Voice of the Contact Centre Consumer 2021

call centre management association

A CCMA Research Initiative

Supporting Partner

odigo

An annual study

In November 2020 the CCMA (Call Centre Management Association) published *Customer Interactions in a Post-COVID World*, a study of the impact of lockdown as a result of the pandemic on consumer behaviour. The response to this work was overwhelmingly positive. This 2021 study builds on the previous study and delves even more deeply into consumer needs, expectations and behaviours.

This first *Voice of the Contact Centre Consumer* is an annual study from the CCMA designed to provide insights to guide contact centre leaders in optimising customer experience, channel strategy, complaints handling and gathering feedback.

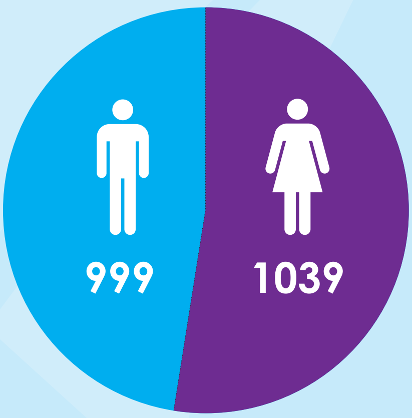
Research methodology

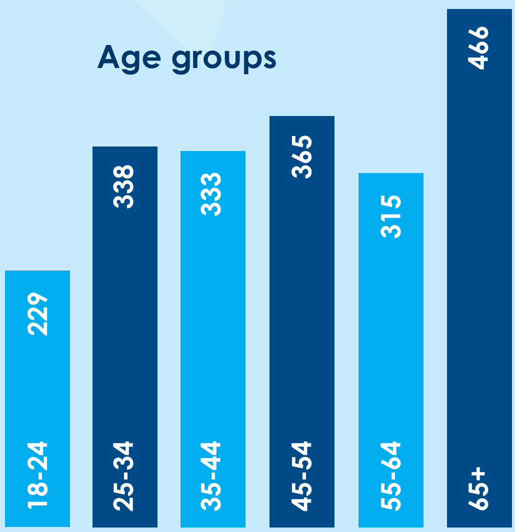
The *Voice of the Contact Centre Consumer* research comprised two distinct phases led by the CCMA's Research Director, Stephen Yap.

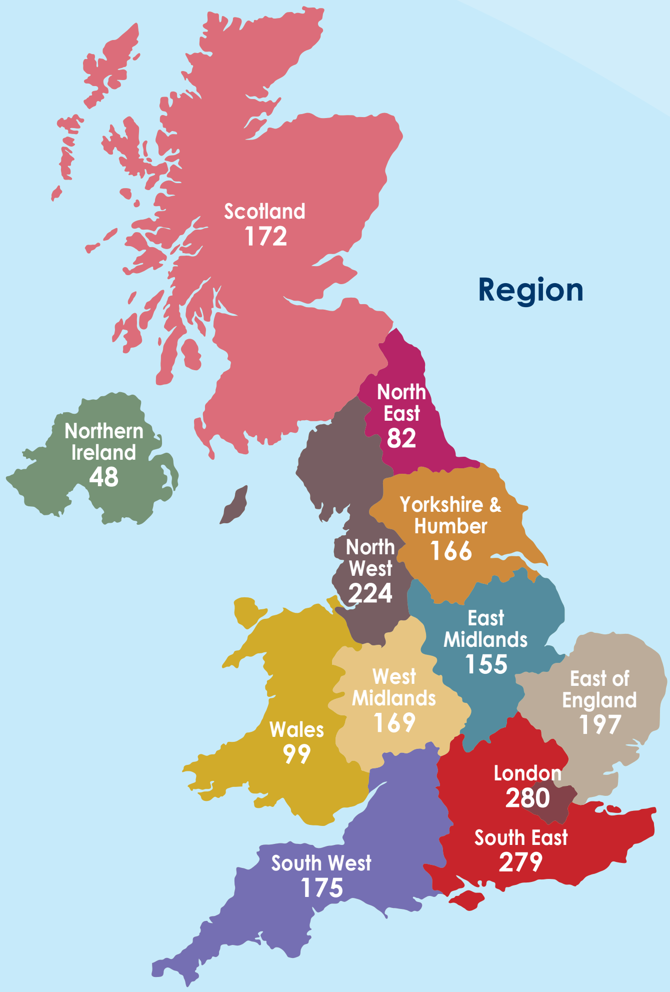
In the first phase n=2,046 online interviews conducted with UK consumers from 24 March to 6 April 2021. Quotas were set by age, gender and region to ensure a nationally representative sample.

The composition of the sample was as follows:

Gender







In the second phase, we presented findings from the quantitative consumer research to a group of contact centre leaders and industry experts to provide commentary and context.

With thanks to

We invited 13 contact centre leaders representing a diverse mix of vertical markets, contact centre types and experiences to a series of Focus Groups in April 2021 to explore the themes uncovered in the consumer survey.

We then asked three leading industry figures to provide additional comments.

The CCMA and Odigo extend their sincere thanks to these individuals for their generous participation in the study.

Contact Centre Leaders

Paul Baxter, Managing Director, Marmalade Insurance

Kirk Bradley, Director of Commercial Operations, Bupa

Carl Bromley, Head of Customer Experience, Ageas Group

Sue Campbell, Customer Experience Director, Capita

Claire Carroll, Head of Sales and Service, Co-op Group

Dominic Hull, Head of Contact Centre, Connect Distribution

Rachel Phillips, Head of Group, Contact Centre, DVLA

Lisa Range, Head of Business Payments Telephony Sales, Barclaycard

Rula Samara, Contact Centre Manager - Customer Experience, Hitachi Capital

Michael Sherwood, Head of Digital Experience, Atom Bank

Bill Wilson, Digital Strategy Lead, Severn Trent Water

Emma Trow, Operations Manager, PerfectHome

Charmaine Vallance-Poole, Head of Customer Experience, Holland and Barrett.

Industry Experts

Martin Hill-Wilson, Brainfood Consulting

Dr. Nicola Millard, Principal Innovation Partner, BT

Amy Scott, Sedulous Consulting

Foreword

Welcome to the inaugural edition of CCMA's *Voice of the Contact Centre Consumer* research, the definitive source of consumer understanding for our industry.

This is not the first time we've done consumer research. But this is without doubt the biggest and most exciting endeavour yet. And I'm proud to announce that *Voice of the Contact Centre Consumer* will become an annual initiative, enabling us to track how our customers' needs, preference and behaviours change over time.

Among a whole host of insights that this report offers, one that strikes me as being particularly powerful is how frequently contact experiences are amplified through word of mouth and social media. The contact centre is truly the front line of customer experience and brand perception, as what happens in the contact centre is routinely shared for others to see.

This is clear evidence that the contact centre is not only an operational function but a strategic one, performing not just a service role but one of brand building.

This report is required reading for anyone involved in strategy and planning for the contact centre.

I hope you will find it as enjoyable to read as it was for us to produce. Your feedback and suggestions for the next edition are warmly invited!

Leigh Hopwood,
CEO, CCMA

Odigo is proud to support the CCMA's insightful research into changing customer habits, trends and expectations. This past, unprecedented year has accelerated digital transformations, cloud migration, artificial intelligence (AI) adoption and automation strategies. How have these efforts impacted the customer experience (CX) contact centres provide? How has innovative technology affected customers' attitudes and what's on the horizon for the contact centres? For those involved in the industry, CCMA's *Voice of the Contact Centre Consumer 2021* report is indispensable.

At Odigo we develop technology that prioritises CX so our clients can provide customer service that is convenient, personalised and effective. The dynamic pace of business, across all sectors, means organisations need agile, scalable and reliable solutions that achieve memorable CX and rewarding agent experience (AX). But open, intuitive and intelligent solutions are just part of the answer.

Winning organisations know that the best way to exceed customer expectations is to know how customers feel and understand what they want. CCMA's research sheds light on issues every contact centre needs to address and presents data that highlights what contact centres should focus on. The results are clear – despite the tumultuous year, customers believe service has improved, the phone remains the preferred channel of choice and self-service is on the rise.

While some results are surprising and some confirm what industry observers have long felt to be true, all the data is interesting, practical and essential for contact centres as they navigate a post-pandemic world. As a company that prides itself on data-driven strategies, Odigo is already acting on CCMA's research. And so should you.

Happy reading,

Neil Titcomb,
Managing Director UKI
at Odigo

The impact of the pandemic on customer service

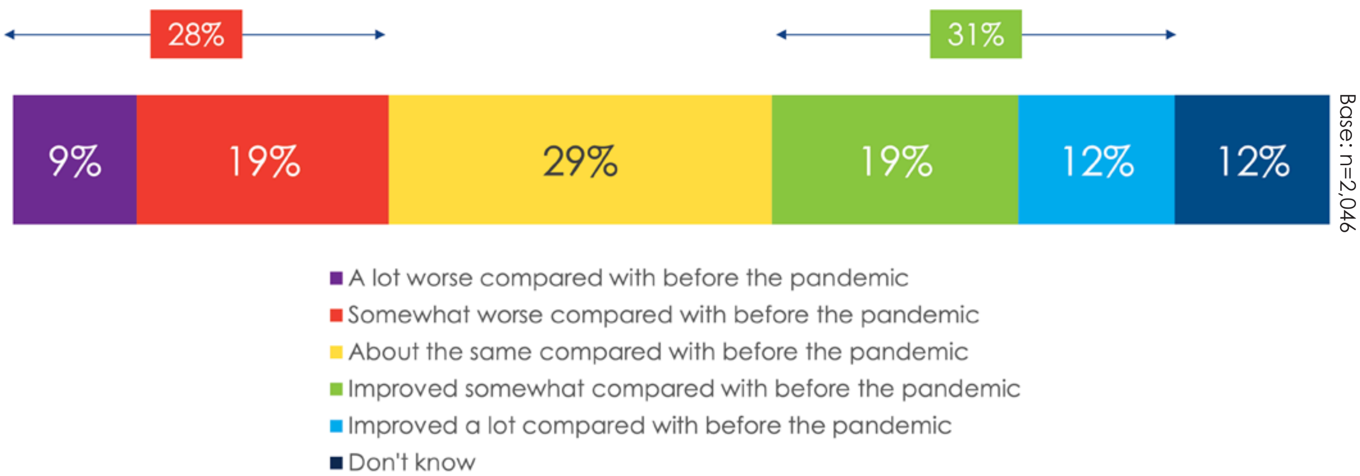
There has been a huge amount of discussion around the impact of the pandemic on contact centre operations, and on customer service. The debate has not just been confined to our industry – it has spilled over into the mainstream and has been the topic of considerable column inches in the press. The CCMA wanted to find out from consumers whether they felt service levels had improved, declined or stayed the same compared with before the pandemic.

Do consumers think customer service quality has been impacted by the pandemic?

The answer is "it depends". Perceptions are highly polarised, with approximately equal proportions of people who say "customer service has improved", "customer service has declined" and "it's about the same". Overall, slightly more people think that customer service has improved than say it has declined.

Slightly more consumers say customer service is better today compared with before the pandemic (31%), than say customer service has become worse (28%).

Figure 1: *Would you say that customer service overall today has improved, worsened or stayed the same since before the pandemic?*



The challenges that contact centres have had to deal with to maintain business as usual are well documented, as are the consequent impact on consumers such as longer wait times. So why might some people feel that things are getting better? Our panel of contact centre leaders called out the rapid deployment of digital channels during lockdown.

"We quickly accelerated our plan to create more digital ways for customers to contact us, which would have taken much longer had we not had a pandemic. There probably are some customers that think it's quicker and easier to contact us now." Kirk Bradley, Director of Commercial Operations, Bupa

"The funeral-care business has always been face-to-face. We had to embrace other channels, and customers had to embrace other channels. And they're actually more impressed with that than they thought they would have been."
Claire Carroll, Head of Sales and Service, Co-op Group

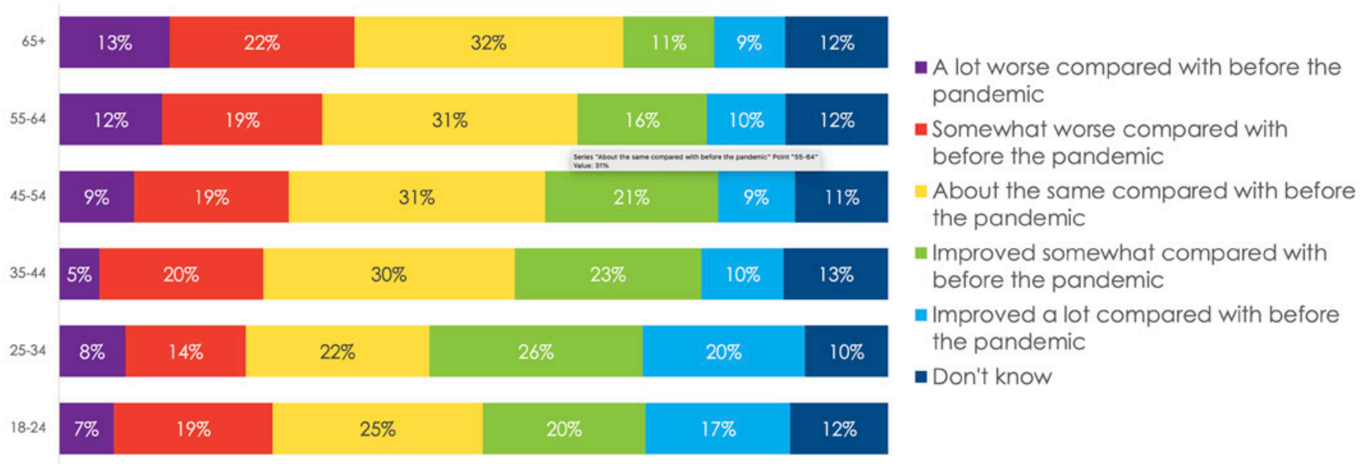
The proliferation of digital channels has impacted people in different ways

While the overall picture tells one story, it masks huge differences between different people in terms of how customer service is perceived.

One way of illustrating this is to examine perceptions by age cohort. As Figure 2 illustrates, on the whole younger people are more likely to believe customer service has improved since before the pandemic, whereas older people are more likely to believe customer service has declined.

People aged 34 or younger are almost twice as likely to believe customer service has improved since before the pandemic (42%), compared with those aged 55+ (22%).

Figure 2: *Would you say that customer service overall today has improved, worsened or stayed the same since before the pandemic? By age group.*



Base: 18-24 n=229, 25-34 n=338, 35-44 n=333, 45-54 n=365, 55-64 n=315, 65+ n=466

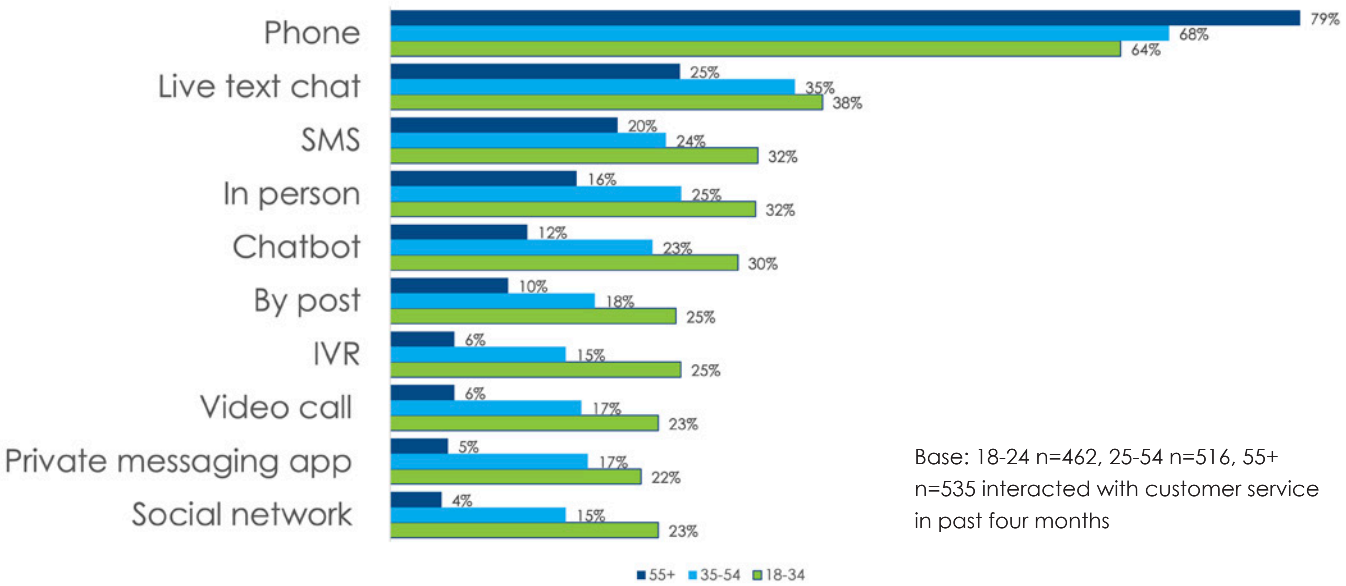
Digging deeper into these findings it is apparent that a person's perceptions of customer service are almost certainly related to whether that person tends to rely on the phone, or if they have embraced other channels. As discussed in the next section, younger people on the whole tend to use a wider variety of channels whereas older people tend to be more reliant on phone, and younger people tend to be more optimistic about the direction in which customer service is heading.

It follows that consumers who are primarily reliant on the phone channel will have experienced problems with wait times in recent months, and therefore may be more inclined to believe service levels have declined. Conversely, people who are comfortable with using digital channels are more likely to think service has improved thanks to the increased availability of these channels.

"In order to meet the contact needs of all of of our customers, we introduced more digital channels." Bill Wilson, Digital Strategy Lead, Severn Trent Water

Phone is still dominant, while web chat is rising fast

Figure 3: *Used channel for customer service in prior four months*



Base: 18-24 n=462, 25-54 n=516, 55+ n=535 interacted with customer service in past four months

Faced with huge pressures maintaining phone availability during lockdown conditions, many organisations worked quickly to introduce digital alternatives such as web chat and chatbots. Web chat is now second only to phone in terms of consumer takeup across all age groups.

Younger people have been quicker to embrace emerging channels. As Figure 3 shows, older people are relatively reliant on phone while younger people tend to adopt a wider array of channels.

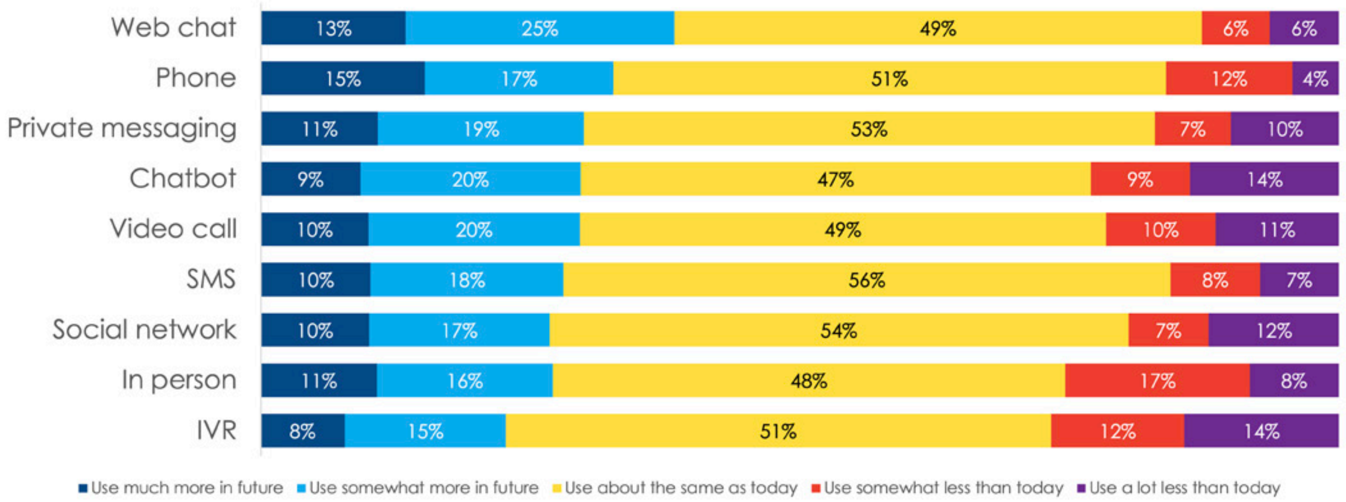
However, the rumours of phone's demise are greatly exaggerated. Phone is easily still the most dominant channel for all age groups, even in a pandemic. This research suggests that as people adopt new channels, these become in addition to rather than instead of phone.

How will channel usage evolve in the future?

While self-claimed future behaviour is no guarantee of actual behaviour, it's nonetheless useful to ask consumers whether they think they might use various channels more or less in the future. The findings are shown in Figure 4.

Web chat and phone are not only the most popular channels today, but they also top the list of channels that people expect to use more in the future.

Figure 4: *Do you anticipate using each of the following customer service channels more, less or about the same in the future compared with today*



Base: n=2,046

One in three (33%) people expect to use the phone more in future for customer service.

The evidence suggests that while organisations may have been successful in migrating some consumers to other channels, people are looking forward to getting back on the phone once phone availability returns. Furthermore, extended lockdown has no doubt created a pent-up demand for live human interaction which the telephone channel naturally fulfils.

Compared with phone fewer people plan to have more in-person customer service interactions in future, which no doubt reflects the lasting legacy of the pandemic.

Channel preference mirrors adoption, with assisted channels most highly favoured

In addition to usage, we were interested in how favourable or unfavourable people felt towards different contact channels.

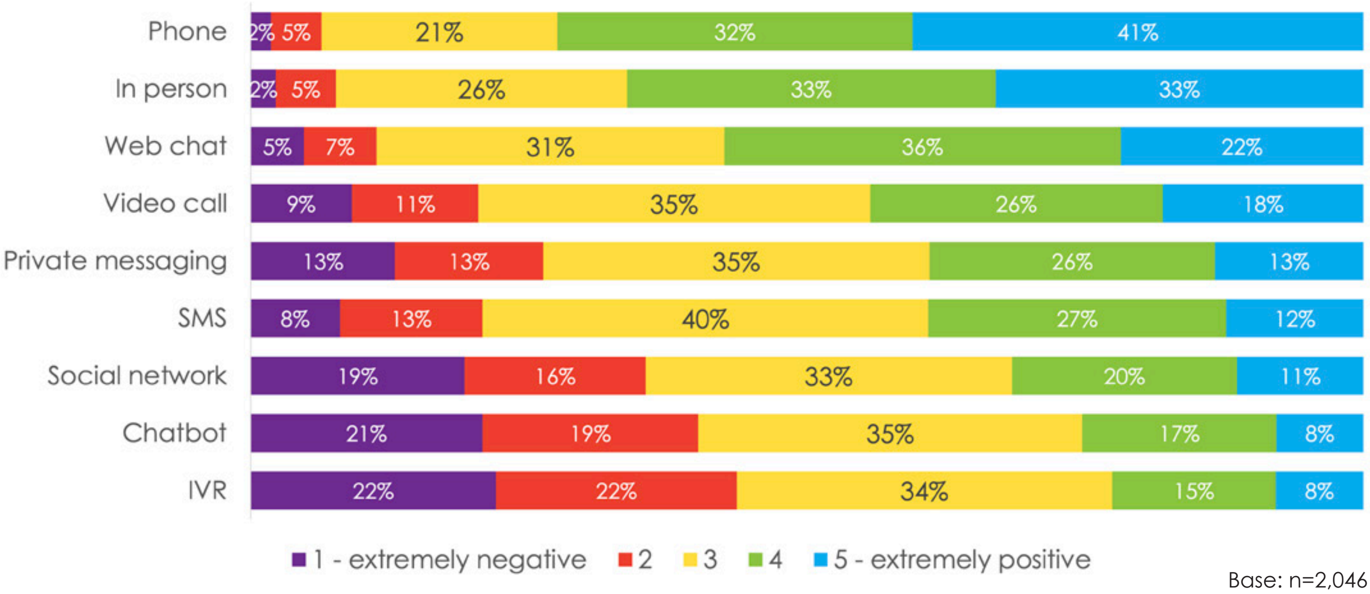
Overall consumers are still much more favourable to live assisted channels compared with automated ones, with "phone" and "in person" the most favoured channels of all. It will be very interesting to how favourability by channel may have changed in 12 months' time.

"Are people just a bit sick of sitting in their houses? In crisis, people tend to look to the past not the future. Is there a yearning for more traditional ways of contacting?"
Michael Sherwood, Head of Digital Experience, Atom Bank

"Phone is substituting for in-person interactions. Things that people would have done in a branch they're now doing over the phone because they have to, and they're finding that they like it and it can be a good substitute for doing it in person."
Paul Baxter, Managing Director, Marmalade Insurance

"We have customers saying 'I've been in isolation and shielding, you were the only person I've spoken to in the last week and it's just so nice to hear a voice." Rachel Phillips, Head of Group, Contact Centre, DVLA

Figure 5: *On a scale of 1-5 where 5 equals "extremely positive" and "extremely negative", overall how positively or negatively do you feel about each of the following types of contact channels?*



Base: n=2,046

A note of caution when reading these findings. Favourability does not necessarily equate to usage and nor does it necessarily equate to the quality of the experience. Favourability first and foremost is a proxy of someone's level of familiarity and therefore comfort with a channel.

Even more importantly, channels do not operate in isolation and as such favourability ratings at the channel level do not tell the whole story. Just because IVR is low down the favourability stakes does not mean that IVR is a poor solution. Like chatbots, IVR is typically used as a bridge to assisted contact – to help direct the query to the right advisor.

The continuing predominance of phone in both usage and favourability attracted a great deal of interest from our leaders and experts, who pointed out that new channels should not be considered as a replacement for phone but that phone will continue to be part of a multi-channel strategy that ultimately should be built around meeting the customer where the customer wants to be met.

"There's a question for me around what is the opportunity that the phone channel presents in a digital world. For example, how to use conversational AI [artificial intelligence] in the phone channel? To not only understand why people are ringing you, but how do you triage them? Do you point them back to the digital channel based upon what they're saying, or keep them on the phone? How do you use conversational AI to either drive behaviour or answer the query better, regardless of channel?" Michael Sherwood, Head of Digital Experience, Atom Bank

"Other than age there's a point around vulnerabilities. A lot of our customers have requested to speak with us via email because they don't feel comfortable on the phone. However, it is important to have all of those all of the channels available to adapt to every customer irrespective of age and vulnerabilities." Emma Trow, Operations Manager, PerfectHome

"The key with channel strategy is to think about what customers are trying to do and their underlying emotional state (positive/negative/neutral), then consider what channels will work and how to signpost customers to the most appropriate one to achieve their goal. Remember the more channels you put in the more channels customers use – don't overcomplicate things by putting in every channel in the universe."

Dr Nicola Millard, Principal Innovation Partner, BT

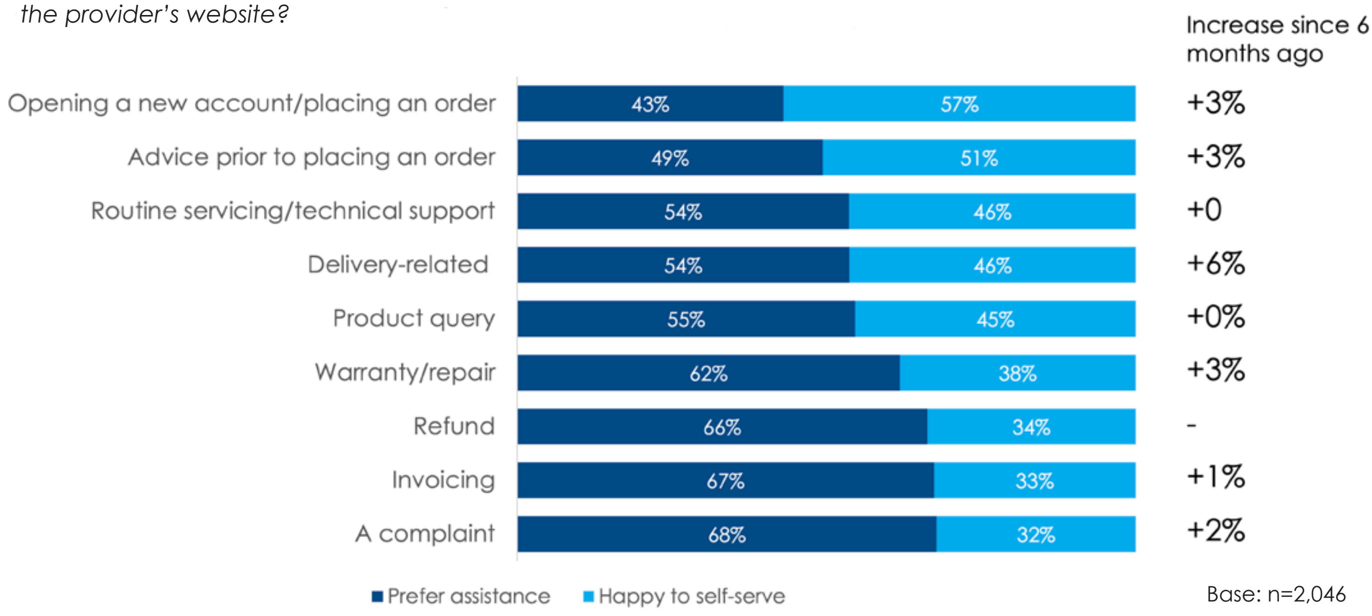
Self-serve is being increasingly normalised

While phone continues to be dominant and consumers continue to be most favourable toward live assisted channels, there is evidence that willingness to self-serve is on the rise. Compared with September 2020, there has been a measurable increase in self-serve propensity, particularly for relatively straightforward customer service interactions such as placing orders or getting delivery updates.

Consumers' willingness to self-serve delivery queries has jumped six percentage points (40%>46%) in just six months.

Widespread self-serve deployments that have happened during lockdown have clearly led to this growing consumer acceptance. Not surprising however, for more complex requirements such as refunds, billing and complaints, the vast majority of people would still prefer to be assisted.

Figure 6: *Generally speaking, for each of the following types of queries would you prefer to be assisted or would you be happy to serve yourself for example via information offered on the provider's website?*

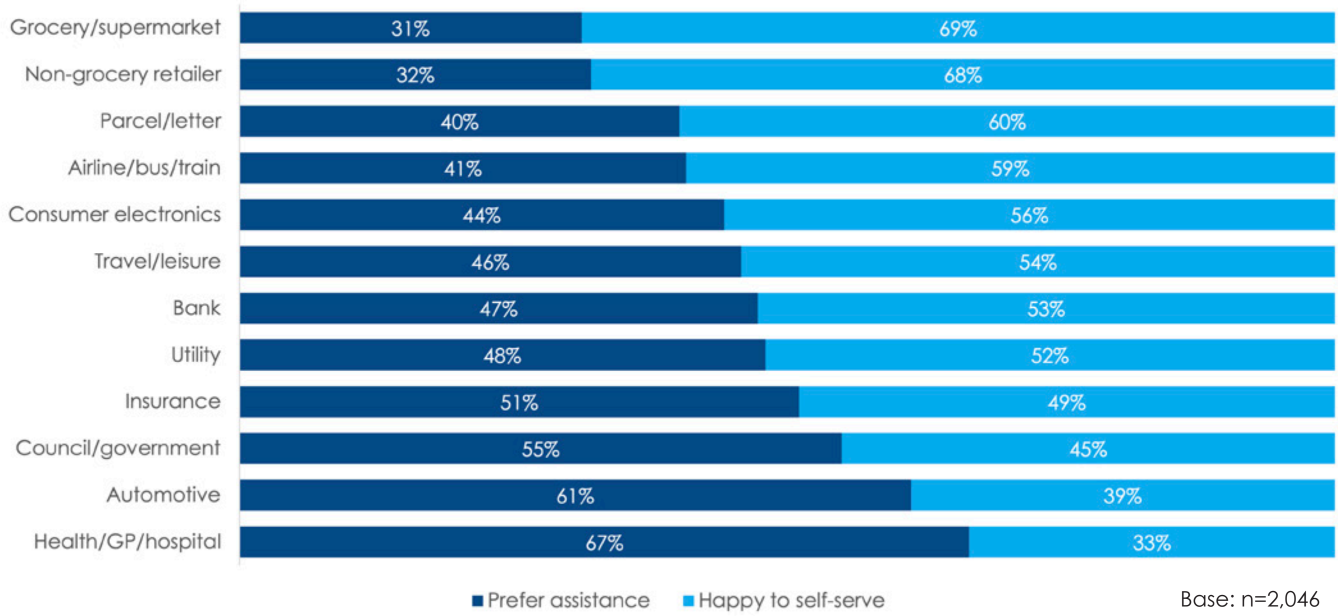


> *"We've seen a 35% increase in self-service adoption across all of our website journeys where customers are happy to carry out simple transactions. We've made our site extremely easy to self-serve, thereby creating space and time for agents to be able to pick up the more complex queries."* Bill Wilson, Digital Strategy Lead, Severn Trent Water

In addition to differences by mission, consumers' willingness to serve themselves differs by sector. People are most open to self-serve when interacting with supermarkets, non-grocery retailers and couriers. Customer service queries for these types of organisations tend to be frequent and relatively simple.

On the other hand, for other sectors such as healthcare, automotive and government where interactions tend to be less frequent and often more complex, there is a greater expectation of assistance.

Figure 7: *Willingness to self-serve, by sector*



Base: n=2,046

It's important to note that there can be substantial variations within a sector, as our panel of leaders pointed out.

"We are a retailer but we offer nutritional and health advice and services. When our customers want to speak to someone about an ailment or health need, they will want to speak to somebody either face-to-face or over the phone." Charmaine Vallance-Poole, Head of Customer Experience, Holland and Barrett

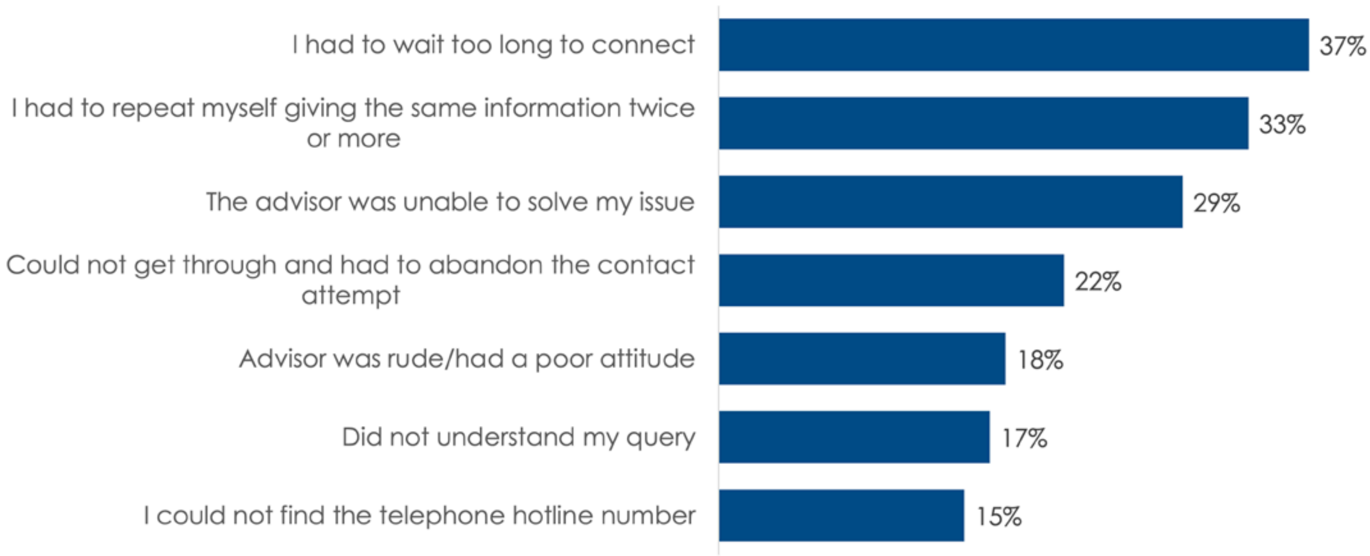
"Some parts of the bank are streets ahead in terms of digital. My area, payment facilities is quite complex and you really need to have that conversation with the customer to truly understand what it is they want, what it is they need and how you can best provide them with the solution."

Lisa Range, Head of Business Payments Telephony Sales, Barclaycard

The challenges for contact centres to address

The next section of this report explores the prevalence of issues and problems that can occur during customer contact, and their impact on customers.

Figure 8: *Did you experience any of the following issues when contacting? Please select all that apply.*



Base: n=1,513 interacted with customer service in past four months

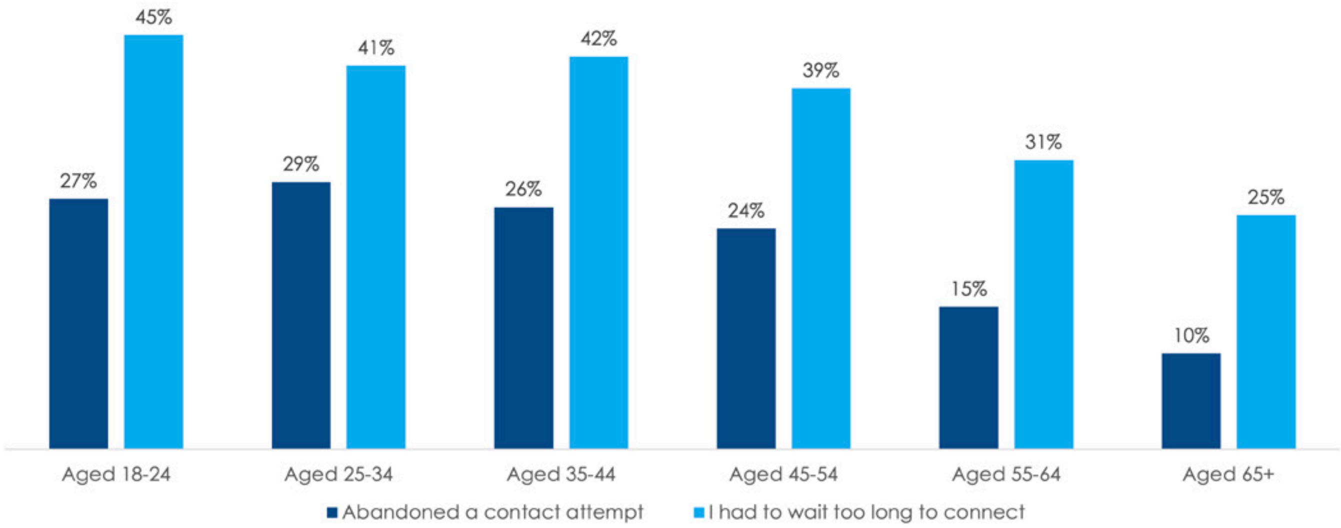
Wait times top the list of issues experienced with contact centres

The most common issue experienced during customer contact is waiting too long. 37% of those who have been in touch with an organisation for customer service in the past four months report they were made to wait too long.

Once again, differences by age are noted, with younger people tending to be more impatient than older people. Those aged 18-24 are almost twice as likely to be unhappy with wait times compared with those aged 65+ and younger people are much more likely to abandon a phone call.

People aged 35-54 are twice as likely to say they abandoned a call (25%) as those aged 55+ (13%).

Figure 9: *Did you experience any of the following issues when contacting? Please select all that apply.*



Base: 18-24 n=192, 25-34 n=270, 35-44 n=252, 45-54 n=264, 55-64 n=227, 65+ n=308 interacted with customer service in past four months

> “I'm not surprised by the finding that younger people are less patient. After all they were raised on a steady diet of instant on-demand services. The world for younger people is one of immediacy and convenience and they have high service expectations. They want speedy and seamless interactions with organisations and when it doesn't happen, they will complain.”
>
> **Amy Scott,** Sedulous Consulting

The importance of contact centres joining up channels and systems

The second most common issue that consumers experienced was having to give the same information multiple times (33%), reflecting a perennial issue in some organisations: a lack of joined-up systems.

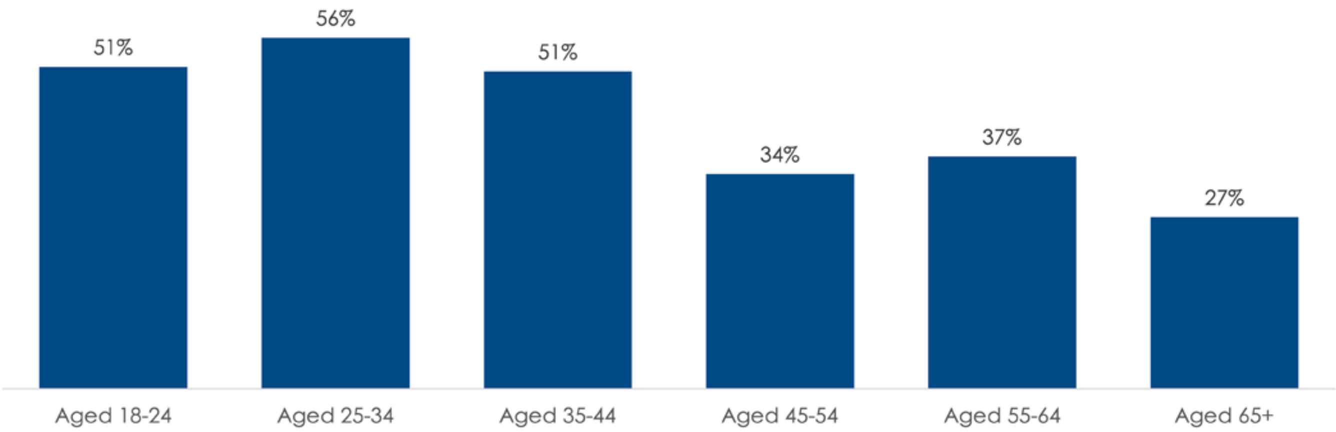
“My experience as a customer was that the level of service was vastly different, depending on whom I spoke to. And my propensity to repeat call as a result increased.” Michael Sherwood, Head of Digital Experience, Atom Bank

“We're like swans, trying to make it look perfect for the customer while there is all the stuff that needs to happen underneath.” Rachel Phillips, Head of Group, Contact Centre, DVLA

Complaints are more likely to come from younger people, and by email

There is evidence that younger people are more likely to complain if they experience an issue with customer service. The highest propensity to complain is among the 25-34 age group: 56% of those in this group who experienced a customer service problem lodged a complaint.

Figure 10: *Did you file a complaint to the organisation or business following the problems you experienced?*



Base: 18-24 n=158, 25-34 n=229, 35-44 n=196, 45-54 n=196, 55-64 n=138, 65+ n=172 interacted with customer service in past four months and experienced a problem

"Younger people have a much higher expectation of us than their parents do. They expect things to be absolutely right for them. We find average handling time significantly longer for young people than for parents, because you spend longer explaining things and they ask more questions. They're also much more likely to be forthright in their survey feedback." Paul Baxter, Managing Director, Marmalade Insurance

People aged 25-34 are twice as likely to have complained about customer service as those aged 65+.

Email is the channel used most often for complaints (56%), followed by phone (44%). This was corroborated by our panel of leaders, who explained that an email message is often used for escalation.

"We've seen more customers go directly via email to the director or CEO. It's not necessarily that the complaint differs to those that don't, but customers think by jumping to that channel they may get things done quicker." Carl Bromley, Head of Customer Experience, Ageas Group

The contact centre is the front line of brand experience

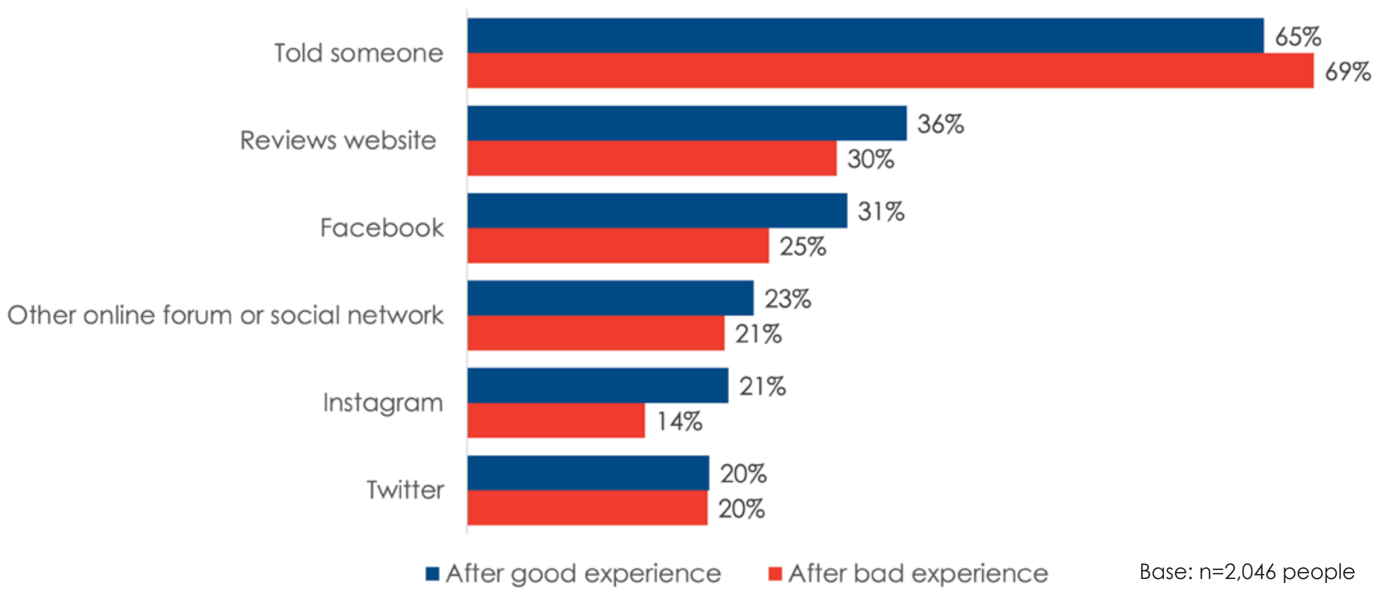
Accepted wisdom dictates that people are more likely to tell others after a bad customer experience than after a good one. This research tells a more nuanced story.

Contact experiences, good and bad, are often shared privately and publicly

While it is true that person-to-person word of mouth is slightly more prevalent after a bad experience, consumers say they are more likely to share on social media or on a review site after a good experience than a bad one. This is particularly apparent for Facebook and for Instagram, as Figure 11 illustrates. Social networks exist for people to share experiences, and the likes of Facebook and Instagram are places where people like to share positive customer service experiences for others to see.

More people say that will share a good contact experience on Facebook (31%) than share a bad experience (25%).

Figure 11: *Have you ever posted on social media or told someone about an experience with customer service?*



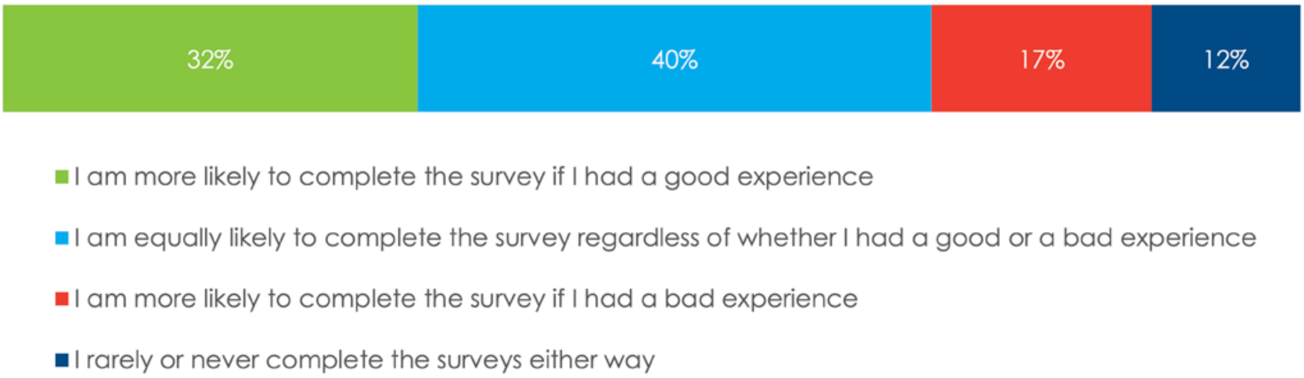
Base: n=2,046 people

Both positive and negative experiences will trigger customer feedback

As with sharing of customer experiences, this research suggests that people are more likely to complete a survey after a good experience than after a bad one.

Almost twice as many people say that they will complete a feedback survey after a good experience (32%) than after a bad one (17%).

Figure 12: *Which of the following best describes your response to customer feedback surveys?*



Base: n=991 people who received a survey invitation following customer service interaction

Our panel of contact centre leaders noted that queries handled through assisted channels tend to attract more survey feedback compared with self-served queries.

Furthermore, bad experiences attract more organic feedback (customers proactively contacting an organisation) whereas when organisations contact customers for feedback via a survey, this tends to attract more customers who had good experiences.

"We get more feedback when there's been an agent interaction than when it was purely self. I think the difference between marking an online experience vs an actual one is a challenge, the actual contact has had an opportunity to build empathy via the agent to customer relationship."
Bill Wilson, Digital Strategy Lead, Severn Trent Water

"We have found that you receive an increased volume of negative customer reviews organically. By inviting reviews, you do get a balance of scores and reviews." Dominic Hull, Head of Contact Centre, Connect Distribution

"If a customer has had a bad experience they will want to email or call us directly to complain rather than fill out the survey. Whereas the customers that had a good experience will take the time to fill out a survey to recognise the individual they spoke to." Rula Samara, Contact Centre Manager - Customer Experience, Hitachi Capital

"To score well as a service provider, your customers need to know that you're there for them. Ideally, you're not there only when something's gone wrong. When customers are contacted for feedback, it's not just some grey or vanilla relationship where you have no one view or another, you actually have a view on the service you've designed. Hopefully, if you've managed your marketing correctly, you will have delivered a positive experience." Sue Campbell, Customer Experience Director, Capita

The contact centre is the front line of customer experience and brand perception. Not only do experiences delivered in the contact centre influence the customers involved, but they also influence the perceptions of other customers and potential customers through word of mouth and social media amplification.

Learnings from Voice of the Contact Centre Consumer 2021

We hope you've enjoyed this in-depth look into the contact centre consumers' needs, expectations and behaviours and that you've found useful insight to support the development of your operation.

Here are a few key takeaways that summarise what we have learned:

1. Efforts to deploy additional channels since the pandemic are making a difference. Views on whether customer service is better or worse today are polarised, but slightly more consumers think customer service is better now than before the pandemic (31%) than think it's worse (28%).

2. Self-serve is being normalised. As providers have accelerated the rollout of self-serve channels, consumer preference is following suit. Compared with just six months ago there has been an increase in willingness to self-serve for simpler queries such as delivery updates and placing an order. For more complex transactions there remains a preference for advisor assistance.

3. Not everyone has embraced new channels. Take-up of new channels has landed quickest among younger people, while older people tend to still rely on phone. Channel strategy must consider the different needs of different groups and ideally offer multiple options for the consumer to choose.

4. Phone is still king. Phone is still the dominant channel in terms of both usage and favourability across all age groups. Additional channels don't replace phone but complement it.

5. Contact centre experiences, good and bad, are widely shared. People regularly share customer service experiences with others. What happens in the contact centre has a direct impact on an organisation's brand, as contact interactions are amplified through word of mouth and social media.

“The consumer research indicates contrasting experiences in the quality of service since the pandemic. However, since the start of 2021 phone has remained dominant for all generations. Apart from phone, the 18-34 cohort led the usage curve in all other channels.

Interestingly, this included non-digital touchpoints such as post and face-to-face. And to be downright iconoclastic, the data also tells us that chatbots are twice as popular with the oldest cohort as IVR! But whatever the channel, the analysis shows customers expect them to be responsive, informed, and effective.

For me, the research highlight were the very modest levels of growth in self-service. Customers indicated they were willing. So I wonder whether expanding self-service would have a greater impact on CX and cost than focussing on more options for live assistance? Worth a conversation with your team at least.”

Martin Hill-Wilson, Brainfood Consulting

About the CCMA

For over 25 years the CCMA (Call Centre Management Association), as the longest established contact centre industry body has been dedicated to supporting contact centre leaders. Founded on the principles of sharing best practice and networking to improve skills and knowledge, the CCMA is a thriving community that represents leaders from a huge cross-section of the industry.

Members of the CCMA community can take advantage of the many networking and learning opportunities aimed at keeping contact centre leaders up to date with changes in the industry; from technology advances, to regulation changes, to discovering new ways to improve the customer experience and more.

www.ccma.org.uk | @CCMATalk

About Odigo

At Odigo we are committed to developing technology that ensures customer experience (CX) is put first and our clients can deliver customer service that is convenient, personalised and effective. The dynamic, fast-changing nature of modern business, across all sectors, means organisations need robust, scalable and flexible solutions that enable swift reactions and proactive engagement.

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