



Developments in wholesale customer interaction strategies

David James - 31 July 2008

Not so long ago, telecoms service providers would only deal with their wholesale customers face-to-face, by mail, phone or fax. Customer service processes were manually intensive, and involved a lot of paper records. However, that picture has changed. Now wholesale customers are being offered powerful web portals and business-to-business (B2B) interfaces that can significantly increase the efficiency and effectiveness of interactions with their suppliers.

Wholesale customers often have a choice of which wholesalers they do business with. The quality of the customer service experience is an increasingly important differentiating factor, along with service availability, price and service quality. Once customers have found the services that they require, then they need to be sure that they can do business with the suppliers of those services on a long-term basis.

The quality of customer service provided by a wholesaler can make all the difference between winning (and retaining) business and losing it to a rival. Customers that perceive the customer service that they receive from their wholesale suppliers as good are much less likely to churn to alternative suppliers, particularly if they use customer portals or B2B interfaces.

The benefits of automation

Web portals and B2B interfaces provide multiple benefits to wholesalers and their customer, by reducing (and in many cases eliminating) time-consuming and error-prone manual processes, by providing validation and verification to improve consistency and accuracy of transactions, and by providing an unattended round-the-clock service that can scale easily to cope with surges of transactions. Increasing the automation of routine high-volume, lower-value transactions enables account management and customer service staff to spend more time on the complex higher-value transactions, which are less suited to automation.

Our recent research into the strategies employed by a variety of wholesalers for serving their customers (Steps towards improved wholesale customer interaction strategies), and into the interfaces they have deployed (A review of wholesaler customer interaction strategies) has highlighted how much effort is being put into improving the variety and functionality of these customer interfaces. Many of the companies that we have researched (including Colt, Deutsche Telekom and Telecom New Zealand) are currently putting a lot of effort into rationalising and streamlining their internal processes and systems, so that they can offer improved customer interfaces incorporating improved automation.

Increasing integration, power and flexibility of customer interfaces

Wholesalers are moving away from having separate customer interfaces for each type of service (voice, access, capacity, VPN, etc), instead providing customers with integrated portals and B2B interfaces that provide functions for ordering, monitoring, managing and fault reporting for many different service types.

The most powerful and flexible customer interfaces that we have investigated provide users with a huge amount of functionality to order and configure services, to raise faults and conduct online diagnoses, to 'slice and dice' many types of data in standardised and customisable reports, and to collaborate on more complex orders and fault investigations. Rather than forcing customers to adapt their business processes to those

of their suppliers, these interfaces are flexible enough to enable customers to use them in their own business processes.

In particular, we identified the customer interfaces offered by AT&T, Global Crossing, Interoute and Verizon as being particularly powerful and rich in functionality.

The importance of customer input

The evidence from our research shows that the most heavily used customer interfaces are those whose design has kept the customer at the core of the process. Wholesalers that have consulted with customers throughout the development process and acted on usage patterns when interfaces have gone live have been able to maximise the effectiveness and popularity of their customer interfaces. This in turn leads to improved customer satisfaction, which in turn increases customer retention and opportunities to grow the value of the relationship.

We found that BT, Openreach and Telstra Wholesale are among the companies that paid most attention to the needs of their customers.