



SPECIAL REPORT: **2018 CUSTOMER CONTACT PREDICTIONS**

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JANUARY 2, 2018



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2018 CUSTOMER CONTACT PREDICTIONS

A CCW DIGITAL SPECIAL REPORT



AN OPPORTUNITY TO REFLECT

Over the past year, the customer contact community has witnessed the ascent of “artificial intelligence” from “potentially interesting technology” into “contact center imperative.”

Fully invested in the notion of a customer experience journey, customer contact leaders shifted their focus to *optimizing* that journey. Specifically, they began to explore how robust analytics, automation technology and unified systems can reduce customer effort – and maximize customer value – at each and every touchpoint.

Analytics, automation and integration were not, however, strictly viewed through a customer engagement lens. Organizations also considered how they impact the agent experience. Companies came to increasingly recognize that by giving agents the proper tools, they can increase customer satisfaction and keep agents happy, engaged and loyal.

Customer contact executives did not, however, spend the entirety of 2017 focusing on how best to deliver the customer experience. They also considered the type of experience they should be delivering.

One of the big narratives, in fact, involved achieving the appropriate balance between speed, ease and personalization. Businesses already understood their importance as individual concepts, but they had yet to fully flesh out their interplay. Which matters most during a given interaction? Is it even possible to answer that question?

A NEED TO ADVANCE

Collectively, the aforementioned developments adhere to a simple, powerful theme.

“We know the contact center is valuable, and we need to pursue every possible opportunity to make it stronger.”

For a community that famously faced a “cost center” stigma, that is an immensely encouraging message. Instead of fighting to justify their existence, contact center leaders finally get to focus on achieving excellence.

While exciting, the new dynamic also presents leaders with an enormous burden. They actually need to take action. They actually need to achieve excellence.

The mere conversations about “automation” and “journey-mapping” and “agent experience optimization” that dominated 2017 are insufficient for 2018. The time for “experimenting” with new technology or “considering” ways to integrate experiences has come and gone.

The shift now concerns action. What are customers specifically demanding? What does a contact center – and its agents – specifically require to meet those demands? How, precisely, can leaders leverage strategies, management initiatives and technology to foster the necessary empowerment?

Some readers may be rolling their eyes. Isn’t action *always* important? Haven’t we been asking contact center leaders to deliver value for the past few decades?

What makes this year different – and special – is that the necessary systems and action plans are no longer theoretical – they are here. Artificial intelligence is not an “idea” – it truly can automate and optimize self-service, workflow and other key contact center tasks. Technology providers are developing CRM solutions that are legitimately integrated, omnichannel and agent-friendly. Routing, knowledgebase and e-Learning solutions absolutely can get agents the information they need – as they need it – regardless of where they are connecting with customers.

On the one hand, that is welcome news for those who have long been trying to turn customer-centric ideas into customer experience realities.

On the other hand, it creates pressure for those who have been succumbing to complacency. This is the era of Amazon – the age of competing on the customer experience. If these tools exist, your customers can (and very much will) implement them.

And if they perfect their strategies before you do, you will fall behind.

2018 is therefore not merely a year of opportunity for the customer contact space. It is a year of urgency.

To navigate this year of urgency, we have compiled predictions and recommendations from a vast array of customer contact experts.





SHEP HYKEN

SHEPARD PRESENTATIONS, LLC



Self-service customer support will continue to rise in popularity as a support solution. The companies that get it right make it easy to get to and clear to understand. The use of video (how-to type videos) will not only offer answers to questions but showcase how to properly use a company's products. This video based support doubles as a marketing technique. Yes, customer service is the new marketing!



AI is one of the hottest topics in the customer support world. It will continue to improve, yet the rock-star, customer-focused companies know it can't completely replace human support. These great companies will strike the perfect balance between man and machine.



While most people seem to be focused on AI being used to communicate with the customer, some companies are using AI to support the agent. The "machine" listens to the conversation between the agent and the customer and instantly gives the agent the information needed to answer the customer's questions. Ginni Rometty, CEO of IBM, says that when you reverse the letters AI, they become IA, which stands for Intelligent Assistant. That "assistant" supports the agent, not the customer.



JOHNNY RUSSO

MARK'S WORK WEARHOUSE



For me, I think that if in 2018 or 2019, the customer knows what channel they are in, you are failing. I think omnichannel is about eliminating channels, and all "channels" working together to make customer shopping seamless. In the background, you do have to personalize and cater the experience for the customer, depending if they are on mobile, in your store, calling your call center, or using your live chat on their mobile while in-store. But for the customer, they should never have to think about channels. All they care about is the brand they are dealing with, and the customer experience they receive.



SARAH PATTERSON

SALESFORCE

AI transforming customer expectations & empowering agents and managers



AI has been the hot topic for the past year, and it will continue to be a hot topic in 2018 as we start to realize its full power and potential in the world of Service. AI is quickly becoming a part of our everyday lives. Whether it's interacting with Siri, Alexa, or Google Home, or Adidas' Adibot to get help with your online checkout experience — and get personalized recommendations based on your past purchase behavior — it's now mainstream. People are becoming accustomed to using AI channels, and they see that the payoff is not just receiving more personalized service, but also getting faster, more accurate answers.



Just as AI has transformed customer expectations, it's also given companies a tool to help them meet those changing expectations. In fact, AI is your agent's new best friend. Now companies can use it to automate many of the manual service processes that take up a lot of an agent's time. AI also serves up the right recommended response that an agent can use to answer a customer's question. So they can spend less time searching and more time focusing on interacting with customers — and that leads to the highest CSAT for that customer. AI also empowers agents with an amazing wealth of information, while classifying and prioritizing cases. So agents can see more than just what a case is about, they also know which cases or questions they should focus on first. AI can even alert an agent when a customer experience is at risk of 'going downhill', so they can quickly take a different strategy. Plus, it can predict whether a customer's CSAT is going to go up or down based on their interaction, then give the agents tips to increase it when they need to. Agents can also see the what information the customer has already viewed so that they know not to repeat that information.



AI also takes on directly answering cases for agents by powering chatbots to handle easy-to-answer, frequently asked questions. This not only makes customers happier by giving them answers faster, it frees-up agents to spend more time on the harder-to-solve cases that require some level of human engagement and empathy. But chatbots do more than just answer FAQs; they can also gather information to help an agent work smarter. If they're built using natural language processing, chatbots can even interpret what customers mean when they respond to questions. For instance, say you're ordering takeout and want to change your order. Instead of having to phone the restaurant again and ask for “2 more eggrolls”, you can simply text “I want to order more eggrolls” and the chatbot - recognizing your phone number and recent order - will start to infer what you mean, then suggest amounts back to you. Another great example of using chatbots is when companies have spikes in customer service cases, such as an airline canceling flights due to a storm. AI can gather all the customer's information, like what times they want to travel and their airline preference, then pass that over to an agent so that they can focus their time on solving the issue vs just gathering that information.



SARAH PATTERSON

SALESFORCE

To make it even easier, chatbots can be trained to know when to pass cases on to agents so that the customer interaction is seamless. Together, human and AI powered bots make each other more effective service channels.

Seamless, omnichannel digital engagement



The explosion of digital channels is creating new expectations for customers. Now they expect companies to provide support on all of the digital channels that they use in their personal lives - even when engaging for what would otherwise be a B2B service engagement. This not only includes social channels and email, but also texting, SMS, Facebook Messenger, and even Apple Business Chat. More than that, they expect that their interactions are going to be seamless across channels. They want to have the ability to start one conversation with a company on Twitter, then move that same support thread to email, then to texting, and to continue with full context and continuity across each channel, all while recognizing who they are as a customer, and knowing what their issue is at each stage of their interaction.



But digital engagement isn't only about engaging across all of the channels that consumers use. It's about using all of the digital tools to provide a seamless experience for customers. With emerging channels like Apple Business Chat, companies can use Operating System-level data (such as a customer's location) to provide support. For example, say you're traveling for the holidays but your flight is delayed. When you land, you need to change hotels. You go on to your phone and search in a web browser for the hotel at which you were going to stay. In addition to getting the search results for the closest hotels, you get a link to chat for support — right in the browser. You can start the conversation, and the hotel can use your device's GPS information to switch your reservation to a hotel that is closest geographically to where you are, and all because they are tapped into the information on your phone.

Predictive, Proactive Support - Service as part of the customer experience — keeping customers in context



Predictive, proactive support is something that we've been talking about for a few years. I see this as starting to take a different direction for companies. It's not just about predicting an issue before it happens, or providing more personalized responses, it's about service becoming part of the fabric of the customer experience. For instance, let's take the common situation of a customer who's starting to struggle with an online checkout experience who pauses for 20 seconds and stops interacting with the page. A predictive customer experience system would recognize the pause, then kick in to help determine if the customer is having second thoughts about one of the items in their shopping basket.. or is simply pausing to answer the phone in the background. Companies aren't waiting for customers to raise their hand and ask for help, they're able to see that something is about to go wrong, so they proactively reach out to keep those customers within the experience — and prevent an issue from popping up. Service isn't about something going wrong, it's about keeping everything going right.



SARAH PATTERSON

SALESFORCE

Agent training for an omnichannel, AI world



All of this service transformation requires a new type of agent, one who is trained to providing support in the new digital, connected world. We often talk about the changes in customer expectations and changes in technology, without putting much weight on the changes that they bring for agents. In this new world, the focus on training agents and helping them to develop new skills becomes more important than ever.



First, it's about training agents for harder cases. As AI takes care of the easier-to-answer questions, agents will deal with the more difficult questions. That means that customers may be even more agitated and impatient when they go to speak to agents since they will have already tried to solve the problem on their own or failed to reach resolution when confronted by the 'Service bot.' That's why they need to know how to better handle these harder cases, and how to empathize with customers. The EQ, or emotional intelligence piece, becomes even more important. Agents need to know when to spend time listening to customers, how to interact with them to show their empathy, and how to do this while trying to solve the problem as quickly as possible.



Second, it's about training agents on a new way to engage. What are the leading ways that you think of to express empathy? Of course, verbal or facial communication. Those are the most common for agents too, and also what they've historically been trained to provide. But customers are going digital. And that means agents need to know how to express empathy and communicate digitally. They need to know when to use text shorthand, when to use emojis, when to even switch the engagement from one channel to another because of the type of issue that the customer is having and because of the way they need to engage.



Third, it's about training to interact with AI. Teaching agents how to engage, and what to say to customers when a case is transferred over from a chatbot. How do they let a customer know that the bot has gathered certain information, and the agent needs to process that information to find the answer? All of these scenarios mean that training for agents is more important than ever.

Analytics and data



The final prediction is around data and analytics. All of these digital interactions coupled with AI gives us more customer information than ever. How can businesses use all of this to their advantage? Companies need to figure out which data to pay attention to, and how to best use it. This requires analytics. Companies need to not only invest in an analytic solution, but in training their agents and managers to effectively use the analytics to find the insights they need to know what they should care about.



JAMES DODKINS

BP GROUP



I see the future of customer experience being 'hyper-personalization' and 'proactive experience.' As we collect more and more data about our current and potential customers, it is going to make it much easier to personalize each experience and also pre-empt customer needs.



JASON PRICE

PRICE PERROTT LIMITED



I think in 2018 we're going to continue to see the 'hype cycle' of technology driving forward fairly relentlessly, with the focus on artificial intelligence and analytics.

There's no doubt these technologies are improving in their quality, but I do see the problem of organizations investing in technology and failing to see real return on investment as a challenge.

Analyst reports frequently place customer experience at the top of the CEO agenda, and I don't think people have really learnt all the lessons of the past on this.

Technology holds real potential, but organizations need to remember that they must 'get their house in order' before they can reap the full rewards.

AI holds much potential to learn, and support, the customer experience. But what is it learning and are you teaching it the right thing? Or will it just learn - and repeat - bad habits!

Analytics and visualization has moved on hugely, but what is it you want to show? Are people actually making use of the learning to improve services?

My recommendations would be to keep a relentless focus on doing the basics brilliantly, which positions organizations well to get a return on every dollar they invest in leading edge technology.



ANDY HANSELMAN

ANDY HANSELMAN CONSULTING



Personalisation will be a key factor in 2018 – in terms of how businesses do this, it will range from a ‘full blown’ AI approach with detailed analysis of customer data and use of customer insights to deliver automated personalised responses to small businesses who recognise individual customers personally and tailor their experience to them. Can’t help thinking that lots of business will fall down through the middle of these two approaches and do neither of them well.



CHERYL CHINA

CITIZENS BANK



Ease – Make it easy for a customer to reach us via their channel of choice.

Caring – Make meaningful connections. Train/coach to soft skills such as empathy and transparency.

Resolution – Take ownership at first point of contact. Empower frontline specialists. Focus on less transfers and less hold time.



KEVIN CHESNEY

ALPINE BANK



Just because everyone in the industry you are in is doing it doesn’t mean you should too. With changing regulatory environment, it’s easy to fall into the nickel and dime trap to keep your bottom line strong. We found that although the negatives were difficult to measure, they far outweighed the simple bottom line positives of little fees for many things. In the end, we weren’t recouping anything with nickel and diming and were dramatically damaging our reputation with the practice.



STEVE DIGIOIA

CUSTOMER SERVICE TRAINER



Speech recognition and voice assistance will continue to increase its influence on society. With the impact of Alexa and Siri on our daily lives some will wonder how they ever lived without "her."



Customer service will see a change from AI, bots and self-service kiosks to reverting back to human-focused interactions. There will always be a segment of society that's more concerned with speed and convenience but the true fans of service, and for a customized and personal experience, will make a return - at least that's my hope.



We must never be satisfied with "good enough", nor should our customers. Businesses that insist on the best for themselves will provide the same for the life blood of their business - the customer.



DOCIA MEYER

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For me, I feel that AI is at the forefront of changing the way the frontline interacts with customers. I feel that there are huge benefits for AI agents to assist staff to find and reply to customers faster or pull data that is needed. 2018, will be a game changer for using this type of technology, indirectly to improve the customer experience.



BRIAN CANTOR

CUSTOMER MANAGEMENT PRACTICE



Clarifying, quantifying and tracking customer effort

The frictionless experience is a top priority for businesses – and a leading demand for customers. Given that importance, it cannot remain a nebulous concept. We need to know (and quantify) what creates effort, what impact it has on the customer experience and what can be done to meaningfully reduce it.



Measuring the environment

Conventional contact center metrics (average handle time, average speed of answer, first contact resolution and even customer satisfaction score) generally focus on the “output” of the operation. Moving forward, organizations will pay greater mind to the tools and circumstances that empower agent productivity. Metrics like “screens to resolution” and “routing efficiency” will take flight.



Renewing vows

Customer retention is more productive than customer acquisition. The cost of angering an existing customer, moreover, is higher than that of failing to attract a new one. Despite these realities, businesses direct many of their CX initiatives toward new customers. In 2018, the tide will turn – and businesses will focus on communicating “exciting” new CX developments to existing or lost customers.



Expanding the definition of “agent experience”

“Culture” is unquestionably important, but it does not inform the entirety of the agent experience. The factors that influence day-to-day performance – training, systems, tools, workspaces, etc. – all play a pivotal role. In 2018, organizations will increasingly appreciate this reality and increasingly focus on elevating the entire agent experience.



BRIAN CANTOR

CUSTOMER MANAGEMENT PRACTICE



Personalization becomes productive and predictive

It is important to reduce customer effort. It is also important to develop meaningful connections with customers. In 2018, organizations will align the two concepts by focusing on productive and predictive personalization. They will use specific customer data to anticipate needs and actually improve experiences.



Emphasis on customer education

Businesses know they need to honor customer preferences, but let's face it: many of those preferences are misguided. They are based on poor past experiences and/or a lack of knowledge about how best to interact and navigate the journey in the modern age. Moving forward, businesses must educate customers on their evolving capabilities. When is technology best-suited for a particular problem? When should a live agent be involved?

MEET THE AUTHOR



BRIAN CANTOR

Principal Analyst, CCW Digital Director
Customer Management Practice



#CCWDIGITAL

Brian Cantor authors the special reports series. In his role, Brian leads all customer experience, contact center, technology and employee engagement research initiatives.

Brian additionally serves as managing editor and director for CCW Digital, which is the largest web publication and community for customer experience professionals. CCW Digital's articles, commentaries, infographics, executive interviews, webinars and online events reach a community of over 140,000.

A passionate advocate for customer centricity, Brian regularly speaks on major CX conference agendas. He also advises organizations on customer experience and business development strategies.

2018 Special Reports Calendar

Special Reports Calendar is subject to change.
Updated as of 1/2/18

Publish Date	Report Topic	Sponsorship Deadline
Jan. 2	2018 Predictions	Dec. 15, 2017 DEADLINE PASSED
Jan. 16	Retail CX	Dec. 20, 2017 DEADLINE PASSED
Feb. 1	Omnichannel	Jan. 18, 2018
Feb. 15	Messaging	Feb. 1, 2018
Mar. 1	CX Automation	Feb. 15, 2018
Mar. 15	Agent Experience	Mar. 1, 2018
Apr. 2	Brand Reputation	Mar. 16, 2018
Apr. 16	Outsourcing	Mar. 30, 2018
May 1	Luxury	Apr. 13, 2018
May 15	Agent Performance Pt. 2	Apr. 27, 2018
Jun. 1	Customer Journeys	May 18, 2018
Jun. 15	Self-Service	Jun. 1, 2018
Jul. 1	FP3 Experience	Jun. 15, 2018
Jul. 15	Outbound & Proactive Engagement	Jul. 2, 2018

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Publish Date	Report Topic	Sponsorship Deadline
Aug. 1	Actionable Analytics	Jul. 19, 2018
Aug. 15	Customer Complaints	Aug. 1, 2018
Sep. 4	Chatbots Pt. 2	Aug. 21, 2018
Sep. 17	eCommerce & the Digital CX	Sep. 3, 2018
Oct. 1	Learning & Development	Sep. 18, 2018
Oct. 15	Remote Agents	Oct. 2, 2018
Nov. 1	Future Workspaces	Oct. 18, 2018
Nov. 15	Knowledge Management	Nov. 2, 2018
Dec. 3	Live Chat	Nov. 16, 2018
Dec. 17	CX Automation Pt. 2	Dec. 3, 2018

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UPCOMING EVENTS



Customer Contact Week - New Orleans

January 22-25, 2018

Hyatt Regency, New Orleans, LA

www.customercontactweekwinter.com



CX Travel & Hospitality

February 24-March 1, 2018

Dallas, TX

www.cxtravel.iqpc.com



Patient Experience Exchange

March 25-27, 2018

Miami, FL

www.patientexperienceexchange.iqpc.com



Design Thinking

April 23-25, 2018

Austin, TX

www.designthinkingusa.iqpc.com



Customer Contact Week - Las Vegas

June 18-22, 2018

The Mirage, Las Vegas, NV

www.customercontactweek.com

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