CUSTOMER SERVICE

Using chat for customer service

Many organisations are now taking advantage of the immediacy of live web chat as an avenue for customer service. So how do you communicate effectively with customers through this channel? **Freya Purnell** reports.

Live web chat is now becoming accepted by tech-savvy customers as a method of conveniently communicating with organisations both for sales and service.

UBank has been using live web chat for customer service for around a year, and online performance manager Kirby Mears says it has been beneficial in providing customers with another channel which is more convenient than waiting in a phone queue and allows them to multitask.

"As opposed to a decade ago when chat was launched by many companies to no good effect, now agents are ready to do it and customers like it. It's a pretty easy channel to implement and therefore you should be able to obtain good benefits from it," Mears says.

Having one customer service agent deal with multiple live chats at any given time can also provide economies of scale for the business (although this is not recommended by some experts).

"An agent is able to deal with many more 'click to chat' interactions than they are phone calls. It is more than possible for an agent to have six to eight chats going at any point in time, depending on how busy things are," Mears says.

When it comes to what type of service interactions lend themselves to live chat, complexity shouldn't necessarily be a barrier, he adds.

"We deal in relatively complex products in banking, so it is certainly something that needs to be considered, but even if chat is the first point of engagement with the customer, they can move into a different channel if things become too complex or difficult," Mears says.

How to get the right staff chatting

UBank has a team purely dedicated to chat, and Mears says when choosing staff to deliver service through this avenue, confidence is key.

"It certainly is a very different skill set that is required compared to normal call centre interactions with customers. It takes a great deal more skill to be able to put yourself in the customer's shoes than in a normal phone call interaction," Mears says. "Usually the customers that

are using this are more tech-savvy, and it is frequently a more casual or jovial interaction."

Online communication expert Leslie O'Flahavan of E-WRITE says training agents to provide live chat is very similar to preparing them to communicate in other channels.

"It's a mix of being able to produce the correct answer, being able to read critically – which means reading what the customer is saying but understanding what the customer is asking, and often that's different – and being able to use an acceptable brand voice in writing," O'Flahavan says.

While strong writing skills are a key attribute for staff delivering service via live chat, she believes there are actually more important strengths.

"We need people whose strengths are high speed strengths, not slow and steady strengths; who are good at probing; and who are good at juggling or multitasking in different applications. A good chat agent is going to be able to leave the chat, look in the knowledge base and at the customer's records, so those skills might be just as important as elegant writing skills," says O'Flahavan.

Agents also need to be able to adjust their tone and 'voice' to the chat channel.

"The brand voice and the chat voice should match up. For example, if you are chatting with your health insurance company, you would expect them to be more 'suit and tie' in their tone than if you are chatting with a company that arranges surprise deliveries of balloons," she says.

Because of the emphasis on writing in chat, agents with poor writing skills may not be well suited to this channel.

"I do think customers are a bit more tolerant of some types of writing errors in chat, because they know this

writing is being produced live in real time," O'Flahavan says – though she adds while simple keyboarding errors may not be perceived poorly by customers, grammatical mistakes probably will be.

Providing the right support

Delivering effective live chat is not just about putting an agent in front of a computer and letting them start chatting with customers. Even an experienced telephone customer service agent needs the right tools, support, training and some practice to reproduce the right outcomes in the live chat format.

O'Flahavan is a big believer in having prewritten or templated content available for agents to use in chat, but they have to be trained to use this content well, so the customer doesn't perceive it as prewritten.

"The agent should have plenty of hold and wait templates in chat, because often the agent has to disengage a little from the customer, so that they can answer the customer's question. The customer won't perceive those hold statements as 'canned' unless they are used inappropriately," O'Flahavan says.

"For example, if the hold statement, 'let me look up your most recent payment', is used correctly, the customer won't mind at all."

To coach agents to write live chat more effectively, O'Flahavan recommends allocating time regularly for agents to chat in the role of the customer, and then reviewing the transcripts in small teams or groups to discuss what they did that worked well or poorly in the chat.

Kirby Mears will present a session on how to deliver live chat at the SOCAP Australia 2013 Symposium. Visit www.socap.org.au to register.

The dos and don'ts of live chat

DO:

Offer live chat for specific business cases, and keep some limits on which customers can initiate a chat. This places some boundaries on what the substance of the chat will be, making it easier for agents to be prepared. At UBank, customers must trigger certain business rules to be offered a chat – for example, if a customer is on a particular web page for longer than three minutes, a pop-up will appear to find out if they have any questions or need help and would like to initiate a chat.

Make available all the information sources an agent might need to dip into to help a customer in real time. "Because chat is live and because it integrates the online world with the service channel, agents should be ready to search for information in a way that they don't have to be on email," says O'Flahavan.

Use clarifying questions. "For agents whose first channel of interaction is the phone, sometimes email can be really frustrating because you can't help the customer clarify the question. In chat, you can, and so you should exploit chat for its ability to help you figure out what the customer is really asking and really needs," says O'Flahavan.

Take cues from the customer's language to dial up or dial down formality. "We have a few levels of scripting – I am personally of the opinion that it needs to be very focused on how the customer wants to deal with us, rather than just following rules and regulations," Mears says. Shorter exchanges will create a more informal, conversational tone.

Use language about how the interaction is going. For example, 'Did I answer your question?', or 'Do you think that item is the type you would like to buy?'. "Both the task and the tone is more interactive," O'Flahavan says.

Ensure agents know how to disengage from a prank, or from rude, scatological or pornographic discussions.

DON'T:

Cross-sell or up-sell while you are solving a problem. "It's very easy to do in chat because you can push a link at any time. Many chat vendors propose pushing links as a way of helping agents engage in multiple chats and therefore buy them some time when they can be less attentive to each customer. It's a really bad idea," says O'Flahavan.

Leave the customer waiting too long for your next response. "The agent may leave the chat for quite a long time without the customer asking 'Are you are still there?', if the agent has managed the time expectations in the chat, and if the agent's departure is because they are pursuing an answer on this customer's behalf, not because they're serving another customer," O'Flahavan says.

Rush to complete the chat with 'do you have any more questions?'. Keep the customer engaged.

Expect chat to instantly solve problems. "It is more of an evolutionary process than most other new initiatives I've seen," says Mears.

Throw new customer service staff into the deep end with chat. "I would never expect someone on their first day to be able to do chat. It is certainly one of those channels where you need to pay your dues – the underlying documentation that is available to the agent is very important, and how familiar and confident they are is very important," says Mears.