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Forrester's Art Schoeller on seven strategies for elevating CX today

Nuance Guest Blogger

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We sat down with Art Schoeller, Principal Analyst at Forrester Research, to find out how contact centers are responding to the unprecedented challenges of COVID-19. Based on his expert insights, we've identified seven strategies for elevating CX—including how to talk to customers, how to support agents, and how to seize the opportunities that adversity creates.


About the author: Art Schoeller is vice president and principal analyst at Forrester Res

earch, Art supports Application Development & Delivery (AD&D) Professionals who plan, build, and run unified communications and contact center workloads for enterprises.

There are few people who understand COVID-19's impact on customer experience as well as Forrester Research's Art Schoeller.

As Principal Analyst for contact center technology, Schoeller has been in regular contact with both vendors and users since the start of the pandemic, listening to their challenges, and providing expert guidance and support.
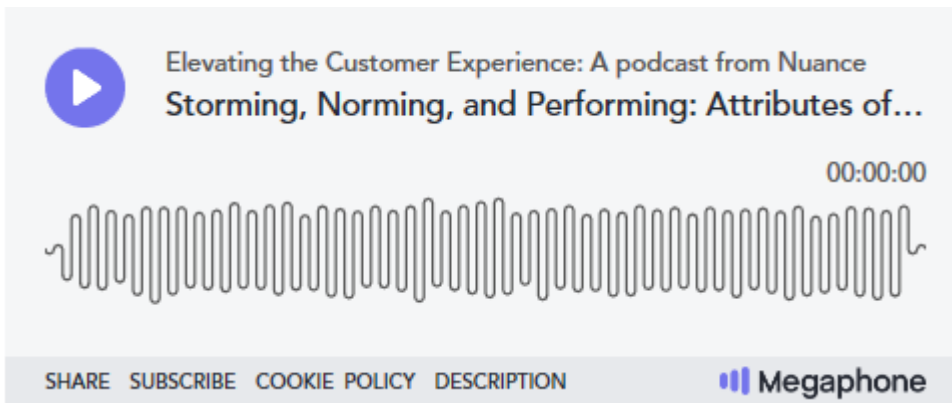
We spoke to Schoeller back in April, with many organizations still reeling from unexpected call volumes and contact center closures. We asked him to share his strategies and solutions for navigating the

COVID-19 landscape, and what's coming next. You can hear our conversation in full in the *Elevating the Customer Experience* podcast series, but here are seven key strategies we've drawn from our discussion.

1. Ask customers what they need

How do you talk to customers during a pandemic? First, you listen. The best performing companies aren't pushing COVID-related solutions. Instead, they're monitoring customer needs.

"This is an environment where marketing to customers is very much, 'How can I help?' as opposed to, 'I got a new widget to sell you,'" Schoeller explains.

Authenticity is key. That means thinking about how customers would normally use your products and services, and how they could make better use of them in the current environment. Then you can reach out with a genuine solution, mapped to genuine challenges.

2. Solve your agents' problems

For some service agents, remote working brings many new challenges. But there are simple steps employers can take to make the transition easier and set agents up for success.

Become more flexible. A high proportion of agents—for example, those with children to homeschool—will not be able to keep their traditional hours. Ensuring agents' capacity (and satisfaction) may mean splitting up shifts, or introducing more flexible workforce management processes, such as shift bidding systems.

Don't skimp on the basics. Do your agents have everything they need to be productive? Take the time to ask. If they miss having a monitor, or if they're struggling for bandwidth, address the issue for them. As Schoeller says, "Be willing to spend the money so that they can upgrade that pipe into their local internet service provider."

Cut everyone a little slack. Your agents can't control every aspect of their home environment. Whether it's a doorbell ringing or a dog barking, there will be occasional disruption on calls. Schoeller believes managers must show understanding. "You can't say to the agent, 'Hey, you can only work if you send everybody out of the house.' […] So, you've got to reach them from an employee experience perspective."

3. Break down silos, and shift to digital

For contact centers that have been experiencing unprecedented call volumes, Schoeller suggests the crisis also represents an opportunity to break down silos.

"We still have these—call them channel divides, if you will—that some organization owns the website, some organization owns the mobile app, the customer service organization owns voice or maybe a couple of digital channels as well," says Scholler.

Now is the time to ask, "Could that caller's question be answered by a chatbot? Or on our website?" Brands that can quickly improve coordination between voice and digital channels will be able to share traffic more effectively, and meet customer needs faster, with fewer resources.

4. Automate the front end

Many organizations are leaning on automation to help manage traffic spikes. They're using IVRs and virtual assistants to determine customer intent and improve routing to other channels.

What does this look like in practice? Schoeller gives the example of a customer calling a brand to ask a very common question. The company has the technology to identify the customer, and the fact they're on their mobile device. Its IVR establishes the customer's intent and offers to send them an SMS message with a link to an FAQ page, rather than keep them waiting to speak to a live agent.

5. Use callback and proactive notifications

Automation isn't the only existing tool that customer service organizations are using to substantial effect. Many are also ramping up their use of callback services and proactive customer notifications. As Schoeller explains, switching on callback options can be a quick win, allowing contact centers to "clip off the top of the peak of traffic, and potentially shift it to less busy times."

Making effective use proactive email or messaging communications requires more careful planning. Get your strategy and messaging right, however, and you can address customer concerns even before they get in touch.

6. Scale faster with cloud solutions

Many organizations have seen COVID-19 push their on-premises infrastructure to its limits.

"If there's a big spike in call volumes, your call servers […] could be experiencing spikes as well," says Schoeller. "Everything that an organization would own in terms of physical hardware, and software licenses—and from a business continuity perspective—is all under stress."

Organizations who've transitioned to cloud solutions are likely to be able to respond faster. As Schoeller

explains, "You can spin up a ton of these services, I won't say on a dime, but much more rapidly. And you don't have to source hardware."

7. Identify lasting improvements

If there's one thing we took away from our conversation with Schoeller, it's the potential for current challenges to drive lasting improvements in customer and agent experience.

Schoeller sees organizations accelerating digital transformation, embracing flexible working, and even tapping back into the "spirit of service"—as they celebrate the everyday heroics of customer-facing staff, they've an opportunity to embed a greater emphasis on CX into their corporate culture.

Dive deeper: listen to the podcast series

For more insights and advice from Art Schoeller, listen to the *Elevating the Customer Experience* podcast series.

Tags: COVID-19, Customer experience, Forrester