

**SUPERCHARGED
OFFICE 365
TEAM INBOXES**

**REDUCING
TOTAL EMAIL
RESPONSE TIME**



Today's competitive marketplace is placing extraordinary demands upon all organizations that deal with customer interactions, especially in customer service, sales and support roles. Managing the large volumes of communication from customers can be a daunting challenge. Balancing the expectations of rapid response with the need for accurate assistance is a constant challenge.

A high volume of business communication is transacted by email. Dealing efficiently with inbound email – especially to functional or “team” inboxes, is a key to success. For organizations that deal with a high volume of email, shaving seconds off the average total email response time can save hundreds of thousands of dollars. But without understanding what goes into efficient team email management, it's hard to measure, let alone improve, that process.

This white paper examines Total Email Response Time by breaking it down into its three component parts and explores ways to improve each of these three areas.

Total Email Response Time Formula

Thinking about the path that an email takes in a team inbox, we can break down the response time into three elements: the time it takes between arriving in the team mailbox and being assigned to an agent; the time it takes before that agent sees, reads and begins acting on the email; and the time it takes to compose and send an appropriate reply. We can look at this as a simple math problem:

$$\text{(Routing Time) + (Agent Pending Time) + (Agent Effort Time) = (Total Email Response Time)}$$

By acknowledging the independent nature of these three base metrics, we can examine the challenges of optimizing each and explore strategies for improvements that yield dramatic gains in overall email management efficiency.

Routing Time

Routing time is the time it takes between an email arriving in a team email inbox, and that message being assigned and delivered to the agent that will be responsible for replying to it. Since not all emails are created equal, and not all agents are as adept at handling every type of customer inquiry, optimizing this metric presents a number of challenges.

CHALLENGES

How is the message assigned?

Corporate email messages often sit in shared public folders or group mailboxes waiting for someone to deal with them. This method of assignment relies on the fact that the appropriate agent will happen to see the message in a reasonable timeframe, will take ownership of it, and act on it. This pooled approach to message management also means that agents can cherry pick the messages they want to work on, rather than dealing with them in a priority manner—such as the order in which they arrive. The typical public folder system makes no attempt to assign messages to agents; instead, it relies on agents to know what to work on and when

There's no management or oversight capability in this approach to message assignment.

Matching Message Assignment with Agent Skills

Routing time can increase dramatically if a message is passed from one agent to another in an attempt to find a colleague capable of dealing with the subject matter of the email.

Providing quality replies to customer inquiries starts with ensuring that agents get assigned messages they are capable of answering. In many companies, this assignment process is performed by an individual employee who triages each message and manually assigns it to what they hope is the correct agent. This model is both labor intensive, and a process-bottleneck (and, potentially, a single point of failure) that can dramatically increase routing time.

SOLUTIONS

Automatic Message Assignment

For email inquiries that can be handled by any agent in a team, using an auto distribution process to assign messages directly to agents can greatly reduce routing time. Taking into account agent availability, a successful auto distribution process assigns messages to the agent best placed to be able to answer in a reasonable time. Limits can be established to ensure that emails are parceled out in manageable chunks. This measure prevents any one agent from receiving an overwhelming volume of email, and ensures a more equitable distribution of workload.

Skills-based and Other Priority Routing

Where a particular individual or sub-group is best placed to handle a subset of inbound team email, for example where specialist knowledge is required or when there's a tiered account management structure, using rules to route these messages directly to the agents who are in a position to respond to them will shorten routing times. Skills-based routing helps eliminate the problem of messages bouncing from agent to agent in an attempt to find someone capable of responding. In the case of special terms for important customers, a subset of assignees, or a prioritized list of potential assignees, will help to ensure the email gets to the right agent with minimum routing time.

Conversation Continuity

While companies should strive for first email resolution (where the initial reply to a customer's inquiry completely resolves the problem without any secondary replies on the issue), many email exchanges become full-fledged conversations requiring a number of email messages back and forth to deal with the issue.

Depending on the kind of issues that need resolving, and the nature of the company's business, secondary replies might be best handled by the agent who provided the first message reply. Since the agent is already familiar with the customer's problem he or she will be more effective at answering follow-up-questions. By utilizing a system that automatically routes email replies to the previous owner, you can further reduce email routing time. Of course, care must be taken to ensure that this process does not lead to unacceptable delay if the agent involved is away from the office, so an effective system needs to take agent availability into account

Agent Pending Time

Agent pending time is the amount of time between when an email is assigned to an agent and when the agent begins to compose his or her response. The average of an agent's pending time represents the size of the message backlog that the agent is experiencing. Agent Pending Time is closely linked with Agent Effort Time since both occur after ownership has been passed to a particular agent. This means that improvements in agent effort time (composing appropriate replies more quickly) will also work to reduce an agent's email backlog, but this section focuses on efforts that can be taken before the agent begins working on the message.

CHALLENGES

End of Day Replying

Often, agents tasked with replying to emails also have to take phone calls, respond to online chats and perform other tasks throughout the day. Replying to emails can easily become a lower priority function in the face of multiple demands on an agent's time. The result is that an agent will often allow email to pile up all day, and then hurriedly work through the backlog at the end of their shift. Not only does this type of behavior increase agent pending time, but it often reduces the quality of email replies produced.

Scheduling Complications

An email assigned to an agent will only be processed if he or she is available to work on it. Meetings, external appointments, sick days, vacation days, etc., can present problems for an email customer service team if they are not properly accounted for. Messages assigned to an agent who is out of the office will remain idle until the agent returns, causing an increase in average agent pending time.

No Radar

If a manager or supervisor doesn't have real-time visibility into the pending backlog for each agent, then they can't bring to bear tools and techniques that can streamline mail flow.

Prioritizing the Backlog

Every organization will have clients or customers that from time-to-time need some extra care. Being able to prioritize the emails received from these customers can be very important. Taking steps to ensure that these emails get responded to first – in addition to the distribution rules discussed above – will drive down the average agent pending time for this high priority group.

SOLUTIONS

Schedule Time for Emails

Management needs to create and enforce policies that ensure email responding is an activity valued as much as the other agent tasks. The two most common methods for doing this are:

- a) Creating aggressive email reply time performance goals for agents that require constant effort throughout the day to achieve (thereby eliminating the end of day replying problem);
- b) Scheduling a specific period of time each day for agents to exclusively work at replying to email inquiries.

Share Dashboards and Reports with Agents

If agents are sitting on messages and replying at the end of the day, then start by publishing service level standards that dictate more aggressive reply time requirements for agents. Back this up by displaying real-time dashboards showing the status of the team inbox, and by publishing regular reports that show how each agent is performing relative to the service level goals. Consider offering incentives to agents for maintaining certain service level standards. This type of motivation can dramatically reduce average agent pending time.

Auto Re-assign Old Messages

Since each agent will have their own pending pool of email messages to work on, it's important that your email management system monitor each agent's queue. If a particular agent is falling behind, perhaps due to a complex issue that requires longer than average to resolve, the system should be able to automatically re-assign their messages to other users so that other customers do not see a drop in response performance.

Auto Re-assign at End of Shift

For companies running multiple shifts, and where agent continuity isn't critical, consider automatically re-assigning messages at the end of a user's shift to the remaining agents that are still working. This will minimize overnight carry-overs and greatly reduce agent pending time.

Management Alerts

In addition to the dashboards mentioned above, Real-time reporting on current email backlog performance is a critical tool in helping marshal the necessary resources to manage the email load efficiently. A good system should also be able to monitor important metrics and alert managers to potential service level problems before they become critical. Set alerts to monitor the depth of the current email backlog and the age of unanswered emails. These are the key metrics to help you avoid being out of covenant with your service level policy. Create an action plan for staff to rapidly rectify any backlog or age issues should an alert occur.

Use Rules to Automatically Prioritize

Some tasks, or customers, may require priority email queuing. Avoid having to manually triage each email that comes in by setting up incoming team inbox rules that automatically assign these priority messages to specific agents or groups of agents. Agents can be coached to answer these emails first, ensuring current corporate priorities are being followed.

Agent Effort Time

Agent Effort Time is the total amount of time it takes for agents to craft the response to a customer email once they begin working on it. This includes the time spent looking up information about the customer, consulting with other staff members or internal systems, and composing the email response.

CHALLENGES

Lack of Access to Information

In order for an agent to solve a customer's problem, they often need to have ready access to the customer's email history. Being able to see how past issues have been dealt with is often key to delivering a quality response to the customer. Cumbersome search mechanisms can delay the agent's access to the information they need, increasing the average agent effort time.

Switching between email platforms

As discussed, it's a fact of today's customer service world that agents are performing multiple tasks, many of which will include sending and receiving email. If the team inbox is on a different application, with a separate user interface, presents an obstacle to efficient email response as the agent switches between platforms.

Email Overload

Psychologically, people have a strong aversion to being overwhelmed. In fact, the stress associated with facing what appears as an insurmountable task (such as an enormous email backlog), typically causes a marked decrease in motivation and therefore productivity. This will have a significant negative effect on average agent effort time.

Continual Message Re-invention

Most organizations receive customer inquiries that fall into a handful of recurring categories: What do you charge? How do I return an item? How much do I owe? How do I change my address?

Agents that take the time to re-compose what is effectively the same message over and over again will have dramatically higher average agent effort times.

SOLUTIONS

Efficient Searching

Scrolling through thousands of messages in a folder in an attempt to find an old email is not efficient. An efficient search utility that can quickly scour multiple folders, such as that built into the corporate email environment in Microsoft Outlook, makes this process quicker and easier.

Throttle Message Distribution

Set a low maximum number of messages that agents can be working on at any given time. A low maximum setting, in combination with automatic email distribution, will keep the perceived workload for each agent to a manageable level. Controlling workload volumes will keep agent stress levels lower and motivation higher.

Drag-and-drop editing

Effective use of copying and pasting, and the ability to drag-and-drop relevant attachments to an email, can make a huge difference in the amount of time it takes to compose a suitable reply to an email. A good team email solution should incorporate the editing features that agents are used to from other standard email packages and corporate productivity software.

Conclusion

As email continues to dominate the business world as the primary means of transactional communication, it presents formidable challenges for customer service organizations to manage the timeliness and quality of their responses, without incurring disproportionate cost increases. While each of the solutions outlined in this paper will incrementally provide efficiency improvements, deploying a team email management solution that delivers all of these benefits will dramatically improve the email effectiveness of any organization.

Emailgistics delivers just such a solution. Building on the capabilities of Microsoft Office 365 and Outlook, and leveraging over 20 years of providing effective team email management tools to businesses worldwide, Emailgistics is a cost-effective SaaS-based solution that will refine and streamline the way you manage your team email inbox.

Visit emailgistics.com to see for yourself. Take a test drive: sign up for a no-obligation 14-day free trial.