AireContact
Cloud Hosted Contact Center

Choosing a Hosted Contact Center Provider

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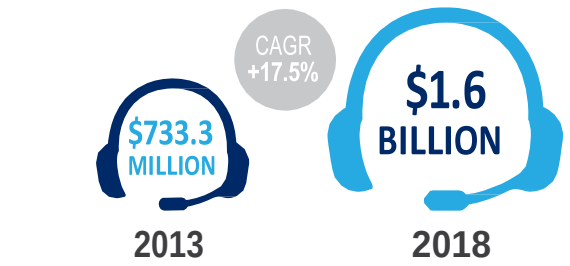
Choosing a Hosted Contact Center Provider

Hosted contact center platforms are poised to take the lead over their legacy counterparts, soon, and for good reasons — they're more flexible in the communication modalities they support, they come with more features, and they often cost less than in-house systems. On-premises systems just can't compete. Yet that is not to say that all hosted, or cloud-based, contact center providers are the same. It is critical to vet a contact center provider for its ability to accommodate contemporary requirements such as omni-channel support, CRM integration, and overall customizability. However, there are other areas — including secure connectivity and potential hidden charges — that will prove important, too. To thrive in the fast-evolving contact center world, users need to be sure to select a supplier that meets these criteria.

HOSTED CONTACT CENTER DEMAND & DRIVERS

Businesses in the United States will spend $1.6 billion on cloud contact center services in 2018, up from $733.3 million in 2013, for a compound annual growth rate of 17.5 percent, according to a February 2014 forecast from IDC.



Source: IDC, February 2014

DMG Consulting uncovered similar momentum among organizations worldwide. In September 2013, the firm found that 62 percent of organizations were using some kind of cloud contact center application as part of their operations. DMG noted that nearly half (46 percent) of firms not using cloud-based contact center solutions planned to implement some form over the ensuing 18 months. Those projections do not mean that contact centers will run on all-cloud platforms any time soon — certainly not within the next five years, DMG cautioned. The key is that "within two years, almost no center will be entirely cloud-less, as the benefits of these solutions become increasingly evident," DMG wrote in its report, "2013-2014 Cloud-Based Contact Center Infrastructure Market."

Indeed, the benefits — and thus, the drivers — are obvious. Cloud-based contact center platforms:

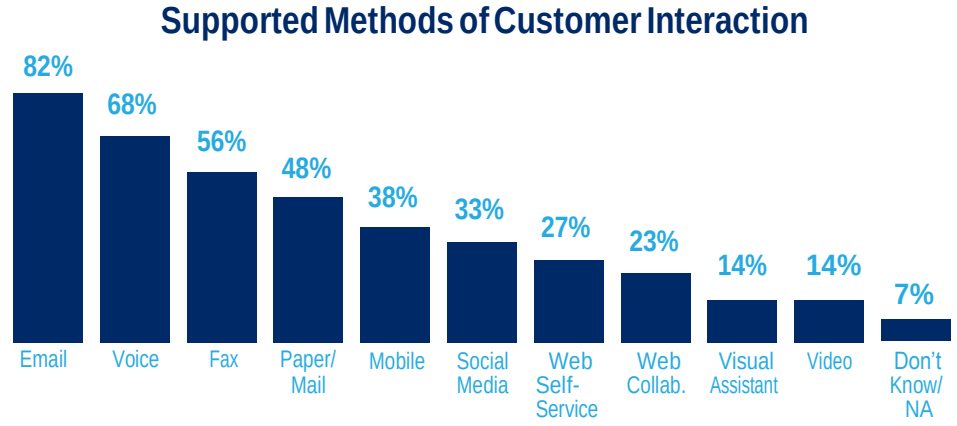
- Help companies save money by moving capital expenses to the opex budget;
- Give customers omni-channel access, i.e., multiple ways to reach a company, no longer just over the phone but also via email, text, video, web chat, and social media;
- Accommodate value-added functionality, such as analytics, CRM integration, or mobile number and landline blocking for Do Not Call regulatory compliance.

Capex to Opex. These days, amid continued uncertainty in the global economy, organizations are staying hawk-eyed on their budgets. At the same time, they need to maintain technological competence, if not superiority. Buying infrastructure presents an unattractive, or even prohibitive, option due to the high cost, and so many businesses are turning instead to subscription models. These allow for annual or monthly payments, rather than large, upfront outlays. Concerns about payments in perpetuity are countered by total cost of ownership analyses. For instance, with a subscription, a company pays for the features it uses, so it does not have to buy capabilities that are irrelevant to its operations. Furthermore, automatic software upgrades ensure businesses do not have to worry about licensing, updates, buying features that would go unused, or other details that would consume IT employees' time.

Omni-channel Accessibility. Giving customers multiple contact options beyond the phone — i.e., email, video, text messages, and social media sites including Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn — are growing in importance. Mobility, fueled by smartphone and tablet adoption, is responsible for the shift, and demand will only increase, said Stephen Loynd, program director at research firm Frost & Sullivan. Therefore, "providers must focus on multichannel solutions," Loynd said in a February 2014 study, "North American Contact Center Outsourcing Market Analysis."

For contact centers, the problem is that few vendors have responded to this need quickly enough. Loynd explains: "In some ways, there's a real sense of vertigo in this industry as new technologies are emerging in the world of customer contact and old models are receding. At the center of this dynamic is a rapidly changing, ever-more influential consumer."

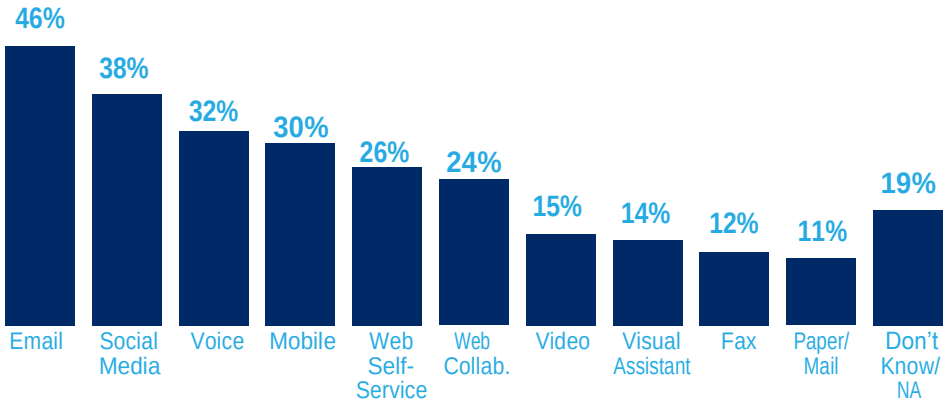
But those on the omni-channel forefront predict even more growth in those capabilities, according to consulting firm Deloitte in its September 2013 report, "Global Contact Center Survey Results." Of the 300 responses representing 560 contact centers, 85 percent interact with customers through multiple channels. Of those, Deloitte found that 42 percent offer social media, 34 percent offer voice self-service, and 30 percent offer Web collaboration.



Source: Deloitte Consulting LLC, September 2013

The emphasis on omni-channel provisioning only will grow as technology accommodates such changes and as a new generation of consumers (Millennials) enter the marketplace. Deloitte respondents predicted that, by the end of 2015, email and social media will top the list of contact methods, followed by voice and mobile.

Channels for Which Volumes Will Increase



Source: Deloitte Consulting LLC, September 2013

Value-Adds. It is imperative, then, that contact centers seek out service providers that are adapting not just to omni-channel requirements, but also to the need to layer on extras that help a contact center run optimally. Frost & Sullivan analyst Loynd calls these "value-add technology solutions" and says that, over the next five years, providers competing on the multichannel and value-add fronts "will have an edge over providers that largely compete on cost, location, and labor arbitrage."

Here are some examples of these cloud-based contact center value-adds:

- **Analytics**, obtained through various types of reports available through a cloud-based contact center platform, give organizations insight into any number of areas, including agent, automatic call distribution (ACD), and campaign performance, as well as auditing. Executives are then able to act on the information as appropriate; for example, adding more staff during peak hours.
- **CRM integration** means incorporating a customer relationship management platform such as Salesforce, SugarCRM, Microsoft Dynamics, and so on, directly into a contact center's system. With this integration, the hosted call center platform exchanges customer data with the CRM, and can provide for a simple interface for the agent to receive and record the customer interaction, including such data as name and previous call, text, email, or chat history, for an improved customer experience.
- **Number blocking**. Telemarketing remains a popular form of outreach for everything from product sales to hopeful politicians, but not everyone wants to be contacted. As such, the federal government has passed regulations that let people choose whether they want to receive calls from telemarketers. For landlines, there's the Do Not Call registry, and, for mobile numbers, the FCC prohibits telemarketers from using automated or predictive dialers to call consumers' cell phones without prior consent. The problem is, in the United States, area codes, unlike those in other countries, do not distinguish between wireline and mobile numbers. The matter is further complicated by number portability. All of this means contact center providers have to be on top of their game. Indeed, good suppliers will team with other vendors, in addition to investing in developing their own technology, to ensure compliance with landline and mobile number-blocking laws.

The main point of connectivity is call quality and an end-to-end SLA.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CONNECTIVITY

Beyond the cloud-based contact center platform, it's critical to think about connectivity. Not only does the proper configuration ensure security and privacy — two elements core to certain regulations — but it further saves money, music to any organization's ears.

Security. Contact centers handling sensitive, confidential information such as health or financial records must pay particular attention to this aspect, as they could be fined for using unsecured connectivity between the data center and their premises. Federal regulations such as HIPAA (for the health care sector), PCI (for retailers), and Sarbanes-Oxley (for the financial vertical) all require networks that protect customers' information. That's where Multiprotocol Label Switching (MPLS) comes in. This protocol enables secure connectivity with managed services on a private network.

Quality. The main point of connectivity is call quality and an end-to-end SLA. Most platforms connect over the public Internet, which is far from ideal for business communications. Traffic must share the network with all the other traffic out there, which slows transmissions and increases latency leading to intermittent call quality. Choosing a provider that does not solely rely on the public Internet is crucial to ensuring quality.

Cost. MPLS also cuts down on calling expenses because it uses IP, rather than legacy TDM, technologies. Still, these services can contain hidden costs, and it's crucial to select a provider that helps avoid — or is at least open about — these issues.

- **Hidden Cost No. 1**: Extra Taxes. Many contact center providers have not been properly assessing federal USF charges on their services and the FCC is on to them. Here's the situation: Voice usage is subject to federal USF charges, and when USF is incurred, so are Telco taxes. Together, the combination can total as much as 30 percent. On the other hand, software seats are not subject to USF or Telco taxes (seats may be subject to state sales tax in some cases, though). The problems arise when a contact center provider quotes and bills components as a bundle, rather than as distinct entities. At least one vendor has made this mistake and its users soon will see a 25-30 percent increase in their bills — the USF currently stands at 15.7 percent and Telco taxes can add another 13 percent. That means that a customer paying $185 per seat, for example, now could be paying $238.10.
- **Hidden Cost No. 2:** Short-Duration Charges. Calls that last six seconds or less are considered short-duration. Some carriers impose a surcharge of 1-2 cents once short-duration calls comprise 10 percent of a company's overall monthly activity, while others charge 1-2 cents for every short-duration call. It all depends on the service provider in question, and while these costs cannot always be avoided, a service provider dedicated to transparency will readily disclose potential charges and discuss any alternatives.

All of these factors are important for contact centers to know; the next step is to find the right cloud hosted contact center solution provider. With that in mind, consider AireSpring's AireContact.

AireSpring provides 24/7 help desk and real-time support.

THE AIRECONTACT ADVANTAGE

AireSpring is a California-based provider of managed voice, cloud, and data applications. In May 2014, the company debuted AireContact, its hosted contact center product developed after buying 7-year-old software developer simplyCT. The takeaway is that AireContact meets the critical needs of contact centers for cloud platforms and managed connectivity from one source:

Capex to Opex. AireContact lets SMBs and enterprises pay on a per-seat basis, rather than using their capex budgets. Seat pricing starts at around $55 per month. What's more, call recording is included in the per-seat pricing as is agent chat.

Omni-channel Access. AireContact supports inbound and outbound conversations on phone, Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, SMS, email, Web chat, voicemail, Web call back, and fax. Algorithms route each interaction to the most skilled agent.

Value-Adds

- **Reporting.** AireContact's reporting breaks down business processes, interaction types, and handling times. Agent chat also is queued like phone calls and logged, so there's full reporting.

  Furthermore, a "wallboard," or integrated performance index, displays statistics such as the inbound call queue and abandoned calls. This is an important tool that call center supervisors can use to look at overall performance. The display can be customized and redefined on demand so that supervisors are looking at real-time stats, not those from 5 or 10 minutes ago. Contact centers also can create multiple wallboards for different personnel — think a COO or CMO versus a floor supervisor.
- **CRM.** AireContact integrates with CRM platforms. Customers may obtain a standard tool kit at no extra fee; adding functionality beyond that incurs a programming charge.
- **Do Not Call compliance.** For landline numbers, AireSpring has teamed with Gryphon Networks Corp., creator of the Core Phone product, to ensure its customers don't accidentally call a number housed on the Do Not Call list. Core Phone checks every dial against state, federal, and other DNC registries, applies any available exemptions, and either allows the call or blocks it, automatically.
- **Mobile number blocking.** AireSpring developed its own proprietary technology that automatically blocks the wireless numbers of users who have asked not to be contacted. AireSpring's platform works for auto-dialers too, so contact centers don't have to resort to manual checks.
- **End-to-End QoS Support.** Most providers operate in a VPN or across-the-Internet environment, in which QoS cannot be controlled. Thus, there are no consistent guarantees for call quality. AireSpring uses its MPLS and private IP backbones to provide dedicated access to support AireContact.
- **Around-the-Clock SLA Guarantees.** AireContact provides 24/7 help desk and real-time support; its SLA encompasses timelines and penalties for failure to restore services in those timelines. SLAs vary by product.
- **Ease of Self-Management.** AireContact comes with self-management applications that let supervisors and managers adjust call center operations without the need

AireContact offers software, seats, and services from a single provider.

for IT support. For example, the simplyManage feature allows for the following actions (among others):

- Modify working hours, off hours, holidays, and vacations
- Create an account for new agents, assign agents to queues, and more
- Upload new announcements to IVR flows
- Forward all inbound calls to external numbers if there's a crisis situation
- Change the thresholds for warnings and alerts
- Add or remove contacts from agents' address books

- **Connectivity.** AireSpring provisions AireContact with its Session Initiation Protocol (SIP) services, which ride on the company's MPLS or nationwide Managed IP network. Most call centers connect to agents across the Internet, or possibly through a VPN. AireContact leverages AireSpring's carrier status and the strength of the AireSpring MPLS private backbone to provide a dedicated, secure connection to the client. This unique approach gives contact centers another way to meet security and privacy mandates inherent within regulations including HIPAA, PCI, and Sarbanes-Oxley. AireSpring's SIP connectivity further allows clients with multiple contact centers to move calls from one facility to another without incurring outbound calling charges.

  In terms of quality, AireContact can use the public Internet, but strongly recommends customers connect via the AireSpring nationwide Managed IP or MPLS Mesh networks. AireContact removes the finger-pointing that occurs when the voice or software provider is not the same as the connectivity provider. In contrast, other contact center solution providers are unable to offer end-to-end management, similar to the way streaming video services like Netflix cannot control an ISP's bandwidth for video quality.

  And, recalling our discussion of hidden USF and short-duration charges, AireContact addresses both of these potential problems. To the former, the company makes sure to quote and bill its seat, minutes, and access costs as different line items, to minimize the impact of federal and state charges. Putting them all together will end up costing the customer a lot more. AireSpring helps you avoid unnecessary taxes. With respect to short-duration calling charges, all of AireSpring's long-distance and SIP long-distance products, including AireContact, remove the short-duration penalty.

AireContact Benefits

AireContact's ability to offer a feature-rich contact center platform, alongside SIP connectivity and MPLS, stands out because it houses an entire solution — software, seats, and services — from a single provider, rather than two or three disparate suppliers. AireSpring provides one relationship to manage, so you don't have to worry about anybody else in the middle of it.

As a single end-to-end solution, AireContact offers the opportunity to build a solution that responds to a contact center's specific needs. Constructing the right cloud-based contact center solution takes research and time. AireSpring invests both into each customer to help them select the solution that's best for them. To accomplish that, AireSpring employs call center experts and sales engineers who explore all aspects, including call routing, multi-location connectivity options, traffic volumes, and more.

Constructing the right cloud-based contact center solution takes research and time.

So, if you are ready for a cloud hosted contact center setup, look at AireSpring and its new AireContact platform. Engage us early, ask the right questions, and synthesize a solution that allows for call center optimization, omni-channel support, and substantial cost savings over both legacy systems and other hosted contact centers that cannot enable secure connectivity.

AireContact
Cloud Hosted Contact Center
For more information, visit www.AireContact.com
or call 800-927-4562

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