Customer Contact eBulletin

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"Tell me and I forget. Teach me and I may remember. Involve me and I learn." —Benjamin Franklin

Executive Interview

An interview with Alex Mead
Vice President, Customer Service
Seatwave

Seatwave, Europe's leading fan-to-fan ticket exchange, is an online marketplace for buying and selling tickets for theatre, sports, music and other live events. Launched in February 2007, the company now operates successful ticket exchanges in six different countries and was recently named Online Business of the Year and Europe's fastest growing digital media company. Seatwave's new Vice President of Customer Service, Alex Mead, brings nearly 20 years' experience and a number of fresh, forward-looking strategies to his new role. Alex recently caught up with Frost & Sullivan's eBulletin Editor, Erin Lindholm, to discuss how to establish customer experience metrics, advancements in call center technology and the importance of enabling your agents with a customer's history.

Erin Lindholm: So you are just coming on board at Seatwave. What changes do you plan to bring to how Seatwave measures the customer experience?

Alex Mead: I want to put two things into place initially, the first being better *self-service*. Customers seem to ask the same questions over and over, and the fact is that tickets are frequently sent out no earlier than two or three days before an event. So I want to let them know upfront, "Don't worry, your tickets will be there before the event, and maybe even the same day as the event, but we guarantee you'll physically have them." At the moment, there are no real customer metrics to track the customer experience in terms of how they are feeling about their purchase.

The second thing that I want to bring to the company is the idea that *this is not just about the transaction of the physical tickets*. Often the events are a big deal for our customers, so we shouldn't care just about the end product. There are a whole set of logistical issues surrounding the ticketed event: Where am I going to park? How am I going to get there? Are there concessions available? There's so much more. I really want to bring a real wow factor to Seatwave. Not just, "We'll get you your tickets in the post," but, "We can help you with your entire experience."

EL: That's a good point. Particularly if it's your first time going to a particular venue, where else are you going to find out that information?

AM: If you're going to Wimbledon, for example, you might wonder, how much does it cost to buy food at Wimbledon? Can I pack a lunch? If I'm getting the train, where's the closest tube station? There are so many things that pop into your head.

There are two things I want to give Seatwave. First of all, the longer-term strategy I'd like to focus on is improving the self-service voice channel. At the moment, customer service is mainly Web-based without a clearly-defined telephone number for customers to use if they wish. That's one of my pet hates. I would like somebody to be able to pick up the phone if they need to. I'm sure you've used eBay or Amazon. How often do you see their phone number on the Web site? It's nearly impossible to find, isn't it? I appreciate you want to deflect calls to self-service channels that are simple to handle or low-value, they don't really help anybody, but you've got to give someone with a real need a voice channel. Also, if you don't have the agent resources to deal with all calls, then utilize voice recognition, which has moved on so far these days. If you're a customer of Seatwave and you're really worried about something, we should allow you to pick up a phone there and then. This should include pre-purchase enquiries as well, as it can often be these concerns that prevent an order being placed in the first place.

EL: As you go forward with these new initiatives, how are you going to make sure that these various channels work together properly?

AM: You need to plan your demand. With Seatwave, although it's in a widely-varying customer contact industry, there should be a bit of foresight because any big event is going to have a huge peak. That's life, isn't it?

You should be able to realize that there's no way we are going to have the capacity to be able to deal with certain huge peaks of demand, and so you've got to look at how you can smooth out that demand. With technology these days, you can do a couple of things. You can smooth out the queuing process by opening up call-back processes. A common contact center method is to ask the customer if they can phone back at a different time, but that's not giving any sort of service to the customer. What I like to say is, "If you'd like us to phone you back later this afternoon, give us a rough time, enter your phone number and we'll call you back." That smoothes out the peak. Or you can proactively say, "You've phoned us at a really busy time. It's going to take us about 10-15 minutes to answer your call. Feel free to wait if you want. However, if

you want us to hold your place in the queue and phone you back when you're in the front, press one." You give the customer a chance to make a cup of tea, and you smooth the peak. There are several excellent queue-buster and callback products on the market these days, and obviously the parameters can be defined and controlled in a real-time basis — i.e., don't offer callback periods you can't guarantee to meet!

The second thing you do when you have huge demand is to automate as many things as you can. A lot of it is going to be customers looking to buy tickets or else they have a standard question and are looking for an answer. There are going to be many frequently asked questions. The two channels you have to make sure you maximize are the Internet channel and the voice channel.

With the Internet, you can self-service a lot of things if you just look at the kinds of questions that are being asked. You can try to guess them beforehand, or you can monitor them in a dynamic manner — 50% of our customers have asked these three questions, so let's put those questions right up front on the page. It's important to have a dynamic interface that automatically populates the frequently asked questions in a real-time basis as today's issues could be completely different to yesterday's. The second thing you can do is automate the voice channel. As I mentioned, the voice-recognition, and even touch-tone self-service technology these days, is really quite impressive.

EL: When we're talking about online support, and the integration of phone support, have you considered any initiatives that involve live chat with agents online?

AM: When I talk about Internet support, that's included in that channel. You're right to point it out. It's one of my pet hates that at most companies, contact centers have a service level that says you need to answer 80% or so of all phone calls within about 20 seconds. With e-mails, they say you've got to answer them within 24-48 hours or even within five working days, which I find crazy.

You've got to really push the Internet channel as impressively as the voice channel otherwise people are going to want to pick up the phone. Say a Seatwave customer is signed on into their Seatwave account, as soon as they click "Talk to Us Now," or "Chat with Us Now," the agent should be able to see the last 15 or 20 web page clicks they've been carrying out. So the agent is presented with: This customer is Mr. Mead; he's been looking at tickets for the fifth test match [in cricket] between England and Australia for the last 15 minutes, and he's been looking at the available seat locations, so he's probably going to have a question about that. That way you don't just blindly open in that awful, non-value way of, "Hello, how can I help you?" You can offer a friendly, educated greeting, "Hello, I see that you've been looking at the cricket, and examining the various seating options, how can I help you with that?"

EL: The key to great customer service is to enable the agents as much as possible, with as much information about the caller. You just offered one strategy. Do you have any other initiatives you'd like to bring on board at Seatwave?

AM: There are two things I always look at: the customer experience and the agent experience. Those are my two high priorities. I am always looking for methods where the agents can have the information quickly at their fingertips so the customer feels like, "Hey, they're talking to me as an individual." Not just, "Hello, how can I help you?" I always like agents to have information about that customer very quickly, so that customer's previous history pops-up, you don't make them go through screens and screens to find it. If you're smart with this data, you can use this information to try and determine why that customer is calling you. Even if you can't do that, you can still say, "Hello, Mr. Mead, I can see that you saw U2 in Belgium last month. How was that for you?" This way, you've got a bit of warmth.

There are a whole bunch of products out there; and customer and transactional information is always within one of the company's IT systems. I'm a great believer in pulling it out and popping it up easily for an agent to see. Too often we hear, "I can't help you. Let me transfer you." It's a great frustration for the agents and it's a great frustration for the customer. If you give the agent all of the information, they *can* help you.

I find it very important for contact centers to motivate agents. I always make sure that there are open and fair rewards schemes. I try to take away the stuff that frustrates agents, which in turn usually frustrates customers, like measuring solely in terms of average call duration and all those other clinical metrics. I try to get an environment where the agents are actually controlling the situation — you don't want them to just waffle on — but where they're measured on things such as: *Did you make the customer feel important? Did they feel valued? Did you try to up-sell and cross-sell if appropriate? Did you try to control the conversation? Did you resolve their issues?* I try to make those measures count in the same way that others measure the clinical, average call duration measures, conversion rate style measures. If you then balance this with real customer feedback, you get a complete 360 degree summary of how well the customer service experience is actually delivered.

I then aim to build a performance management framework along those measurements, working with the agents to build this program, not just giving it to them. And what I do is I link reward schemes around that, and every quarter you get three divisions of agents. The top 20% get a little bit more money, a higher bonus rate. And they can see exactly what they've done to get that. And the people in the middle, they get a bit of a bonus, the people in the bottom bands don't get a bonus but get extra support, and they can see exactly what they have to do to get a bonus next quarter. I'm a great believer in having these sorts of measures in place, rather than the really subjective management when there are no clear measures or people are being measured on the wrong things.

EL: So then when you go to your board, you go to your executives, and you don't have the hard metrics of, say, first-call resolution, how do you get that budgetary and internal support?

AM: I'm not saying you shouldn't be able to provide the board with the hard metrics, but I am saying you should not necessarily measure and motivate your agents with these same metrics, as that nearly always ends up in a poor customer and agent experience. A lot of customer service directors get hit over the head because their boards want them to answer 80% of calls in 20 seconds, that sort of thing. I always turn that around and say, "Okay, I guarantee we will be efficient with our resource utilization, and I will do all I can to be proactive with our self-service mechanisms, with our queue-buster solutions, and we may even have an outsourcer on stand-by. We will always make sure we are able to adapt to any additional contact volumes that we were not expecting, within a certain degree."

However, as a customer service director, you really have to stand up and push back and say, "This is the capability of our customer contact center. Within the current resourcing and budgetary levels this is the maximum number of contacts we are capable of dealing with. If there is a marketing plan, or a spike we are expecting and we need to get additional resource lined up (e.g. an outsourcer), fine, but we need to have some notice." I educate them, rather than letting them shout about abandoned calls and service levels. I say, "Look, next week we're going to abandon calls because you gave me no warning. That's a reality so let me know which contacts you want me to prioritize above others." I always aim to integrate the contact center completely into the whole business. That way they won't argue with you about performance if you do.