

# Web Self-Service and the Customer Experience

By Michael Wengal

It is no secret that great service is of major importance to plan sponsors. In fact, respondents to *PLANSPONSOR* magazine's November 2003 *Defined Contribution Survey* ranked service to plan participants as the most important aspect in evaluating plan providers.

Today, great service expands beyond the traditional idea of person-to-person interaction. According to Fidelity's *Building Futures IV: Plan Options and Participant Choices in Workplace Savings*, approximately 77% of all customer service requests occurred online last year. An additional 15% of requests were satisfied via Fidelity's automated telephone-based Voice Response System. Combined, these two self-service channels fulfilled more than 93% of last year's total customer service requests.

The prevalence of self-service has grown exponentially over the last few years – particularly within the financial industry. From Automated Teller Machines (ATMs) to online banking, self-service provides customers nearly unlimited access to accounts and information whenever they want it. According to the *Financial Services Fact Book*, the number of ATMs in the U.S. increased 125% in the last six years. Online banking jumped 164% in the two-year period 2000-2002. The popularity of these self-service innovations continues to grow as customers discover their efficiency, accuracy, and 24-hour convenience. According to the PULSE EFT Association, the ATM card ranks second only to the home telephone as today's most popular consumer convenience.

## It's all about customer experience

Web-enabled customer self-service in particular continues to grow in favor. The Web offers a visual dimension that automated phone lines and live phone support cannot match. In addition to graphically displaying information to users, Web channels support investment education, retirement planning, research, articles, if/then scenarios – even the downloading and printing of information. This provides users with an information rich environment to learn, explore, and experiment. Patricia Seybold, author of *The Customer Revolution*, explains that customers “want to be able to help themselves to information, find solutions to problems, and navigate through the decision making process easily, at their own pace, and without distraction ... the ability to find, research, and buy what they want, when they want, the way they want, is one of the primary reasons they choose to do business online.”

The Web environment also supports personalization. “Personalization” enables plan participants to get the most out of each online visit by tailoring content and tools to fit each user's personal preferences and level of financial sophistication. In the benefits world, the ideally personalized self-service environment features user-centric pages, appropriate for each participant's life stage, situation, and goals. For example, Fidelity NetBenefits® varies the information highlighted in a session based on each participant's life stage. Therefore, information on how to develop an initial investment strategy intended for a Generation Y employee would not be presented to a 65-year old employee planning to retire in the next year.

## Old-fashioned human interaction

No matter how robust self-service offerings may become, not all customers will prefer these channels. Face-to-face and telephone assistance will always be the cornerstone of good customer service. But the overall nature of these service channels is beginning to change.

While self-service offerings are successfully absorbing the vast majority of simple questions and transaction requests previously handled by service representatives, walk-in investor centers and call support centers are increasingly fielding complex questions and requests. By accessing information and tools online, plan participants are becoming more educated and involved in the management of their accounts – resulting in more sophisticated questions. According to James K. Watson Jr. and Joe Fenner in the January 2001 *InformationWeek* article, “The High Price of Self-Service,” this new call volume is a good thing, since it shows that, “customers are engaged, interested, and willing to contact the business to resolve their issues or increase their activity as a customer.”

## The future of customer service

The unique, interactive nature of the Web will continue to foster innovation in customer service. Already on the horizon are new and ground-breaking means of enhancing the participant experience.

“The future of customer service will bring a convergence of the various channels of contact,” says John Begley, executive vice president of Fidelity's Customer Support Services. “For example, live collaborative sessions between a plan participant and a service representative will soon be available via the Web.” Begley explains that if a participant runs into questions or issues while using NetBenefits<sup>SM</sup>, he or she can call a toll-free phone number to speak directly to a customer service representative. When connected, and with the participant's permission, the representative can access the participant's Web session to demonstrate the steps in a transaction or how to access various tools and information. When ready, the participant can resume his or her session and perform the desired activity.

These live collaborative sessions will combine the best of both service channels – the visual dimension of the Web with the human touch of a live person.

## The bottom line

Today, financial service providers are expected to offer some level of online service as part of their customer service offering. The Web has proven to be a convenient and accurate tool for account management and a highly effective means of integrating education and targeted messaging to retirement plan participants. As technology advances, new and better self-service avenues will continue to develop. One day, online self-service usage may be as widespread and second-nature as sliding an ATM card.

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