Consumer affairs has a definite relationship to consumer technology, especially when it comes to contact channels. Fortunately, it's a trailing relationship. Technology is usually mature in the consumer space before it begins to be exploited in consumer affairs. This gives us ample time to adapt to emerging trends.

Yet not all trends are created equal. Many consumer channel trends are simply new mechanisms for old interactions. Fax and email were not substantively different experiences from letters. There were differing convenience and speed factors. But the overall consumer experience was the same.

By Tim Nichols

Here's how consumers will be exploiting their technology in years to come, and how your contact center can stay ahead of the curve.
The emergence of social media and the ubiquity of mobile access are the leading edge of a revolution that will fundamentally change consumer support. But to fully understand what’s about to happen, we need to reach further into the future to get a better glimpse of how people will be exploiting their tech in years to come.

Back to the Future

As Yoda famously said, “Difficult to see, always in motion is the future.” Any child of the ’60s will tell you of the promises of a shining future full of jetpacks, flying cars and vacations on Mars. From the Depression through Disco, this was the accepted path of technological achievement. Yet this was a future we not only failed to arrive at, but no longer seem to be tracking.

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QuickTakes

We may not know exactly what consumer technology will look like in the future, but we can be sure of the following:

- Consumer technology has been evolving around connectivity and interaction, and the movement of consumers from reactive to proactive experiences is inevitable.
- Technology that you wear, or “wearables,” will emerge in the consumer space in the next few years, and you should be considering their implications on behavior.
- In this technology shift, a human element remains that consumer affairs is uniquely suited for, including defining and executing even automated experiences.
- When consumers do contact you, you will need to “know” them, what they are experiencing, and pick up “the conversation” that is effectively already in progress.
toward at all. What happened?
The failure was one of projecting along straight lines. The brain tends to have a Newtonian nature to it. If we’ve seen some of this happening in the past, and a lot of this happening recently, we should expect a metric boat-load more of it in the future. However, as a physicist or a student driver will attest, unexpected collisions have a way of knocking you off your trajectory.

At the dawn of the 20th century, all the technological advancement was around transportation. People who rode horses to school grew into adults who owned cars, flew in jet planes and saw a man walk on the moon. The straight-line projection was that flight would become personal and that space travel would become accessible to the masses. It was just obvious.

But a funny thing happened on the way to the future. Flying machines and spaceships turned out to be hard to control, requiring pilots to have skills far above the average consumer. Fortuitously, computers were just emerging. These were eagerly repurposed for flight control—a need that in turn drove rapid advancement in digital technology itself. So while the digital revolution may have been spurred by transportation, it also became the collision knocking the train off its track.

As computers and networks matured, they offered a wholly different solution to the same problem transportation was trying to solve. While flying to work in your car sounds cool, ambling into your home office in the morning and collaborating with colleagues around the globe is a pretty awesome alternative.

The takeaway is that technology does not proceed in a line, but is subject to disruptions that take it in different directions, yet ultimately address the same underlying needs.

The Future of Consumer Tech

Consumer technology has been evolving around connectivity and interaction—not only among people, but among things. The advent of wired networking and the Internet began to connect computers on desks. This allowed more collaborative work, but only from certain locations. Laptops freed us from the desk, but left us hunting for power and network connections. WiFi and lithium ion batteries freed us from wires, and then mobile emerged to free us from briefcases.

Today, the world emerges from our pockets on demand. However, you’ve likely observed that teenagers are always connected, resulting in our youth having one hand perpetually occupied. While this may be a digital plus, it puts them at a disadvantage when navigating the physical world relative to their two-handed ancestors.

True, we could wait patiently for evolution to fashion an organic device holder protruding from everyone’s chest. But technology is beating evolution to the punch by fashioning wearable devices such as headsets and smartwatches.

Projecting along a straight line, futurists such as Ray Kurzweil predict the eventual merger of man and machine in an event called “The Singularity.” Many

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think the singularity will occur in the next 50 years. There’s debate over whether it will manifest as human cyborgs, where the fragile body is augmented or replaced by robotics, or if it will be the implantation of hardware in the brain to connect the mind to the digital world. It may even be some hybrid of the two. Yet make no mistake, today’s futurists are as sure of this outcome as their fathers were that you’d have a jetpack. And therein lies the problem.

Today’s wearables are experiencing a challenge not unlike what happened in transportation. The technical evolution is becoming constrained by an issue requiring a solution from a different field. In digital’s case, the constraint is power.

Wearables today are peripheral devices largely because it’s improbable to strap sufficient power to your body to get you through a day of activity. Even then, your Google Glass will run out of juice long before the phone it’s tethered to does. Implantable chips or bionics have power needs that today’s batteries simply cannot meet.

One solution for this roadblock would be a safe, cheap and portable power source—maybe piezoelectric clothing that would turn your movements into power for your implants. Another would be a different computing architecture—maybe an organic computer that runs on bioelectric energy. The direction is unclear, but either way the solution will usher in a fundamentally new generation of technology, knocking us in an unanticipated direction. This future-tech will further advance the goal of better interpersonal communication and collaboration; we just don’t know exactly how.

Granted, wearables are not mainstream devices yet, but they are mature enough to begin considering their implications on consumer behavior.

The Evolving Consumer
Once, people only consumed information reactively. Online, that meant bookmarking and periodically visiting sites you valued. However, as the wealth of sites continued to grow, finding or even being aware of content became prohibitive. This ushered in search engines. They enabled locating information more easily, but it was still primarily reactive. You had to want to find something and go looking for it.

Next up was RSS—a subscription service. You identified the topics you were interested in and the sources you cared about, then the RSS reader brought the content to you. This was the nascent stage of the proactive web.

The proactive trend continues as social media has supplanted RSS for curating your info. Services like Google and Amazon desperately try to cull orts of information from your life to assemble predictive models of your needs. And the promise of Big Data is to aggregate those disparate bits into larger holistic models of behavior. All this is fundamentally to get information to you proactively.

Emerging in this space
is the tracking of your interactions with the physical world. Your phone’s GPS knows where you are. Your Nest thermostat knows when you’re home. Your TiVo knows your favorite shows. Your car knows your driving habits. Your credit card knows what you buy, and when and where. Google Now watches your calendar to push directions and notify you when you should leave. Google Glass has an always-on mode that constantly monitors what you see, and some Motorola phones have an always-listening mode so they can eavesdrop and immediately respond to your requests.

While Baby Boomers may look at some of this as a little too Big Brother-ish, Millennials are embracing the loss of privacy as a fair trade-off for the convenience of a world that increasingly reaches out to them when, or even before, a need arises.

The Contact Center of the Future
As consumers move from reactive to proactive interactions, it’s reasonable to expect marketing and consumer affairs to complement that shift. Historically, marketing has been more proactive, while consumer affairs has been reactive. However, the future will belong to contact centers that can transition from efficient reaction to value-creating pro-action.

Some companies already embrace this future. Cars now routinely reach out to remind you that service is due. Banks reach out to warn of fraud. Airlines notify you of changes to travel plans. And TV Guide will notify you when new episodes are airing.

Consumer packaged goods (CPG) companies face challenges these early adopters don’t. While it’s straightforward for your car to prompt you for service, a can of soup or tube of lipstick lacks the built-in infrastructure to perform such feats. CPG companies face much more dependence on external infrastructure to enable their pro-action. Yet much of this infrastructure is already in place or emerging fast.

Mobile apps like RedLaser or ShopSavvy were an early step by serving information based on barcodes. IBM has gone further, demonstrating an app to recognize labels and offer up information as an overlay on a phone display. Blippar has commercialized label recognition and offers mobile infotainment content via augmented reality. It’s a small step to migrate these apps onto headsets. With a camera always watching what a consumer is seeing, it would be natural to overlay timely content to aid or influence decisions facing consumers, without the consumer explicitly asking. In a sense, this is applying the benefits of a Just-in-Time inventory system to the consumer space—where the inventory is information.

The challenge here is to not overwhelm the consumer with irrelevant information. This can’t be an unending stream of ads shoved into their eyeballs. It will be insufficient to know what the consumer is looking at. It will be necessary to merge that info with their buying history, how long they’ve been looking at an item, whether they’ve picked it up or looked at the back, what store they are in, and what their personal preferences are.

This will likely give rise to broker services that will provide the consumer history and behavior, and provide APIs for your company to interject the product specific content. Much of this interaction will be automated through sophisticated heuristics engines. But there remains a human element to all this for which consumer affairs is uniquely suited.

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Marketing and consumer affairs have been growing operationally closer year by year. Email ushered in the first push toward one-to-one marketing, and was perhaps the first shared channel between the two organizations. But the delineations were still fairly clear between the roles. The more recent push for social-media channels has created a far blurrier distinction between where marketing stops and consumer affairs begins.

The advent of proactive consumer experiences will blur the lines further still. The rules around content delivery will have to be personalized to be remotely effective. No two consumers will have quite the same behavior patterns, and locking a consumer into even a small demographic bucket will yield an unsatisfactory experience.

No organization better understands the needs of the individual user than consumer affairs. This expertise will be crucial in defining and executing even automated experiences. But more importantly, when personal interaction is called for, it will fall on consumer affairs to be there with the answer ready. Tomorrow’s consumer will not tolerate minutes of querying to capture names, addresses, UPC codes, and problem statements. They have given you a view to their world. You will need to know them, what they are experiencing, and pick up the conversation that is effectively already in progress. This is the contact center of the future.

The march of consumers from reactive to proactive experiences is predictable and, at this point, pretty much inevitable.

Enabling the Future

The emerging technology future is still a ways away, so there’s no need to panic. Expect to see wearables emerge in the consumer space over the next couple years. But while consumer affairs still tends to lag behind, be mindful that the acceleration of technology adoption only lessens this interval. Expect leading edge CPG companies to be entering this space within five years. Meanwhile, companies whose products already embody the infrastructure are already raising the bar and setting new expectations for exceptional customer service. You can’t afford to be too far behind.

Technology evolution is uncertain and subject to sudden disruption. It’s why your car doesn’t fly, and why you can’t post to Facebook with your mind. Remember, consumer affairs is merely riding the tech wave. Whatever the specific technologies involved, the march of consumers from reactive to proactive experiences is predictable and, at this point, pretty much inevitable. The future will be here before you know it.

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