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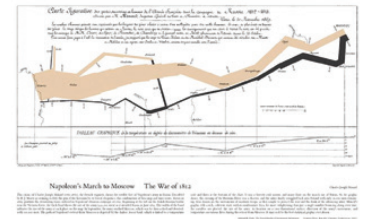EQUITY HOUSING

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Reaching out to tenants with technology

Jeremy Payne, International VP of Marketing, Enghouse Interactive

The introduction of universal credit and welfare reform has put pressure on housing providers' finances and those of their tenants. That has placed a premium on efficient communication between the two groups; one approach housing providers can take is broadening the range of communications they offer.

Housing providers should be encouraging their tenants to self-serve through everything from intelligent voice-based services to online forums. Another cost-effective way housing providers can keep tenants happy is by delivering two-way outbound notifications. These effectively create simple actionable SMS and email messages which can help alert tenants to engineers' visits or the need to settle rent arrears.

More chatbots

We also expect to see housing providers making greater use of chatbots to drive enhanced engagement with tenants.

Firstly, bots will be used for direct interaction with tenants and in particular for handling the more common, routine enquiries. Housing providers will retain the option of escalation to a live agent but this should only be necessary if the call becomes technically complex or emotionally charged.

Secondly, chatbots can be used in the background of a call to support the agent by ensuring they have the right information at their fingertips during a live chat. We believe that this will later evolve to include real-time monitoring of a voice call. The chatbot's role will be to capture the essence of the conversation and use this to prompt the agent with relevant information in real time.

Tenant choice

But any discussion about the use of chatbots and indeed self-service in general within contact centres must be tempered by a note of caution. The government has been pushing the 'digital by default' message for several years now and universal credit is arguably its first fully digital by default service. However, recent figures indicate that over a million adults who live in UK social housing have never been online.

Given these challenges, it's clear that housing providers need to offer tenants a choice of interaction methods. They need to encourage tech-savvy tenants to communicate online and through self-service but also maintain resources behind traditional voice-based communications for those people who are more familiar and more comfortable with phone calls.

To make sure they can deliver all this, housing providers need to have the right technology and communications infrastructure. That means they need to give contact centre agents a single, consistent user interface that's able to handle all aspects of omni-channel communications while ensuring they have visibility of every interaction.

Having these tools available on a single desktop means that agents can manage all tenant interactions as if they were the same. However, this kind of approach also needs to connect to back-office systems to make sure that queries are resolved efficiently. Housing providers should provide one contact centre number, with the ability to triage seamlessly to subject matter experts when needed. For example, the 'presence' capabilities of tools such as Skype for Business and Cisco Unified Communications Manager can be critical here in enabling these cross-organisation connections to bring in expert resources on demand.

Focus on quality

However efficient and effective the solutions implemented, though, housing providers can't deliver the customer interaction required without closely monitoring their agents' performance.

Part of this is about collecting relevant information and turning it into intelligence to inform future engagement. Delivering quality must, however, also be about measuring agent performance both in terms of ensuring compliance with industry regulations but also for tracking and maintaining the performance levels agents display when interacting with tenants.

Historically, most analysis has been done after the fact. The introduction of real-time speech analytics has changed this and brought specific benefits for housing providers, enabling them to deliver instant feedback to agents and immediately improve the quality of the experience for tenants.

Implementing the above solutions can significantly benefit housing providers but they are increasingly seeing a benefit from moving to a more cloud-focused approach. It's typically more cost-effective but also gives providers the opportunity to scale as their business needs fluctuate, not least to support the kind of 24/7 service that customers increasingly demand.

Bright prospects

Housing providers are under pressure to drive operational efficiencies while maintaining high levels of tenant satisfaction. It's a difficult task. However, technology can help deliver a best-practice approach, enabling housing providers to overcome the challenges, build more positive relations with tenants and face the future with confidence.

Jeremy Payne is international vice-president of marketing at Enghouse Interactive.