

A CrmXchange Interview with Nicolas de Kouchkovsky, CMO, Acqueon



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In our continuing series of conversations with solution providers that contact center professionals would ordinarily have seen at live industry events, CrmXchange Managing Partner Sheri Greenhaus conducted an in-depth interview with Nicolas de Kouchkovsky, CMO of conversational engagement software specialist Acqueon. The company's products and solutions enable enterprises to proactively engage with prospects and customers. They empower agents and sellers to determine and act upon customer context while driving next best actions.

Overview/Omnichannel Capabilities

As a conversational engagement software company, we help brands engage with their customers. The use cases range from sales and service, through to collections and retention. Engaging customers seems so obvious that people sometimes wonder about it. It's actually challenging to do it at scale and in a productive fashion. Our core offering is an omnichannel campaign management software using voice, two-way text and messaging, and email.

We really shine at making the real-time channels, voice and text, more effective. We've built a predictive dialer into our campaign management software. What makes us stand out is our ability to use analytics and AI to optimize campaigns. In the past, what was intelligent about outbound and predictive dialing was the tracking of how many dial attempts would go through to adjust its pace. Today, businesses can use AI to figure out the best time and the best number to call. In use cases such as service or collections, they can also leverage propensity models. We have been quite proactive in enabling reps and agents to have meaningful conversations by giving them the context and customer knowledge they need to succeed. We provide tools to optimize and automate their workflow, allowing them to focus on the conversation.

Omnichannel has been tearing down the barriers between sales and service. It remains difficult to make outbound meaningful. When an agent either calls someone, fires an SMS or sends an email, she needs to be aware of the full context of the person she is contacting. She must be highly relevant and show empathy commensurate with the topic.

Looking under the hood of our software, we want to discuss three attributes.

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- First, we are cloud and cloud multiplatform. Our solution supports Cisco, NICE inContact, Amazon Connect, and Twilio Flex. We make customer engagement an extension of the contact center platform. When you look at the world of campaign management solutions, most if not all are only available on top of their own telephony platform. We let our clients choose their platforms.
- Second, we designed our solutions around a rich customer data platform. Our campaign manager is a powerful ingestion engine. Businesses can upload databases, drop in files, or connect to applications. We bring all these data sources into a rich data model that feeds our AI predictions and provides rich context to agents.
- Third, we built into the product 'smart workflows' to improve agents' productivity and enable them to make the most out of every conversation. In a world where it's often difficult to reach customers, the system can suggest to the agent a follow-on topic of conversation based on the outcome of the initial interaction. While it may look trivial, having this intelligence at scale - that tells them when to take an action and when not to - is the kind of thing that makes a difference. Since the core of the solution is outbound, choosing the most effective channel can be critical. The way AI predictions work is by determining the probability -time slot by time slot—of reaching someone. Then, optimization strategies can be applied. By predicting the best possible time and the best channel to reach an individual, the intelligence makes a successful outcome more likely.

Why the Solution Works Better in the Current Environment

Let me give a few examples to illustrate the relevance of our solutions today. Collections is a vital use case right now. All businesses are challenged to improve their cash flow. At the same time, many people are experiencing hardship. It makes the collections process much more delicate. Our models can predict when a company calling someone has a better chance of even getting a fraction of a payment due. This where the built-in customer data platform is important. It can assemble information from different systems and past dispositions to make such predictions.

Callback is another solution in high demand to help deal with traffic surges. It also helps drive adoption of automation and self-service by prompting callers in a queue with options that can include pivoting the conversation to text instead of waiting on hold.

The pandemic has also acted as a catalyst on two fronts. First, there is a much greater need for customer engagement. Businesses such as banks that had shut down branches need to re-engage with their clients and determine the best strategy for re-engaging. I think last month, there were over 4 million Americans unable to pay their mortgages. Many wanted to do it but were unable to do so. Our solution allows financial institutions to present alternatives such as refinancing options instead of applying brute force to collections. This allows them to balance automation with greater customer engagement.

Second, digital. Now that we are past the initial urgency of adjusting to work-from-home and stay-at-home mandates, businesses are accelerating their digital projects. If you look at digitalization, it was focused on automation. Businesses have been digitizing the parts of their processes that could be automated. Now they are looking at it more holistically and how to digitize these processes end-to-end. This is leading to a new model of digitization that is more pragmatic and leverages humans to bridge the gaps of what cannot be easily automated.

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Healthcare is an industry where these changes are happening rapidly. Let's look at Telehealth for example. First, patients need to be told about the availability of Telehealth. This is best done with highly personalized outreach to explain that is an option. It's one of the drivers to increase call volumes. A simple method for dealing with these surges can be implemented in the IVR, prompting callers for being called back or switch to SMS interactions. We found callback giving company greater control over call volumes. Callbacks are more predictable and can be delegated more easily. Callback has definitely become a popular solution, and not just for healthcare. State services who need to help people experiencing difficult situations, for example obtaining unemployment benefits are turning to it as well. We have deployed callback solutions to follow up and assist people for completing their applications.

Another pandemic-driven use case is contact tracing. We are currently assisting a government outside the US for such a solution. This is a perfect application of campaign management. If any medical condition requiring attention is detected, a campaign can be triggered to have practitioners to do an initial screening. Then, we need to find out with whom the patient has been in contact with and follow up with them. This follow up is yet another campaign. We are finding though that our use of the word "campaign" can be problematic as it doesn't help customers visualize what can be done using our software. We enable all kinds of outreach at scale and in a managed way.

This is where being cloud-based and having a solution that runs on top of a contact center platform is extremely valuable. The work-at-home situation led to an acceleration of the transition to the cloud, particularly for large enterprises, the segment we serve. These businesses prefer to layer engagement capabilities on top of their contact center platform and leverage it. This makes it easier to accommodate people working from home. In retail and healthcare, where companies are operating with all-hands-on-deck, it's easier if they don't have a silo and can leverage their existing communications platforms.

Privacy & Security

As a company dealing with outbound and engagement, our first concern is to enable our clients to comply with Do Not Call and TCPA regulations. Privacy has become a big issue. Additional measures have been taken by governments to protect consumer privacy, notably GDPR. It gave momentum to a more comprehensive movement. GDPR was followed by a law in California and there is a flurry of similar legislative efforts, in both different countries and other states in the US. Compliance has become complex for all organizations and always evolving. This has led many to request tools to keep them safe. We have worked diligently to build in compliance in our software, allowing them to check all data both when they onboard it and in real time when they use it. It also involves the reporting necessary to fulfill legal regulations.

We are also focused on helping organizations be trusted. Consumers are bombarded by messages and are receiving more unwanted calls and robocalls. In this context, being able to reach customers has become an even more critical issue. Customer engagement is becoming a "lifeline" for a brand, enabling it to stay in touch with its customers. Trust starts with managing the "right to know and the right to be forgotten" so anyone who is a customer can ask what a business knows about them and request it erases information that they do not wish to have retained. This requires to manage the workflow of requests to ensure they are executed in a timely fashion.

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We recently introduced a product called 'Acqueon Identity.' It enables businesses to give customers a heads-up via mobile phone and/or mobile app that they are about to contact them. A bank for example can use the secure connection through its mobile app to send a message stating "This is Bank X and we would like to call you about an important issue." This message is not an SMS, which could be spoofed, but a secure communication coming through the bank's mobile app. When the consumer clicks on that notification message, she is taken transparently to the app. If there are any additional authentication steps necessary, they can be performed using the app, leveraging the device authentication mechanisms such as biometrics or facial recognition. This transforms what might have been perceived as a suspicious call from a stranger into one that is mutually verified. The trust it establishes provides an additional level of comfort.

What Influences Businesses to Adopt the Platform

We now have 200 customers throughout the world. 1 in 4 are Global 2000 organizations. Perhaps the most significant driver that leads companies to choose us is that we are cloud-based and that our platform offers a plethora of choices on how they can connect from a telephony and channel standpoints. Our omnichannel capabilities include two-way SMS: this sounds simple, but few solutions incorporate it and it opens up many possibilities.

Many businesses are seeking to improve engagement. If they do sales for example, our built-in customer data platform let them build predictions and statistical models. This in turn helps them determine how to effectively run their campaigns, pushing guidance to agents allowing to make the most of every single conversation. Companies are impressed with that level of intelligence, coupled with the built-in data. They tell us they love it because it is open and works with multiple contact center platforms, which protects their existing investments while they move to the cloud at their own pace. It eliminates the need to move an entire stack all at once.

Our solution can typically be implemented in a matter of weeks, depending on the sophistication of the customer. We've brought that down to as quickly as a week to 10 days in the cases of some government agencies in the context of the urgent deployments we spoke about earlier.

The final aspect that influences their decision is compliance. We give businesses a toolbox to handle the breadth of regulations, allowing them to turn on controls as simply as flipping a switch.