



The Merging of Contact Center & Unified Communications

How Every Business Can Leverage
Contact Center Technology

eBook

The Age of the Contact Center

What is a Contact Center and Where Did They Come From?

Once upon a time there was something called a “call center.” It was called that because contact was made with a telephone call to it. It was a central place where agents were located that you would communicate with via a telephone call. And that was the only real way to communicate with them.

Over time, call centers started to add more functionality beyond just phone calls to increase the convenience they offered customers. First fax was added, then emails were added next. Fast forward to today, and there aren’t really “call centers” anymore. There are contact centers, and you can communicate with them in different ways, including websites, social media, apps designed specifically to interact with the company (that even proactively ‘push’ information to you), SMS/MMS, and video. And, of course, phone calls, fax, and email remain an option in most contact centers.

This evolution towards a contact center was driven by many things. Technological advances in networks, for example, helped make this possible. But even beyond that, it was driven by people wanting to communicate in different ways – ways that were easier and more efficient for them.

The move to contact centers was also driven by companies wanting to reduce costs. Because if customer communications become structured less around people and real time communication and more towards self-help, equipment, and personnel costs can be reduced while customer satisfaction can potentially go up.

Technological advances combined with the drive to reduce costs without sacrificing service enabled enhanced multimodal communication to become reality in today’s world. But there are still changes occurring in the world of contact centers, especially as it relates to small and medium-sized businesses.



How Contact Center Technology Became Accessible to All

Many small businesses have already updated their existing phone system to a modern business phone system that includes Unified Communications (UC) capabilities or have plans to upgrade in the near future. These capabilities include:

- Instant messaging to colleagues (even on their mobile phones)
- Using smartphones as an extension of the office business phone number
- Email and fax integration
- And so much more

The business world has entered a new era of remote work, and companies with UC systems have been able to fare better. One important reason UC has enabled this is the built-in mobility functionality – since the communication is on IP, it can be transmitted via LTE or WiFi, which means you can be connected remotely, relatively easily.

So, users can work remotely, whether on the road, at home, or even on a boat. Any place with an LTE or WiFi connection. And with an expected 628 million public WiFi hotspots by 2023 (up from 169 million in 2018), this trend will continue for sure.¹

Video conference calls with teammates and customers, phone numbers ringing to your laptop or smartphone, a single place to look for customer messages or emails, and more have enabled companies to have employees work remotely while seamlessly continuing to drive the business forward.

But getting back to the UC capabilities that are in the business phone system. Those sound familiar, right? Well, they should. These UC capabilities are the same multimodal communication methods described above for contact centers, but in the business phone system.

As such, business owners are now understanding that having a basic contact center would enable much better customer service. This has prompted the merging of these multimodal contact center features into the UC system. Why have another specific expensive contact center unit (either on-premise or yet another monthly subscription) if the UC system can handle the basic contact center features that would help a small business? And why not merge them – the UC system already includes multimodal communication potential.

¹Cisco Annual Internet Report (2018-2023)

How Businesses are Using Contact Center Features

There are many contact center features available to satisfy almost any business communications need, but the most important features enable better customer service. These can even allow small businesses to more professionally present themselves to the outside world, making the business seem larger and more established in the process. These types of customer service-enhancing features include:

- Music on hold
- Callback when available
- Call queues
- Allowing inbound callers to hang up without losing their position in line
- Built-in queue priority (to allow certain types of calls to be prioritized)
- Automated appointment reminders with options to confirm, cancel, or reschedule
- Routing rules (such as time of day routing or department routing)

Best of all: because these are being integrated into the Unified Communications platform a business is using, they are accessible with a business phone number, which can be through a dedicated desk phone, a smartphone, or even a laptop. That means users can handle customer service calls remotely just as well as in person.

And some businesses also need their phone system to integrate with other commonly-used business tools, such as CRM, help desk, property management, or practice management software. This is an aspect of expensive dedicated contact center software that is also being brought into the UC realm, as UC and contact center functionality continue to merge.

These integrations also enhance customer service. For example, customer information can easily be accessible to whoever answers the phone (even if it's not a dedicated agent), saving valuable time for the customer. The customer phone number can help pull up prior customer information so when the small business gets on the phone, they may already know what the customer is calling about. And, if a customer service rep needs to find an expert in the company, then a UC platform with presence functionality can help the rep get an answer more quickly.

The industry is seeing more and more contact center features start to become part of the UC phone system. There are many businesses that need some contact center functionality, but not like those required for gigantic contact centers such as those large airlines or financial institutions might need. More and more, vendors are offering UC products for smaller businesses, where the features they need are just part of the overall system. And this is good news for these smaller businesses who can thrive in markets dominated by giants by being a sincere smile, friendly voice, or helpful message to their customers in ways a mega-corporation could never hope to achieve.



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