



The difference a phone call can make to our business

Friends Provident calls on Psytechnics to deliver an unprecedented customer service offering.

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Kev Sharratt, Principal Service Analyst
at Friends Provident



FRIENDS PROVIDENT

In the financial services industry, quality of customer service can be more important to revenue growth than product performance. In a competitive market, the quality of customer-facing staff is critical in fostering customer loyalty, and ultimately in driving revenue growth. Factors such as the time it takes to answer a call, whether the caller is put through to the most appropriate agent and how easy it is to navigate an automated system become really important. A poor impression can mean lost customers, unfavourable reputation and ultimately a decline in revenue as consumers take their custom elsewhere.

IP telephony, or VoIP as it is commonly known, has become more commonplace in large companies and call centres, replacing regular fixed-line desk phones. This is primarily because of cost; if a company already has a network for data such as email traffic it makes sense to use the same network for telephone calls too. A recent Psytechnics survey, commissioned by Vanson Bourne, questioned over 100 IT managers in large UK companies. The results showed that four in five financial institutions that responded to the survey already use IP telephony (IPT) in some capacity, either across the company, or in call centres to interact with customers.

One such company is Friends Provident, the FTSE 100 life and pensions company. The company knew that an IPT infrastructure was necessary to deliver a superior level of customer service, slash telephone costs and connect its regional UK offices. Friends Provident takes customer service seriously. Customers predominantly interact with the company via

telephone; a good quality phone call is one of the most important assets in delivering excellent customer experience, time after time. Kev Sharratt, Principal Service Analyst at Friends Provident, explains how Friends Provident worked to roll out IP telephones throughout the company and more importantly how it became invaluable to understand a customer's experience of a phone call.

"We're a forward thinking company and want to ensure that we offer customers and colleagues the best possible telephone service. In 2004 we began to look at alternatives to the incumbent phone system being used in regional Friends Provident IFA (independent financial advisor) support offices. The existing system was incredibly expensive to run; even moving an employee's extension number to a different phone cost upwards of £10. We initially rolled out an IPT system in our Croydon office, quickly expanding the system to all our other regional offices across the UK as an alternative to an expensive and outdated phone system.

Six-star success

Shortly after, in 2005, Friends Provident became committed to revolutionising its customer service programme to deliver enhanced and unprecedented customer experience. This became known as the Friends Provident six-star customer service programme. We already had an IP telephony system part deployed and it made sense to expand this solution company wide, to remaining branches and our four head offices. We could then offer our customers cutting-edge service via a flexible, next-generation phone system."

Quality of what?

During the initial stages of the IP telephony roll out, the IT team became committed to delivering on the Friends Provident six-star customer service programme. The company-wide initiative made the team think about how they could monitor the IP telephony network better and in a more proactive way. This simple idea became integral to the success of the IPT system, by introducing a solution that could actually monitor individual phone calls for quality. Sharratt continues: "When the IPT system was only part deployed, we became very aware of the difference between quality of experience (QoE) and quality of service (QoS). A small proportion of our call centre staff were not satisfied with the call quality when using the IP telephony service, due to a number of factors including varying volume levels, or an echo or hiss on the line. We instinctively knew that if we wanted to offer the best possible service we needed to manage voice performance, as well as check whether the IP telephony network was operating correctly.

"We purchased numerous quality of service tools, all of which indicated that our IP telephony system was working. None of the tools could explain the mystery behind the small number of call quality issues that we were experiencing. We needed a tool to identify phone call experiences of customers as well as check the network infrastructure was working."

The importance of experience management

With a need to measure quality of experience as well as quality of service, Sharratt turned to Ipswich-based Psytechnics, having followed the company's spin out from BT in 2000.

"I was aware of the research the company had carried out into measuring customer quality of experience, when making phone calls over an IP telephony system. Psytechnics suggested Experience Manager, which manages voice performance in addition to measuring regular QoS. Experience Manager can tell instantly if a customer has a poor quality telephone connection and pin point the cause of the problem. The software is proactive in flagging any disruption to call quality and is focused on ensuring a positive phone call

experience. In terms of voice performance management, Experience Manager is better than any other solution available. The fact that you can resolve echo and noise ratio in real-time is pretty unique and very important when keeping customers satisfied with a predominantly phone-based customer service programme.

As the Friends Provident six-star customer service programme gathered momentum, we felt that measuring a customer's perception of a phone call was the way in which to maintain an edge over competitors. Coupled with our new contact centre, we can ensure our customers hang up the phone having been allocated to the correct agent quickly and efficiently, and most importantly, feeling impressed with the quality of the phone call."

Testing, testing

"Friends Provident started working with Psytechnics in November 2006, initially agreeing on metrics to measure end-user experience. The company opted to trial Experience Manager for one month, measuring the quality of experience on phone calls made to a Model Office setup to accept 'Live' calls during the new Contact Centre Trial. "The trial was successful, in that it really allowed us to instantly identify any drop in call quality that our regular quality of service tools did not recognise. At the same time, we were also looking at IBM Tivoli Netcool to provide an enterprise management platform. The fact that Psytechnics complimented Netcool and also integrated so well into our existing telephone infrastructure was another positive point."

And now...

"Friends Provident feels confident enough to migrate all employees to its IP telephony system. We, the IT team, are now able to easily identify deficiencies in end-user experience and keep up the Friends Provident six-star standard of customer service. We can check any call quality issues in real-time and can even tell remotely if a telephone handset or headset isn't working correctly. Voice performance management may sound trivial, but it can be the difference between losing a customer due to repeated poor quality phone calls (and a negative perception of customer service), versus a

triumphant and strong customer service record. There are simply too many other variants that have nothing to do with the network to rely solely on quality of service tools to run an enterprise-wide IP telephony infrastructure.

"My final thought is this: never underestimate the importance of being able to measure your customer's experience. As a business, customer satisfaction is one of our most important ways of measuring success."

For financial service companies, customer service has to be of a high standard. Callers want to feel that they have had a great experience when making a phone call. As IP telephony becomes the new standard for telephone infrastructures it becomes important to understand that such a system does not necessarily deliver the best service without close monitoring. As Friends Provident has demonstrated, whilst IP telephony technology offers significant cost savings and flexibility, in the customer satisfaction war it is also important to understand the experience your customers have when calling you. It is already the norm to record customer calls for training purposes but measuring actual quality of experience and managing voice performance has been overlooked up until now. It is all very well cutting costs, but it should never be about cutting service too.

About Psytechnics

Psytechnics is the world authority for Voice and Video Quality Assessment, delivering Voice Performance Management with the technology and expertise behind 6 ITU standards. Backed by 15 years of research in BT and Psytechnics laboratories, Psytechnics is continually innovating at the world-wide headquarters in Ipswich, UK. Psytechnics technology uniquely measures real-time voice and video quality to predict the user's experience. It is used by over 300 Service Providers around the world, as well as large enterprises and companies such as IBM and Microsoft.



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