



Julian Mead, National Manager of Inform Communications explodes a few myths about what the public really wants ■

Let's be honest, automated call-handling or IVR (Interactive Voice Response) has had a tarnished reputation over the years. In the early days, many poorly designed services gave very little information, or simply kept you going around in a never-ending loop with few, if any, opportunities to speak to an advisor. Quite justifiably, there was a back-lash from both organisations and customers.

How times have changed. Automated services have become increasingly sophisticated whilst becoming easier to use - here are some figures that might surprise you.

Don't hang up!

If you think that automated call handling is generally unpopular, you'll be surprised to learn that 80% of local authority customers actually prefer it.

The telephone is still the first choice access channel

So, what's caused this dramatic turnaround in customer's perceptions? Well, as usual, it's a mixture of things. Firstly, customer expectations – they now prefer to get their enquiry resolved quickly, first time, by whichever method proves the most convenient and efficient. Massively improved websites have become increasingly successful in resolving enquires round the clock but the telephone remains the most chosen route for contacting the council. So why not extend the

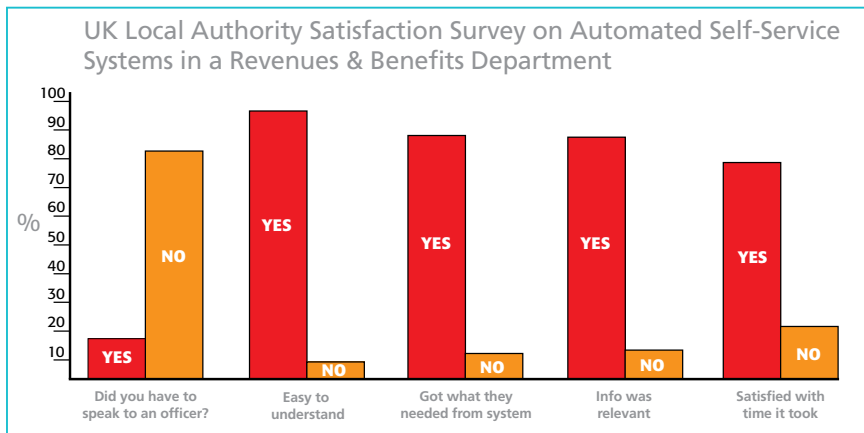
automated services and takes many years of experience to get right first time. So even if you have your own in-house IVR capability in your telephone system, partnering with a specialist service provider can save a lot of time (a complete service can be set up in just six weeks) and give you options and opportunities for cost and efficiency savings straight away.

Self Service means good service

Self Service is no longer viewed by Inform's rapidly growing number of clients as just an 'ambulance' for short-term issues such as end-of-year billing, but as an on-going, permanent, effective business tool for delivering customer service excellence across the whole council. For example, London Borough of Ealing, having started with a Revenues & Benefits service some three years ago, has now rolled out the benefits of Self Service to other busy service areas including Parking, Registrations and Planning.

Other councils are using Self Service for Environmental and Housing enquiries.

After only a few months of service Belinda Black, Director of Customer Services, at the London Borough of Ealing said:



Quite remarkable results and a Customer Services Manager's dream to be able to report high customer satisfaction, low call waiting times and zero abandonment rates. Customers are obviously becoming more sophisticated and used to getting what they need, on demand, when they need it, 24 hours a day.

It's a matter of choice

But the surprises don't end there. On average, over 70% of customers choose to remain within the service rather than speak to an advisor, even though the scripts give many options to be able to be transferred. On an annual call volume of 80,000, this releases the equivalent of five to six FTEs' time. In these austere times and with budgets under such huge pressure, this opportunity should be on every agenda.

same customer service message to telephone customers i.e. you can now access or leave a wide range of information 24/7/365 – without waiting in long queues or being asked to call back when offices re-open? Customers now expect fast, efficient service delivery 24/7 and are increasingly willing and able to serve themselves - options and alternatives are the name of the game nowadays.

Ask an expert

And, secondly, it took specialist, focused service providers like Inform Communications to identify that it wasn't just the technology that was important here but the scripting, the way the service flows for the customer and the ability to both access and leave relevant, comprehensive and up-to-date information. This is the art of building, hosting and updating modern, efficient

“The financial and operational case for Self Service is truly compelling. The facts speak for themselves, over 18,000 calls successfully answered in the first two months with zero complaints. Staff productivity up, queue length and processing times down.

The benefit realised has exceeded the initial business case, providing an improved level of service that would have required an additional six full-time staff for the cost of less than two.”

For more information visit www.informselfservice.com