

## Managing Customer Email Messages: 10 Telltale Signs You Have Outgrown Your Current Email Solution

If you have a website you likely offer an email customer service option - otherwise it would be like a brick-and-mortar business not providing a phone number for customer service. If you feature an email address on your website, customers will find and use it. Is your business set up to handle email inquiries promptly and effectively?

### **Many great personal email clients are available, but...**

Many businesses start out with a personal email client to manage customer email messages. Personal email clients can help you do just that, manage your personal email messages effectively and increase your productivity. However, when it comes to handling growing volumes of customer email inquiries, a personal email client may fail to scale to meet your business needs. A personal email client is designed for individual use, not for providing efficient, mission-critical customer service. Personal email clients do not treat email messages as part of a larger case that needs to be tracked and managed to closure, they have no understanding of service levels, and they do not treat email messages as valuable conversations with customers. An **email response management system (ERMS)** is a logical next step in the evolution of customer email management in growing businesses.

The move from a personal email client to ERMS mirrors the move in phone systems from private branch exchange (PBX) to automatic call distributor (ACD). The ACD industry emerged when the phone became a preferred interaction medium between businesses and their customers. As call volume surged, businesses outgrew PBX systems for handling customer calls. They switched to ACDs, which unlike PBX systems are built to enable businesses to handle large volumes of customer phone calls carefully and consistently. Just as the ACD is the main building block of a call center, an ERMS is a critical component of a successful web-enabled contact center.

### **Does Your Organization Need an Email Response Management System?**

Organizations that use personal email clients to handle customer email messages face some typical challenges when their email volumes begin to grow. Following are 10 telltale signs that customer service managers can easily spot. If you have noticed any of these signs in your business, consider switching to an ERMS for managing your customer email messages. With the right ERMS, you can reduce your service costs, increase the productivity of your contact center agents, improve service quality, and enhance sales.

#### **1. You get more than 1000 email messages per month from your customers.**

Volume is the leading indicator of the need for change from a personal email client-based response solution to an ERMS. As volumes grow, service teams usually have to add more agents to the team. As a result, coordination and tracking become increasingly difficult without the right tools.

As a general rule, if your business gets about 50 customer email messages per day, and the volume is growing, you should begin to explore ERMS options. Otherwise you may be unprepared when the volume becomes unmanageable in your current environment. The tipping point - where an investment in ERMS more than pays for itself in a year or less - is 100 email messages per day or about 2000 email messages per month.

## **2. You cannot find a customer email message from 6 months ago.**

A personal email client is great for small working sets of email messages, but storing and searching large numbers of messages is not always the strength of an individual email solution. Your system may be set up to delete older email messages every couple of months unless they are filed in specific folders. But your customers have long memories, and they may follow up on communication that you likely deleted as part of your last email inbox clean-up.

As consumers, we know how valued we feel when we call or send a company an email message and they remember our past interactions. When we do not offer the same quality of service to our customers, we risk losing them. Most ERMS systems allow you to maintain complete interaction history for each customer, as well as associate related email messages as a single case.

## **3. You spend an hour every day categorizing and routing email messages to agents with different skills.**

One of the most common early signs of outgrowing a personal email client is that service managers spend large amounts of time every day sorting through customer email messages, categorizing them, and allocating them to their team of agents. This process tends to be slow, error-prone, and expensive for the organization.

An ERMS can help you streamline and automate the process of categorizing and routing customer email messages - and could significantly reduce the number of people routing and allocating them.

## **4. One of your service agents calls in sick and her inbox has customer email messages.**

As a customer service manager, you dread the days when an agent calls in sick: How will you handle the customer email messages that are locked in the agent's inbox? Even if you override the password and forward unanswered email messages to another agent, you cannot identify related email messages that should be forwarded as well to enable the agent to create proper responses.

## **5. An unhappy customer is on the phone. You forwarded her support request to your engineering team, but no one ever followed up.**

Or, maybe your best customer is on the phone, complaining. She sent you an email message that you handed to one of your agents, who forgot to handle the inquiry because something more urgent came up.

Do customer queries go unnoticed fairly often? Even if you have the best intentions for customer service, if you fail to respond to customers' service requests, you communicate that you do not care about them. Dropping such a task happens all too frequently when customer email messages are managed using a personal email client. As customer email volume grows, more and more email messages are passed around the business, and the lack of alerts and task management becomes debilitating.

By migrating to an ERMS, you could reduce the average response time even while maintaining the same number of agents - even as email volume continues to grow.

## **6. Agents are constantly responding to the same set of email inquiries.**

The 80/20 rule is very evident in customer email handling - 80% of the queries are about 20% of the concerns. As a customer service manager, you do not need to worry too much about efficiency when customer email volume is low. But as the email volume grows, your agents complain about the drudgery of composing similar replies or constantly cutting and pasting from stored responses, while customers complain about getting varied responses to the same query from different agents.

An ERMS includes a common knowledge base for all your agents to store frequently used responses. Agents simply insert the right knowledge base article into their responses. Implementing a knowledge base to respond to common email queries can help your agents respond to more email messages, quickly and consistently.

Not only does the knowledge base increase agent productivity and ensure consistency in responses, it is the key to a whole range of possible efficiencies. An ERMS using its categorization capabilities can create autoreplies and autosuggestions from knowledge base articles. Advanced ERMS even allows you to publish parts of your knowledge base on your website as frequently asked questions.

#### **7. Agents spend a large amount of time looking for the information they need to answer queries.**

To effectively resolve a query, an agent usually needs access to the customer's account and interaction history, information about the company's products and policies, and related information such as shipping status. This information is typically found in a range of back-office systems, in the minds of subject matter experts, and in external systems. Personal email clients are not designed to make access to this information easy for agents as they reply to email messages, but an ERMS is. An ERMS includes specialized workspaces for agents with quick single-button access to important information. More information is more power, and the right tools can help agents get all the information they need and present it to maximum effect.

In fact, ERMS providers are increasingly moving toward thin, web-based applications that can be used from anywhere, anytime. Agents can log in to a browser-based email response application from home or the office to take care of customer email messages. The ability to work from home or while traveling is a powerful advantage. By giving agents increased flexibility while ensuring quality and productivity, businesses can tap into cost-effective talent pools that would not otherwise be available to them.

#### **8. You want to handle spikes in email traffic by getting temporary help, but the administrative overhead is prohibitive.**

Businesses have spikes in activity in the contact center - some have more than others. If you have a retail business, you have to be prepared to deal with the holiday season and the resulting increase in inquiries and service requests. Marketing campaigns, too, can cause a flurry of inquiries. Most small and medium-sized businesses have developed good models for handling phone-based customer inquiry spikes, but they are unprepared to handle sudden increases in customer email inquiries.

The capabilities of a personal email program do not lend themselves to coordinating and distributing work across a team of individuals. If the team needs to scale on short notice with temporary agents, the problem quickly becomes overwhelming for the supervisor. New agents must be trained, and their responses must be audited or reviewed. The trade-off between scale and quality becomes stark without the right ERMS capability.

#### **9. You spend hours sorting customer email messages in order to create weekly trend reports.**

The simplest reports can be challenging for service managers who use a personal email client for managing customer email messages. They have no choice but to physically count these messages to create reports. Although this manual process works for a small number of messages, the overhead becomes unacceptable as the volume of messages grows. Moreover, as customers use the email channel for service, they also provide additional feedback through their interactions that can be mined using ERMS capabilities. Personal email solutions cannot extract the valuable information that can be gleaned from incoming email messages and fed back to the marketing and product teams.

#### **10. Your boss keeps pushing for better service-level compliance, but you have no way to measure service levels.**

Problems with value-based service and meeting service-level agreements (SLAs) become more acute with email. Often, your best customers do not have the time to hold on the phone, and prefer to use email and the web to communicate with your business. Because your company president wants to provide the best service level to these customers, your boss asks for SLA reports based on customer type.

When you are using a personal email client, measuring SLAs is not possible, much less enforceable. These personal email programs lack the capabilities to track and analyze customer service interactions. When SLA compliance becomes a significant performance indicator for your job success, you should move to an ERMS.

## About Cisco

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For information about Cisco Unified E-Mail Interaction Manager, please visit <http://www.cisco.com/go/eim>.



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