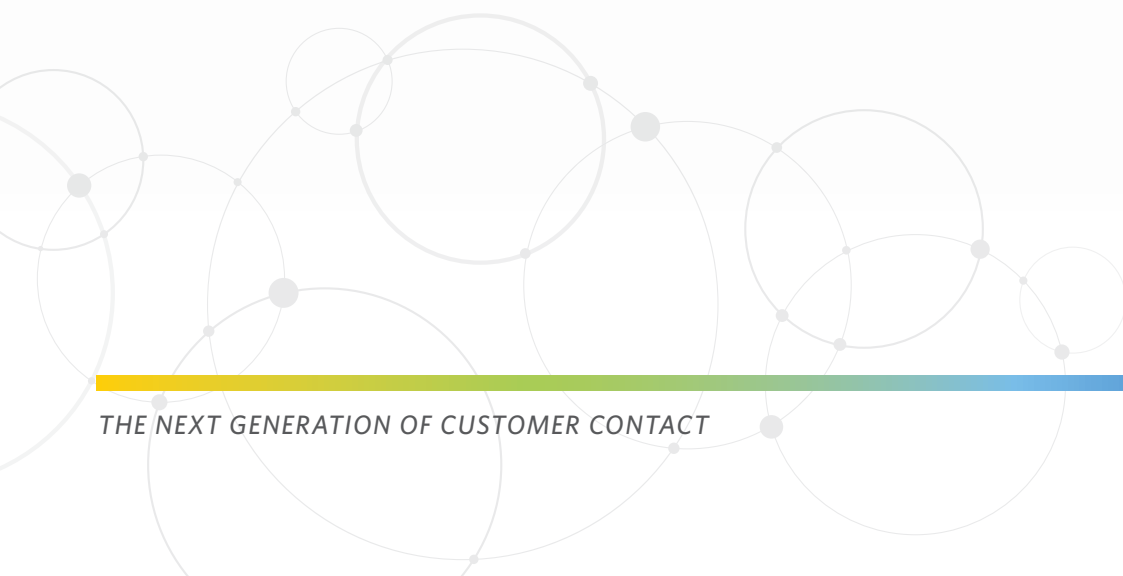


KEEPING PACE WITH THE CONSUMER

Finding the right partner for your next-generation contact center



THE NEXT GENERATION OF CUSTOMER CONTACT

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Executive Summary

Today's socially networked consumer is demanding more from the companies they do business with. They are expecting higher levels of service and enhanced communications provided through more channels, and they have more outlets for voicing opinions about their experiences than ever before. Engaging in proactive conversations with those consumers to manage and deliver on their expectations will become critical to a company's ability to succeed. Planning for a next-generation contact center will help to address these requirements while enhancing the overall customer experience.

Unified communications and collaboration technologies provide the foundation for the next-generation contact center, by connecting not only the contact center and the rest of the enterprise, but also the enterprise and the customer in new ways. These technologies bring vital capabilities to customer-company communications, including voice/telephony, unified messaging, contextual presence, multimedia conferencing, desktop and data sharing, web portals, social computing and content and knowledge management.

Communication channels are expanding beyond more familiar choices like voice, chat and email to include SMS/text messaging modes, customer communities using social networking, and access to content-rich, user-directed, self-service experiences through the Internet. And as these channels are expanding, so are consumers' expectations. At a minimum, they'll expect a rich experience tailored to each channel. As social media continues to democratize the customer experience, they will increasingly want to interact with both fellow consumers and decision-makers within the company to gain a larger voice in the brands they champion. Ultimately, they are looking to participate in the reinvention of customer-company communications and the creation of products and services.

These trends bring either risk or opportunity to companies looking to build relationships that cultivate loyalty. The outcome depends on whether or not businesses take action. Customer-centric companies that choose to adapt to this new norm will need to move from traditional customer interactions confined to the contact center to enterprise-wide customer-company collaboration. To keep pace with evolving customer needs and to take full advantage of emerging technologies, companies should understand the essential capabilities that a next-generation contact center must deliver and begin planning for it today.

This paper outlines key capabilities and top-line technical requirements to consider as you engage with IT to determine the best path forward to meet your customers' demands.

The Foundation for the Next-Generation Contact Center

How should companies begin the journey toward this new customer communications paradigm? It starts with an understanding of the key benefits and requirements of the next-generation contact center—from both a business and an IT perspective. Key stakeholders across business management, contact center, telecom, networking, and enterprise architecture functions must work together to find common ground on short- and long-term requirements.

There are some essential requirements that all next-generation contact centers must address. Simply stated, any contact center platform should meet certain criteria today and be supported by a roadmap that provides flexibility and a seamless transition to newer capabilities. Unified communications and collaboration technologies are going to play an instrumental role by providing the foundation that enables increased internal and external customer communication channels, as well as enhanced business processes. The availability of core contact center capabilities on a unified architecture will allow businesses to leverage the advanced functionalities provided by unified communications and collaboration.

The effort to transition to the next-generation contact center is worthwhile, as companies that effectively address the change and its inherent challenges are reaping several important benefits. To succeed in the expanded, open environment of customer-company collaboration, companies must harness the knowledge of their entire organization and the customer ecosystem in real time.

Underlying the benefit of increased customer satisfaction is the next-generation ability to provide consistently relevant, high-quality transaction experiences regardless of channel choice. Beyond building customers' trust across individual transactions, multi-channel dialogue facilitates ongoing customer-company communication that promotes increasing loyalty to products, services and the brand. The information exchange may take place through a blend of proactive company communications and customer-initiated conversation, or through mutual participation in customer communities and the blogosphere.

Most companies face serious barriers to delivering at this level. Their contact center platforms tend to be siloed from the rest of the enterprise, and augmenting existing systems with new products and capabilities can be an expensive and time-consuming proposition.

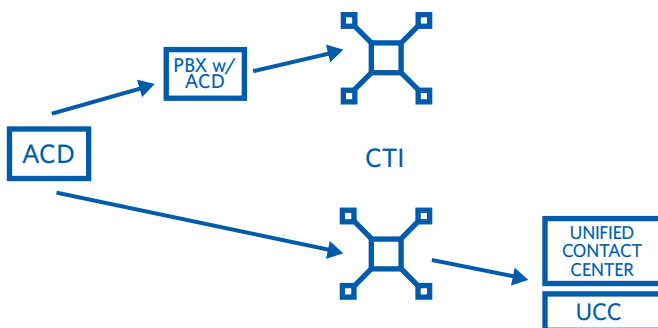
A Software-Based Unified Architecture

The next-generation contact center requires a unified platform that can initiate a dialogue and respond to inquiries in a consistent manner across all contact channels. This technology integrates business rules and centralizes communication channel management and administration, empowering business line managers to monitor and optimize operational and agent performance in real time.

A unified contact center overcomes the challenges and expense associated with the previous generation of proprietary, siloed and hardware-intensive computer telephony integration (CTI) architectures. ACDs with integral PBXs and other stand-alone systems (“point products”) are rapidly becoming obsolete. They are being replaced by a software-based model that unites all of the communications components in your contact center architecture to reduce complexity, cost and risk, while at the same time increasing system reliability. Most importantly, a software-based architecture is essential for delivering customer contact applications that fully leverage next-generation enterprise technologies like unified communications and collaboration.

A unified architecture should combine the following critical capabilities:

- Full-featured inbound routing (ACD capabilities)
- Intelligent proactive contact capabilities (outbound dialing)
- Speech-enabled and self-service technologies such as voice portals
- Virtual routing to remote agents and dispersed locations
- Rich-presence tools that identify the availability of experts within the contact center and throughout the enterprise
- A real-time communications environment that integrates the customer contact and unified communications technologies



Divergent paths: unified, software-based applications that fully leverage unified communications and collaboration (UCC) infrastructures will replace legacy solutions that have PBX hardware at their core.

Tech Talk

A software-based unified contact center architecture breaks down communication silos by going beyond telephony to unite all contact center capabilities and work with the company's enterprise architecture.

An effective unified contact center architecture should be compatible with enterprise architecture, including a network layer that interoperates with open-telephony standards, as well as application integration, reporting and management layers. It should also:

- Support virtualization to minimize physical footprints
- Support web services to ease application integration
- Offer access to an existing pool of IT professionals who can develop and manage the environment
- Embed interfaces in other enterprise applications
- Offer Session Initiation Protocol (SIP) interoperability
- Support user preferences for receiving communications on mobile devices

The Advantages of Unified Communications and Collaboration

As companies look to find common ground between their enterprise and contact center architectures, unified communications and collaboration technologies are primed to merge the capabilities of two separate environments.

A unified architecture that supports session initiation protocol (SIP) interoperability provides a standards-based way to employ new and third-party applications as they become available, giving contact centers a foundation for taking advantage of these technologies. This enables contact centers to support the real-time capabilities and features of unified communications such as call control and speech recognition—and non-real time communications such as voicemail, email, SMS and fax.

Tech Talk

In this rapidly changing environment, contact center vendors must have a well-defined strategy for taking advantage of unified communications and collaboration. Companies should consider these factors as they review potential platforms:

- In a space where no single vendor has all of the answers, solutions shouldn't rely on proprietary technology that can impede companies from tapping into third-party innovation
- Foundational unified communications capabilities, such as rich presence, that can be embedded into applications to engage enterprise knowledge workers to resolve customer issues, should be part of any modern contact center
- Roadmaps should include collaboration capabilities such as enterprise search for both structured and unstructured content—for example, call recordings and conversations taking place on social networks—and work processes that integrate traditional and web-based transactions
- The technology roadmap should include capabilities to leverage location data and presence on mobile devices

Unified communications and collaboration in the contact center offers the following advantages:

- Greater first-call resolution
- Optimal balance of proactive and customer-initiated contact
- Adoption of web 2.0+ applications to benefit the next-generation consumer

Contextual presence is a core element of unified communications and collaboration. Among its many functions are the abilities to identify and engage enterprise knowledge workers in customer interactions or to drive intelligent notification via the best channel for announcements and alerts, such as order shipment status or prescription refill notices. As interactions expand into the enterprise, next-generation contact center operations will need to leverage workforce optimization both in the contact center and the enterprise. This allows the use of a common set of unified communications and collaboration technologies to track, manage and optimize customer interactions within the contact center and into the enterprise and consumer communities.

The Future of Customer Contact: From Customer Interaction to Customer-Company Collaboration

While unified communications and collaboration are important considerations for today's contact center, they will become even more critical as customer communications move beyond session-based transactions to an ongoing dialogue. Any contact center solution must account for the convergence of the 2.0 consumer and the enterprise powered by unified communications and collaboration. This reality is breaking down the walls between the enterprise and the contact center, and shifting the emphasis for engaging effectively with consumers from customer interaction to customer-company collaboration. Each interaction is just one element in an ongoing, often customer-initiated conversation.

Customer satisfaction hinges on the immediate availability of the most helpful resources—voice or web portals, agents, or any other option including blended self-service and live services—just as long as the information provided answers their most complex questions in the simplest possible way. To deliver a single-interaction experience that's appropriate to the channel, companies will need to follow a few entrenched rules.

Just as consumers expect to switch smoothly from one channel to another, they take for granted the company's complete familiarity with their history at each interaction point. For example, customers who search a company's secure self-service Web portal and find they need additional information should have a click-to-connect option for contacting an agent through voice or instant messaging. The agent, with access to a knowledge base that contains a detailed customer profile, can more effectively troubleshoot a service need. Structured data as well as unstructured data gathered from the company website, call center interactions, social networks and other sources also provide actionable and consumable customer information for other departments.

To address the changing consumer most effectively, companies should devise an approach to engage social networks and online communities. They must also make effective use of their vendors' IT services to enable the next-generation of collaboration capabilities. By providing access to the organization's entire knowledge base, the contact center can implement a customer-centric model that is monitored and managed by the company. This model offers enterprises the following advantages:

- Transforms the immense volume of unstructured data from contact center interactions, web site visits, the blogosphere and social networks into actionable information and intelligence
- Uses search capabilities to monitor customer conversations around key topics (e.g., "closing account") by linking applications to customer-facing emails, instant messages, SMS/text messaging, Web conversations and social networks
- Incorporates data gathered from social-media monitoring into individual customer records

Finally, contact centers need to leverage communications channels to collect customer data, as well as proactively deliver information and service via the customer's preferred channels, such as intelligent notification of events or actions taken on the customer's behalf (e.g., account approval or credit issued). The balance of this two-way flow supports optimal communications management. Companies looking to implement next-generation contact center solutions should ensure that the partner they select is able to accommodate the adoption of these expanding capabilities today, with an eye toward how CRM systems can be integrated to optimize sales, customer service and collections business processes.

The Next-Generation Contact Center Essential Elements

- Advanced technologies that bring customer contact processes into the enterprise
- Standards-based technology
- Seamless, multichannel capabilities in a unified platform
- Blended capabilities to support intelligent outbound (proactive) and inbound contact
- Unified communications capabilities including rich presence, instant messaging and multimedia conferencing
- Capabilities that leverage social networks, online communities, web portals and enterprise search and knowledge stores
- Tightly integrated workforce optimization capabilities that use unified communications and collaboration to track interactions into the enterprise
- Support for consolidated CRM views
- Strong strategic professional services that ensure companies fully leverage their intellectual capital with communications-enabled business processes

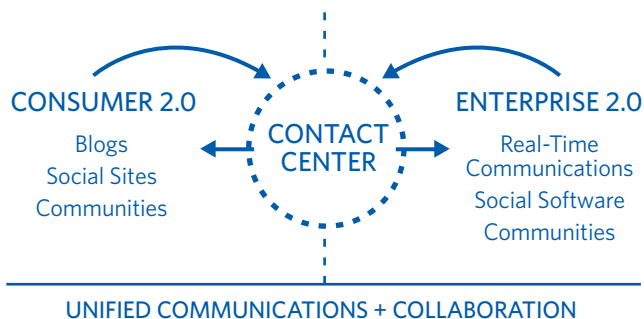
What Vendors Should Offer

Unified communications and collaboration capabilities in the contact center support favorable business outcomes, including cost reductions through increased operational and agent efficiencies, and stronger customer relationships. As customer interactions become more integrated into the enterprise, leading companies will use their organization's full knowledge and expertise to engage their customers while embracing social networking to enhance customer-company collaboration.

The most qualified vendors will provide a contact center solution that optimizes a company's resources and allows easy adoption of the best tools and technologies as they become available. That means enhancing customer-company collaboration through applications that can be configured to optimize both business processes and intellectual capital in real time. For instance, the vendor's professional services may deliver a 360-degree customer view that pulls real-time data from the financial server into the contact center. Or, applications may introduce back-office processing capabilities into contact center workflows that trigger real-time communications. Communications triggers can help move a process forward, whether the purpose is to support a customer interaction, advance a requisition, or manage a back-office transaction. Another example is applications that enable web self-service to allow agents' use of wikis to alert other agents of contact center trends.

Interacting with customers at the connection points they favor responds to their desire for convenience. Answering their needs with full-enterprise expertise helps deliver the consistent quality they expect. Progressive companies will embrace opportunities to engage consumers in meaningful dialogue, through proactive service and participation in online communities and other user-centric channels, to communicate on the customer's terms.

To achieve the net result, greater customer loyalty, companies should consider only those vendors that possess the vision, expertise and professional services to help them engage with the growing ranks of 2.0 consumers.



The combination of social-software savvy consumers and next-generation enterprise communication technology changes the rules of customer contact, and breaks down the walls between the contact center and the rest of the enterprise.

About Aspect

Aspect is a global software and IT services firm specializing in applying Microsoft unified communications and collaboration to help customers achieve optimal results through enhanced business processes across the enterprise and in the contact center. Aspect provides IT consulting, integration services and business applications. For more information, visit www.aspect.com.

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