

DFS

Retailer provides shoppers with a positive **personal connection through live video chat.**

By **Susan Hash**, Contact Center Pipeline



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For years, consumers have considered shopping for a big-ticket item, like a sofa, to be a necessary brick-and-mortar experience. After all, buying a sofa can be a significant expense, it plays a key role in the home's decorating theme and there are thousands of shapes, sizes, colors, fabrics and materials from which to choose. It's helpful to have an expert on hand who can answer questions and offer advice.

DFS has been selling high-quality, handcrafted sofas for 45 years. Being in business for nearly a half-century is a pretty significant milestone for any company—and a lot has changed in the retail environment in that time. DFS' commitment to being an innovative, world-class service provider has helped the company expand from a strictly brick-and-mortar business into a multichannel market-leading sofa retailer in the UK.

Importantly, at DFS, the focus on innovation never trumps the personal touch. The company's contact center does not rely on IVR technology to field basic questions—calls are answered by live agents 24/7, 365 days a year. On the website, the company strives to provide customers with a shopping experience that is more than simply convenient—the goal is to be exceptional. DFS advisors are available to answer questions via text chat. Or those who wish to blend the convenience of online shopping with more personalized assistance can opt for a conversation with a DFS advisor via live video chat.

The video chat experience has been thrilling DFS' website visitors since its launch two-and-a-half years ago. It's an online feature that is quickly setting the retailer apart in a competitive marketplace. It's also an important stepping stone on the company's journey to world-class status, says Arron Burton, Online Operations and Compliance Manager for DFS. He adds that video chat has been particularly useful with prospects who are in the early browsing phase. "It allows us to change a potential customer's expectations," he explains. "If they take some time to consider which products they liked and which retailer, we stand out in their mind as the one that provided a rich engagement and experience."

Setting the Scene

DFS began its venture into live video chat with a test program to gauge customers' views, since, at that time, only a handful of pioneering companies offered live video interactions with customers. DFS chose a cloud-based solution from Veeva that included voice, video and text, as well as co-browsing capability. The experiment proved to be highly successful. Customers were excited by the ability to have a live visual interaction over the Internet—and the company has since expanded its video chat capacity to 20 seats and 35 video chat advisors.

DFS' success with video chat may be attributed in part to the care taken by its leaders to address potential concerns with video upfront. While the popularity of applications like Skype and FaceTime have increased consumers' familiarity with video-based communication, not many have used it in an online shopping transaction. DFS decided to put in place a few processes to ensure that its customers would be comfortable with the experience.

Early on, the company used a nudge feature to proactively engage with customers since it had a limited number of video advisors. "We didn't want to overpromise and underdeliver if people wanted to have a video chat and we didn't have staff available," Burton notes.

If customers clicked on the link to initiate a chat session, they were presented with a brief overview to describe the service—before they were connected with an advisor. The introductory video first clarified that the chat was video-enabled since some customers might have assumed that they were opening a text chat window. Next, it explained that, when the customer was connected to an advisor, they would be able to see the DFS advisor, however, the advisor would not be able to see the customer unless the customer opted to turn on his or her camera.





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LEFT: Arron Burton, Online Operations
and Compliance Manager, DFS

"If a video image pops up on your screen, the natural reaction is that, if I can see them, then they can see me. But that is not the case," Burton says. After viewing the introductory video, some customers chose to enable the camera, while others did not.

The Veeva24 solution also allows DFS advisors to share screens with customers, for instance, in cases where a customer needs help finding their way around the website. That brought up another critical concern that needed to be addressed. "It's very important that the customer understands that we're just sharing our desktop with them, we're not on their desktop or in their computer," Burton says. "Whenever we've made that clear upfront, we have had nothing but positive responses."

Over time, as the number of video chat advisors and video-enabled desks increased, DFS replaced the nudge feature with a fixed tab that allows customers to connect to live video chat. "We're now at the stage where we can support it with our existing staff," he says. "While the nudge worked for us early on, now we're putting the customer in control and giving them the ability to select video chat if that's what they wish to do."

**PRACTICAL
POINTER:**

Practical Pointer: So what's happening in the background while advisors are conducting a video chat with customers? "We didn't want customers to be distracted by seeing a wide open office space with people walking around and having conversations, so we set up screens behind the advisors that are branded with our logo and corporate colors," says Burton. "We think it looks more professional, and it also makes the customer feel more private and comfortable if they're sharing personal information."

Directing the Talent

During the early stage of the video chat rollout, sessions were handled by DFS' phone agents. Burton admits, though, that not everyone was comfortable being on camera. While some phone agents were able to move into it, others preferred not to. As the demand grew, the company began to recruit specifically for the role.

Preparing staff for their on-air interactions has been relatively simple, he adds. The system itself is easy to use, and there was no additional training required beyond the typical training that the phone agents undergo.

But since advisors are working with a camera, they do need to take a few minutes at the beginning of the shift to properly position themselves so that their face is visible in the camera area. "Heaven forbid that we have an engagement and all you can see is the top of somebody's head," Burton says. "It wouldn't quite give the same impact."

In addition, advisors are coached to make eye contact with the customer—which means looking into the webcam and not at the screen. “It’s important for our advisors to act as if the customer is sitting right there. We coach them to treat the screen as the person, and to show that with your facial expressions as well as with the words that you’re saying. We can’t always see them, but they can always see us,” Burton says.


“We stress to our advisors that, while this is one engagement out of many for you throughout the day, this is the one engagement that this customer may have—so you’ve got to make it count. It’s important to that individual that we get this one right. Treat every engagement like it’s the first and only one of the day.”

Rave Reviews from Customers

The video chat capability has allowed DFS to provide a personalized customer experience that, in some cases, goes above and beyond even an in-store experience. Burton recalls a recent engagement with a customer who wanted advice on what type of sofa to purchase. She used the camera in her laptop to show the DFS advisor around the room so that the advisor could see the space, colors and decor. “It evolved into a great conversation about the different things she could potentially do with the room and how she could change it,” Burton says. “The fact that she’s sitting in the comfort of her own home, and that we can actually see into her home: We could not have had that level of engagement in any other medium that we currently offer.”

Customers who have used the video chat service have responded with outstanding reviews. DFS’ Net Promoter Scores for video chat transactions are the highest of any channel—it ranks higher even than face-to-face transactions in the company’s retail showrooms.

Burton sees video chat continuing to grow and evolve at DFS. There are all sorts of possibilities, he points out. For instance, in a service capacity, it could greatly reduce the time to resolve issues if a customer can use a video connection to help the company to identify a problem and quickly resolve it, rather than having to schedule an in-home assessment.

He also expects video to play an important role as the company continues to balance strong growth with its customer-centric goals. “Our ambition is to be world-class. We see video as a key part of that,” Burton says. “Ultimately, it offers a high level of personalization, and allows a much richer engagement for the customer—and all from the comfort of their own homes.” 

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