

Tech

## Give Consumers a Voice in the Changing Customer Service Landscape



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First impressions are everything, especially for brands competing for customer loyalty. And when it comes to the initial interaction with a customer, more and more are willing to let machines do the talking.

Customers don't seem to mind, for the most part. According to a survey by McKinsey and Company, digital-care forums – such as email, web chat, and social media – could represent [48 percent](#) of all customer service correspondence by 2020.

Rather than dialing a 1-800 number and awaiting a customer service representative's assistance, people of all ages now seek help from virtual agents, chatbots, and online communities. But this doesn't mean that voice has lost its utility.

The voice-centric contact center channel is still preferable for complex, high-value, or emotion-filled customer service transactions. These platforms allow callers and representatives to ask questions and collect detailed answers instantly, yet their biggest value may be how they convey emotions.

We can "hear" the smile in a representative's voice, the frustration in a customer's comments, the empathy and understanding — or sometimes a lack thereof — from both parties. Customers are still humans, so sometimes that personal touch is needed.

## The Revolution Is Here

Before exploring how companies can optimize their customer service programs, we should give technology its due. We live in the golden age of customer service, a time when just about every company communicates with consumers in a manner other than through a call center.

Cost-effective channels such as the web, mobile, chat, email, social media, and even community message boards streamline customer service capabilities and give customers the freedom of choice. Technology paints a fuller picture of the customer journey for brands, which allows more insight into customer behavior and illuminates points at which customers might get "lost."

In short, technology allows for an efficient, cohesive conversation between consumer and brand, one that's often more productive than just patching in a rep from the call center. To be fair, though, a conversation isn't totally devoid of emotion just because it happens away from the phone.

Jay Ivey, an analyst at [Software Advice](#), notes that diction, syntax, and punctuation in textual interactions can communicate tone, attitude, and emotion as effectively as any verbal cue or body language. But for all the value they provide to both companies and consumers, digital channels alone aren't enough for brands seeking to offer the best possible customer service.

## Can You Hear Me Now?

Years ago, the voice-centric call center was the high-wire act; today, it's usually the "net" because consumers start their service or sales journeys on mobile devices or the web.

With this new customer journey in mind, companies should seek to offer varying levels of assistance. Utilize some combination of low-cost channels such as the web, mobile, chat, self-help, or a community board where customers can interact with one another.

From any of these channels, the interaction can escalate when needed so customers can receive help from a customer service representative. The new agent, however, will need to see the totality of the journey before.

For example, imagine you're having problems hooking up your new smart thermostat. After unsuccessfully checking out message boards and trying some self-help troubleshooting, you're given the option to do a web chat with tech support or be referred elsewhere if the problem persists past Level 1 support.

Throughout these interactions, the customer journey must remain cohesive: The web chat tech support agent must be aware of your efforts, and the tech support manager on the phone must know that you've previously interacted with all available touch points. Still, there's a reason for the aforementioned decline in vocal interactions: They're often unnecessary.

Let's say you're on your mobile banking app looking to receive your statements via email instead of traditional mail; in this case, a self-help application would be your safest bet.

If you want more information on mortgage lending promotions, you might want a web chat in which an agent can push materials or send links for you to review. Finally, if you have a question about unauthorized charges on your Visa, you'd want to be immediately transferred to a live representative to handle this time-critical issue.

In nearly every case, voice represents the highest-touch channel. It's also the preferred avenue for complex problems that would require too much back-and-forth in email or chat.

## Find the Right Channel

Some inquiries may require voice, while others may be better served in another forum. After all, the innovative customer service platforms, technological advancements, and proliferated online information make self-service and finding the right answer easier than ever. Yet a machine, no matter how helpful, can never provide the empathy and understanding characterized by positive human interactions.

That's why a click-to-call from a mobile app or website or a good, old-fashioned phone call quickly answered by a knowledgeable, friendly, and helpful customer service representative will always be the gold standard in customer care.

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