A special mix of business, IT, and machine learning:

How Etisalat is revolutionizing its customer experience

Introduction

Founded in 1976, Etisalat is the largest telecommunications corporation in the Gulf Corporation Council (GCC). Headquartered in Abu Dhabi, UAE, Etisalat serves 11.6 million customers and over 300,000 small, medium, and large businesses in the UAE, totaling over 140 million subscribers across 16 countries.

To support its vision of an enhanced customer experience, Etisalat originally selected Pega for its omni-channel marketing solution back in 2012. In 2018, the company extended its omni-channel solution out into the small-to-medium business (SMB) space under the leadership of Dr. Esra Taylor.

Dr. Esra Taylor has over 10 years of experience in campaign management for both B2B and B2C in telecom sector the U.S. and UAE. She is Head of Marketing in SMB and accountable for go-to-market strategy, campaign management, digital channels, customer identity management, and sales planning and analysis.

Jo Allen and Peter Woods – both 1:1 Customer Engagement Ambassadors for Pega – had the fortune of sitting down with Dr. Esra Taylor, to hear from her in her own words the transformation she has led Etisalat through. The following is transcribed from our conversation with Dr. Esra Taylor.

“Driving incremental revenue is key for us”

Can you tell us a little about the history of customer interaction at Etisalat for SMB?

When I joined Etisalat six years ago, we had nothing in terms of a robust solution for targeting customers. We were using Excel and manually sending files out. It was a nightmare. Regularly we’d find that we were contacting customers who had already bought the product we were trying to recommend. So, we started analyzing files to remove these. It was so horribly manual and painful.

Our sales agents were used to a mantra of “activate, activate, activate” with no focus on value. Through this transition we’ve moved from a place where we were focused on sales, to a focus on incremental value. For us, it’s about selling the right thing to drive value in the long run, and that means a shift in mentality away from pure volume to value. ***We’ve seen a 20% increase in incremental value in the last year through this focus.***

"The hard bits"

Can you talk a little bit about the challenges you faced?

INTELLIGENTLY FLEXIBLE

When we first started, everyone was used to a concept of sell, sell, sell. They were used to activating new products for customers. They saw the changes as putting restrictions on them. They now had a system telling them what to recommend for a customer, and that wasn't always a sale. They had to move from a place where they were deciding for themselves what they should discuss with no checks and balances, to a place where they couldn't ignore recommendations, as they were based on intelligent insight and prediction. But through an aligned incentive program, they recognized the benefit and found it easier to adopt this new way of working. Once they embraced it and understood that it wasn't always about selling, they started to really like the new approach. Not only that – they highlighted additional opportunity. Our sales agents were spotting opportunities to sell more than we were recommending. For example, a customer might be sold data, but there was an opportunity to extend this to include international as well. And, not only that, the sales agents were spotting gaps that we weren't able to flex for an individual. We realized that we weren't really touching around 60% of our base due to price points – where perhaps one customer wanted 1GB of data and another wanted 10GB.

We re-vamped our solution further and moved to a place where we could bundle on the fly, therefore addressing the needs of each individual customer.

AVAILABILITY OF THE RIGHT DATA

We really struggled to get access to data across our systems. It was all fairly manual for us. I had to get multiple data feeds just to understand what the customer had and their spend. And this meant we had too many gaps and too often were recommending something the customer already had. We simply didn't have the right data points. If new products are released without visibility of the data, we can't drive appropriate recommendations. It's therefore critical that the business is involved, alongside IT in building the view of the data.

We created a 360 view of the customer within our data warehouse, so this is the key source of data. That means that we're all using the same source of truth and are aligned across the organization. That 360 view has become sacrosanct. It means I'm now capturing all key data and not losing information. Any new product that's launched is automatically feeding into the catalog as part of the IT development. This is one of our biggest successes of working so closely with our IT function – we are all completely aligned on the process and have access to the right data points through a robust process.

Can you talk a little bit around what helped you overcome some of these challenges?

SHARED KPIS

We developed a really close working relationship with our IT team. We have a dedicated project team who we meet with on a daily basis. I also have a counterpart within IT that I talk to regularly to ensure we're aligned at a high level too. This great working relationship has really helped us. There's a joint recognition that the IT team's focus is on the more technical changes, and my business team can focus more on the management of the strategy implementation. We're able to make changes ourselves, but when we make more fundamental changes, IT is involved.

More than the alignment, we have shared key performance indicators (KPIs), which allows us all to focus on the right outcomes and delivering business benefits around incremental revenue. These shared KPIs mean we have a shared interest in delivering the right solution in the most effective way. It's been this way since day one, but our relationship has grown over the program, and the results are becoming so clear.

DRIVING INCREMENTAL REVENUE

Ensuring we have the right incentives and commission in place has been really key for us. There are obvious operational KPIs that the channels drive themselves, such as average handle time (AHT) or calls answered, etc., but I have ownership of some additional ones in relation to the Pega solution. These are overlays to their core KPIs, which allows us to drive the appropriate behavior in line with the objectives we have, such as incremental revenue. And this allows us to move away from pure volume targets.

Mission Success

What's been the key successes?

UNDERSTAND THE CUSTOMER INTENT

Customer trust is incredibly important, and with Pega we have been able to understand the customer intent. It allows us to ensure we don't engage in conversations blindly. We're able to appreciate the customer situation and what their needs might be, but at scale. As an example, if we see a customer using video conferencing a lot, we can talk to them about bringing more people together through an online meeting room for more effective collaboration. We're therefore demonstrating that we're listening, understanding, and providing useful recommendations. Using predictive modeling and adaptive learning has really helped here in industrializing this understanding and building lookalikes. ***This has also resulted in noticeable increase in revenue, where we've seen increases of 60% when we use Pega machine learning rather than a pure rules-based approach.***

Machine learning is great, but you really need to know how to use it. It learns based on what it's provided, so it can be self-fulfilling. We feed it other offers so it can learn off poor decisions as well as good. It's important to find the balance here. If you don't understand the customer intent, you might not know enough, and some things would be eliminated. ***By feeding some random offers we're keeping the learning fresh and have pushed the incremental value further, seeing increases upwards of 105%.***

INTRODUCTION OF PEGA BUNDLE NEGOTIATOR

We introduced the Bundle Negotiator in 2019. At the time, we realized that our sales agents were eager and able to sell more during an individual interaction. They were having great conversations, but the customer was in fact asking for more than the sales agent was authorized to give. Naturally the salespeople were questioning this. More than that, it was all very manual as customer needs were very individual and our propositions were one size fits all, meaning we could only touch about 60% of our base. By introducing the Bundle Negotiator we've been able to provide the flexibility required so we can address each individual need on the fly. We're now able to offer unique combinations based on base products that give the customer what they need at a sensible price. ***Now we're seeing an average of two sales per call, which is driving incremental value. If I just focus on Bundle Negotiator it brings 10% incremental revenue YoY.***

DRIVING CHANGE TO IDENTIFY NEW DATA POINTS AS MATTER OF COURSE

Having the right data available is critical to us. ***It's not about having volumes of data, but more about having accurate data that reflects a customer correctly and drives the appropriate decisions.*** That's why we established a process to ensure that any new products work with us to identify the data solution so it's business as usual to provide this to the data warehouse, and Pega in turn.

SHIFT FROM OPERATIONAL TO STRATEGIC

The biggest change we've seen is being able to redirect team members to more strategic tasks. Before, my team would have to manually perform campaign selection, and this took up a large portion of their time. Through the introduction of Pega, much of this process is now automated. We're using machine learning to ensure the solution is continually adapting and learning, which means that we can focus more on the strategy. My team now spend a larger proportion thinking about new ways to address customer need, reviewing current activity, and driving improvement. They're able to focus on identifying new data points to enhance decisions, rather than hand-cranking activity. And, when we make major change, we work closely with IT to develop the solution to address these changes. This has allowed me to also develop my team in new areas and expand their roles, rather than making it the requirement of a new team.

"DATA MODEL"

Another key initiative is that we have built a data model that helps us to identify the contact ability of each customer. It helps us to prioritize the key customers with the highest propensity to accept the call and also with potential to buy a new product. This model has improved our contact ability rate up to 10%. This model helps as well to identify in which campaign we should keep this customer, like mobile or fixed campaign. It does that by looking at the propensity to buy based on customer history from options of mobile and fixed.

A New Normal

How has COVID-19 affected you? How have you adapted?

NEW NEEDS, AT SPEED

The shift in focus of the team has really allowed us to start thinking differently and expanding our approach. We now have a tool through which we can drive change at pace. We're able to test, learn, and adapt. This has been invaluable throughout the pandemic. We went from a normal way of working to suddenly all working remotely. It was literally overnight. And it was the same for our customers. So, we had to find a way to adapt.

In doing so, we uncovered some new customer needs. We found customers in greater need for VPN and online collaboration tools. And we had solutions, in fact we provided these to key customers for free; something we could easily implement within Pega. We also could react to customers who were struggling and put their office lines on hold, rather than disconnecting, meaning we could keep the customer long term rather than see huge churn. We've provided new eCommerce solutions for our customers. These solutions are all targeted based on customer situation and delivered at pace through Pega. Furthermore, we have a truly omni-channel solution so we can deliver this change across all channels without delay.

ADOPTING A TEST & LEARN PHILOSOPHY

Now that we're able to move at pace, we've adopted a philosophy of test and learn. My team comes up with new ideas, we trial them, and if they work, we industrialize the process. If it doesn't, we stop the test and move on to something else. We have so much more flexibility now to constantly learn and optimize.

IMPROVED EXPERIENCE

We've seen some great improvement in customer satisfaction. In fact, it keeps rising and rising … but I don't know how much further it can go! We track a "TRIM Score" across all touchpoints. This allows us to look across all channels, refine and improve as necessary. But I think the main reason we're seeing such good results in this space is the fact that we have a very structured way of engaging with the customer and we're taking care of them. We go further than selling and moving on; we've introduced things like mobile hub so admin of the customers can order, assign the benefit per employees, analyze the bills, and company usage to optimize. Customers have all flexibility on their fingertips, which they love. We provide them the visibility about their orders and usage. Additionally, customers can also do analysis and manage all lines in one place. The visibility we provide is really useful for a small or medium business as well. We're essentially providing a tool to account manage, which makes the organization's life so much easier. Real-time marketing improves overall revenues from lead management, inbound, and outbound marketing with another 45%.

[1] The TRIM Score, officially called "TR*M," was created by research institute TNS Infratest (now Infratest dimap), a German institute and 51% Bain company.

New missions

Can you give us an idea of some of the new areas you're looking at moving forward?

NEW IDEAS AND INITIATIVES

We are very open to trying new things and different ideas across all our operations, moving things to automations and building new data models to support our key business objectives. We have regular brainstorming sessions, across all team members involved from Customer Value Management (CVM) planning to front-end sales agent and IT. In every quarterly exercise, we picked out minimum 5 – 7 new ideas to work on. We tried all means to ensure we add minimum one new idea implementation in our campaign planning every month. We do pilot of ideas and post launch we do idea impact analysis and tweak or change anything required. It's really like a continuous improvement process we follow. These ideas mostly coming from sales agents who interact regularly with customers and they really brought awesome ideas as always.

BESPOKE OFFERING

During the pandemic, we've had more requests for bespoke offerings from our customers. And those needs drive different price points. To be able to deliver this, we've had to analyze and determine whether it's profitable or not based on the customer profile. We plan to industrialize this process through Pega as we simply can't maintain this and I don't want to keep developing new products for every customer. So, we need to be able to analyze this on the fly and determine whether it's a viable commercial option and then follow through on fulfillment if required. We need to be able to provide flexibility not just in the bundle, but the pricing associated. ***At the moment, this is something that takes us two months to undertake manually, but moving forward this will be possible in seconds.***

ONLINE ADVISOR

One of the great things about Etisalat is that we're well set up for the digital customer. We have some great products in this space, so the adoption of such products at this time is fast. In times of uncertainty we're facilitating customers to work from home, which has really helped us. It really puts us in a great position when customers are all moving to digital channels, but there's more we need to do. We want to be able to serve customers more effectively within the online channels, putting our solutions right at the customer's fingertips, where they can get a solution within seconds that's tailored to them. We're even looking at being able to provide recommendation via terminals, a bit like in McDonald's do when you are putting in your order on the terminal. We want that consistent customer experience to be expanded into new channels.

END-TO-END INTELLIGENT DIGITAL MARKETING

Now, we are talking about understanding the customer, and the optimal way to extend to him the best possible service or solution. Based on his use of our current services, across our various platforms including mobile app, B2B portal, website, we are able to understand his possible need, and identify the solution to satisfy this need. Based on his reaction to our offering, we will know the customer intent and interest better.

We are not only improving our customer understanding, but also delivering a personalized experience through the digital channel. We are now implementing a Data Management Platform with Pega to have dynamic website pages for our customers, to present the best offers on the main banners in our website.

Next we are using intelligent machine learning in paid media. Based on our analysis of customer understanding and analysis, we will present the most predictive offer to our customer in paid media channel. This will help us open more channels to our customers and optimize the paid media channel.

KEY OUTCOME

The key success is to introduce the machine learning in CVM and connect all the channels (omni-channel approach) to increase customer touchpoints and gain more insights about them. With that, we could connect all the customer touchpoints and gain more insights about what customers really need. ***It has resulted in 20% more incremental revenues in autopilot mode.***

About Pegasystems

We are Pegasystems, the leader in software for customer engagement and operational excellence. Our adaptive, cloud-architected software – built on the unified Pega Platform™ – empowers people to rapidly deploy and easily change applications to meet strategic business needs. Over our 35-year history, we've delivered award-winning capabilities in CRM and digital process automation (DPA), powered by advanced artificial intelligence and robotic automation, to help the world's leading brands achieve breakthrough business results.

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