

Future Trends in Customer Contact

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Future Trends in Customer Contact | A CCW Digital Special Report

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, customer centricity already represented a pivotal business goal. Brands were using the promise of customer centricity to attract customers, and companies were investing wholeheartedly in their customer experience operations.

Along with transforming the way consumers shopped and interacted with brands, the pandemic made customers immensely more mindful of the experiences they were receiving. The expectations and stakes of customer interactions have markedly risen, and they will continue to rise in 2022 and beyond.

As companies deal with a more demanding customer experience landscape, they are also facing the emergence of employee experience and operational challenges.

How can they navigate the increasingly challenging, increasingly important world of customer contact? This special report will provide the necessary guidance. It will begin by detailing four trends that are meaningfully transforming the customer contact landscape, before sharing a set of best practices that will pave the road to success.

Trend #1 | Customers do not simply hope for it all, they expect it

When 60% of consumers say they care more about the experience than ever when deciding which brands to support, and two-thirds say they will switch to a competitor after one or two bad experiences, one thing is abundantly clear: honoring customer demands is essential.



"With the internet and mobile apps providing more ways in which products and services are sourced, compared, purchased and rated, customer support has become a top priority in nearly every industry, from banking and retail to healthcare and telecom."

- **Matt Edic, IntelPeer**

What do customers demand when interacting with companies across all touchpoints? **The simple answer is that they want it all.** Aware of their power to demand great experiences and find new options when their old favorites fail to deliver, customers no longer feel pressure to sacrifice their own preferences and adapt to business' antiquated rules and processes.



"Consumers are in the driver's seat. They want convenience and self-serve options and personalized experiences." - **Matt Edic, IntelPeer**

Omnichannel is paramount

More than four-fifths of customers now express an increased comfort with agent-led and self-service digital options, but 95% still expect the ability to call. To put it simply, accommodating today's customers means being available in all channels.

Customers do not, however, simply seek the option to engage at all touch points. They also demand the ability to seamlessly move between touch points, as well as between self-service and agent assistance, based on personal needs and context. Customers identify easy escalation as a top sign of a great experience, and they lament repetitive questioning as a frequent pain point.



Speed is essential

Over the past decade, thought leaders have condemned “efficiency metrics” like average handle time and average speed of answer as incompatible with the idea of customer centricity. These metrics, they argue, urge agents to rush customers off the phone even before their problems are solved.

Although the criticism of these metrics is well-intentioned, it risks sending the wrong message about speed. Customers may resent being rushed off the phone, but they do not want to spend extra time in customer service engagements. Ardent supporters of the “time is money” adage, they resoundingly prefer speedy interactions to intimately conversational ones, and they cite long wait times and unprepared employees as top challenges.

The need for speed is, in fact, one of the main reasons customers are demonstrating such a growing preference for digital engagement.

Not a call to re-anoint average handle time as the Holy Grail metric, this trend instead marks a reminder to identify and close all gaps in the customer journey. Are we instantly routing customers to the right channel? Are we using data to anticipate why customers are interacting and avoid repetitive questions? Do internal knowledge bases empower agents to answer questions without putting customers on hold?

The need for speed also underscores the importance of proactive engagement.

Personalization is crucial

Customers want fast, easy, and convenient experiences, but they *also* demand highly personal ones. They want to feel as if the brand knows them, appreciates them, and is designing the best possible experiences *for* them.

Under a past school of thinking, these demands might have seemed incompatible. How can we be highly personal and highly efficient?

The modern customer contact thinker – and customer, for that matter – recognizes that speed and personalization actually go hand-in-hand. Today's customers do not identify personalization as saying their name 5 times in a conversation or asking about their pets and vacation plans. Rather, they want the brand to have instant access to their account information, purchasing history, and interaction records and then use that information to streamline the process. Indeed, a company that develops the ability to personalize experiences is concurrently gaining the power to make them easier and more efficient.

None of this means that *friendliness* has lost its importance; 95% of consumers say they are more likely to support a brand after dealing with a personable employee. It is simply a reminder that personalization is not about *showing off* the little details one has about its customers; it is about using those details to anticipate needs, reduce friction, and deliver the best support outcomes possible.

Trend #2 | Agent Satisfaction is equally essential in today's world of hybrid work



“Happy agents yield happy customers” is hardly a new concept, but the stakes of the adage have become clearer than ever. Brands are simultaneously witnessing how challenging it can be to achieve meaningful agent happiness and how costly it can be when they fail.

The “Great Resignation” is exacerbating agent attrition

Turnover has long plagued customer contact, and the COVID-driven “Great Resignation” has only exacerbated the challenge. Agent turnover now ranks as a leading operational pain point.

Amid their transition to remote work, employees have not only begun re-evaluating their self-worth and career ambitions but gained the ability to pursue jobs anywhere in the world. They have less reason than ever to be loyal out of convenience; if the contact center role does not provide a great day-to-day experience, attractive compensation, enriching tasks, and promising career mobility, employees can quickly find a better option.

Naturally, this heightens the urgency of elevating the agent experience. Contact centers can no longer bank on maintaining head counts simply because people in their city need a paycheck; they need to actively attract and retain talent by delivering a great experience.



"[Companies] have no choice but to raise standards for agents in order to meet and exceed customer expectations. With turnover rates at 30.5% in 2021, it's extremely difficult to provide the necessary coaching, training, and rewards because of the effects of the revolving door. It's imperative for companies to have a strategic initiative to reduce agent turnover. Now, 54.4% of organizations have such an initiative. By keeping experienced and valued agents, companies can improve the overall agent experience. The initiatives themselves help to identify and address issues that lead to high agent turnover rates, including the following: agreeing to flexible hours (45.3%), increasing compensation (45.3%), allowing agents to work from home (41.5%), establishing career paths (38.7%), surveying agents to gauge their happiness (36.8%), adding agent analytics tools (34.0%), adding gamification and competitions (32.1%), and adding more supervisor coaching (28.3%)." - **Robin Gareiss, Metrigy**

Hybrid work introduces challenges and eliminates shortcuts

In addition to affecting employee mindset, the rise of remote and hybrid work adds functional challenges to the agent experience.

As they attempt to access core contact center systems from their own devices, using their own Internet connections, and in their own suboptimal workspaces, agents may encounter considerable friction. Providing remote agents with valuable training and collaboration opportunities has also proven difficult, exacerbating the risk of agent disengagement.

Making matters worse, the remote model eliminates many of the shortcuts that exist in the physical contact center. If agents are struggling to access a knowledge entry, they do not have a desk mate or nearby supervisor who can provide help. If agents are feeling disillusioned with their work, the company cannot bandage morale by throwing a pizza party or happy hour.

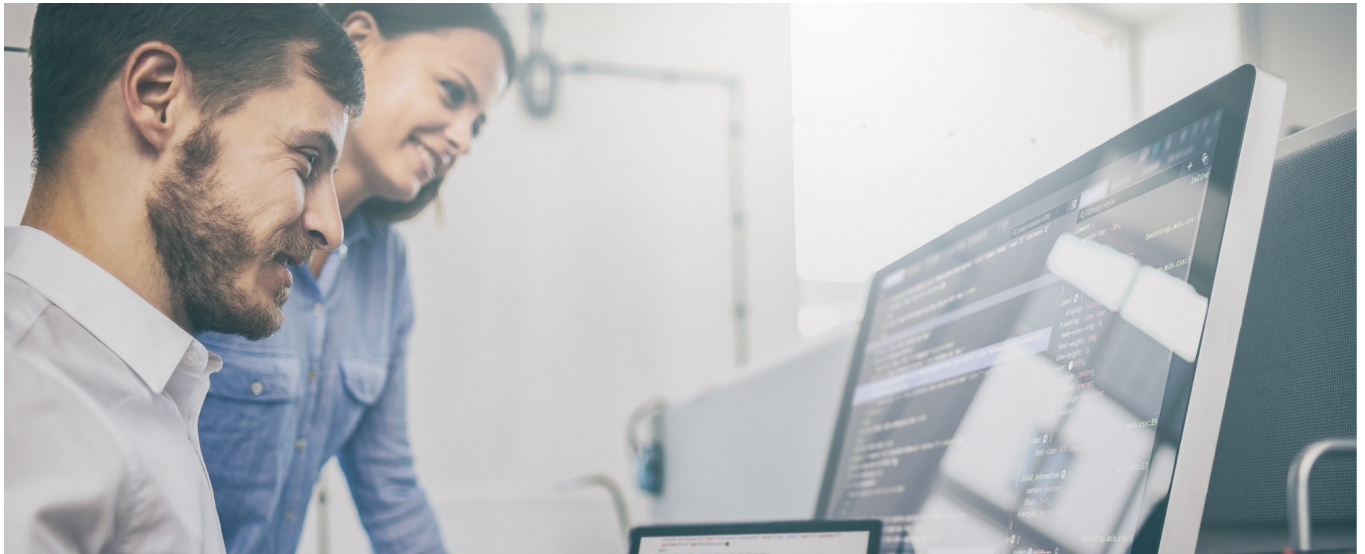
The role of the agent is transforming

As the labor market becomes more challenging, the role of the agent is growing more complex. The rise of omnichannel engagement means that today's employees need to be comfortable with numerous contact platforms. The ascent of self-service for simple issues means that today's employees need to be comfortable handling complex, unpredictable customer inquiries.

It will take a higher-caliber agent to thrive in this landscape, and a contact center cannot develop a team of such agents without an appealing agent experience, a robust training model, and stellar knowledge bases.

Training and knowledge management will become particularly important as companies embrace remote and "gig" work models in which agents will be expected to deliver expert service with little-to-no exposure to the brands they are representing.

Trend #3 | AI is essential, but success can no longer be theoretical



Not simply a popular talking point, artificial intelligence (AI) is a paramount strategic focus for today's customer contact leaders. They identify customer-facing AI and employee-facing AI as their #1 and #2 focuses for 2022 and beyond.

With this ample attention, however, comes a demand for significant results. Only about one-fifth of customer contact functions are celebrating the success of their current AI investments, which means the overwhelming majority of companies need to change, or at least refine, their course.

Recognizing highly valuable use cases

AI can certainly help companies efficiently handle simple tasks, but its impact can go far beyond password resets and delivery date lookups. Modern AI solutions can support customers with meaningful interactions. They can also play a role in augmenting agent performance and training, improving journey mapping and customer routing, gathering vital customer data, and even helping companies scale their core contact center platforms.

Instead of strictly looking for a few rote tasks to automate, savvy companies will evaluate all existing processes and interaction types and then determine if and how AI can help. And even if the task will still require human involvement, AI may be able to streamline the process and augment the agent's performance.

Understanding the power (and limitations) of existing technology

AI solutions are not your grandfather's automation tools; they possess cognitive and conversational abilities that are suitable for decently complex work.

Too often, companies squander this opportunity and use their AI-driven tools, such as chatbots, no differently than they would a static FAQ page. This reductive approach minimizes the efficacy of the deployment and delays customer adoption of AI support options.

On the other hand, some companies rely too heavily on the promise of AI and forget that the technology still requires strategy. It still requires a thoughtful approach to deployment, iteration, and a method for providing and refining the data that drives its logic and workflows.

Considering the full operational impact

What happens if an AI solution delivers the desired outcome? So jaded by past underperformance, many companies neglect to consider this very important question.

Successful AI deployments will transform customer journeys and agent workflows, and leading contact centers are preparing accordingly. If AI-based bots absorb most simple issues, these companies know to train agents to handle more complex ones. If AI-driven analytics solutions identify the root causes for customer dissatisfaction, these companies know to build processes for instantly addressing those problems.

They are also considering the long-term operational ramifications of AI, such as what it will mean for the contact center agent's career path and how it will impact the relationship between the contact center and IT departments.

Trend #4 | Unification is an entry fee, not a differentiator



With more literal forms of separation emerging throughout the customer contact operation, the stakes of aligning systems, processes, and mindsets have never been greater. In today's landscape, removing "silos" can no longer be a long-term aspiration; it needs to be an urgent focus for all customer-centric, employee-centric, and business-centric contact center teams.

The permanence of distributed work

Since only 12% of contact centers are planning a full-fledged return to the office, it is safe to say that distributed work models are here to stay. As a result, the cost of siloed systems will remain higher than ever.

As agents from different teams use different devices to access different customer records from different locations, it will be imperative for contact centers to unify their data, knowledge entries, customer contact tools, and enterprise systems. One's ability to seamlessly anticipate customer needs and provide personalized support cannot be, in any way, affected by the location in which they are working.

The reality of omnichannel engagement

Omnichannel engagement is not simply about being available in all channels. It is about *connecting* all channels to create seamless customer experiences.

Such seamlessness is utterly impossible if all channels, data, and systems are not perfectly aligned. Customer contact agents require a 360-degree view – and omnichannel contact center tools – in order to recognize, understand, and support customers as they move about the journey. Such a view also empowers teams to more accurately understand customer preferences and behaviors, while more astutely orchestrating customer journeys.

The ascent of CX as a business-wide focus

Thought leaders have long trumpeted the customer experience as a concern for the entire business, not just the contact center team. As companies increasingly embrace this mindset, they require systemic alignment to make strategic collaboration possible.

If different teams are looking at different data, performing tasks in disconnected systems, and measuring performance based on conflicting indicators, they will never be on the same page.

Taking Action and Wowing Customers in Today's CX Climate



Customers and employees do not simply care more about experiences; they demand more. They are looking for more supportive and empowering interactions than ever, and they are fiercely holding brands accountable for delivering.

Indeed, today's customer contact landscape can appear daunting for leaders and organizations who have long struggled to modernize technology, overhaul processes, and adapt operations to the voices of customers and agents.

The situation does not, however, have to be intimidating. Thanks to new innovations and best practices, adapting your customer contact function to the key trends has never been more attainable. As a result, the prospect of achieving unprecedented customer and employee satisfaction has never been more viable.

Adopt the right CPaaS

Customers are looking to receive stellar service across a variety of channels, and their definition of "stellar" and preference for channels can change at a moment's notice. Employees need to support higher-complexity inquiries from distributed environments. Companies need to scale and restructure their customer contact operations in real time.

Essentially a recap of the aforementioned trends, these realities also serve as the business case for a Communications Platform as a Service (CPaaS) solution. Leading CPaaS solutions unify all facets of the customer contact operation, ensuring companies have the data, resources, and connectivity to wow customers no matter where or how agents are connecting. Not simply accommodating of today's needs and variables, these cloud-based, low/no-code, AI-driven solutions are inherently upgradeable, allowing companies to easily adjust processes, increase resources, or add features as necessary. They are also immensely customizable.



"This is what makes a CPaaS solution ideal for a wide range of businesses, particularly those that want to blend self-service with conversational assistants and live agents over time. For instance, organizations with contact centers handling heavy call volumes and diverse customer interactions and touchpoints will benefit from a CPaaS solution that allows for the integration of the following solutions and features: Self-service, AI-enabled chatbots and virtual assistants, Intelligent routing across platforms, Automated customer authentication, and outbound notification and reminders. " - Matt Edic, IntelPeer

Recalibrate metrics

Average handle time may be passé, but the notion of speed is not. Customer-centric companies will therefore adopt metrics that more faithfully assess the connection between efficiency and customer satisfaction.

Beyond looking at high-level satisfaction, loyalty, and advocacy metrics, leading companies will consider intermediate indicators of customer and agent effort. On the customer front, this may include self-service containment, "questions to resolution," transfer rate, and availability of one's preferred channel option(s). Internally, the company may look at silence time and knowledge base utilization to determine if agents can quickly access the tools and insights they need.

Quantitative metrics aside, customer-centric companies will also look at qualitative indicators to truly understand whether they are satisfying or wowing their customers.

Unlock the power of customer data and company knowledge

No longer limited to phone feedback surveys, today's companies can leverage AI-driven analytics solutions to capture actionable insights from all interactions. Whether to help personalize experiences, remedy common pain points, improve agent training, predict customer intent, or assess customer sentiment, this intelligence is the bridge between valuing customer centricity and *delivering* it.

In addition to optimizing customer intelligence, leading companies will use AI-driven knowledge tools to streamline the process for employees. When employees, even inexperienced, remote ones, receive real-time guidance through complex processes and issues, they are capable of incredible, personalized, loyalty-building interactions.

Re-orchestrate agent journeys

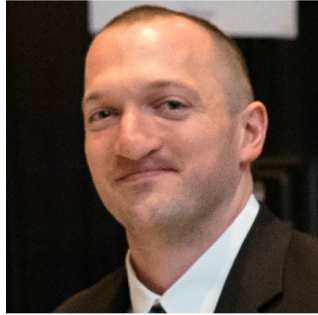
To simultaneously address employee experience demands and prepare teams for more complex work, leading companies will map – and re-orchestrate – agent journeys.

After redefining the agent's role in the world of frequent self-service, companies will evaluate how they are hiring and onboarding best-in-class talent. They will consider key points of drop-off and friction, such as ineffective early training or incompatible equipment and connections.

From there, they will design tools, deploy AI, recalibrate coaching, and distribute knowledge with the goal of supporting each agent on a more personalized, enriching career path.

They will also turn customer data tools inward to capture and act on the voice of the employee.

About the Author



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Brian Cantor is the principal analyst and director for CCW Digital, the global online community and research hub for customer contact professionals. In his role, Brian leads the customer experience, contact center, technology and employee engagement research initiatives that drive CCW Digital's complete portfolio of content.



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