

VHT Products:



2009 Highlights

25 million toll minutes saved;
or the equivalent of over 47
years of hold time taken out
of the call center

47 percent improvement in
average speed to answer

More than **500,000** abandoned
calls recovered



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– Lance Morton, Director of
Automation Resources for
Customer Support & Services



In the highly competitive world of airline travel, keeping customers happy can go a long way toward earning loyalty and building repeat business. Perhaps no airline understands and executes this strategy better than Southwest Airlines.

Based in Dallas, Southwest Airlines operates more than 3,200 flights a day, serving 68 cities in 35 states. With more than 34,000 employees, the airline strives to make sure each customer interaction contributes to a positive traveling experience.

Challenge

One area that perhaps offers the greatest customer impact is in the airline's contact center operation. It's here where customers often experience their first contact with the company – and where customer satisfaction and loyalty can be won or lost in an instant.

With a contact center operation that fields an average of 110,000 calls per day, Southwest is continually reviewing its systems and processes to make sure its 2,400 customer service representatives (CSRs) are meeting the airline's high standards for quality and efficiency. Like any contact center operation, performance levels can be impacted by a multitude of unexpected or uncontrollable variables.

One primary source of frustration – not only for Southwest customers, but for customers across all sectors of industry – is waiting on hold. In its search to find ways to minimize these occurrences, one approach Southwest clearly did not want to take was to shove callers into a network of automated systems. Instead, it sought to address the issue in true Southwest fashion – with a human touch.

“We have plenty of self-service options on Southwest.com,” said Lance Morton, Southwest Airlines' director of automation resources for customer support and services, “and we figure if someone's calling, it's because they want to speak to us.”

Solution

After reviewing its options, the airline decided to implement the Virtual Hold® virtual queuing solution from Virtual Hold Technology® (VHT®). Using the Concierge® software solution, customers waiting to speak to a CSR can hang up the phone and walk away while they are on hold – and the phone will ring back as soon as a CSR becomes available.

Southwest Airlines

“Some people might consider this a very sophisticated strategy, but I would like to think it’s really just very basic thinking,” Morton said. “It’s simply taking care of your customers and making it easier for them to get in touch with you.”

When hold times are under 2 minutes, callers are immediately transferred to a CSR. But when situations arise that create lengthy hold times – such as weather conditions, flight delays, or promotional offers the Virtual Hold system announces the wait time, saves the caller’s place in line, and calls them back when it’s their turn, in the time promised. This gives customers the freedom to continue other activities instead of being tied to a phone.

Results

On the first day of implementation in April 2009, 40 percent of Southwest callers accepted the callback option instead of waiting on hold. Southwest saw immediate results with reduced physical queue times – and on the social networking website, Twitter (see sidebar). With more callers taking advantage of the callback option, average speed of answer improved by 47 percent. In addition, Southwest has saved 25 million toll minutes, or the equivalent of over 47 years of hold time taken out of the call center.

According to Morton, implementation of the system went precisely as planned and right on schedule. Since the installation, VHT has frequently followed-up with Southwest to make sure the system is meeting expectations and delivering the return that was promised.

“In my 16 years here at Southwest, I am hard-pressed to recall a project that was implemented so smoothly and so in alignment with the time and cost forecast,” Morton said. “Virtual Hold lived up to the hype.”

The solution not only benefits Southwest Airlines’ customers, but also its employees because CSRs deal with happier, more satisfied customers, which results in higher job satisfaction and productivity levels. Since the call is presented as a normal inbound call to the CSRs, the Concierge solution requires virtually no agent training.

“There wasn’t a huge training effort because the technology simulates or is the same process as an incoming call,” Morton said. “The technology does it seamlessly, with in-bound calls being mixed in with return calls with no delays – customers and customer representatives are paired up with precision timing.”

Southwest is the first U.S. airline to implement the virtual queuing technology. And, as you might guess, the airline isn’t finished. The company is exploring the option of implementing Virtual Hold’s Rendezvous® system, which gives customers the opportunity to schedule a time to receive the callback for up to seven days in the future.

When you’re a market leader, you always have to be moving and staying on the cutting edge. For Southwest Airlines, that just comes naturally.

Southwest Airlines’ loyal customers have been all atwitter about the Virtual Hold callback.

I love Southwest Airlines. I had to call them and instead of making me wait on hold they called me back. #OthersCanLearnFromThis

@SouthwestAir now lets you hang up while waiting on hold and they call you back when someone’s available. They’re my favorite.

Southwest Airlines’ awesomeness knows no bounds: hang up the phone, we’ll call you back when an agent is available.

I just called Southwest to change my flight. They have a callback service so you don’t have to wait on hold. Exceptionally brilliant.

Just one more reason to love Southwest Airlines. You don’t wait on hold to talk to an agent they call you back. Awesome.

COMPANY SYSTEM PROFILE:

- Nearly 39 million calls annually
- Six contact center locations
- 2,400 Customer Service Reps
- Aspect ACD with routing developed by Southwest Airlines
- Call Center Associates WFM



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