Augmenting Customer Success with Intelligent Virtual Assistants

The 451 Take

Customer success teams are tasked with establishing healthy relationships with customers, which in turn results in revenue for their organization. This requires building trusted, valued relationships with customers and delivering on the promise given during their initial investment. From that first touch, regardless of channel, a relationship begins to form. A positive experience with a brand or service can lead to upsell and cross-sell opportunities and reduced customer churn. Hitting corporate KPIs, such as dollar retained and dollar growth, is more critical now than ever.

But this task is more difficult when customer success teams struggle with high customer-to-account-manager ratios. Thinly stretched customer success teams are forced to strategically prioritize a relatively small number of high-value customers, while a much larger pool of customers is given less personalized attention. As businesses become digitally enabled and communicate with customers through more channels, an even greater burden is placed on customer success and account management teams to engage with a higher volume of customers across those channels.

Digital Leaders See Automation as a Path to Boosting Revenue

Source: 451 Research's Voice of the Enterprise: Customer Experience & Commerce Merchant Study 2020

Automation, AI and ML drive transformative process changes…

34%	of digital leaders plan to boost customer service and support recommendation or workforce optimization with AI/ML
40%	of tech leaders plan an AI/ML approach to customer-facing processes, like chatbots and virtual assistants
43%	of digital leaders think AI will be "transformative" for their businesses

…In providing structures to improve CX and customer success

60%	say their top goal is to grow revenue by selling more to existing customers
28%	think the main barrier to better CX is finding talented/skilled workers
63%	think it is critical to use new CX tools to respond quicker to customer inquiries

Customer success teams are key to customer retention and long-term growth. In fact, 60% of customer success leaders say growing revenue by selling more to existing customers is one of their top priorities. The more customers they can engage with (and help), the more they can drive renewal and expansion, adding to a company's top-line growth. This critical team is the linchpin in the ongoing sales process that collects customer feedback, encourages expanded product usage, requests referrals, drives customer health and recovers lapsed service customers.

To maximize the value that customer success teams provide, it helps to scale the volume and frequency of proactive outreach to engage customers with timely, appropriate messages. Logically, the more personalized outreach at scale customer success teams can manage, the more 'success' they generate – more satisfied customers and increased sales. One solution to remedy the capacity challenge facing teams is to adopt an augmented workforce.

An augmented workforce is a blend of business professionals and intelligent automation. By using AI, machine learning (ML), and robotic process automation (RPA) technologies in concert, organizations streamline processes and create more efficient workforces that drive revenue growth. Intelligent virtual assistants (IVAs) are an example of how intelligent automation can be used to create more personal, trusted relationships with customers. Reaching more customers and prospects proactively, more often, exposes them to more opportunities to discover the value the business can provide. Automated assistance allows a business to gauge satisfaction, perceived value and utilization early enough to make changes to boost or rescue a relationship and turn it into advocacy.

The 451 Take (continued)

Advances in AI and ML have catapulted intelligent automation onto the radar of the most digitally mature organizations. In fact, 43% of digital leaders think AI will be transformative for their businesses. These business leaders see AI/ML as a gateway to automating many customer-facing processes. And that technology in turn unlocks opportunities to grow revenue by selling more to existing customers via the customer success team (a priority goal of 50% of businesses, and of 60% of those rated as digital leaders). An augmented workforce of IVAs accelerates customer acquisition, retention and growth and provides organizations with the digital transformation tools they need to succeed in an increasingly challenging market.

Business Impact

IVAS ARE FAR MORE THAN SIMPLE CHATBOTS. They augment the skills of a human workforce, allowing a deeper and more continuous connection with customers that leads to better outcomes across many metrics. Improved relationships are reflected in customer retention rates and higher net promoter scores. What used to be merely transactional evolves into advocacy.

CUSTOMER SUCCESS TEAMS CAN LEVERAGE IVAS TO ACCELERATE REVENUE GROWTH AND REDUCE OPERATIONAL COSTS. AI-powered conversations find issues before they become problems; they identify needs and gauge the propensity to renew earlier in the cycle. Using an IVA as an extension of a customer success team drives top-line growth by surfacing conversations at the most valuable moment.

IVAS PROVIDE THE KEY THAT UNLOCKS PRODUCTIVE RELATIONSHIPS – PERSISTENCE. IVAs can make multiple attempts to engage when human reps are stretched thin, and customers tend to provide more feedback because they can engage in their own time (and on their own terms).

CUSTOMERS THAT ARE PROACTIVELY INVOLVED ARE MORE LIKELY TO PARTICIPATE IN QUARTERLY BUSINESS REVIEWS OR CUSTOMER HEALTH CHECKS. This reinforces a collaborative process that continually reminds them of the value they receive from the relationship.

Looking Ahead

The addition of IVAs will lead to a blending of processes and functions between sales teams and customer success teams. With IVAs reaching out to drive renewal and expansion and gather valuable feedback from customers, success teams will be able to provide the kind of personalized help and onboarding that leads to great customer retention and lower customer churn. Sales and customer success teams that have greater capacity won't always be reacting to customer behavior – they will be able to anticipate needs, fulfill them, and suggest ways to engage that surprise and delight customers with speed and accuracy.

As this human/automation collaboration becomes the norm, customers will expect their needs to be met 24/7/365, and for the first time, businesses will be able respond to both urgent and less urgent needs without over-taxing customer success teams. Digital transformation projects are forcing businesses to take a hard look at processes and the tools that underlie them. As this moves forward across the economy, AI-powered virtual assistants are likely to take on an ever-larger role as 'first responders' to customer issues and critical outreach tools for success teams.