

# Lost in the Labyrinth Customers Want Out!

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## Introduction

This abridged version of Kathleen Peterson's Gold Paper, *Lost in the Labyrinth, Customers Want Out!*, published exclusively for Witness Systems and its customers, highlights the challenges within today's enterprises. It provides a context for leveraging the Witness eQuality™ software suite to optimize communication and enterprise-wide collaboration among the C-level, Cube-level and the customer. It discusses the importance of capturing customer interactions to help create a shared vision of the mission and desired Customer Service brand that must exist among all facets of the enterprise.

Kathleen, an internationally recognized Call Center Management Consultant, cleverly weaves the ancient story of the Minotaur imprisoned in an intricate labyrinth to create a metaphor of today's Contact Center as the complicated maze into which customers are often thrust. She takes a fresh look at the enterprise from this labyrinthine perspective, focusing on the responsibility of both management (C-level) and front-line staff (Cube-level) to guarantee excellent levels of customer care.

Kathleen cites the emerging role of Customer Relationship Management (CRM) as a catalyst for examining the information and communication gap that exists between the C- and Cube-levels. She challenges Contact Centers to tear down the walls of the labyrinth and create clear paths to excellent Customer Service.



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## The Enterprise Labyrinth

In ancient Crete, King Minos asked Daedalus to build a complex labyrinth for imprisoning the monstrous half-man, half-bull Minotaur. The heroic warrior Theseus' greatest achievement was to slay the Minotaur deep within the bowels of the labyrinth and, with the help of Ariadne's colored thread, find his way out of the labyrinth.

A *labyrinth* is something winding, complicated and intricate. It has always been a part of the human fabric of society - having been engraved, imprinted and branded on the pottery, coins and fabrics of culture since the beginning of civilization. Labyrinths are also embossed on the very fabric of today's modern world.

The *Worldwide Web* is one form of the contemporary labyrinth. There is also the extraordinarily extensive and complex labyrinth of copper and fiber carrying the voices of telephone and data networks. Every enterprise today has an institutionalized reflection of a labyrinth embedded within it, often referred to as the Customer Service maze. Too often we design technology to create speed; but instead we enable frustration and aggravation. Some companies treat their customers with twists, turns, swerves, options, choices and inevitably, confusion. Isn't making our customers weave through the maze of service options just another way of giving them *bad service*?

Let's take a new look at the enterprise from a labyrinthine perspective. We will cover the vast space that too often exists between C-level (CEO, CIO, CFO, CTO, etc.) executives at one end of the Customer Service chain and the Cube-level (front-line staff) and customers at the other.

*What can be done within the enterprise to create clear paths and to remove obstacles creating the walls in the labyrinth?*

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## Maze or Clear Path Ahead?

We must be willing to examine closely the path our customers follow and search for obstacles. If we are to enhance the customer experience, we must look at the Customer Service chain within the enterprise. *Is it a maze or a clear path?* To play in the world arena, we must call all our current practices into question.

*Does what we do enhance or entrap our customers?  
Are we in fact inviting our customers into a labyrinth of options without satisfaction?*

In order to remove obstacles, we may face a frightening fact. The obstacles may be due to management practices, not Cube-level performance issues. Senior management has neglected to see that as routines become more complex, as product launches and special campaigns become more frequent, the complexities of customer access will increase. And, as if that were not enough, the customer is more complex too. Today's customers often know more about your company, its services and products than the people they talk to. The Internet, in particular, has *knowledge-ified* customers.

*Knowledgeable customers are demanding customers.  
Get ready for the demand generation!*

We must review the entire service chain experience and the labyrinth our enterprise may have become. Only then can we truly evaluate our ability to respond to the sophisticated customer. We must study the typical flow of customer engagements today. The flow of information between customer and company too often follows an erratic, random and inefficient or wrong path.

It makes sense that the enterprise ought to be able to take some of the cuts, corners and curves out of this inter-enterprise puzzle. It should be a straight shot to direct the agent to the information, and the customer to the solution - creating complete relationship satisfaction in every engagement. This ultimately impacts the customer's experience with your enterprise and the experience with your **brand**.

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## **If Information Is Currency, Contact Centers Are Revenue Engines**

*Information is a form of currency in the digital age.  
Contact Centers are a pure source of it.*

The Contact Center is a singular source of **customer intelligence**. It is as close as you can get to the real and true source of customer information and intelligence, the actual **interaction** with the customer. Here is where an enterprise can capture new, fresh and raw information about its customers, as you are talking to them. The Contact Center dominates, and will continue to dominate, as a remarkable enterprise resource for information and data as a source of raw currency for some time to come. Information currency is being minted in its largest denominations when a company truly interacts with its customers!

*Contact Centers are fuel for the revenue engines of the enterprise. The Contact Center is its enterprise's breathing apparatus – to be thought of as lungs, not as an appendix.*

Lost in the backwaters of media-fed attention to the Internet, ERP and data mining, Contact Centers remain the enterprise's ideal source for information and branding. While the Internet gets all the attention, Contact Centers that incorporate Internet-based customer interactions are still doing all the work.

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## **CRM – Return On Investment?**

There is a growing realization – especially in light of the market's course corrections with dot.coms – that the **information revenue stream** must be nurtured. The nurturing opportunity is enhanced by new and sophisticated Customer Relationship Management (CRM) software systems descending on the market. But are these systems enough? The resistance to further investment in the Contact Center is one obstacle in the labyrinth. Another is the enterprise's desire for a solid report on the Return on Investment (ROI) of CRM systems.

We must closely examine the impact of additional software. The actual ROI of any CRM system should really be **Return on Information**. Then ultimately, we move into a space where the **Return on Relationships** becomes the paramount metric.

## *How will we realize the ROI or, perhaps more importantly, the ROR?*

It is the processes, relationships and a willingness to respond at a personal level to customers that will realize customer information as currency.

As an example, the impact of entering **notes** on a customer record can be powerful. (Very often these notes contain nothing because agents are not allowed the time to enter information. Immediate demand takes priority over long-term gain.) We can hear the difference between asking a customer on his/her second call of the day, “How can I help you?” vs. “I see you have just spoken with Greg. Did you have another question?” In this scenario, we achieve a higher level of consistency and potentially reduce the number of calls by eliminating repeat calls. Had the time been used on the original call to do it **right**, subsequent calls would be unnecessary.

Where is the greater value – having agents take calls **faster**, or having the duration a bit **longer** to complete the record? The answer should be simple. Yet many managers send conflicting messages to their staff because they are receiving conflicting criteria from their management. This is the fundamental **quality** vs. **quantity** question. Effective observations translate to effective feedback – gaining efficiencies while maintaining quality. This means analyzing **input**, not just **output**.

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### **Reaping the Rewards of CRM**

The vision of Customer Relationship Management assumes a willingness to change the way we view the Contact Center and its role in the enterprise. It should also assume a change in how we manage the operation. The enterprise cannot achieve the mission of Return on Relationships without first achieving a Return on Information. ROI requires the realization that the time that it takes to do it right the first time is part of the Return on Relationship plan.

CRM solutions are often associated with enhancing the relationship with the customer. An equally significant gain, however, is that the relationships among departments, workflow and processes may also emerge as improvement opportunities. Systems that support the fundamental principles of CRM may be just the catalyst your operation needs to forge ahead.

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### **From C-Level to Cube-Level**

Breaking down the walls of the service labyrinth can only happen at the most senior of executive levels. Customer Service chain executives cannot and do not reengineer the corporation. Sustainable, long lasting impact revolutions have always occurred from the top down. Often it is only the C-level that can see the global perspective that the philosophy of CRM requires. At the C-level, success will come when it is realized that the Contact Center is no longer simply a source of implementing technology and managing people.

The C-level is often a co-enabler of consistent and chronic Customer Service dysfunction. It must experience the customer interaction first hand!

*When was the last time a C-level visited the company Contact Center? Was it a visit that included more than just a brief pass-through with a visitor or consultant? How can you enable the C-level to truly grasp your customer interactions first-hand?*

Realistically, system and transaction complexities may prohibit the C-level from taking calls. But plugging in next to an agent or listening to a recorded transaction would provide a true nature of the contact and the environment. (Today's world also allows the executive to have that experience via a full recording of the transaction received via E-mail – both voice and data.) It would take the C-level directly to the Cube-level. This means **real time** to the customer.

C-level resistance to Contact Centers is rooted in the old belief that all the Center has to do well is answer the phone! In order for the Contact Center to effectively handle all access channels – phone, E-mail, Web, fax and letters – other interaction points must be handled too. The processes that support these channels must be effective for the Contact Center to be effective. Gauging their effectiveness can be achieved by capturing, and then analyzing actual customer contacts, regardless of medium. Again, an example that assessing the **process** is an important factor in evaluating the result.

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### Quality – How Real Is It?

The Contact Center will tell the CEO just what it tells agents: we are a **quality-first** operation. Every Center has a mission statement with phrases like, “quality, first time every time” and “highest level of Customer Service.” But there is usually no mention of how to report on the activity of these missions.

The fundamental conflict is that too often we find plenty of talk about quality, but base the results on **production reporting**. The result is that executives responsible for the Contact Center view it as a factory. If Contact Centers continue to be driven into production reporting by executives who want a one shot easy view of performance, no one will be satisfied, least of all the customer.

*Even if the C-level believes that costs are down because the reports say so, the true cost may rise in the form of quality reduction. This ultimately causes employee problems as well as customer loyalty problems. Reports that show the C-level a more conclusive, accurate picture will include both quantitative **and** qualitative information, offering real business intelligence.*

We find that, from the customer's perspective, high production operations are rarely considered to be high performing. This is not to say that we ignore the production contribution – Contact Centers certainly have a production mandate. But let's not mistake activity for productivity. If we focus on quality, quantity will follow. While average talk times may increase, the number of calls will decrease and impact cost accordingly.

*When you combine information from your customer information system, accounts receivable system, order entry system or other custom applications, executives have a focal point for improved performance enterprise-wide.*

Customer relationships contribute to the bottom line. They do not take away from it, when done right. Often the sad reality is that we fail right from the beginning; at the hiring, training and organizational design processes.

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## Old Ways of Thinking About New Things

The production mentality of Contact Centers conflicts with the emerging marketing mentality. CRM at its core obligates a shift from operations and production to marketing. The decision to consider Contact Centers as a marketing function, not an operational one, is inevitably a C-level decision. True customer relationship appreciates that all calls and customer engagements are marketing calls – not just technical support, sales, human resource questions, etc.

C-level executives must rely on the power of their ideas. This includes enough forward thinking not to make strategic decisions in denial. It also includes the realization that success in the 21st century can only be achieved by first navigating the **tell the truth** paradigm of how truly branded the customer experience can be.

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## The Power of the Interaction

Where should a C-level executive see the greater potential branding – in one 30 second Super Bowl commercial (at millions of dollars) that reaches only a fraction of true customers, or in the four minutes a customer spends communicating with a Center agent? The fact is that it is in the Contact Center where the company brand hits the market space. Everything else just leads up to that.

Yet, how often does the C-level look to the Contact Center for brand extension? Conversely, how often do we find the issue of the company brand and image discussed and shared when we train Contact Center agents? The power of capturing and analyzing customer interactions as part of the CRM vision is that these experiences can promote, reinforce, and perpetuate the company's brand to the consumer world.

Many enterprises today brand everything else but the actual customer Contact Center experience. But make no mistake. There is such a thing as a branded service experience. Think about when you talk to a USAA, LL Bean or 911 agent.

*What branded image comes to mind?*

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## Keep the VPs, But Hire a CCO

With the Contact Center's emerging role in CRM and the evolution of customer information as a form of currency, we must increasingly see the Contact Center represented at the C-level in some form.

One of the evolutionary results of CRM will be the creation of a new C-level executive position – a **Chief Customer Officer** (CCO) or a CRO, a **Customer Relations Officer**. This executive must understand the labyrinthine nature of communicating with customers and be able to **champion** the Customer Service chain to every other enterprise unit.

Terrific people have always helped the front-line customer experience. The management challenge comes in mediating the commitment between technology and productivity gains. We can begin by exposing a truth-telling paradigm.

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## To Tell the Truth

The reality is that the delivery of service metrics is how the gate opens to the executive and C-levels. For Contact Center and Customer Service chain executives to be both survivable and promotable in the 21st century, the first initiative is to start telling the truth.

A downstream consequence of the ease of info-manipulation is that budgets related to providing service get manipulated as well. Another budget flaw is that Contact Center managers typically spend the first six months of a fiscal year fighting for a budget that they spent the last six months working on. Then they start the process over again. Giving consideration to the value of a customer interaction 13 months from now is a technical impossibility. This occurs in the face of a CRM world that considers the *lifetime* value of customers.

CRM fundamentally contradicts the very efficiencies that Contact Centers strive to achieve. At the Cube-level, this conflict is identified by the fact that it takes too long to look at the customer profile. Because agents are being metric-ed to handle the customer's call in less than 120 seconds, they don't utilize it – even if they have true information to build a relationship. They don't have time to. This is what happens when we try to force productivity instead of building relationships.

*We need to train them to think and to consider at an organizational level to do it right the first time, not in 120 seconds.*

Customer Service of any type is driven by speed, because faster is better. In too many Contact Center environments we have gone from the simplicity of boiling water to the sophistication of using technology – microwaving – and have accomplished the same thing. If you do it fast, but get it wrong, what have you gained? You have blatantly substituted activity for achievement.

Technology in Contact Centers today must *empower* managers to tell the truth. The arena of success in this new century will be around the people who have abandoned previous thinking and adopted a *tell the truth* mentality.

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## Mid Management – Good at the Budget Trap

In order to make enterprise leaders happy, the Contact Center's report and metric expert efficiently crafts and delivers overly simplistic outputs in the form of reports. Consequently, managers are missing a valuable opportunity to improve not just call-answering times, but also Customer Service brand expectations. Activities are misrepresented in a sublime and effective manner by altering metrics themselves.

*The system perpetuates a dumbing down not a smartening up.*

Many management executives fear that totally true metrics may lower their Center's stature and jeopardize their own reputation. However, there is a big difference between guarding your job and growing your job.

Growing the job is the tougher avenue by far. That's why so few do it. It is radical to consider that emerging 21st century Contact Center managers must take responsibility to make their most senior executives aware of the fallacy of using the Customer Service metrics they use today. Using ideas such as service level buy-backs is an extraordinary form of the polite lie.

If Contact Center managers would stop selling themselves on the idea that what they are doing is productive, executives would be willing to listen.

To make Customer Service matters more complex, the idea of Customer Relationship Management is emerging, more than ever, as an entirely new reference point for the enterprise's Contact Center operation. Unfortunately, we still live in a **just add boiling water** society and this instant better service mentality is further complicated by the complexities of CRM.

A Canadian bank recently discovered that by increasing employee satisfaction by five percent, it gained an increase in customer satisfaction (within that population of agents) of more than ten percent. That's a big leap for a little work! If the end of better Customer Service is justified by the means of improving employee satisfaction, then it obviously pays to improve employee satisfaction.

*Are your agents given the opportunity to fail their way to success? Are they encouraged to do things they don't know how to do in order to learn how to do them?*

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### Scripting Intimacy – Is It Possible?

**Customer intimacy** is bantered around in an almost reckless way. The truth is that you cannot script intimacy. Your enterprise may be technically proficient enough to **screen pop** sophisticated customer data, but not competent enough to create or engage in a relationship. Proficiency isn't competence. We perpetuate operational cultures that confuse answering the phone and reading a screen with conversational skills and empathetic listening. Only by seeing and hearing actual customer interactions, and then coaching and training for improved performance, can we truly enhance these "soft skills."

A solid customer relationship comes from the agent who knows his/her business. Don't ignore the fact that the customer relationship environment is far more sophisticated than ever before. Products and services haven't changed – customers today are seasoned consumers. The skill requirements are no longer built around reading. **They are built around listening.**

In most cases, scripting is an endemic symptom of enterprises already out of control and looking at the wrong end of the Customer Service equation.

*The perspective of agents' value must rise at the C-level, while improving the tools at the Cube-level.*

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## Taking the Leap: Operations to Marketing

Once, while home recuperating from minor surgery, I called my cable TV company to order the super-duper mega-movie package – anything and everything without commercials. The next day, I found in the local newspaper a glaring half-page ad for cable modems from the very same company. **Why didn't the agent I spoke to offer me the cable modem deal?** I would certainly have been interested. The previous day, I was a hungry free-spending customer. Now I had to call the company back to order a cable modem. I was an easy **yes** for them.

This example shows an environment driven by operations. A savvy marketing department would not have missed this easy **cross-sell** opportunity because they would have been sampling interactions and would have discovered the lack of cross-selling and missed revenue opportunities. In an ironic twist, in my case, the operational efficiencies were compounded because there was now a need for a second order. This created billing problems for months ahead – all because an agent was not trained well enough, or there was a failure in the system to alert this agent to express the opportunity.

The cross-sell initiative developed by management needs to be framed as a service issue. A problem in most **service and order taking** enterprises is the mentality within the agent population once an initiative is created to **sell** something. Many feel that if they wanted to sell something, they would have gone out and gotten a sales job. What these agents should consider is that they are being asked to provide a better representation of what the company has to offer.

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## Visionary or Radical?

There are many of you, from C-level to Cube-level, with vision and clarity about the future. But a significantly fewer number are radical enough to actually **do** something about the inefficient ironies within today's Customer Service environments.

*You may be visionary enough to recognize the challenge, maybe even envision a grand solution. Now it's time to really do something about it.*

Don't underestimate that what it takes to do **something about it** is immense and extensive. Success begins with the guttural realization that if you want to play the CRM game, Customer Service as it exists today may be far more lip service than **real service**. Real service is harder to do.

It is no longer about cost justification. It is about change justification. But change is hard and not always worth it, particularly in an industry where there is so much historical inertia. Some will have to face the reality that creating a corporate culture truly supporting the customer can be a terminally difficult thing to do. For others – the radicals – there are tremendous crystallization opportunities among the various departments that touch the customer engagement. The Contact Center side of the house is going to have to start asking for things that it has traditionally never asked for, such as collaboration across the enterprise.

The successful future of the Contact Center includes the emergence of a confident management mentality that truthfully realizes that it is time to stop giving the C-level exactly what it asks for and instead give it what it **needs**.

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## Clearing the Path

It is not being suggested that cubicles, departments and hierarchies of the traditional enterprise be replaced. What is suggested is that walls and boundaries **separating** these operational domains be demolished. When this happens, Ariadne's colored thread becomes unnecessary.

Until this is first envisioned and then acted on, the labyrinthine nature of Customer Service will perpetuate and persist. And customers will remain fearful of bad service – the Minotaur within your enterprise embedded in our collective psyches – as it has been for thousands of years.

The future is fairly binary – evolve or become extinct. Success for Customer Service chain executives will be found in reaching as far down into the enterprise as they expect agents, supervisors and managers to stretch up.

*In the age of technology and information, live human contact – be it over the phone or through Web-based contacts, itself a profound activity – becomes the key competitive differentiator. Only by capturing and analyzing these contacts can the C-level attain the information needed to clear the path to 21st century leadership.*



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***Kathleen M. Peterson, Founder and Chief Vision Officer of PowerHouse Consulting, Inc.***, is an internationally acclaimed Contact/Call Center

authority and speaker. Kathleen has shared her humor, knowledge, and experience across five continents as a featured speaker at conferences and Fortune 500 companies. She has twenty years in the telecommunications and Contact/Call Center consulting industry. Kathleen is widely published, and with her knowledge, humor, and motivational style is frequently sought as a keynote speaker or seminar leader by top organizations. Kathleen consults with senior management in varied industries and provides recommendations on center management, operations, technology, staffing, and human factors. Kathleen cannot be described in words; she must be experienced! She is a “working” speaker, bringing energy and real-life experience to all engagements. With her humorous and anecdotal presentation style, Kathleen always gets rave reviews from her audiences.



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***PowerHouse Consulting, Inc.*** is a professional management and technology consulting firm that provides expertise in applied telecommunications (voice/data/image/integration) and Customer Service (Contact/Call Center and Help Desk) applications. We are seasoned experts with the knowledge and experience to bring quick, practical, and cost-effective solutions to every engagement. With PowerHouse, clients are assured that our resources are independent and dedicated to their unique business objectives. Our goal is to consistently exceed client expectations by providing incomparable service and superior state-of-the-art technical expertise.



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***Witness Systems*** is a leading provider of recording, analysis and electronic learning management software that enables companies to enhance their customer interactions across multiple communications media. Its eQuality suite of products is designed to further extend the ability to record, evaluate and analyze complete customer contact based on user-defined business rules. Witness Systems’ software is deployed by contact center managers as a training tool to improve the performance of agents and as an evaluation tool to gauge business process effectiveness – all in an effort to help companies deliver world-class service. Witness Systems has installed its products in a multitude of industries worldwide, including automotive, financial services, healthcare, hospitality, insurance, outsourcing, publishing, retail, telecommunications, travel and utilities.