

# Building a Multi-Channel Contact Center in the Era of Social Networking

Sponsored by:

**InVision**  

---

**Software**

DMG Consulting LLC  
6 Crestwood Drive  
West Orange, NJ 07052  
973.325.2954  
[www.dmgconsult.com](http://www.dmgconsult.com)  
[info@dmgconsult.com](mailto:info@dmgconsult.com)

# Building a Multi-Channel Contact Center in the Era of Social Networking

## **Table of Contents**

Executive Summary .....	1
Business Trends Driving Adoption of Multi-Channel Contact Centers .....	2
Multi-Channel Contact Center Defined .....	3
Common Servicing Channels .....	4
The Impact of Social Networking .....	6
Technology Required for Multi-Channel Contact Centers .....	7
Benefits and Challenges in Multi-Channel Contact Centers .....	8
Case Study .....	10
Best Practices for Forecasting and Scheduling for a Multi-Channel Workforce ..	12
Getting Started.....	14
Conclusion .....	16
About InVision Software.....	17
About the Author .....	17

### Executive Summary

The explosive growth of social networking is forcing enterprises to change how they interact with their customers, prospects, partners and investors. The telephone remains the primary communication tool between businesses and their customers. However, as Generation Y'ers and Millennials (people born between 1977 and 1997) take their rightful place as leading consumers, they are showing a preference for communications channels such as SMS, chat and email. Video is also slowly making inroads and social networks and communities are threatening to alter many hard-won contact center best practices. Enterprises must keep up with changing channel preferences or risk having customers defect to companies that "get it."

This document is a guide to building a multi-channel contact center in the era of social networking. It will:

- Define the new multi-channel contact center
- Prioritize servicing channels based on customer demographics
- Discuss the impact of social networking on contact center operations
- Review technology requirements for the contact center of the future
- Assess the benefits and challenges in multi-channel contact centers
- Present best practices for forecasting and scheduling in a multi-channel contact center
- Provide a roadmap for getting started

## **Business Trends Driving Adoption of Multi-Channel Contact Centers**

The concept of multi-channel contact centers was introduced to the market in 1997, as the Internet became hot. Market innovators anticipated that the Internet would alter the way that customers, prospects, partners and investors interacted with enterprises and that sales and servicing organizations would be quick to adapt. Surprisingly, most contact centers have not yet become accustomed to the changing needs of their clients; too many contact centers continue to provide primarily phone-based support. And even worse, when they do provide support for alternative channels – email, chat, SMS (texting), community bulletin boards and, increasingly, social networking – service levels and quality are inconsistent and client history is not shared across channels.

Like it or not, it's way past time for enterprises to support multiple channels. Customers, particularly Generation Y'ers and Millennials, believe that they have the right to interact with enterprises in their channel of choice. Companies that don't support their needs and convenience are perceived as not committed to them and not deserving of their loyalty.

Trends that are driving the migration of contact centers to multi-channel support organizations include:

- The recession is forcing enterprises to reassess all activities, including their contact centers
- Contact centers are converting to revenue generators
- Customer churn, which typically runs at 5% to 30% annual rate, is a bigger issue during recessionary times
- Social networking has given customers a vehicle for spreading good and bad news with the click of a mouse
- Generation Y'ers and Millennials with an inseparable connection to technology are forcing enterprises to change the way they conduct business
- The composition of live customer interactions is shifting from a predominance of voice to multi-channel

Twelve years ago, it was acceptable for companies to ignore alternative channels; today it is not. Enterprises must evolve or they will find their customers defecting to companies that "get it."

## Multi-Channel Contact Center Defined

In 1997, Gartner defined a contact center as a “multi-channel (phone, email, chat, fax), multi-purpose (service, sales, marketing, and collections) organization that served a variety of constituents (customers, prospects, partners, and investors) in a logically consolidated but physically disaggregated setting.” See Figure 1. By definition, contact centers are intended to support multiple channels.

**Figure 1:**



Source: DMG Consulting LLC, July 2009

### Common Servicing Channels

Voice, which includes land lines, cell phones and interactive voice response (IVR) system interactions, is the most ubiquitous form of communication, and will remain so for at least the next five years. The second most common channel is Web self-service. An increasing number of customers are demonstrating a preference for helping themselves. While there are a growing number of effective websites, too many are poorly designed, forcing customers to ask for live help. Email is the third most commonly supported contact center channel. However, slow response times, typically 24 to 48 hours, are compelling customers to call. Fax is a dying channel that in most cases is presented as an email. It's still necessary for contact centers to support this channel, but as a practical matter, it's likely to disappear within the next five years.

Emerging contact center channels available today, some of which are already being supported, are SMS (texting), IM/chat, desktop sharing (collaboration), community bulletin boards, video, social media and bi-directional broadcast media. Figure 2 presents an overview of the year when each of these channels is expected to become standard for key industries. This Figure represents a realistic estimate of how long it will take before most contact centers will have to adapt to the changing needs of their customers.

## Building a Multi-Channel Contact Center in the Era of Social Networking

**Figure 2: Planned Contact Center Channels <sup>1</sup>**

Channels	Verticals						
	Financial Services	High Technology	Retail	Telecom	Travel	Government	Education
Phone <sup>2</sup>	Now	Now	Now	Now	Now	Now	Now
Fax	Now	Now	Now	Now	Now	Now	Now
Web Self-Service	Now	Now	Now	Now	Now	Now	Now
eMail	Now	Now	Now	Now	Now	Now	Now
SMS (texting)	2011 <sup>3</sup>	2012	2013	Now	Now	2014	Now <sup>4</sup>
IM/Chat <sup>5</sup>	Not common	Now	Now	Not common	2013	No	2014
Bulletin Boards	2012	Now	2012	2012	2012	2013	2012
Collaboration/Desk Top Sharing	2014	Now	2013	No	No	No	No
Social Media <sup>6</sup>	2014	2013	2014	2014	2014	No	2014
Bi-directional Broadcast Media (i.e., Twitter) <sup>7</sup>	2013	2013	2013	2013	2012	2015	2012
Video <sup>8</sup>	2015	2015	2015	Not common	2015	2017	2015

**Notes:**

1. There will continue to be increased use of all of these channels during the next few years. The year reflected in the chart is when use of a channel is expected to become standard for an industry.
2. Phone calls and IVR-based self-service
3. Financial services includes banking, brokerage and insurance. Brokerage will use SMS before banking and insurance.
4. Education needs the ability to send alerts via SMS.
5. Security concerns limits the value and benefits of IM/chat.
6. There is a big push to figure out how to use these channels for sales, marketing and service.
7. Things like Twitter will come and go. DMG expects the broadcast bi-directional notification capabilities to become important.
8. Bandwidth is a constraint today.

Source: DMG Consulting LLC, July 2009

## **The Impact of Social Networking**

Companies large and small are struggling to figure out how to use the social networks, specifically social media like Facebook and MySpace, bulletin boards and bi-directional broadcast media such as Twitter, to enhance their bottom line. While many companies are still wrestling with ways to respond to these media, their customers are simply using them.

Many companies have “skunk works” efforts in either marketing or IT that are attempting to manage these new channels. Unfortunately, these groups are not prepared to handle high volumes. While it will take time and likely some embarrassing and well publicized failures, the task of responding to social networks will inevitably fall to contact centers. This increases the challenge for service organizations, which are already struggling to determine the best way to cost-effectively provide an outstanding experience to existing customers.

While few organizations know how to leverage the power of the social networks, contact centers are well positioned to support these new channels. Universal queuing technology can be used to manage inbound and outbound traffic, and workforce management can help enterprises staff appropriately to ensure that multi-channel transactions are handled by agents with the right skills and attitude on a timely basis. While the technology is conceptually under control, the challenges lie in building social networking sales/customer service best practices.

### Technology Required for Multi-Channel Contact Centers

Contact centers are technologically sophisticated operating environments. Handling multiple channels adds a new level of complexity, which is why many organizations have put off dealing with this challenge and others are using the sub-optimal silo approach, where each channel is handled by a separate group. Building a multi-channel contact center where transactions are managed from a single queue requires changes in all aspects of a contact center: its organization structure, policies, best practices, technology and staff.

To succeed, enterprises need to implement a universal queue, multi-channel standardized servicing application, workforce management (with algorithms designed to handle the different channels), recording/quality assurance (QA), coaching and eLearning.

Here is what is required for each of these applications:

*Universal queue:* must be able to receive, queue and route transactions from all channels.

*Standardized servicing application:* requires a standardized interface that is able to receive and handle transactions from all types of channels: calls, emails, SMS, Fax, chats, tweets, etc.

*Workforce management:* Forecasting and scheduling software that uses the right algorithm and mathematical treatment to accurately determine the number of each type of transaction that is expected to arrive every 15 minutes of every day. Once the forecast is determined, the scheduling application needs to create agent schedules that optimize contact center performance while ensuring that each type of transaction is handled within its service level.

*Recording/QA:* A multi-channel recording and quality assurance application that is able to capture and replay all types of transactions, regardless of the channel in which it arrives. The solution must also allow supervisors to review and critique every transaction and to assess each agent's performance in all channels.

*Coaching:* Real-time tool to provide feedback and best practices with agents.

*eLearning:* A flexible training tool that handles all types of content and information that agents need to deliver an outstanding customer experience.

## **Benefits and Challenges in Multi-Channel Contact Centers**

There is a right way and a wrong way to set up a multi-channel contact center. The right way promotes optimal and cost effective handling of all transaction types, regardless of the channel in which they arrive. An effective contact center has one agent population with specialty groups possessing different skills. (Each channel may be assigned a different skill group.) The transactions arrive at the centralized queue and are distributed to the most appropriate agents. The workforce is handled as a single group and workforce management software is used to forecast the volume for each channel and schedule agents to handle the expected number of transactions.

In contact centers that do not have universal queuing technology that handles Internet Protocol-based transactions, each channel is handled by a separate group of agents. For example, the voice group handles calls and the email group handles only emails. (Often, agents are not even cross-trained to support a second channel.) Unfortunately, most of these organizations use separate and non-integrated applications for case management and customer history. Agent empowerment, service level commitments and quality scores vary greatly by channel, confusing customers and agents alike.

Below is a list of the benefits and challenges associated with building multi-channel contact centers.

### **Benefits:**

1. Allows customers to use their channel of choice and to switch between channels at their discretion
2. Allows companies to deliver a consistent level of service in all channels
3. Allows enterprises to standardize policies and procedures
4. Allows companies to share customer case history information, regardless of the channel in which the transaction arrives
5. Allows companies to simplify their operating environment by eliminating duplicative organizations and applications that serve similar functions for different channels
6. Allows organizations to enrich the agent's job, thereby increasing agent retention

## Building a Multi-Channel Contact Center in the Era of Social Networking

7. Allows organizations to reduce operating expenses for agents and management through the use of multi-channel WFM solutions

While there are many benefits for customers, management and agents from multi-channel contact centers, there are also challenges that must be overcome when building them. These **challenges** include:

1. The need to create a new and streamlined organizational structure
2. The need to modify the management structure, as there is no longer a need to have separate managers overseeing activities from different channels
3. The need to standardize and simplify operating procedures
4. The need to cross-train staff to handle more than one channel
5. The need to alter agent compensation
6. The need to implement a sophisticated WFM solution with algorithms to accurately forecast for all channels supported by the organization
7. The need for a WFM application that optimizes agent schedules in a multi-channel operating environment
8. The need to upgrade contact center technology to facilitate efficient handling of multiple channels
9. The need to install a customer relationship management application (case management) to track transactions across all channels
10. The need to give agents a servicing application that allows them to handle inquiries regardless of the channel in which it arrives

## Case Study

A consumer products electronics retailer decided to consolidate its six regional service centers into one contact center with 90 agents. While their supervisors had been able to deal with the complexity of handling multiple skills and channels with small groups using Excel, this was not possible for the consolidated site.

**Goals:** They wanted to achieve the following benefits:

1. Migrate from an Excel-based forecasting and scheduling process to an automated one
2. Reduce the number of agents
3. Reduce the amount of time their supervisors spent scheduling
4. Improve scheduling accuracy and better meet the needs of their customers
5. Match customer needs to agent skills
6. Increase agent satisfaction by giving them the schedules they preferred.

Part of the challenge was the need to fairly schedule agents to handle a mix of calls, chat session, emails, faxes, and back office paperwork. All agents were required to handle any transaction that arrived at their desktop and this could not be handled by Excel in any way that allowed for a fair and equitable distribution of the work. If the company did not address their multi-channel workforce management challenge, they would not have been in legal compliance and would have been confronted with an angry workforce which would have disrupted service.

## Case Study

*The Solution:* A centralized WFM solution that used different algorithms to address and treat the different types of transactions – calls and chat sessions that need to be handled in real time and faxes, emails and back office work that needed to be responded to within 24 hours. The solution also optimized schedules based on skills to ensure that the right technical expertise was available at all times.

*The Benefits:* The solution was implemented in less than 6 weeks, even though this was the first time they had used an automated solution and were consolidating 6 sites into one. The benefits were:








1. Payback in less than 12 months
2. 90% reduction in scheduling time, resources and cost
3. Schedules that are delivered 4 weeks in advance that comply with all legal, technical and financial requirements
4. Introduction of flexible working hours that improved agent satisfaction and therefore the customer experience
5. Down-to-the-minute forecasts that significantly improved staffing accuracy and adherence to service levels.

Using a WFM solution greatly facilitated the transition from the 6 sites to the centralized environment. It improved agent satisfaction, allowed the company to comply with their legal and technical requirements and improved service quality, while dramatically reducing their operating expenses.





### Best Practices for Forecasting and Scheduling for a Multi-Channel Workforce

The two primary challenges in multi-channel contact centers are getting all interactions routed to the right department, and staffing that department properly (which also requires accurate forecasting of the incoming volume for each channel). Customers reach out in the channel they find most convenient and leave it up to the organization to get the transaction to the right staff member. With the rise of social networking, this challenge is daunting for most companies. Below are 21 best practices that should be applied to forecasting and scheduling multi-channel contact centers. They incorporate a number of new approaches for handling social networking.






#### Multi-site and Multi-channel Scheduling Best Practices

-  Decide if your organization is going to prioritize efficiency or for fairness. Make sure the WFM solution you are considering allows you to flexibly weight these two parameters and change them as necessary. Also be sure that the WFM solution is able to treat the handling of each channel differently.
-  Keep response time service levels as consistent as possible in all channels, including emails.
-  Use the intra-day scheduling tool to make real-time schedule adjustments, including shifting resources to the most time critical channels from the ones that allow for latency.
-  The intra-day tool needs to be able to automatically recommend these changes based on the service level needs of each channel.
-  Use a WFM solution that gives agents control over their schedules by: allowing them to schedule themselves, select available schedules, exchange schedule/shifts, request vacation and specify their preferred channels.
-  Use a WFM solution that allows for scheduling of multi-channel agents that handle transaction from any channel on a first-come-first-service basis.
-  Use universal agents who are qualified to handle transactions from multiple channels and skills.






## Building a Multi-Channel Contact Center in the Era of Social Networking

-  Do not force agents who are excellent in one or two traditional channels to support media that they are not comfortable handling.
-  When building an at-home agent program, do not send “home” all of your best agents.
-  As social networking is new assign outstanding agents to handle the new channels and develop effective processes and procedures that can be rolled out to the rest of the agents.
-  Do not schedule social networking channels using the same performance metrics as calls or emails. Identify the proper standards for each of the new channels.

### Multi-site and Multi-channel Forecasting Best Practices

-  Obtain historical volume data for each site, channel and skill and on a consolidated basis for every 15 or 30 minutes of every day. It is ideal to have 2 years worth of data but three months is acceptable.
-  For planning purposes, forecast separately for each site and channel. Then, forecast on a consolidated basis for the entire operation. Determine which forecasting approach provides the best results for the contact center.
-  If no historical data is available, find an operating environment that is somewhat similar and use it to create initial volume estimates. (When all else fails, obtain these estimates from your workforce management provider.)
-  WFM or contact center manager should build a formal relationship with all corporate/operating groups – marketing, billing, manufacturing, IT, credit, etc. that can impact contact center volume. This will give the contact center the opportunity to adjust their forecast for volume fluctuations.
-  Set up and use an intra-day forecasting and scheduling tool that proactively notifies management when volume or head count is out of adherence.

## Building a Multi-Channel Contact Center in the Era of Social Networking

-  Set up a report that captures and measures transaction volumes by channel so that you can watch the trends and adjust agent skills as necessary.
-  After determining which social networking channels the contact center will support, set up an enterprise-wide mechanism for capturing its volumes. DMG recommends that contact centers support legitimate bulletin boards that discuss their company and product and Twitter.
-  Use a WFM solution that has different algorithms to support the various channels, including social networking. (Note: Bulletin board comments should be responded to within 1 to 4 hours and Twitter within 5 to 15 minutes.)
-  Create scorecards and dashboards that track and measure the accuracy of forecasts. Set up a process to review and enhance the forecasts on a daily basis. The Forecaster needs to watch the volumes on new social networking channels very carefully, as they are just emerging.
-  The WFM function needs to have a seat at the contact center management committee.

### Getting Started

While there are many benefits to converting an existing customer service, technical support, sales or other type of contact center to a multi-channel environment, it presents new management, procedural and technical challenges. Below is a high-level project plan for converting an existing service organization to an optimized multi-channel contact center. Most servicing and sales organizations today are handling more than one channel, even if their automatic call distributor (ACD) handles only calls. In sales organizations, the inside sales staff often informally handles a large volume of emails and faxes. Customer service agents frequently receive follow-up emails from customers. While these transactions are not generally tracked – as many organizations lack the tools for measuring them – they take up a substantial amount of agents' time, resulting in inefficient and costly handling. The steps below provide a framework for making the contact center more effective while also increasing agent satisfaction and retention.

## Building a Multi-Channel Contact Center in the Era of Social Networking

1. Implement technology that allows for the centralized capture, tracking and distribution of all transactions handled by your contact center. If this cannot be done on a centralized basis, capture the transaction volume for each channel in separate reports and then bring the information together via reports or scorecards so that management has an appreciation of everything the department is doing.
2. Make sure that your WFM solution has algorithms or mathematical treatments to accurately forecast and schedule all types of transactions formally or informally handled by your contact center. If the solution cannot handle the new channels, find a solution that can.
3. Using the WFM solution, forecast transaction volumes and then create agent schedules for all of the transactions handled. During this process identify the resources and skills that are currently missing in your contact center.
4. Train or hire resources to address the missing skills.
5. Design training programs to handle any new channels including Twitter and blogs. (Both supervisors and agents must be trained.)
6. Develop procedures to integrate the handling of tweets and blogs into the contact center's workflow.
7. Update the QA process to address the newer channels. This will include modifying QA forms and retraining QA specialists.
8. Enhance the department's reporting structure to incorporate the handling of new channels and to provide a consolidated view.
9. Enhance the reward and recognition programs to address the new channels.
10. Work with Human Resources to alter the annual and semi-annual reviews to address the new channels.
11. Work with marketing to create effective communications to let all customers know that your company welcomes their use of the newer channels.



## **Conclusion**

Enterprises have no choice but to enhance their contact centers by enabling them to handle all types of channels, including social networking. The benefits of each channel may not be obvious, but the costs of ignoring any channel are too great. Channel freedom is a customer right, not an enterprise option.

Many companies have found that it's relatively easy to support multiple channels, but it's challenging to simultaneously optimize service, customer satisfaction and operating costs. The key to success is using IP technology that can handle all types of channels and a universal queue that can receive and route any kind of transaction. Contact centers also need management solutions to keep track of customer needs and ensure consistently high-quality service. They also need workforce management software to forecast volume by channel, and to schedule agents appropriately and plan for the future. Proper staffing is a prerequisite to delivering high-level and cost-effective service in all channels.

### ***About InVision Software***

InVision Software is a world-leading supplier of enterprise-wide workforce management (WFM) solutions which enable companies to optimize their staff planning and scheduling processes. InVision empowers customers to reduce personnel costs, increase productivity, improve employee satisfaction and to boost revenue by leveraging better customer service. Founded in 1995 and based in Ratingen (Germany), InVision currently employs more than 220 WFM specialists and has offices across Europe, North America, and South Africa. InVision Software AG (IVX) is listed in the Prime Standard Segment of the Frankfurt Stock Exchange. Among InVision's clients are numerous international blue chip companies, such as ABN Amro, Allianz, BMW, Deutsche Telekom, IKEA, Sky and Vodafone. Further information at: [www.invisionwfm.com](http://www.invisionwfm.com)

InVision Software, Inc.,  
3333 Warrenville Road Suite 200  
Lisle, IL 60532  
630.799.8370  
[info@invisionwfm.com](mailto:info@invisionwfm.com)

### ***About the Author***

Donna Fluss is the founder and president of DMG Consulting LLC, the leading provider of call center and analytics research, market analysis and consulting. She is the author of *The Real-Time Contact Center*, *the 2008 Contact Center Executive and Management Briefing*, and many other leading industry reports on contact center hosting, interactive voice response, speech analytics, performance management, workforce management, surveying and analytics, and quality management/liability recording. Contact Donna at [donna.fluss@dmgconsult.com](mailto:donna.fluss@dmgconsult.com).