



Jan Smets

CONTACT CENTER

FROM COMPLAINTS SERVICE TO VALUE CENTER

MANAGEMENT

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Foreword

Jan Smets is quite rightly known as an excellent writer and speaker on all matters relating to contact centers. Not only because he can tell us what is going to happen during the next fifty years, but also because he has kept our feet planted firmly on the ground for decades with his own inimitable, inspiring and funny but scientifically rigorous style. I know from personal experience that his message of ‘get the basics right’ is still as valid today as it has always been. What’s more, it is a message that many organizations still need to take to heart. This book will allow them to do so – and that is surely one of its major merits.

When Jan told me that his publisher was interested in making an English translation of his first book and that there was a possibility for sponsoring by third parties, I immediately approached a number of the leading organizations in our field, who in recent years have put a lot of effort into innovation and progress on the supplier side. With the acquisition of Interactive Intelligence, Genesys has sent out an unmistakable signal that ‘cumbersome’ and ‘expensive’ platforms will soon be a thing of the past. Verint specializes in customer and employee engagement, combining a human touch with automation and robotics to create a seamless and efficient experience for both staff and customers. VANAD is an internationally and fast-growing contact center ‘jack-of-all-trades’. Together, they show that outsourcing remains a valuable business model, and not just for cost reasons. It was logical that these innovative companies should wish to participate as a sponsor in Jan’s book. Our thanks to them for their willingness and generosity.

In essence, there has been little change to the fundamentals of Remote Customer Interaction over the past few decades. It was – and still is – about distance channels and value creation. The challenge is and will remain how to find the best balance between human contact on the one hand and the ways in which organizations and technology can contribute to providing better solutions on the other hand. In the future, these solutions will need to go beyond simply answering specific customer questions, and for this the human dimension remains indispensable. People may no longer understand everything about computers, but computers will never understand everything about people. Feeling and creativity will never come from a system, and certainly not in that combination.

There are more than enough companies around the world to demonstrate that Remote Customer Interaction is a strategic value driver. The European

Union has also made clear with GDPR and the new contact center ISO standard that customer contact is a worthwhile profession and deserves to be respected as such. I am in no doubt that this inspirational book contains enough telling examples and valuable information to consign Calimero to the pages of contact center history forever.

Good contact centers are a win for all stakeholders: the people who work in them, the customers who deal with them, the organizations that use them and everyone else besides. Why? Because a contact center is the best source of knowledge and relevant information about the most important activity of each and every organization: taking care of its customers.

I wish you lots of pleasure in reading this first international book by my good friend Jan.

David Gybels
CEO, The House of Contact Centers

Introduction

Contact center management: from complaints service to value center

Contact center management

This is a book about [contact center management](#). As you might have guessed. If not, the title would have been utterly silly.

The following pages are intended to be a traveler's guide through a very specific branch of management. Don't expect reams of meaningless theory or politically correct slogans. Using real examples from daily practice, supplemented with dozens of useful tips, we will explore in an original, instructive and (hopefully) entertaining way the typical questions that play a crucial role in the life of any contact center:

- In what ways can a contact center truly generate value for the customer and the company? Can the semantic discussion regarding 'cost center' versus 'profit center' finally be settled?
- Are social media the beginning of the end for the classic contact center?
- How should a contact center be managed in order to achieve increased customer satisfaction?
- How can the performance of a contact center be monitored and interpreted by choosing the right KPIs? How can the real value of some of the current fetish indicators be properly assessed, subject as they are to the fashionable trends of the moment?

This book has not been written as a technological manual. You will find no instructions for using specific systems and applications. Instead, its purpose is to step back and take a broader look, to reflect on strategic visions, and to translate their key elements into concrete management decisions.

At the same time, it wants to do even more. In the final analysis, it is above all a story about [dealing with customers](#), about how you can create or (if you are not careful) destroy emotional value in real conversations with other human beings day after day. In this sense, the book is relevant for anyone involved in customer experience and can serve as a practical supplement to the avalanche of theoretical literature that already exists on this subject.

Nowadays, it is impossible to imagine any sales, marketing or customer service process without the support of a contact center. Such centers are created to deal in the most efficient way possible with the large volume of customer interactions inherent in those processes. Even though they each have their own specific role and typical characteristics, any story about contact center management is therefore inevitably also a story about marketing, sales and service.

Or as Brian Cantor has expressed it: ‘All contact centers, regardless of size, specific functions or channel capabilities, are united by a simple reality: they represent a link between brand and customer.’¹ Linking the brand and the customer... How cool is that!

Finally, this book is also about the efficient management and guidance of organizations. Business processes are often spread over many different silos, separated by hierarchical walls and functional divides. The distance from and to the contact center is sometimes too great, so that there is a risk that some of the added value will be lost. It is my ambition in the following pages to be something of a bridge-builder, spanning the gulfs that often exist between different sections of the same organization.

In this sense, the book is not exclusively targeted at contact center managers. As a result, its reading requires no prior in-depth practical knowledge of the field. At most, contact center managers might be able to skip a few pages here and there or read through others more quickly. But I take it for granted that all my readers, whatever their specific function, share a passionate interest for strategy, customer experience, sales, marketing or management ... Something for which you already have my sincere respect.

This book is not about typically Belgian situations. Sure, the examples and quotes often stem from Belgian contact centers or organizations. Because that is where I have first-hand experience to share, and not just rehashed stories to copy. But if there is one thing I have learned over the years, when talking to peers at international conferences or congresses, it is that we all struggle with the same universal issues. This makes me believe that the lessons presented here are not bound by Belgian borders.

Work to be done

According to research conducted by the House of Contact Centers between 2005 and 2014, almost 70% of Belgian contact centers think that they are not performing as well as they would like.² On average, contact center managers give their organization a maturity score of 2.2 out of 5, whereas their ambition is to achieve a score of 3.7. The House of Contact Centers itself regards 3.5 as the norm for ‘good’, but seeks nonetheless to raise its customers to a level of 4.

Please don’t see this as ‘proof’ that customers in Belgium are being poorly served.³ It is best regarded as a drive to do better and a sign of sufficient self-knowledge in the field to know that there is still room for improvement.

Since the end of 2006, I have been closely involved with the Expert Class in Contact Center Management. This has given me a privileged insight into the determination displayed by contact center managers to learn and evolve in a positive direction. The Expert Class also proved to be an ideal forum in which to translate my wide-ranging practical experience with Belgacom and bpost in a series of concepts that I could test against other insights. Contact centers are still a relatively young business phenomenon, for which no such thing as ‘universal truth’ already exists. Precisely for this reason, it was doubly interesting and informative to do some ‘sound-boarding’ during Expert Classes with my fellow professionals, who were able to talk shop from the perspective of a proven reality rather than based on commercial rhetoric.

It was this series of lectures and lessons that nurtured my desire to one day put down some of my findings in writing.

Thank you!

I am extremely grateful to the illustrator Marijke Meersman for the push she gave me to finally get this book off the ground. It was she who put me in contact with the good people at LannooCampus. We had worked together in the past. In years gone by, Marijke was the designer of many beautiful postage stamps, an activity for which I am also responsible at bpost. Now we are once again ‘partners in crime’, but this time for something completely different.

Of course, my heartfelt thanks also go to Hilde Vanmechelen, Niels Janssens, Hans Housen and Lotte Demeyer of LannooCampus, for their expert guidance through a process that for me was new and unfamiliar. My respect for real

writers has increased to no end as a result. Their wise counsel but also their endless patience and ruthless feedback kept my determination going to see this project through. Likewise, a deep bow also to Annemie Vandaele and Mitchell Pontzeele for their initial editing of the text. Thank you, Mr. Connerty and Haico Kaashoek for the English translation.

Thank you to David Gybels and Inge Vissers for their invitation to take part in the Expert Class, but also for their unconditional support at all times, without which this book would never have been published. Nor its English version, for that matter. For the latter, I also want to express my deepest gratitude towards Marije Gould, Menno Schuurman, Michel Delfosse, Merijn te Booy and Ad Nederlof.

My fellow lecturers and students contributed in no small measure to the content of the following pages, primarily by allowing me to crystallize my ideas through discussion. The chapter about reporting is largely based on their feedback during one of the Expert Class modules. Without them, there would quite literally have been no story to tell.

It goes without saying that this story has also been colored by my own experiences working in two of the largest in-house contact centers in Belgium. Belgacom and bpost are the glasses through which I have viewed the world for the past 20 or so years.

If you only take away one lesson when you reach the end of this book, I hope it will be that ‘one size’ very definitely does not ‘fit all’! Do not expect to find ready-made answers to all your problems in the following six chapters. It bears repeating that this book is not intended to be a manual to be copied. Focus instead on its ideas, examples, and best/worst practices, which hopefully you will then be able to integrate into your own reality.

And if, while reading, your bullshit meter tilts into the red zone, please don’t be afraid to let me know. This, like all other feedback, is more than welcome...

To help offset the effects of my own narrowness of vision, I am honored that a number of my personal sources of inspiration were also willing to contribute their own ideas and comments. This allowed the end result to be raised to a much higher level. I am therefore eternally grateful and indebted to (in alphabetical order):

Benedikte Paulissen, *Telenet*,
Benno Schiffer, *Verint*,
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Christophe Degrez, *Eneco*,
David Gybels, *THOCC*,
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Geoffrey Peyttier, *THOCC*,
 Gert Linthout, *Möbius*,
 Gerry Cools, *Proximus*,
 Horst Remes, *OneStone*,
 Koen Van Gerven, *bpost*,
 Kris Vervaet, (then) *EDF – Luminus*,

Nathalie Werbrouck, *Proximus*,
 Rudy Moens-HansTops, *bpost*,
 Stefan Sterk, (then) *Carglass*,
 TomVandeCruys, *Lampiris*,
 Koen Delvaux, (now) *Joyln*.

Standing on the shoulders

Isaac Newton already said that it is easier to see further if you can stand on the shoulders of giants.

In the past, I have been fortunate enough to work with a number of people who can truly be regarded as the giants of their profession. Hence, a sincere ‘thank you for everything’ to Alain, Antoine, Benedicte, Bart, Bernard, Carina, Carla, Christian, Claudine, Danny, David, Dirk, Etienne, Evi, Frank, Fred, Geert, Gerry, Hannelore, Hans, Ingrid, Isabelle, Jan, Jean-Marc, Jethro, Joris, Katleen, Kathleen, Katia, Katrijn, Klara, Laure, Lien, Marc, Marinus, Marleen, Martine, Nathalie, Nikki, Paul, Pascale, Patrick, Philippe, Sid, Stéphanie, Stef, Wim and all the many others with whom I have been able to help write a small piece of contact center history. The practical examples that follow are as much their work as mine, perhaps even more so...

This applies equally to the many hundreds of contact center agents at Belgacom and bpost, the unsung heroes of customer contact, who actually do every day what others only talk about. Hats off to you all!

Thank you also to Mary-Lynn, Baudouin, Jacques, Philippe, Geert, Koen, Marc, Kurt for the inspirational leadership, coaching and opportunities you have each given me over the years.

Contact center management is a passion. Whenever I meet new colleagues from the sector, it always seems as though we have been infected by the same virus, of which the symptoms include obsessive customer orientation, operational pragmatism and constructive (self-)criticism. This not only makes the exchange of ideas that much easier, but also that much more pleasant. It is impossible to even begin to summarize the countless planned and chance encounters that have taken place throughout my career, let alone all the congresses, seminars, receptions, work meetings, discussions, presentations, documents and other writings, each of which in their own way has continued to inspire me over the

past two decades. I can only hope that I have provided the correct references, when appropriate. I offer my sincere apologies for any oversights I might have made in this respect, and would be pleased to receive any corrections that may be necessary.

Where the heart is – and stays

But leaving aside this professional passion, the heart is only truly at home... at home!

From today onwards, I start repaying the enormous debt I owe to Carla and Jonas for giving me the freedom to sacrifice some – in fact, quite a lot – of our precious quality time to wrestle with the challenges of the blank page and the often equally blank mind. And this in addition to the many hours of ‘real’ work, which also eat into our time together but have at least provided me with the story that I hope to tell in the following pages.

Jonas, papa’s book is finally finished. Again.

How about a game of Fifa on Playstation? But only if you let me still be KV Mechelen...

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1

THE CONTACT CENTER DEFINED

Introduction

'Let's start at the very beginning. A very good place to start ...'

European research: Belgian contact center sector

A European white paper from 2013⁴ recorded the following statistical data for the Belgian contact center sector:

- 96,500 people employed;
- 2.15% of the active working population;
- 10% level of penetration in companies;
- Market value of 5.6 billion euros.

Each day in Belgium, almost 100,000 contact center employees do their utmost to answer the questions of customers and help them with their problems.

This means millions of individual contacts, day after day, in a tiny country like Belgium alone.

Given these numbers, it might seem that there is little need to start with a clear definition of a contact center. Surely with all these daily experiences, everybody must be able to form their own picture of what a contact center is and how it works, or not?

That might be true to some extent, but only on condition that 'everybody' is actually aware that he or she came into contact with such a center in the first place. According to a recent research study,⁵ contact with companies has become so self-evident for customers that people don't even always remember exactly when and how it happens.

If it is possible to speak of a general contact center 'image' in the public mind, this image usually reflects deeply ingrained prejudices that exist both inside

'If you talk about a call center, people often think of a gulag full of telephone slaves carrying out monotonous and soul-destroying work, while being constantly monitored, measured and assessed. And often combined with irregular and anti-social working hours, in an environment dominated by STRESS.'

Extract from an internal bpost HR document (including capitals)

and outside the organization. These clichéd prejudices say that, by and large, customers do not like contact centers. They are not happy with the long waiting times and the impersonal service they receive. Contact center staff are perceived as hating their work, which they carry out under the supervision of a management that would like nothing more but to outsource the whole lot as fast and as cheaply as possible, preferably to somewhere abroad.

If you do a Google search on the term ‘I hate contact centers’, you will get around 175 million results. Do a similar search with ‘I hate my contact center job’ and you will get almost 165 million results. The contact center is often seen as the ‘ugly duckling’ of the business world.

In an effort to counter this impression, the sector-specific professional literature is often guilty of what might be called ‘pamphletism’. Definitions focus on claiming a particular role, position and importance, rather than concentrating on a clear description of the concept ‘contact center’ in itself. Expensive words are the norm, with little clear will or desire being shown to clarify what the words actually mean.

A degree of objectivity would therefore be useful. It is important to set out the parameters within which the rest of our story will take place. But instead of searching for the ultimate definition, it is more beneficial – and a lot easier – to

‘Contact center’: a concept in search of a definition

Wikipedia keeps it short and simple: ‘A contact center is a department specialized in dealing with customer contacts through various channels of communication.’ It is this diversity of channels that distinguishes a contact center from a call center. According to the same source, the latter is: ‘A department or organization specialized in dealing with telephonic communications. A distinction is made between inbound and outbound traffic. The main characteristics of call centers are the large number of employees (agents), the strict distribution of tasks, strong central direction and a high level of efficiency.’

Notice how the unsuspecting reader is immediately spoon-fed a number of ‘characteristics’ that conjure up the clichéd image of the gulag-telephone factory. And how a ‘contact center’ is immediately given a different emotional coloring than a ‘call center’.

The Contact Center Management Dictionary⁶ also places the emphasis on different channels of communication when it speaks of a contact center as 'a general name for an organization or part of an organization that focuses on maintaining contacts with customers/clients. These contacts take place through various channels of communication by which two-way traffic is possible: internet, e-mail, text messages, telephone, fax, letter, chat'.

More recent definitions place greater stress on the 'noble' role of the contact center or the high degree of specialization involved.

In a series covering a number of direct marketing topics, a contact center was defined as a 'company or department, which, amongst other things, deals with incoming and outgoing communication processes (for example, telephone calls, e-mails, chat) for marketing purposes using trained personnel, supported by telecommunications and information technology'.⁷

Finally, in a 2009 publication David Gybels of the House of Contact Centers described a contact center as 'a specialized department or an organization in its own right that is responsible for dealing with large numbers of customer contacts via direct channels: telephone, e-mail, text messages, IVR (Interactive Voice Response) and WWW. Contact centers are supported by the use of sophisticated technology, are partially automated, can be organized virtually and serve as a multi-functional service center with a central position within the organization. Contact centers are value drivers. They make a direct contribution to income, customer satisfaction, CRM, the gathering of market information and the optimization of services and processes.'

Amen. Go in peace...

identify the fundamental building blocks that all contact centers have in common and to then determine the way in which they are managed.

The three main building blocks, which you can see in figure 1 (page 19), are the core of the belief on which the rest of this book is based. As such, they are worth spending a few pages on. Those of you who are already converted to the contact center faith can skip to the start of the next chapter or else can read on and nod knowingly in agreement as our story unfolds. The choice is yours.

The essence of contact centers: three universal building blocks

In my opinion, the work of a contact center always involves dealing with:



Figure 1: the three universal building blocks of contact centers

- large volumes, in which ‘large’ must be interpreted in relation to the total size of the operations;
- non-physical;
- customer contacts, where the term ‘customer’ includes both internal and external customers, as well as the notion of ‘user’ (the customer of a customer).

A contact center is the most efficient organizational structure to deal with large volumes of customer contacts when they do not involve a physical element. Amen.

As soon as a specific group of people within an organization are charged with handling virtual customer contacts, a contact center has been created. As far as I am aware, there is no scientific ‘lower limit’ to determine how ‘big’ a center must be or how many staff it must have before it can be regarded as a ‘proper’ contact center. Having said that, some specific contact center instruments, such as WorkForce Management, are deemed only to be effective from 20 to 30 employees upwards. In her book *The Real-Time Contact Center*, Donna Fluss even sets the bar as high as 100 employees.

It should be clear, of course, that we are talking about more than the occasional telephone contacts of a receptionist or an administrative assistant.

Our three building blocks assume the non-physical nature of the contacts. Although many people like to claim the contrary, the contact center does not have exclusivity when it comes to interaction with customers. In reality, it is often not even the largest contact channel. At bpost, for example, the post offices have an annual volume of customer contacts that is thirty times greater than the volume of the organization's contact center. And I'm not even considering the multitude of contacts made by postmen and -women during their daily delivery rounds.

Even so, it is the virtual nature of contact center work that makes it possible to concentrate on 'large volumes'. This creates the necessary degree of freedom to take maximum advantage of economies of scale. For example, it would be unthinkable in a retail environment to set up a gigantic store in a cheap and remote corner of Europe and then expect every customer on the continent to find their way there. But this is perfectly possible – in fact, it is a tried-and-tested recipe – for contact centers. Irrespective of its physical location, a contact center is the place where all virtual contacts are brought together.

As a result, it is not unreasonable to expect that this concentration should lead to the development of a significant degree of expertise.

As we have seen, some definitions explicitly link the contact center to information technology. The temptation to do this is understandable. Many tools are indeed highly sector-specific and characterize the way some contact centers are organized and run. I am increasingly gaining the impression that many vendors/suppliers simply see the contact center as a mere collection of technological applications (preferably their own). But these applications are no more than an enabler of the contact center concept, not its essence. They are part of a 'chicken-or-egg'-like discussion relating to the volume aspect of a contact center's work. Technology makes possible the scaling-up of services, without losing manageability. At the same time, the reliable and complex support of large volumes requires the use of sophisticated technology.

The virtual nature of the contacts is crucial for determining the processes of the contact center. In a later phase, it will also be the decisive factor for defining the role and position of the center. If an activity cannot be carried out efficiently 'at distance', it needs to be questioned whether this activity even belongs in a contact center.

On the other side of the contact relationship there is always a customer, either internal or external. This third building block implies that in everything that follows we will need to find a balance between efficiency and value creation.

Front office and back office: the yin and yang of the contact center

Referring to a contact center as opposed to a call center makes it possible to recognize the mix of communication channels. The concept of a call center places the emphasis too explicitly on the front office, the part of the organization that is in direct contact with customers.

In the following pages, the back office – ‘the part of a (contact center) organization that deals with support and largely administrative processes’⁸ – will also be regarded as a core element in the functioning of a contact center.

Viewed in operational terms, the front and back office are inextricably interwoven. Searches, complex questions, complaints, etc. that would delay the customer for too long in the front office are referred to the back office for further follow-up. This second-line function means that the back office forms an integral part of the contact. In many organizations some offline channels of communication, such as letters, faxes and certain e-mails, are passed directly to the back office. When this happens, there is no longer a structural barrier between the first and second line processing of contacts. The integration is complete.

In operational reality, the front and back office are the yin and yang of the contact center: the origin of the workload of the latter is found in the work carried out by the former.



Figure 2: the yin and yang of the contact center

The more contacts the front office can deal with autonomously to the satisfaction of the customer, the better it will be for the back office, since the influx of complaints and follow-up tasks will be significantly reduced.