



designing the Ideal...

CUSTOMER/ENGAGEMENT SPECIALIST CONVERSATION

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Regardless of how or why a customer chooses to interact with your brand, the only thing that stands between a positive or negative experience is a human connection. But creating a unique and memorable customer experience isn't rocket science. It's much more difficult than that.

That's because human communication is incredibly complex—especially in the contact center. Consider the sheer number of situational possibilities that occur before an engagement specialist greets a customer. The customer could be seeking assistance about a number of different issues (e.g., billing, general questions, sales, repair, retention, and collections) via at least four communication types (voice, chat, email, and social media). Furthermore, both engagement specialists and customers possess one of at least 32 distinct personality types¹ (i.e., combinations of neuroticism, extroversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness) and unique emotional states (happy, sad, disgusted, angry, surprised, or fearful) at the time of engagement.

Lastly, both customers and engagement specialists are influenced by culturally-based instrumental values such as individualism, hierarchy, structure, gender roles, and emotional expressiveness. The combination of all these variables gives us:

$$6 \times 4 \times 25 \times 25 \times 6 \times 6 \times 25 \times 25 = 754,974,720 \text{ situations}$$

That's right, before an engagement specialist even says "hello," there are more than 750 million situations that can frame the conversation. Acknowledging this incredible complexity, leaders in the customer experience industry are faced with a pivotal question: How do I manage engagement specialist and customer communication to create a unique and authentic experience that improves customer satisfaction, retention, and sales?

At STARTEK, we've evaluated hundreds of thousands of conversations and millions of customer satisfaction surveys. Based on our findings, we've learned that contact centers "design" engagement specialist and customer communication in one of three ways: (1) transaction, (2) interaction, and (3) dialogue (see Table 1).



Communication Design	Communication Approached as...	Customer Viewed as...	QA Objective	Typical Results
Transaction	An Exchange of Information	An Identification Number	Compliance	Positive Impact on Efficiency Metrics
Interaction	Synchronized Monologues	A Typical Person	Demonstration of Key Behaviors	Inconsistent Impact on NPS and CSAT
Dialogue	Mutual Value Creation	A Unique Individual	Communication Mastery	Consistent, Positive Impact on NPS/CSAT

Table 1: Communication Design

the transaction design

The transaction design results in the greatest reduction of engagement specialist-customer complexity by focusing communication exclusively on business needs. Within this design, communication is treated as the exchange of task-related information, viewing customers primarily as account-holders. In some ways, the transaction design places the engagement specialist in the role of a human IVR who is trained to efficiently solicit the problem from the customer, access a knowledgebase for an answer, and provide a quick and accurate resolution. Because of the singular focus on business needs, engagement specialists are evaluated on their ability to solve problems quickly and effectively. The hallmark of the transaction design is an emphasis on efficiency metrics such as Average Handle Time (AHT) and Issue Resolution metrics such as First Call Resolution.²

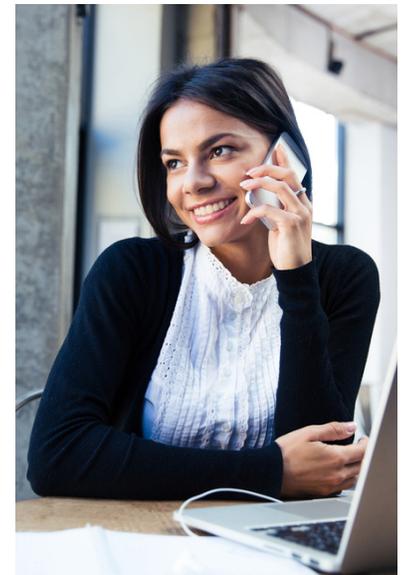
The transaction design works best in situations that require either strict compliance or limited interaction with a customer (e.g., account activation calls). Although engagement specialists typically get a lift in customer satisfaction scores when they resolve the issue, customers, on average, tend to rate this design as less satisfying because engagement specialists seem mechanical and distant.³

the interaction design

The interaction design adds more complexity to the conversation by adding social components to engagement specialist-customer conversations. Within this design, communication is viewed as a coordinated sequence of semi-planned statements (synchronized monologues), placing the engagement specialist in the role of actor.

For example, a customer describes the reason for calling to an engagement specialist, often punctuated by words signaling frustration. The engagement specialist then replies with rehearsed responses, such as empathy statements and scripted apologies. Furthermore, the call is bookended by packaged greetings and closings that sound highly polished and swift, revealing to all who are listening that the engagement specialist has offered these canned statements to every customer.

The interaction design is built upon the assumption that every customer has the same set of social needs, such as the desire for friendly and polite conversation. To create an atmosphere of friendliness, engagement specialists might be trained to use the customer's first name repeatedly or offer ingratiation phrases ("I do appreciate your willingness to..." or "Thank you for..."). Engagement specialists might also be taught words and expressions that are designed to communicate politeness, such as offering professional apologies and exhibiting courteous asking-behaviors ("For security purposes only, may I have the last four digits of your Social Security Number?").



the interaction design continued

The calling card of the interaction design is a QA form that lists key behaviors, both task and social, that engagement specialists should exhibit on all calls, such as use of the customer's first name, empathy statements, power words, professional apologies, and proper openings and closings. Although most people appreciate friendly phrases and polite verbal gestures, customer satisfaction scores often suffer because engagement specialist communication sounds rehearsed and at times, disingenuous.

the dialogue design

Unlike the other two designs, the dialogue design best addresses communication complexity because customers are viewed as unique individuals with distinct circumstances and specific needs. With this view, preplanned responses are considered inappropriate and potentially detrimental if they cause a perception of insincerity.

Instead, engagement specialists are taught the functions of communication and are tasked to craft their messages to satisfy the unique needs of each customer and situation. For example, engagement specialists are taught the mindset and skills of optimism, methods for employing the diverse set of skills that comprise rapport building, how to manage customer face, techniques to remain present in the conversation, and more. Within this design, engagement specialists are placed in the role of communication professional, empowered to make communication choices that result in a skilled, spontaneous, and personable conversation.

When communication is designed as dialogue⁴, the goal of QA is to improve the communication skills of the engagement specialist in a systematic, developmental, and educational way. To that end, coaching sessions revolve around how the engagement specialist's communication behavior impacted the customer experience. Coaches refrain from providing answers or offering sample words or phrases.

As an alternative, coaches highlight specific learning opportunities and ask guiding questions of engagement specialists. Once key functions of communication become natural, engagement specialists add additional layers of skill and complexity to conversations, producing an unmatched and effortless experience for the customer.

Communication, from the dialogue perspective, is framed as "mutual value creation" because both customers and engagement specialists satisfy important needs when conversing. On one side of the coin, the customer's needs are met in an effortless, professional, spontaneous, and personable way. On the other side, the engagement specialist receives a genuine sense of accomplishment (i.e., job satisfaction), knowing that his or her communication choices resulted in an outstanding customer experience. Because of mutual value creation, dialogue produces the highest gains in customer-facing metrics such as CSAT and Net Promoter Scores.



the impact of communication design on retention, satisfaction, and sales

Studies conducted by STARTEK of satisfaction surveys, call recordings, chat sessions, emails, and social media exchanges show that the choice of communication design plays a significant role in achieving retention, satisfaction, and sales goals. Not surprisingly, dialogue design scores higher in all three metrics than transaction or interaction (see Figure 2).

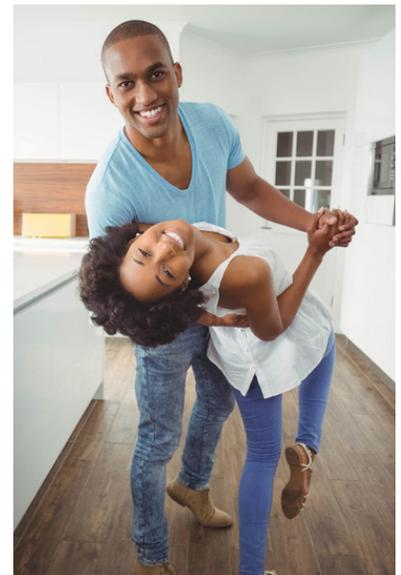
	COMM STYLE	CUSTOMER SEEN AS	SPECIALIST MODE	RETENTION SCORES	CSAT SCORES	SALES
 TRANSACTION	MANUFACTURING An Exchange of Information	An Identification Number	Human IVR	28.6%	7.9	6.6%
 INTERACTION	THEATER Synchronized Monologues	A Typical Individual	Actor	38.5%	8.6	23.1%
 DIALOGUE	CRAFT Authentic Engagement with Value Creation	A Unique Person	Artisan	50%	9.7	36.3%

Figure 2. Comparison of Communication Designs and Performance Impact

conclusion

Human communication is an astonishingly complex process, requiring leaders in the customer experience industry to make pivotal choices about how to orchestrate the ideal customer engagement. At one end of the spectrum, leaders can reduce engagement specialist-customer communication to its lowest common denominator, restricting conversations to business needs only. The upside of this choice is consistency and compliance; however, the transaction design places a low ceiling on the customer experience.

At the other end of the spectrum, the complexity of communication can be harnessed to create value for both customers and engagement specialists using dialogue design. Although it requires a high level of commitment and effort at all levels of the organization, the result is an unmatched customer experience that produces loyal, satisfied customers who serve as willing advocates of your brand.



About STARTEK

World class customer engagement starts with world class conversations – and that’s where we come in. We’re STARTEK, and we specialize in orchestrating the ideal customer experience at the point of conversation between you and your customers. Powered by the science of dialogue, our customer engagement specialists and communication scientists understand the human component of the contact center better than anyone. In fact, our omni-channel engagement solutions have helped countless brands, including JD Power award-winning companies, connect emotionally, solve issues, and improve net promoter scores. Whether engaging on the phone, online, in person, in your contact center or in ours, STARTEK can help you turn your strong customer relationships into unbreakable ones. Because the outcome of every conversation matters.

To learn more, visit www.startek.com

REFERENCES

¹Based upon the Big Five Trait Taxonomy

²Resolution metrics include First Call Resolve, Customer Call Backs, Customer-Reported Issue Resolution

³Engagement specialists exhibit verbal and nonverbal behaviors characterized as low in immediacy, resulting in the perception of increased psychological distance.

⁴Dialogue is defined as the structured yet spontaneous process of exchanging information, managing emotions, sharing experiences, and negotiating identity, resulting in both mutual value creation and reciprocal advocacy.

