

Making the Case for Self Service (Without Fomenting an Employee Revolt)

Although associates often view self-service with suspicion, such technology actually can serve to enhance job security

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The biggest expense most businesses face is labor. Because of that expense most industries, especially low-margin ones, continually seek out ways to reduce labor costs and schedule only the number of workers to handle projected customer traffic.

Those practices can be a trap for operators, however. Any unexpected increase in traffic can overwhelm a business and leave it in shambles, resulting in unhappy customers and demoralized employees. Who hasn't been in a grocery store late in the evening when the single cashier struggles to deal with a line of disgruntled shoppers?

The ultimate outcome is that customer traffic fails to align itself with staffing levels. Additional attempts to tighten labor spending can send sales into a downward spiral.

Not surprisingly, business operators often approach self-service technology as a way to cut labor costs while increasing the ability of existing employees to handle unexpected business. Adding a transactional kiosk or similar self-service device, they reason, can be an easy way to reduce the number of employees while preserving the ability to handle occasional bursts in traffic.

Unfortunately, operators can face a backlash from employees who view self-service technology as a threat to their jobs. In one of a series of commercials for auto insurance, for example, "Flo" surreptitiously sabotages the

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robot her company has deployed to replace her on the sales floor. Although a real-life scenario might not result in physical damage to self-service devices, negative attitudes on the part of employees can certainly hamper the success of a deployment.

Still, self-service continues to grow and will only keep growing. The key to avoiding employee backlash, then, is to help workers realize that saving employer costs and moving mundane transactions to a self-service device can actually help create higher-skilled, better paying positions for those employees.

“Employees are not necessarily the first transaction mechanism. Ideally, they are the next degree of service facilitators which the machines require in order to succeed,” said Craig Keefner, media manager with Menomonee Falls, Wis., interactive solutions provider CTS or Connected Technology Solutions. “If a customer has a simple transaction they can use a self-service device, but if they have questions or their transaction is more complicated the employees are there to assist.”

Redeploying the labor force

To be fair, some business executives may have brought employee suspicion of self-service devices on themselves. CKE Restaurants CEO Andy Puzder, for example, has publicly stated that impending regulations from the Affordable Care Act will lead in part to restaurants deploying more self-service ordering kiosks as a way to cut back on staff. CKE operates the Carl’s Jr. and Hardee’s restaurant chains, among others.

“You’re going to go into a fast-food restaurant and order on an iPad or other tablet instead of talking to a person, because we don’t have to pay benefits for any of those things,” he told the Wall Street Journal. “There’s a personal element that you don’t get from machines, and I think you’re going to lose that.”

But despite those pronouncements, self-service devices aren’t ever likely to eliminate entirely the need for live employees. The most successful deployments shift basic transactions to the device and place the human in the role of facilitator, freeing that person up to engage with customers.

“Self-service always works better with multiple machines grouped together with a person tending like a shepherd tends their flock,” Keefner said.



Moving those simple transactions to a self-service device allows companies to redeploy employees to manage more complicated tasks such as upselling or explaining product details. The instant access to information available via an in-store terminal means employees don't have to spend their off time memorizing mundane specifications about a particular product or service, speeding up employee training and reducing needless stress.

Self-service devices in a brick-and-mortar location can create a pathway to "click-and-mortar" services that create a pathway that draws online shoppers to the physical store while enabling operators to maximize their investment in warehouses and related infrastructure. That scenario results in additional revenue, leading to the creation of additional jobs.

Retailing giant Sears, for example, is deploying 5,000 merchandise pickup kiosks at stores throughout the country. The kiosks, manufactured by Connected Technology Solutions, employ iPad and Android tablets as their CPU and touchscreen display. Customers can order products online for delivery to a nearby store. They then stop at a merchandise pickup kiosk in the store, enter their email confirmation and a sales associate will retrieve the item and load it into the customer's car.

Ultimately, a business can see its revenue increase as a result of deploying self-service devices, meaning more opportunities for employees rather than fewer. In fact, some research indicates retailers see a 6 to 8 percent increase in sales after deploying self-service technology.

Retail and restaurants aren't the only businesses whose employees can benefit from the deployment of self-service devices. In fields such as government, insurance and health care, where patrons are required to submit personal information as part of the process, a check-in kiosk or similar device can help shorten wait times, minimize errors and free up staff to provide more sophisticated service.

When open enrollment for the Affordable Care Act begins October 1, the process is likely to bring with it not only a host of questions but also a flood of form-filling. Staff at hospitals, doctor's offices, insurance companies and pharmacies will likely be inundated with new patients and customers. Not only will self-service technology allow employees at those operations to better manage the capture of patient information, but the language flexibility of self-service devices allows businesses to serve a wide range of non-English speaking customers without requiring employees to possess multiple language skills.

What customers are seeking from self service

- **Avoiding lines:** The majority of consumers globally (52 percent) prefer self-checkout kiosks in order to avoid waiting in line to make a purchase.
- **Price check/product availability:** When researching products in the store, 57 percent of shoppers prefer to use in-store touch screens.
- **Desire for more personal customer service:** Although many shoppers want automation when purchasing, consumers are nearly evenly divided, with 58 percent preferring to receive help from an in-store associate.

Source: Cisco Customer Experience Report



About the sponsor:

The team at Connected Technology Solutions (CTS) has been providing interactive marketing solutions since 2002. The company is headquartered in Menomonee Falls, Wis., a suburb of Milwaukee, and operates satellite offices in Tampa, Fla., Denver and Chicago. CTS has long been recognized for its outstanding creative talent and innovative engineering, garnering CTS' team and clients a collection of the most prestigious awards in the industry, including Kiosk of the Year, Best Digital Signage, Best Gaming, four POPAI and four Design of the Times awards.

Connected Technology Solutions, for example, recently rolled out patient check-in kiosks custom designed for UnityPoint Health in Sioux City, Iowa. Before the kiosks were installed patients stood at the front desk and registered with a hospital representative, a costly and inefficient process.

“It’s really for the convenience of the patient,” said Tracy White, admitting manager at UnityPoint. “The kiosks have brought so many benefits to hospitals as far as wait times are concerned. It really makes it easy for our patients and our patients love them.”