

Pull it together

When two firms join forces, customer service can be a casualty. Here are some strategies for keeping everyone working towards the same goals

Providing high-quality customer service is always important, but never so much as during a merger. Merger activity shines a spotlight on the company and encourages customers to think about their relationship with it. In the run-up to a corporate union, the media and the merger advocates usually talk up the benefits and so customers' expectations are raised. If those expectations are not subsequently met, customers can begin to look elsewhere. Maintaining high levels of customer service during a merger is therefore extremely important, but it is also very challenging.

Driven to distraction

The problem is that it can be easy for the organisation to become distracted from customer service. Senior management often become fixated on developing new structures and delivering cost savings and this can filter through to customer service agents. They might be worried about their own job security, or they might spend too much time adjusting to new policies and procedures. To compound the pressure, it is likely that competitors will approach customers attempting to poach them and play on the temporary uncertainty of the situation.

At this sensitive time, the merged business needs to deliver service offerings that meet the expectations of all customers. Duncan Wallace, Chief Operations Officer for Merchants Group, a global outsourcer of contact centres, says: 'Two organisations coming together need to operate at the higher of the two levels rather than settle on a middle ground, because the customers who are used to the higher level of service will continue to expect it.'

Coping strategies

Few companies can cope alone. Most need to bring in experts such as John Kelly, Head of Integration at business advisers KPMG, for advice. John comments: 'The most important thing is to provide your customer service staff with certainty as soon as possible. Settle any questions over redundancies

top tips for a smooth transition

- Work out what success will look like and devise a strategy. Each company will use different measures, so you might need to re-assess the capabilities of both organisations to get an accurate start point.
- Clear and early communication with both staff and customers is vital. Make sure everyone understands the benefits of the merger and is kept up to date with developments.
- Don't be afraid to ask for help. Bring in consultants and talk to people who have been through mergers in other organisations.
- Don't try to artificially balance your teams. Pick the best people from both organisations.
- Although mergers often focus on cost savings, don't cut costs at the expense of customer service.

and remuneration and define territories and responsibilities so that everyone knows what they're doing.

'Then, be prepared to pay for duplicated systems during the transition. It's no good getting rid of existing systems on the promise of a great new streamlined and integrated system if it takes three years to arrive. Finally, ring-fence your customer service function. All too often integration problems in head office are allowed to filter through to customer service. Keep the politics in head office and let customer service get on with their job.'

Janet Curran, Research and Instructional Consultant at training agency Skill4, emphasises the importance of addressing cultural and training issues. She says: 'The two organisations will have different cultures, so bring them together through organised events. Formal training sessions can be a great way to do this while also ensuring that everyone has the skills they need to deliver to newly agreed standards.'

Sandra Buckley, Principal Consultant at HR specialists Berkshire Consultancy, points out that managers need to recognise and deal with the emotional element of a merger: 'In many ways mergers are like bereavements. Employees mourn the loss of the old organisation and must be given a chance to do this. A good way to move the organisation forward is to focus everyone on a common goal, such as providing better customer service than a competitor.'

The merger between Telewest and ntl created the UK's second largest fixed-line communications

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customer satisfaction survey

To ensure that we continue to provide award-winning customer service, we have carried out a survey of customer satisfaction. We will report on the outcome of this research and any action taken as a result in the next issue of **Business Outlook**.

company and it also posed challenges for the customer service function. Liz Lunn, Head of Business Customer Service, is one of those tackling the issue head on: 'We have 200 agents helping our business customers with new product delivery, changes to services requirements, technical support and billing. We have a history, in both organisations, of excellent customer service and we intend to maintain it.'

Paul Buttery, Director for Customer Services and Operations at ntl:Telewest Business, is confident that the merger will be good news for customers. He says: 'Our customers can now get a national service from one supplier. Our larger scale means we'll be able to cope much more effectively with peaks in demand for provision and customer service. We can pick the best people, products and practices from both organisations.'


Of course, a major priority is to ensure that customers maintain their confidence in the merged entity, whichever side they come from. On this score, Paul says: 'The key is for senior management to provide clear and early communications to employees who can then keep customers informed.

So, our top managers have been visiting our offices on a national roadshow, explaining the changes that are occurring and how they will benefit our customers. We have also rapidly identified and solved any customer problems that have arisen.'

Clear leadership

Liz Lunn is focusing on ensuring customer service agents remain motivated during the transition. She says: 'You need to get a clear leadership structure in place, but it's the customer service agents who are the most important people during this merger. If they're not happy, then our customers won't be happy, and if our customers aren't happy we won't have a business for long.'

Liz has set up a series of staff recognition initiatives to bring everyone on board. Agents can nominate colleagues for a Customer Service Excellence award. The person with the most nominations receives a letter from the MD and their picture and achievements are displayed on the company intranet. Also under a 'Who's Who' scheme, all agents display their name and photo on the desk, so that everyone gets to know their new colleagues.

Liz believes that it is initiatives like these that have led to the company keeping its customer service agents for an average of three and a half years and gained a number of Customer Service Awards for the Business team. The Business Division has just finished a major customer satisfaction survey, which will give the first indication of whether these internal efforts are filtering down to the customer, and Paul Buttery is ready for whatever the report throws up: 'Your internal performance measurements can be as good as you like, but if it isn't translating into customer satisfaction then you are failing. With everything we are doing, we're confident that won't be the case.' 

how can we help? Business Customer Service

While we bring together our Telewest Business and ntl customer service teams, please use the following contact details:

Current Telewest Business customers
Free phone 0800 953 1800
Web telewest.co.uk/business

Current ntl customers
Free phone 0800 052 0800
Web ntl.com/business

If you have any customer feedback that you would like to pass on to ntl:Telewest Business, please email: business.outlook@ntl.com

efficient working methods. Once an organisation switches to VoIP, the old dividing lines between telephony and desktop software break down. At the simplest level, managers and employees need no longer juggle separate systems to first locate and then dial a number. 'Depending on the software that you're using, once you have VoIP you can simply paste a telephone number from an email or click on a number within Microsoft Outlook – the system will dial it for you,' notes Ian Fogg, Senior Analyst, Broadband and Voice at Jupiter Research.

And with a software-based administration system in place, VoIP makes it much easier for the individual to set up and maintain personalised unified messaging. 'Say an employee is travelling,' says Peter, 'he might want to divert calls from certain numbers to voicemail and others to his mobile. VoIP systems make it simple to do this.' As an added bonus, the travelling worker armed with a laptop can also be given remote access to the corporate phone system. 'Location is no longer an issue,' agrees Ian.

Beyond these basic but useful wins, VoIP provides an opportunity to pull voice telephony beneath the umbrella of a 'collaborative' software framework.

step up from Centrex

Centrex customers can easily step up to an IP-based voice or multimedia solution via a secure IPVPN. With a desk-by-desk upgrade, additional functionality is available to staff who need it – including features such as 'Presence', Instant Messaging, and 'find-me' call routing. Those who don't have an immediate requirement continue to use their standard handset at the usual monthly rental fee. The service is hosted and maintained by ntl:Telewest Business so, as standards and functionality evolve, we will update your service leaving you free to run your business.

For instance, when making a **voice** call, it's possible to draw seamlessly on multimedia tools such as whiteboards or video conferencing. More radically, VoIP can be integrated into call routing applications, with the software configured to divert calls so the most relevant employee can deal with each one.

It's still early days for VoIP. According to Ovum, uptake in the UK corporate sector runs at between 5% and 15%, with large organisations being more willing to experiment than their smaller counterparts. And there have been good reasons for caution. 'In the past, there were genuine concerns over reliability and security,' says Peter, 'but these have been addressed by vendors.'

For instance, some early users of VoIP did have a problem with variable voice quality, often because the calls were running on local and wide area networks that couldn't handle the weight of traffic. To avoid this, Peter recommends that organisations audit their networks in advance to ensure there is sufficient capacity before making the transition to VoIP. And even then, it is wise to allocate bandwidth to certain functions – voice, email, shared applications, etc – in order to ensure that a spike in, say, application usage will not impact on voice. This can be done by taking a service that includes Multi Protocol Label Switching (MPLS), which assigns priority and manages network traffic to improve quality. Provided the network can cope, established vendors can offer reliable and safe products, with security maintained through firewalls and encryption.

So should businesses be rushing to embrace VoIP? 'All businesses should certainly have a route map for transition,' says Peter. 'But very few would make the change overnight.' The most cost effective way is to upgrade gradually when old PABXs come up for renewal. In some cases though, uptake will be triggered by a business requirement, such as a need to add new sites or set up home working initiatives. And once the upgrade has been made, the result will be a more flexible and business-friendly phone system. ☺



'It's convergence that opens the door to more efficient working'

how can we help? Convergence tools

Whatever your circumstances and strategy, ntl:Telewest Business can help your organisation make the transition to IP-based voice and multimedia tools that add up to good business. To discuss your requirements:

call free on 0800 073 1180