

# Continuing the Conversation: Cross-Channel Customer Service Integration

**Research insights and practical advice for improving customer satisfaction and ROI for interactions that span web, e-mail, direct mail, and phone, with special guidance for improving IVR self-service interactions.**

### Executive Summary

For the past few years, companies have been bombarded with the message that a solid cross-channel strategy is critical to maintaining high levels of customer satisfaction. But why do multichannel interactions matter so much? And why is it important to support them? In this whitepaper, we discuss the nature of consumers' increasingly prevalent cross-channel behaviors, cover some of the challenges inherent in addressing these behaviors, and suggest a set of practical steps businesses can take to optimize the performance of their cross-channel technology investments.

Most businesses maintain a wide range of service channels – telephone, email, chat, and social media, to name a few – to facilitate conversations with customers. Unfortunately, organizations have not always coordinated planning and execution across these service offerings, and individual channels have matured within their own disconnected silos. We are learning, however, that customers do not confine their interactions to individual channels. Companies did not anticipate how prevalent cross-channel customer service scenarios would become, or how routine consumer behaviors and attitudes would drive these scenarios. As a result, businesses have not adapted their approach to include more integrated multichannel experiences, and contacting them can be frustrating and time-consuming for customers despite numerous channel options.

Tellme's research and experience shows that customers intuitively select the channel or channels they believe will best achieve their objectives when contacting a company. They do not regard each channel as a separate offering, but rather a single set of tools for accomplishing a goal. As a result, they become frustrated when businesses fail to make the switch between channels smooth and easy. This frustration leads to dissatisfaction, confusion, disillusionment, and churn.

To succeed in today's market, where customer service is one of the last remaining differentiators, businesses will need to develop service strategies that break down the channel barriers that have emerged. An integrated strategy with natural transitions between channels will prevent customers from having disjointed experiences, and will create more opportunities for easy and successful interactions.



### Why Cross-Channel Integration is Important

Our research has shown that routine self-service tasks initiated on one channel can easily turn into cross-channel customer service scenarios, particularly when:

- The perceived complexity or urgency of the customer's task gets too high
- Time constraints or lack of information prevent customers from completing a task in a single session
- An obstacle, like a failed login or a missing feature, is encountered on the chosen channel

In these types of situations, it becomes much more likely that the conversation will blend across channels, that the customer is going to transition to another channel midstream, or that the customer will ultimately require the help of a live person. External studies have estimated that as many as 60% of interactions between customers and organizations will include a transition across multiple channels. In our own study, conducted in August 2009, we corroborated these findings, observing these cross-channel scenarios occurring more than 4 times out of 10.

Tellme's end user research also showed that:

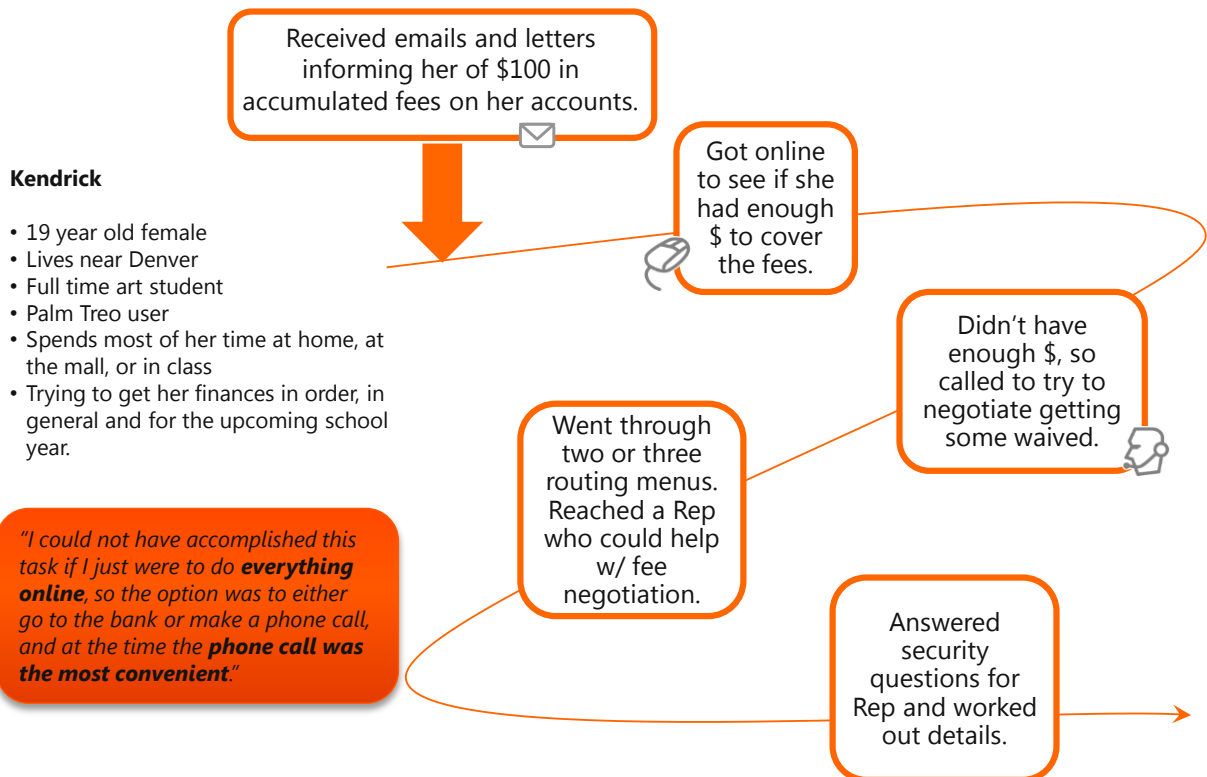
- Customers feel expert enough to know when they need an expert, and their tolerance for standard automation treatments are very low once they have assessed that they need to speak with a live person.
- Inbound calls are usually triggered by interactions that begin on another channel, often due to the shortcomings of that channel or an escalation in urgency or complexity.
- Lack of context and cross-channel awareness is creating inefficient, disjointed experiences that place burden on the customer and take up valuable agent time.

It is no longer enough to allow customers to interact and transact on any channel, since increasingly they are employing more than one channel at a time to accomplish their goals. Similarly, it is no longer enough to measure customer satisfaction for each channel separately, since experiences that span across channels will influence an individual's satisfaction within any isolated channel. Lastly, consumers' cross-channel behaviors necessitate a change in the role each channel plays in customer and self-service overall.



Consider this real-life example from our research:

### Getting out of the red.



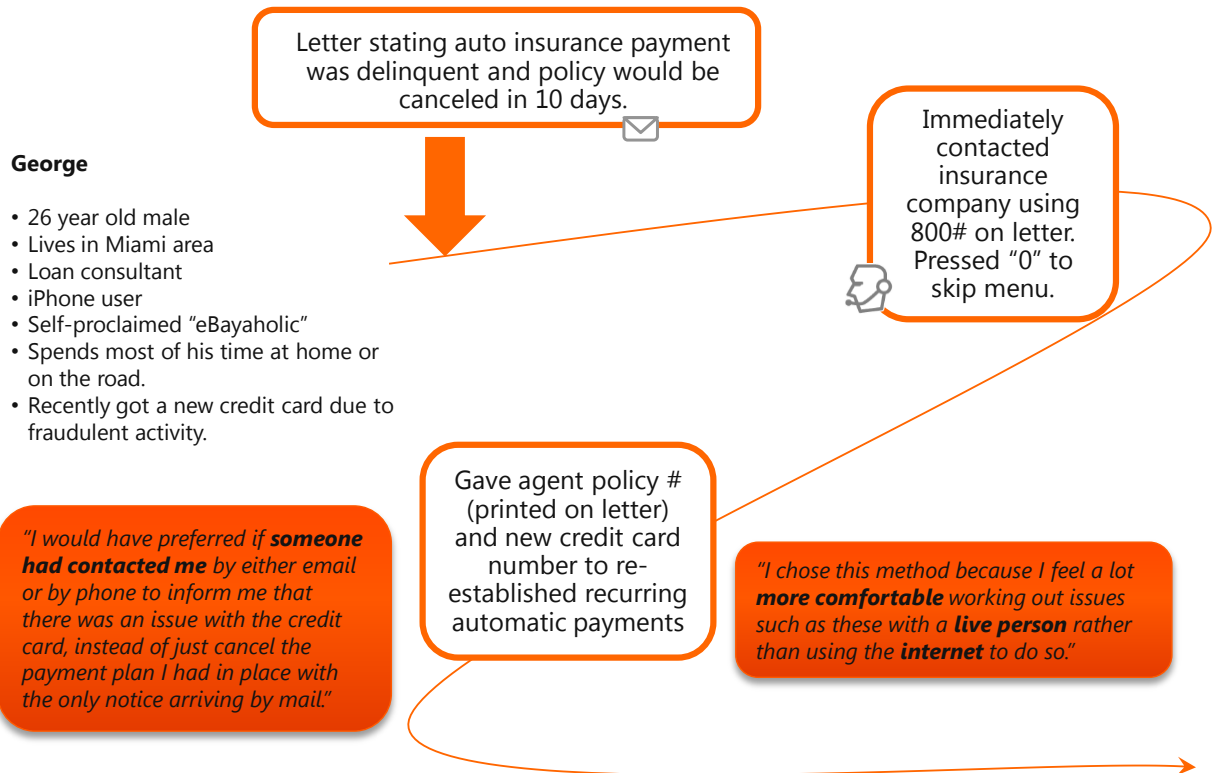
Here, a college student is trying to manage her finances. She frequently makes late payments or accidentally overdrafts her accounts, which can result in numerous fees. At the start of this interaction, she received an email alerting her about some penalty payments. Ultimately, she wants to resolve the issue and return her account to good standing.

There are a several places where a better cross-channel experience would have benefited both this customer and the business. First, the notices she received were not preventative, nor were they actionable. As a result, the problem became increasingly complex to fix as time passed. This customer service call could have been prevented by an interactive outbound alert informing the customer about upcoming due dates and giving her the option to make a payment.

At the point when the customer realizes that she cannot self-serve and crosses channels from the web to the phone, the IVR was not aware of the situation or the recent activity on her account. Using this knowledge, it could have anticipated her reason for calling and fast-tracked her to the appropriate agent. Instead, the customer was forced to do all the work.

Cross-channel awareness and integration can improve the effectiveness of each individual channel, but so can a more thoughtful approach to how each channel might best be used. Not all channels are created equal – each one has strengths and weaknesses that make it a more or less ideal choice in certain situations. Customers are aware of these differences, and use their knowledge to decide which method is the best tool for accomplishing their goals. To illustrate this point, take this example from the same end-user research:

### Failed payment and policy cancellation.



In this scenario, the customer had recently replaced his credit card, and he still had automatic payments associated with the old account which were now being rejected. He received a mailed letter from his auto insurance provider informing him that his policy was going to be canceled in ten days. Paper mail is still one of the most common channels for outreach, and it can easily drive traffic to other channels like the phone. Still, it is frequently overlooked in the overall cross-channel strategy, causing breakdowns like this one.

Since the IVR did not infer his reason for calling and proactively offer him relevant options, any hope of automating or efficiently routing this task is lost. Given the nature of the letter he was sent, it would be easy to guess this customer's goal and offer him relevant messaging and an instant transfer to the right department, or perhaps the chance to enter new payment information using an automated system. Instead, precious agent time was spent on a relatively routine task.

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In a world where instant gratification is commonplace, static communications are less appropriate in situations where action is required. This customer was notified about a high consequence event in a manner that was neither timely nor actionable (paper mail). This escalated the urgency of the situation and caused an expensive customer service interaction that would have been easily preventable through more thoughtful channel choices and better cross-channel awareness. When companies choose the best channels for a given conversation and create meaningful links between them, they not only empower customers but also save themselves time and money.

Since customers perceive each channel as having unique strengths and weaknesses, trends are beginning to emerge for how individual channels are used. The web is preferred for simple, routine self-service, while live assistance from a professional is preferred for more complex tasks or for resolution of urgent items. Knowledge of these trends can be used to design more efficient and effective customer service experiences.

In summary:

1. Customers are already interacting with businesses across service channels, completing chains of small, inter-related tasks to accomplish a single goal.
2. Poor cross-channel experiences have a negative impact on overall customer satisfaction, primarily due to the frustrations caused by non-integrated solutions.
3. Each channel's role is evolving due to the way customers are using multiple channels to accomplish their goals.
4. When companies choose the best channels for a given conversation and create meaningful links between them, they empower customers and create cost savings.

## Getting Started

So where to start? While it can seem daunting to begin implementing a cross-channel strategy, there are several ways to achieve short-term success in manageable increments.

First, spend the time to define a long-term strategy, and the vision for where you are going. Ask: what should my cross-channel experience look like in 3-5 years?

Second, start small and identify features that are easier to implement and have less dependency on infrastructure. Prioritize the enhancements that will support the vision.

Third, since IVR is still a high-traffic, costly channel that is frequently used in conjunction with other channels, start by making phone self-service more predictive, personalized and proactive. These guidelines will create opportunities for continuing the conversation.



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- **Personalized** – Consider how the experience might be tailored for the individual by using information that is most relevant to the caller. This approach can also incorporate knowledge of past interactions, or preferences indicated through any channel. For instance, if a customer always checks his balance at the outset of a call, why not offer to serve up balance information at the beginning of every subsequent call?
- **Proactive** – As part of continuing the conversation, use outbound for notifications or alerts to contact customers before they pick up the phone to call. Also, consider allowing the customer to act on the information through simple IVR-based automation. In both of the examples we shared, an actionable payment reminder could have prevented an expensive agent transaction. It can also be a powerful tool for improving satisfaction, since it shows customers that their best interests are an active priority.
- **Predictive** – Anticipate what the caller is likely to be calling about based on other available information (e.g. knowledge of past interactions, concurrent online sessions, recent account events or activity). Consider the first experience we outlined: the concurrent web session combined with knowledge of the customer's account status could have been used to anticipate her reason for calling and would have made the IVR experience more impactful. Note that even if the context of the recent web session is not known, simply acknowledging those interactions and giving callers a fast-track to representatives is a good first step. It makes the IVR seem smart, demonstrates relevant knowledge about the customer, and sends a message of empathy and cooperation.

Finally, to ensure success, measure the impact of these first few steps.

- **Have clearly stated goals.** What are you trying to accomplish? Increased customer satisfaction? Lower call center volume? Decide what will have the most impact, and craft goals accordingly.
- **Set expectations correctly.** Recognize that doing what is possible may not add up to doing what is effective. Be sure to communicate expectations and goals, especially if sub-optimal use cases are being employed to validate an entire cross-channel strategy.
- **Identify the right metrics.** Focus on task completion as a key measure of customer success. Are callers authenticating successfully? Are they opting into or out of proactive information? Are you correctly anticipating their reasons for calling?



### Conclusion

Cross-channel interactions are happening right now, and they are not being handled as effectively as they could be. In particular, isolated channels are creating bad experiences and more work for customers. To make these experiences more effective and satisfying, focus on minimizing the gaps and breakdowns across channels, and on preventing problems before they occur. Try to facilitate interactions that more naturally continue an ongoing conversation – ones that anticipate customer goals and incorporate knowledge of their past experiences and behaviors.

As detailed in this whitepaper, Tellme recommends four initial steps for designing more integrated and effective cross-channel experiences:

1. **Have a long-term cross-channel strategy.** Determine how multichannel experiences should look in 3-5 years, and identify the small steps that will lead to that vision.
2. **Start small.** Identify features that are easier to implement, and prioritize enhancements that will support the vision. Even small steps towards implementing a cross-channel solution can be powerful and far-reaching.
3. **Make the IVR more personalized, proactive, and predictive.** Since it is so often paired with other channels, the IVR needs to evolve. A better understanding of how the IVR is being used in multichannel scenarios is key to making it a bigger asset in any cross-channel customer service strategy.
4. **Define and measure success.** Create metrics that reflect task completion and customer satisfaction, and measure the impact of these first few steps.

### About Tellme

Tellme is the world's largest VoiceXML platform, improving automation and customer service performance for businesses across 2 billion+ calls every year. To deliver this world-class service, Tellme builds and maintains an award-winning platform that encompasses the following features:

**Application Lifecycle Resources:** Customers, partners and developers who build applications on the Tellme platform use Application Lifecycle Resources to develop and optimize their applications throughout the lifecycle of the application. Tellme offers a variety of tools to ease voice application management and drive insights that can increase task completion rates. Tellme helps you accomplish tasks such as: building and testing voice applications, changing your voice application in real-time, recording calls for tuning purposes, analyzing user segmentation and calling patterns, and much more.

**Core Platform Services:** Tellme experts manage, maintain and optimize the Core Platform Services to deliver the best performance on core platform functionality. Tellme's expertise in speech, audio and integrated customer experience enhance



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the quality of your inbound and outbound voice applications to enrich the caller experience, increase task completion rates and create opportunities for further business growth.

**Network Services:** Tellme's industry leading carrier-grade network is optimized for scalability, security and reliability due to its attention to Network Services. Tellme customers enjoy both peace of mind and flexibility with a carrier-grade platform that supports the latest in technology. Tellme's powerful network-based platform encompasses carrier-grade TDM and VoIP telephony infrastructure to support your inbound and outbound voice traffic, as well as a highly reliable web infrastructure to support data transactions. With capacity on-demand, Tellme can easily handle seasonal or event-driven spikes in call volume, ensuring you are always available to your customers, and there's no bottleneck for important outbound communications.

For more information, visit <http://www.tellme.com/business>.

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