Emerging digital customer care landscape at telcos

Communication Service Providers (CSPs) across the world are in pursuit of improving customer experience and reducing their operating costs, thanks to disruptive business models, ever-increasing competition and the rising digital wave in the industry. The growing demands and expectations from customers are forcing CSPs to reinvent the way their services are delivered in order to ensure that they are moving closer to customers. This will mean that the CSPs have to go beyond the traditional approach in the way they care for their customers and need to adopt more engaging and disruptive channels. Digitizing the customer care landscape will not only help CSPs to improve their online footprint, but also ensure that they can slowly reduce human interactions and interventions needed to sustain such a model. This will address two of their major growth imperatives in one shot—improve customer experience and reduce operational costs.

Customer care landscape—today & tomorrow

Absence of personalized customer journeys, traditional and limited option of channels for engagement, heavily human-centric problem solving, siloed and fragmented system landscape, and lengthy conversations, among others, add to the frustration levels of customers today.

Lack of analytics and automation add to the loop of discontent and the customer experience drastically goes down as the customer engages with the CSP. This is further complicated due to lack of proactive notifications and the telcos inability to understand the customer behavior in advance (see figure 1). Clearly, there is a paradigm shift in customers' approach and they expect faster, simpler and efficient service.
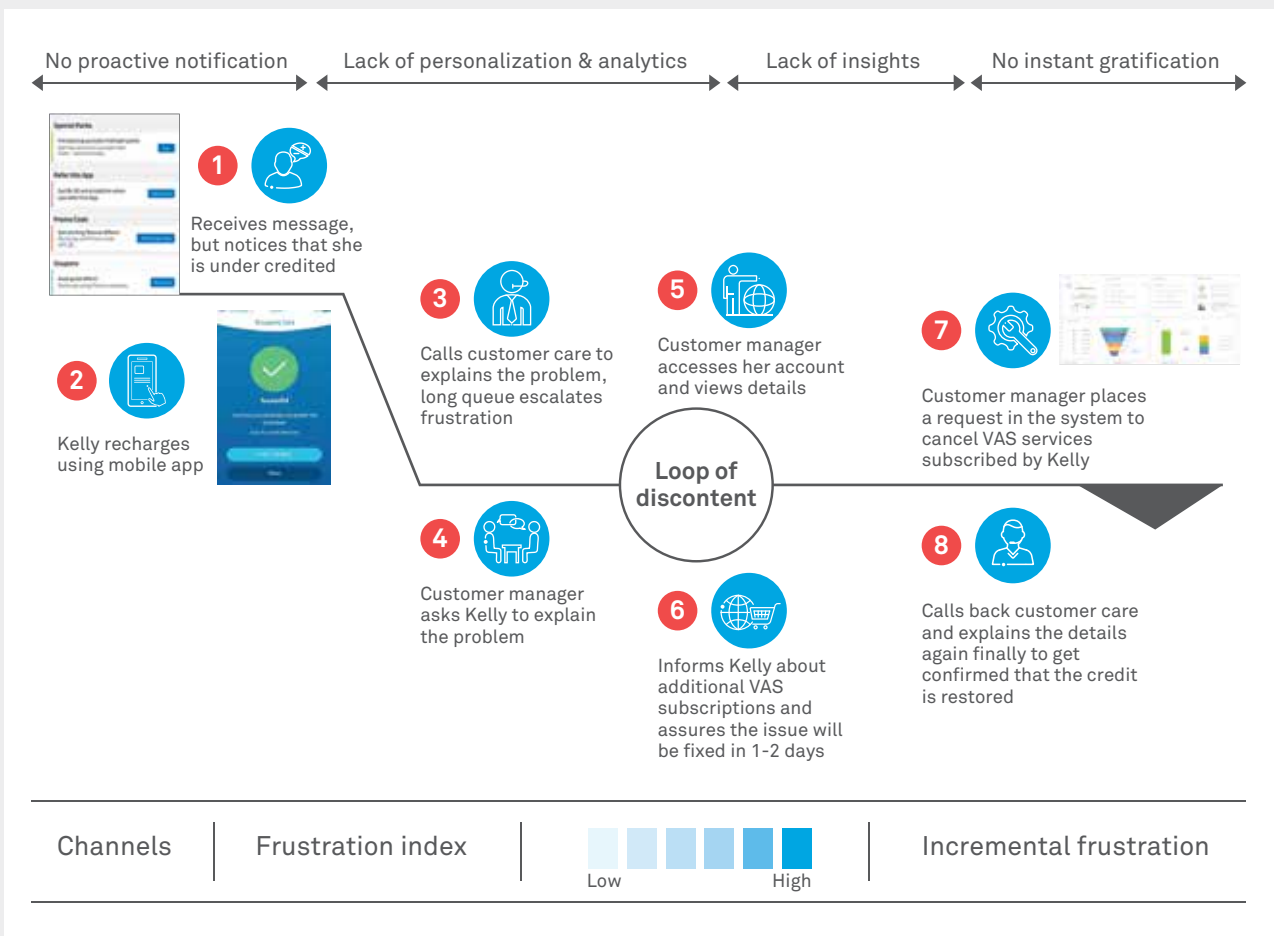

| No proactive notification | Lack of personalization & analytics | Lack of insights | No instant gratification |

1 Receives message, but notices that she is under credited

2 Kelly recharges using mobile app

3 Calls customer care to explains the problem, long queue escalates frustration

4 Customer manager asks Kelly to explain the problem

Loop of discontent

5 Customer manager accesses her account and views details

6 Informs Kelly about additional VAS subscriptions and assures the issue will be fixed in 1-2 days

7 Customer manager places a request in the system to cancel VAS services subscribed by Kelly

8 Calls back customer care and explains the details again finally to get confirmed that the credit is restored

| Channels | Frustration index | Low ▢▢▢▢▢ High | Incremental frustration |

Figure 1: Customer journey today

A combination of enablers like analytics, automation, personalization, social media integration and omni-channel experience, among others, enhance customer experience.

In the emerging landscape, customers engage with a telco through multiple channels, essentially starting from one and ending in another and demand seamless experience across all of them. They expect to be notified and gratified instantly for their issues and do not spend too much time waiting to get connected to an agent and repeatedly explain the problem. A combination of enablers like analytics, automation, personalization, social media integration and omni-channel experience, among others, enhance customer experience (see Figure 2).

Digital care landscape - tomorrow

Hyper personalization & social media integration

Multiple channels, unified experience

Next Best Action enabled through customer insights

Drastic reduction in cost through simplification & reduced inbound calls

Intuitive intelligent systems & BOTS driven interactions

Analytics driven cross sell /up sell & proactive problem solving

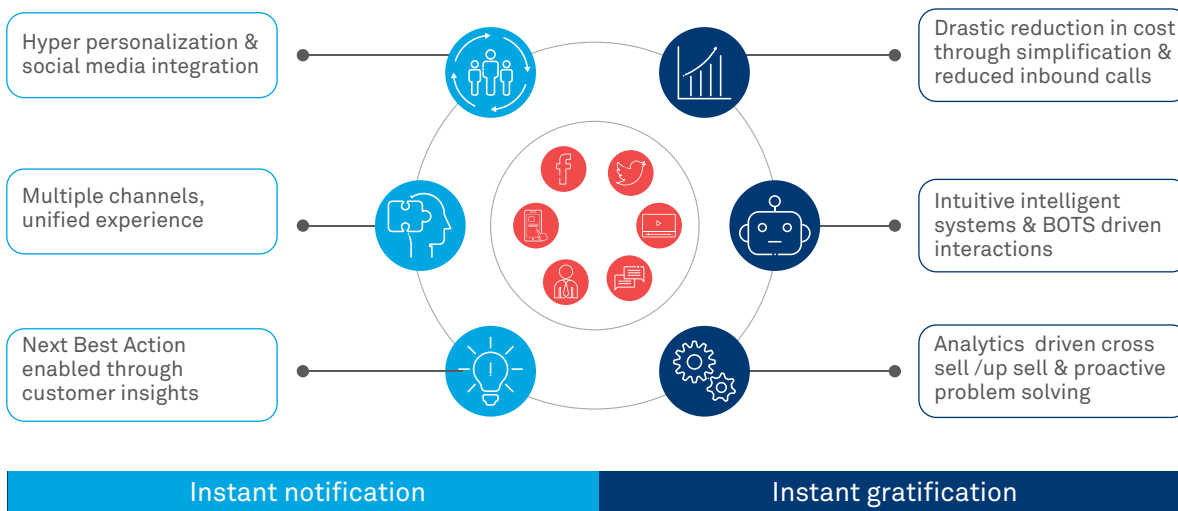Instant notification

Instant gratification

Figure 2: Emerging customer care landscape

Building the digital connect

Digital care is all about enabling customers to connect with the CSP through a channel of their choice, at any place and time. Enabling a consistent and seamless experience across channels and providing personalized care necessarily improves the experience. Digitizing customer care is not about eliminating human intervention, but bringing in the right mixture of digitally enabled human experience.

Analytics allows telcos to adopt an insight-driven approach to understand customer behavior, usage patterns, and their likes and dislikes. It helps telcos learn from the history of a particular customer engagement and provide more meaningful and contextual services, assist customers with 'next best action' and enable more cross sell/upsell opportunities.

Automation plays a pivotal role in improving operational excellence and rendering services with improved velocity and scale. Automating some of the highly repetitive, high volume tasks through robotic process automation (RPA) will allow customer-facing agents to focus on more high value calls and free up frontline resources for redeployment and future investments. Artificial intelligence (AI) platforms will bring in the much-needed cognitive and Machine Learning capabilities to enable autonomous solutions with enhanced productivity and agility. Some of the areas telcos might find these solutions to be useful are in process automation, rolling out virtual agents, building predictive engines for recommendations, etc.

Chatbots can be the digital concierge for customers, providing personalized care to customers at any time. They are agile in response and can mature into a more autonomous, decision-making state with the help of AI, and drastically free up some of the frontline investment to reduce huge operational costs. AI will ensure that the bots are adaptive in nature, learning and evolving continuously. Chatbots, available 24X7, can address scalability challenges well as they can handle multiple threads at the same time without breaks.

Injecting cognitive capability ensures that the virtual agents are able to converse with customers in natural language without sounding too robotic and are able to connect more empathetically with the customers. CSPs can improve their Net Provider Score, efficiency and drastically reduce a lot of call volumes by deflecting a part of the calls to chatbots.

Careful mapping of present day customer journeys to identify the pain points across channels and 'right segmentation' of customer profiles to derive persona-based journeys ensures that customer experience is consistent and relevant to all types of customers. The capability to differentiate customer experience based on personas and to reimagine their journeys accordingly across the channels they interact with, is a huge competitive advantage for telcos.

Social media plays a major role across the customer lifecycle since millennials flock the web for opinions and recommendations, to share and express their sentiments, and also to provide their feedbacks. Many telcos across the world are including social as a key channel to receive customer feedbacks and perceive social as a key medium to engage with their customers much faster and to reach out to them at scale.

Having an omnichannel experience is a huge boon to the telco business since customers can have multiple channels of their choice with the context and content being maintained across them seamlessly. Some of the key imperatives for an enhanced omnichannel experience are—the ability to maintain the identity of the customer across the channels and to integrate the customer data across these channels as a 'single source of reference'; availability of a content management solution and sales catalog to drive consistency of products and services and to be synchronous across these channels; presence of an orchestration framework to push the recommendations and the content across these channels; and a knowledge management platform to harvest and store relevant content for the internal and external users.

Going digital is the game changer for the CSPs since it will help reduce inbound calls, improve KPIs and more importantly, address concerns of customers in a much more personalized and effective manner by tapping into customer insights.

In a highly competitive world, CSPs are already at the cusp of reimagining their customer care landscape where customer experience is the key. The ability to engage with the 'customers of tomorrow' will be the biggest differentiator in shaping up telcos' future business.

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About the author

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Swaminathan is currently a part of the strategy team responsible for enhancing the enterprise customer experience for one of the leading telcos in Europe. He has envisaged couple of future-proof user journeys in the B2C and B2B space that were represented in industry forums like Mobile World Congress. He has over nine years of experience in business consulting across the world in multiple industries. An ardent sports lover, he regularly finds time to play badminton and cricket, and loves to read.

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