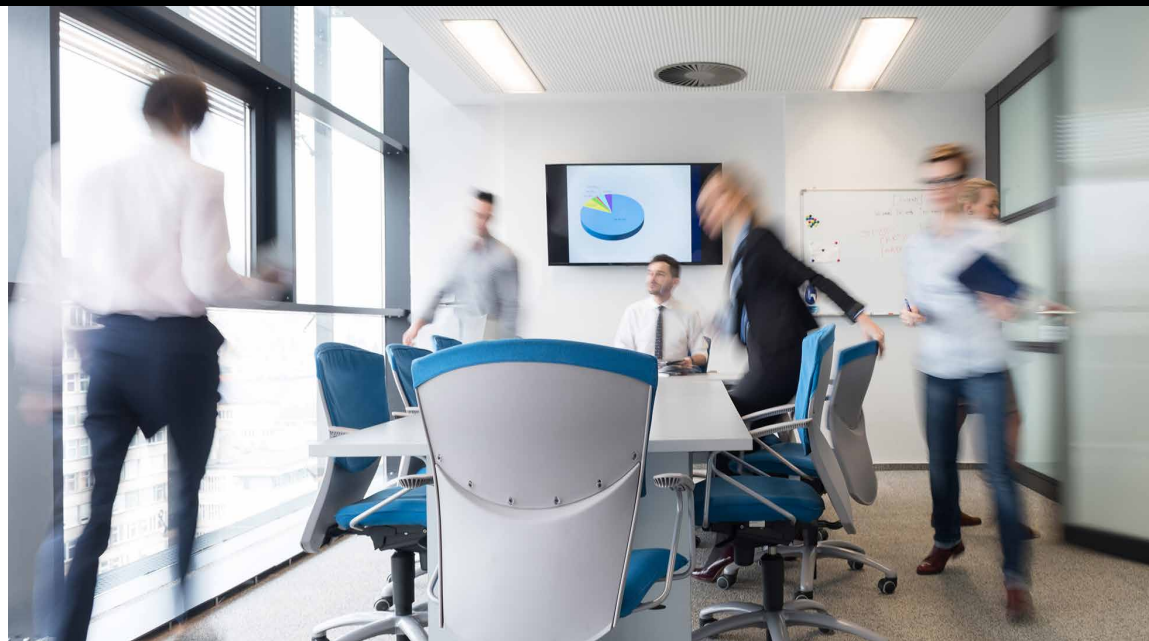


SHARPENING YOUR BUSINESS EDGE: OPTIMIZING THE BRANCH OFFICE EXPERIENCE



Companies today are as distributed as their customer base, with branch offices and satellite locations scattered well beyond traditional boundaries. For many, these distributed sites are the face of the company to the customer, with most—if not all—customer interactions occurring in these locations and not in the corporate headquarters.

Banks and finance centers, retail stores and even urgent care centers all fit within the category of the branch office, with each location connected to the corporate headquarters and, increasingly each other. Together, they make up the distributed enterprise. However, each location is its own entity and must be able to operate independently of headquarters to ensure business can continue even if one or other locations experience technical issues.

Distributed locations, therefore, must be equipped to handle all manner of customer interactions – and evolving customer expectations—and do so in a way that anticipates what the customers want next. From personalization to creating a bond with its brand, today's businesses are thinking beyond how they serve customers today and imagining how they'd like to create new experiences that evolve business models in the process.

Today, more than ever, customer satisfaction is critical. Companies that create satisfied customers see on average 7.2 times greater annual growth in company revenue, with a 5.2 percent increase in customer profit margins. Comparatively, companies without satisfied customers experience an average 2.3 percent decrease in customer profit margins.¹

As important to the customer experience branch locations are, however, branch locations traditionally have not received the same level of attention as the corporate headquarters. For many, their networks were created ad hoc to support the technologies necessary to run the back-of-office functions and connect to corporate headquarters. As such, technology upgrades and integrations have been not a priority, and most networks today run on systems that are old or outdated. What's more, most branch locations don't have an IT person onsite to handle issues immediately; rather, IT help is usually shared between multiple locations.

These outdated systems are an impediment for companies in their digital transformation journeys. To keep pace in today's multimodal environment, companies must continuously reinvent and disrupt their way of doing business and employ new and emerging technologies to meet evolving customer expectations. Beyond using cloud-based services to streamline operations, companies are looking to machine learning, artificial intelligence, chatbots, intelligent digital assistants such as Amazon's Alexa or Apple's Siri, Internet of Things and other technologies to improve customer satisfaction, create new and improve existing business processes and make more intelligent decisions that impact the bottom line. As a direct line to the customer, branch locations, too, much engage with these technologies.

Even other locations not often considered as branch locations but certainly fit the description—warehouses, distribution centers are two examples—can benefit from digital transformation. Such locations can generate large volumes of data that can be analyzed to uncover trends or determine ways to accelerate go-to-market opportunities for example. However, this data must be collected and stored to be analyzed, and, as such, requires a network that can handle the volume load.

THE BRANCH LOCATION AS INFLUENCER

Finance

Much has been written about the importance of the branch office in banking and financial services. More than just the face of the company, bank branches are helping extend the customer experience beyond the transactional and into one that is deeper and more engaging than what can be found banking online.

Forward-thinking banks are focusing on creating an environment in which technology drives the customer experience forward, but doesn't replace the human element. Customers visit branches because they want—or need—interaction with an agent. Technology won't—nor should it—replace tellers or other bank personnel.

Artificial intelligence (AI) is one such example. Past attempts to use AI in interactive teller machines were met with limited success²; however, using AI to automate certain tasks—such as using a cash recycler to reduce the amount of labor and other cash handling costs, for example—can free bank personnel to focus more on other customer experiences within the branch.

Likewise, self-service kiosks are helping customers help themselves perform certain actions such as activate their debit or credit card, choose the best loan option or schedule an appointment to visit their safety deposit box. However, a branch employee is available to help the customer manage the process or even perform the task on the customer's behalf. The time saved with this hybrid approach can enable bank personnel to focus on more revenue-generating tasks as well as customer outreach and marketing.

The branch will continue to play a critical role in the banking sector, even as technology provides the ability for conduct any transaction online. The human element is critical in customer service, and banks rely on their branches primarily as a vehicle for providing that customer service. That won't be changing anytime soon.

Retail

The retail industry in particular lives and dies by customer sentiment. Just about all aspects of retail, from where stores are located to what inventories they hold, are the result of customer interaction. It stands to reason, then, that retailers have even more to lose from poor or lacking customer experience.

That said, technology can be create exceptional customer experiences in the retail sector, helping both on the front end and back office. Convenience is a critical element in today's retail environment, where customers are just as apt to shop online as in-store—and some even shop online while they're in the store. Retail environments need to move beyond simply embracing

an omnichannel shopping environment and devise strategies to capitalize on it. The endless aisle is one such example.

Another is scan-and-go capabilities, which Amazon recently implemented in its flagship Amazon Go grocery store in Seattle.³

AI's influence also will be felt in greater amounts. Beyond its ability to automate operations and help retailers order and stock merchandise with more precision, based on predictive analytics and data culled from myriad sources, AI can help salespeople better service customers. For example, Alexa- or Siri-type digital assistants can tell salespeople the availability of certain sizes or colors of items in stock and even proac-

tively place restocking orders when inventory is low. Or, based on external data such as weather patterns in a particular region, for example, an AI assistant could automatically discount the price of down jackets or shift the inventory to stores where the need for down jackets is greater.

Other technologies—such as smart mirrors that virtually “dress” the customer with selected apparel or scan the customer's measurements and make suggestions for the best-fitting garments—also are designed to provide a level of convenience to the customer while freeing salespeople for deeper-level interactions.

Health Care

The traditional branch office concept isn't typically associated with healthcare facilities, but for a growing number of organizations, satellite or remote locations can be the main point of interaction with a patient. Medical offices, urgent care centers and pharmacies all can be part of a healthcare provider's network of facilities, and all provide the organization with opportunities to provide top-notch customer care at various points of the healthcare journey.

Even organizations such as medical labs and bioinformation agencies can be structured with satellite facilities or even temporary facilities to help in medical emergencies and other catastrophic events. No matter what the environment, technology plays a critical role in ensuring

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patients receive proper care by providing healthcare workers with access to the right information to provide such care, and by helping administrators gather and communicate healthcare data to their partners.

By taking an “ecosystem” approach to health care—one that includes patients, providers and payers—organizations can make the most of technology to improve quality of care, optimize processes and operations and receive payments faster—ultimately delivering overall better patient outcomes.

For example, electronic health records are now standard in most—if not all—medical facilities. The challenge for many now is ensuring providers have access to that data, no matter where they are, and that their networks are equipped to handle large data sets.

In the laboratory setting, big data and predictive analytics could be used in DNA processing and genomics, helping clear the backlog of DNA testing in crime labs and better determining the guilt or innocence of a suspect based on DNA collected at a crime scene. These technologies also are critical elements of personalized medicine, or pharmacogenomics, in which physicians are able to prescribe certain medications they believe will work best for a patient based on the patient’s genetic makeup.

In the doctor’s office, technologies including wearable health devices and telemedicine are growing in popularity, as physicians and patients alike seek easier and more convenient ways to monitor chronic issues and diagnose minor ailments. In fact, according to one recent study, 71 percent of providers now use telemedicine and telehealth tools to connect with patients.⁴

TECHNOLOGIES BUILDING A BETTER BRANCH OFFICE

As critical as they are to the customer experience, branch locations need technology that will enable them to work independent of the corporate headquarters yet integrate seamlessly with HQ to communicate and collaborate effectively. It takes the right mixture of wired and wireless connectivity, robust voice and data solutions and data center and cloud connectivity to ensure all branch locations have the information they need to service customers quickly, efficiently and securely.

High-quality branch office or remote location networks should include:

- **Connectivity:** Most branches are “bandwidth-challenged.” The right amount of bandwidth, from high-speed Ethernet connections or high-speed broadband up to a Gig, can mean the difference in delivering fast, reliable service to customers. Software-defined networking and software-defined wide area networks can reduce dependence on hardware and simplify complex data networks, giving administrators the ability to manage multiple sites from one central location. SDN also can support the adoption of high-speed broadband networks to handle the data and speed loads of next-generation technologies at every location.
- **Voice and Unified Communications Services:** Distributed locations must be able to communicate with their customers, the corporate headquarters and each other—and do so in the most efficient manner. Having a flexible yet robust communications system that can be managed from any location can provide a true value-add and impact customer

relationships considerably. Cloud-based advanced voice systems that interoperate with popular productivity tools, such as Microsoft Office 365, help employees be more productive – both in and away from the office – to remain connected to customers.

- **Direct Connections to the Cloud:** Branches need secure, reliable and direct branch internet connectivity to public or private clouds to speed the performance of cloud-based applications. Direct access also reduces the cost of—and time involved in—transmitting data back through corporate data centers.

MANAGED SERVICES CAN BE USED TO HELP TIE DISPARATE SYSTEMS TOGETHER AND “FILL IN THE GAPS” AS ORGANIZATIONS UPDATE THEIR CURRENT INFRASTRUCTURE, AND CAN PROVE USEFUL EVEN AFTER NETWORKS HAVE BEEN UPGRADED.

COMCAST BUSINESS AND THE BETTER BRANCH OFFICE

In building the network for a better branch office, organizations should consider an environment that includes both on-premises and cloud, and networking technologies such as SD-WAN and high-speed broadband to better manage business applications across all locations. And networking components such as WiFi and unified communications can ensure users of the network—branch locations, corporate headquarters and customers alike—interact and transact using their preferred method of communication.

To help ease stress on an organization’s current network—not to mention the daily burden on IT managers—managed services can be utilized to offer certain services without further impacting the network. Managed services can be used to help tie disparate systems together and “fill in the gaps” as organizations update their current infrastructure, and can prove useful even after networks have been upgraded.

Working with a network service provider can help ease the burden associated with building and maintaining a network capable of handling the bandwidth-intensive needs of various technologies today and in the future. By working with a third-party network services provider, organizations can leverage virtual and physical private Ethernet connectivity to assure there are no gaps in network performance and availability for critical applications at the branch locations. They also can receive all or some of their most critical connectivity functions as a managed service, including managed connectivity, WiFi, security, voice and business continuity, among others.

To learn more about how Comcast Business can help, visit business.comcast.com/distributed-enterprise.

CONCLUSION

Today’s branch locations are more than transactional locations—they often are the center of an organization’s interactions with its customers. Opportunities to further customer relationships and loyalty at the branch location far outweigh those in the company headquarters.

As the “face” of the company, branch locations must be as technologically efficient as the company headquarters—and perhaps even more so—to create exceptional customer experiences and enable top-notch back-office functionality.

Warehouses, distribution centers and other atypical branch locations also need the same level of technological efficiency to take advantage of new and emerging technologies, as well as realize the opportunities provided by the volumes of data and information these locations can create.

To keep pace in today's environment, companies must continuously reinvent and disrupt their way of doing business and employ new and emerging technologies to meet evolving customer expectations. That requires a flexible, robust network designed to handle the needs of today's technologies and meet the requirements of the next generation of technologies and services.

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4 Thomas Beaton, "71% of Healthcare Providers Use Telehealth, Telemedicine Tools," mHealthIntelligence, April 28, 2017 <https://mhealthintelligence.com/news/71-of-healthcare-providers-use-telehealth-telemedicine-tools>