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## Call Center Featured Article

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### Microsoft Intros New On-demand Customer Self-service Solution



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Microsoft ([News - Alert](#)) on Monday introduced a new on-demand application, Automated Service Agents (ASA), for customer service organizations. Described by Microsoft as the next generation of Web-based self-help, ASA helps companies enhance their customer service capabilities without having to hire more staff.

ASA is essentially an automated instant messaging (IM) client that customers interact with to get answers about specific questions. Much like the “bots” accessible from IM services such as Yahoo! Messenger and Google ([News - Alert](#)) Talk (providing details about the weather in a certain location, for example), ASA replies in natural language using pre-set answers.

“ASA is an automated chat client that uses natural language to offer self-service support to customers through a Web link or a portal site,” Clinton Dickey, director for Microsoft ASA, told TMCnet.

Since it isn’t always possible for customers to get the answer they need from an automated system, companies can set ASA up to “escalate” the chat to a live rep (using whatever communications channel the prefers, be it e-mail, chat or phone) if the customer needs assistance from a real person. This escalation process also provides cross-sell and up-sell opportunities.

Dickey said the an ASA system can be set up so that if a customer expresses or implies interest in another product or service during a routine support chat session, the system may respond by asking if the customer would like to get more info from a live rep. This adds another layer of business value to ASA by presenting new ways to increase revenue.

Clients using ASA also gain access to a flexible set of reporting and analytics tools that can glean valuable business intelligence by revealing, for example, which products are most popular or which services generate the most support queries.

The value proposition of any customer service solution, Dickey noted, can be charted with quality of experience (QoE) on one axis and cost on the other. On the high end of both QoE and cost is traditional “attended” service — a live person talking or chatting with the customer. On the low end of cost and QoE is traditional self service — solutions like Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) and search-based help.

Between these two extremes, Dickey told TMCnet, lies ASA. Unlike attended service, ASA doesn’t require additional staffing or special equipment, and so is more affordable. Unlike traditional self service, though, ASA offers more value by giving most customers the help they need without needing to talk to a real person. ASA, in other words, hits the sweet spot between low cost and high quality.


ASA is delivered to Microsoft clients using the hosted, Software-as-a-Service (SaaS ([News - Alert](#))) model. This means organizations don’t need any special equipment, or expert staff, to set up and use an ASA-based self-help system. Microsoft works with clients to build the initial database of topics, and provides training how to keep this knowledge management system updated.

Once the database is populated, clients make it their own by making it available on a Web site or portal, surrounded by a branded interface.

Dickey said the entire process of getting a client started with an ASA system take roughly 8 weeks — five weeks or so to build the database and prepare it for launch, and another month or so after it goes live to fine-tune responses so customers are provided with an optimized experience.

He added that, at launch, a typical ASA system is about 40 percent accurate in terms of answering customer questions without having to involve a live rep. After the roughly 4-week fine-tuning process, accuracy typically tops out at about 80 percent. That’s as good as can be expected, since an automated system will never be 100 percent accurate; sometimes a live person really is needed to provide satisfactory customer service.

ASA is based on technology Microsoft obtained when it [acquired](#) Colloquis in October, 2006. Since then the company has quietly been building a customer base for ASA, and is now officially launching the service as a Microsoft business offering. Formal integration with other Microsoft products is in the works, Dickey said, and an announcement about that is slated for later this year.

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