Leeds City Council - live web chat service

Summary

Leeds' live web chat is about providing support to website users to help them complete their business with the council whilst they are online even when they reach a point where they are not clear as to how to proceed. It is about providing support and encouragement to customers to change their behaviour and stay online. Advisors can chat with customers while they are online, helping to guide them through the process and preventing the need for the customer to telephone the council or visit in person, either of which will cost the council more money to resource. Customer advisors can deal with three enquiries simultaneously, making live chat much more efficient.

Objectives
The council had identified that 20% of calls to their contact centre come from people who have already visited the website, but had abandoned their efforts to self-serve. As they are not online at the point of their call it is relatively hard to discover exactly where they had problems. The council wanted to reduce the costs of failure demand and improve the customer experience by offering live assistance to those who experienced difficulties whilst trying to self-serve online, with web chat in situ on the website.

Approach
The software that the council implemented identifies when a customer may need live chat and offers them the option of connecting immediately. The proactive chat system (provided by LivePerson as a 'software as a service' solution) is currently provided during telephone opening hours (8am-6pm Monday to Friday), which covers the busiest times of web use – the hours could easily be flexed.

When a customer has been identified as experiencing a problem on a particular page, this triggers a message to those agents available who then send an invite to chat to the customer:
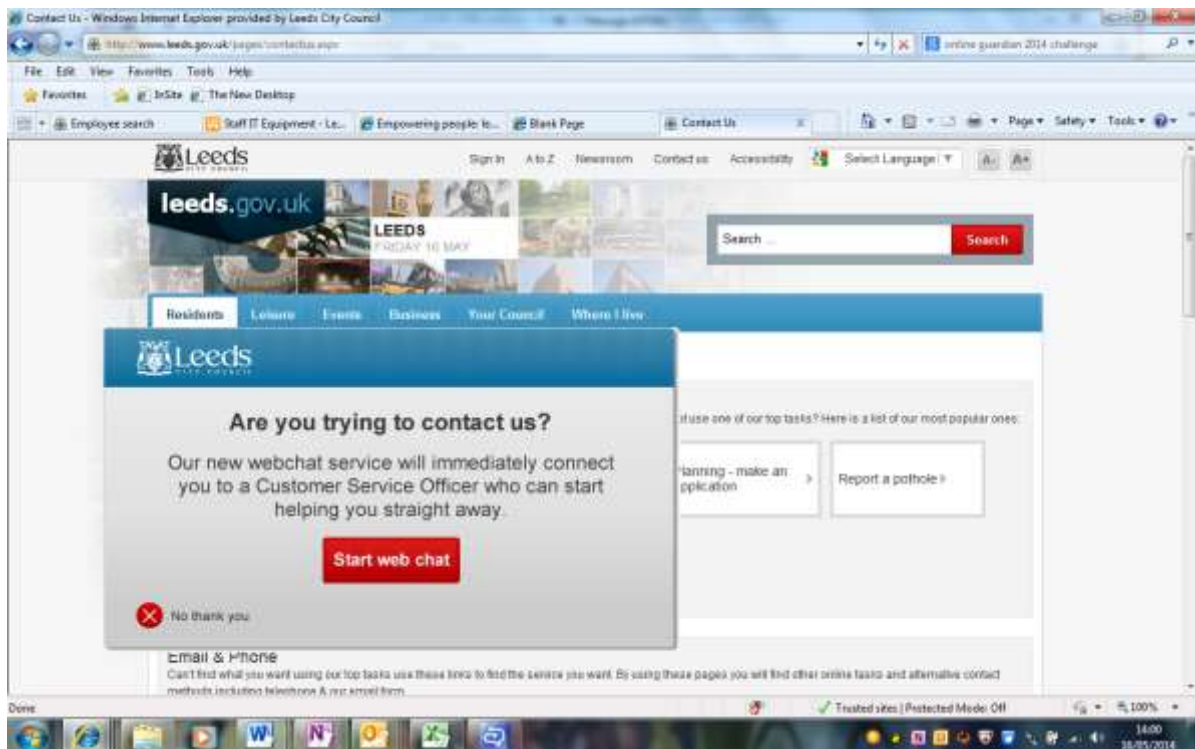
Outcomes

The feedback from web chats provides data on the customer's journey, this can be used to help redesign and improve the process, preventing other customers experience similar access issues, and increasing confidence in the effective implementation of online services.

As a result of feedback from customers and from analysising their journey's on the website, the council's web chat agents (customer service officers) submitted over 400 requests in the last eight months to amend information or processes on the council's website. A few examples are as follows:

1. Web change request stating 'Just found out that Kippax Leisure Centre is closed until a week on Monday (so is closed for half term)'. It was important to add a message to the website quickly, because parents would be looking for children's leisure activities over the holidays. As a result of this change request, the council was able to update the website on the same day.
2. Web change request asking to add bank holiday opening hours for museums to the website as the bank holiday weekend was coming up. The service didn't realise this information was missing and added it immediately.
3. Web chat change request mentioned that a common question the council was being asked on web chat was from parents querying when their child will be going to school and when they can apply. It would be useful if there was a document attached to the relevant page that had the yearly start dates and the eligible dates of births for this start date. The service publisher discussed with manager who agreed this was necessary, and included some new text on the webpage. This means customers no longer needed to phone the council to find out this information.
4. Web chat change request stated that customers were having difficulty using browsers other than internet explorer to access the admissions self-serve page. Immediate action was taken to put a message on the web page to warn customers that some browsers would not work, and longer term action was sent to ICT to put in place a fix.

All of these examples reduced web chats and calls about the particular issue in hand, and improved the online experience for future customers. The city council's website, as rated by SOCITM in their annual Better Connected report scored 1 star in 2012/13 and jumped up to 4 stars (highest rating) in the 2013/14 latest report – the council attributes a significant part of this to the improvements implemented as a result of the web chat service.

Total contact with the council's contact centre has fallen by an average of 4% per month year-on-year over the past eight months, and calls answered by a customer service operative have fallen by an average of 14% in the same period. While this cannot all be directly attributed to the use of web chat or the website improvements made as a result, the council, based on the positive feedback from customers who have used this service, recognise that web chat is making a significant contribution to the trend.

Customer benefits

The web chat service enables those customers having problems online to get immediate support so they can complete their transaction without breaking out of the web environment to make a phone call, and without losing the information they have already entered in the form. More than 80% of customers using live chat stated that their enquiry was resolved, and the service is delivered more quickly than phoning or emailing. This builds customer confidence for future self-service as well as contributing to the on-going improvement of the functionality and user experience of the site.

Council benefits
The council have calculated that an average telephone call costs them £3.06 in direct agent costs (without on-costs). This is based on their figures that show an average agent handles 7.3 calls per hour. By comparison, an agent dealing with web chat can handle 10 chats per hour. The equivalent staff cost is £2.19, and including the licencing cost of web chat this comes to £2.52 per chat. With 34,000 web chats in the last year, the council has so far saved £18,360 over eight months from August to March. This is a 13% saving over the equivalent cost of phone calls – an email could have generated multiple email responses, and a face-to-face visit would of course cost much more.

The savings figures also miss the real benefit that is from the reduction in further calls that would have been made had the improvements to the website not been made, and the 'conversion' of web users to true self-servers.

Post-survey chats show consistently that 70% of customers say they would have telephoned had they not used web chat, and a further 20% would have emailed.

There are two key benefits driving provision of web chat beyond financial savings:

1. It can help change the behaviour of website visitors so that rather than give up when they hit a problem and then make a call or visit the council, they get instant help to navigate the website and as a result they will be more likely to persist the next time they hit a problem on the web site.

2. It provides immediate feedback to the web team on problems with the customer journey and contributes to a continual improvement feedback loop.

Web chat used in this way opens up the opportunity for a better used, and a better designed website.

Customer quotes:

'Absolutely fantastic response time, great manners and superb answer, fantastic, maybe you should show others how it's done, THANKS'

'Exceeded my expectations in speed and service – well done to my council'

'brilliant service it open more access for deaf peoples who now can use chat line keep up good work Thanks'

'Excellent service. I live abroad and it was excellent to be able to communicate with LCC this way. Samantha handled my question very well.'

'Whilst your website is difficult to navigate it was very useful to have somebody on hand to direct me to the link I was looking for.'

'I work in IT and am well used to using web chat for both business and personal use. This is the best experience I have had of web chat.'

'thnx for the live chat support specially who feel not comfortable on phone to deliver or receive their messages'

For further information, please contact adam.quesne@leeds.gov.uk