digital integrations.

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The moot points of how airline contact centers can bring about moments of magic:



Mapping the customers' online journeys and progressing those to the contact centers



Creating a single source of truth for data that is relied on by both online and offline channels



Banking on artificial intelligence as a part of the whole, and not have it existing as a lone technology lever



Paying special attention to social channels; not treating them alone as listening posts but integrating them as action channels



Maintaining consistency across channels that feed in and out of contact centers, whatever be those means



Tracking and evolving based on current and expected customer behaviors and preferences, to ensure relevant and contextual experience

The framework for holistic evaluation and transformation

40% of aviation companies are poised to use technology and innovation drivers to uplift **customer experience** at contact centers.

At TCG Digital, we have grouped these drivers into a framework of Modernization, Engagement, and Optimization. We believe this framework will help airlines channelize and streamline their correct management decisions, business processes, and technology actions for transforming contact center experiences. Let us look at how these drivers will play roles.

A. Modernization - This tower includes the most important transformation objectives to provide an elevated customer experience

Chiseled customer journeys across channels

Customers across tier status want to feel individually treated. Personalized and contextual interactions with customers and being able to map treatment across different customer journey touch points have become increasingly important. There is no generic treatment since each customer's travel management problem is different.

Inclusion of conversational commerce across the sales and servicing value chain

Including conversational commerce with customers where they feel at equal ease interacting with an agent or a system across different channels and touch points has become an obvious. This elevates customer experience, aids the airlines in collecting contextual data and rolling out the correct treatment and reduces cost through optimal use of agents' time and faster turnaround.

Use of predictive/proactive customer service

Airline contact centers need to proactively identify customer problems through steps followed by the customer either through previous Omni channel touch points or IVR menu option choices. At the same time being able to predict customer problems, customer choices, typical interactions etc. through the use of historical customer data and AI/ML based techniques will be necessary for implementation.

B. Engagement - The more a brand engages with the customer, the more can it ensure true customer service by removing information asymmetry. Here are the objectives for engagement

<p>Use of customers' voice, sentiment, speech, lingual analysis in real-time, along with smart routing of calls/interactions</p>	<p>This is a key for airline contact centers to implement. The voice, tone and tenor, accent etc., along with recorded customer interactions (without jeopardising privacy) should not only let agents handle customers accordingly, but also profile the customer personas and have their appropriate treatments rolled out. Eventually this should also be incorporated as part of agent trainings and tuning of the system flows.</p>
<p>Chatbots for automated resolution of standardized and repetitive processes, queries</p>	<p>This is a no brainier and tons of airlines are actually implementing this. An obvious choice for service quality standardization and reduction in cost.</p>
<p>More options to pay</p>	<p>Today, with the proliferation of payment methods, customers want the choice to be able to pay at contact centers using their preferred modes of payment. This ability is constricted with airline contact center applications today. In fact, there is sufficient evidence to showcase that the success of a sales and servicing channel coupled with its ability to penetrate customer segments has dependency on the number of payment options available.</p>
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<p>Personalized customer interactions through enriched data, CRM and persona identification and mapping, all in real-time</p>	<p>Without harping much on the concept of segment of one, the airline industry being high touch, airline contact centers should customize their business processes, systems, and have agents provide enriched customer experience based on real-time or near real time personas.</p>
<p>Seamless system to agent and agent to system switching</p>	<p>This is the true spirit of Omni channel. Airlines should offer smart systems that seamlessly allow customers to switch between digital channels to agents and vice versa so that the most appropriate channel does the most appropriate transaction.</p>

C. **Optimization** - This is the tower that captures the essence of bringing not just system efficiency, also delivers contextual value to customer interactions

Inclusion of call/interaction optimization techniques using AI/ML techniques

AI/ML techniques are the need of the day for airline contact centers to adopt. Optimizing call paths, business processes that agents follow, identification and treatment of appropriate customer personas, contextual rendering of cross sell and upsell offers and multitude of other capabilities need AI/ML techniques to be implemented.

Enabling appropriate human staffing through call and transaction pattern identification

This is where the rubber meets the road. Agent staffing/deployment at airline contact centers should be based on transaction patterns identified from historical data nurturing and analysis. It should not be alone based on call volumes, but the types of transactions, the segments of customers being serviced, the contexts etc. Only this optimization can bring true value to contact center operations.

Design appropriate trainings for agents through historical data analysis using AI/ML techniques

Training decision needs to be data based. All agent interactions should be recorded to unearth true value of how customer handling should be designed. System based, role based trainings have to be elevated to a level where trainings become more contextual in nature.

Conclusion

Smart is the way forward for airline contact centers. Airlines have traditionally looked at contact centers to be most relevant for either digitally naive customers or ones calling for handling complex rebooking/refund transactions. It is imperative for airlines to create a distinguished messaging and rollout for contact centers, where there is a perfect blend of human to digital interactions. It should be part of the Omni channel strategy that should gain corporate attention rather than bearing in-siloed operational existence. A contact center is a value adding entity - comprising of operations, people, technology, processes, and excellent service standards. This should be the way forward for airlines to look at. At TCG Digital, we believe that this simple paradigm of Modernization, Engagement, and Optimization can be followed to reach efficiency, excellence, and open up new revenue channels for airlines.

A contact center is a **value adding entity** - comprising of operations, people, technology, processes, and excellent service standards.

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Author



Sudipto Ghosh
Director, TCG Digital