Understanding Modern CX
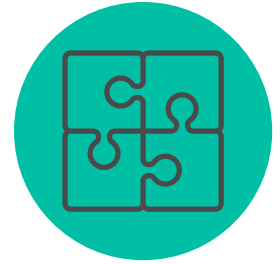
Understanding the Increased Role of Service Agents in the Modern Customer Experience

Introduction

No matter your company size, the department you work in, or the industry your business focuses on, one thing remains constant: the past year has been one of major shifts, transformations, and challenges.

While we have all felt the pains of change in one way or another, no challenges compare to the ones that customer experience and customer service professionals have faced.

2020 caused a pivot toward remote work for both consumers and customer service teams, resulting in a virtual and transactional nature of relationship between brands and their customers.

Agents have become an even more pivotal touchpoint in the customer experience. They are the main customer experience, in many ways. And though customer service has always been an integral piece of overall business success, it's never been as important as it is today.

In fact, 50% of American consumers say that Covid-19 has increased their prioritization of customer service as a factor when deciding to do business with a brand.[1]

As a result, it's important for every brand that your agents can deliver on-brand experiences that delight customers, no matter where they are. But creating great customer experiences requires not only understanding how your customers' expectations are changing and how to meet them, but also investing in creating a robust customer service strategy and team.

In this whitepaper, we'll be diving deep into the modern customer experience, and the role that customer service agents play in ensuring a positive, seamless, and on-brand experience.

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[1] https://info.stellaconnect.com/ebook/customer-service-trends-for-2021

How Remote Work Has Changed the Customer Experience

The reality is that remote work is here to stay, both for consumers and for front-line customer service employees in many industries.

According to a forecast created by Global Workplace Analytics, it's estimated that by the end of 2021, **25-30% of the workforce in the United States will be working remotely multiple times per week.**[2]

What's more, previous surveys they've run have revealed that up to 80% of employees report wanting to work from home "at least some of the time."[3]

Long story short, remote work isn't going away anytime soon, and brands need to continue to adapt both their business models and their teams to this virtual environment.

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GLOBAL WORKPLACE ANALYTICS

What Remote Work Means for Customer Service Organizations

Today, asynchronous communication has become the de-facto means of collaboration.

While consumers are disconnected from brands, agents are disconnected from each other.

Gone are the days of support agents working side-by-side, answering phone calls and emails in the same room, able to turn to the rep next to them for questions or advice.

If you don't have a proper strategy in place for balancing out the effects of this separation, it can lead to unengaged agents, which can then create disgruntled customers.

After all, if you're reaching out to a brand with an issue or concern and the agent on the other end isn't empathetic or helpful, it's going to leave a bad taste in your mouth.

As more and more businesses continue down the path of working fully remote, it's important to keep the health and happiness of your employees top of mind. Your company culture isn't just inside the four walls of your office space – it's at the core of each interaction with your team members, peers, and customers.

But we'll dive into that more later.

[2] https://globalworkplaceanalytics.com/work-at-home-after-covid-19-our-forecast
[3] Ibid.

What Remote Work Means for Brands and Their Customers

This shift to a remote world and workforce means that the process for customers interacting with brands has also become almost entirely virtual.

Today, customers can research products or services online, order them from the comfort of their home, and have a package dropped onto their doorstep after a few days or an account set up in a matter of minutes.

They never have to step foot inside a store or talk to someone at your brand if they don't want to.

For some brands, this scenario may be a bit frightening. After all, creating a seamless and friction-free experience for someone visiting your website is much different than creating that same experience for someone physically coming into your store.

Doing so requires asking questions like: What does your virtual buying process actually look like from a consumer perspective? Do you make it easy for potential customers to find the information they need, read reviews, and make purchases on their own? Are there broken links on your website, issues that cause your pages to load slowly or break? If they want to, is it easy for customers to find ways to reach out to your team?

The list goes on and on.

In addition to this shift toward virtual buying, customers also have an increased reliance on customer reviews and word-of-mouth recommendations.

According to our *Customer Service Trends for 2021* research report, surveying over 1,000 consumers in the United States, **24% of respondents** ranked reviews from other customers as the **most important factor when deciding which brand to choose.**[4]

24% of consumers rank **reviews from other customers as the most important factor** when deciding which brand to do business with.

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And it makes sense - if they can't see a product in person for themselves, reviews from other customers are the best way for them to get a sense of whether or not they'll actually like their purchase.

But this doesn't just apply to new customers seeking out your brand. After all, who's leaving the initial reviews?

Knowing that positive reviews are important for influencing new customers, it's crucial to also think about them in the context of existing or recurring customers, and the customer experiences that your brand is delivering to result in positive reviews.

[4] https://info.stellaconnect.com/ebook/customer-service-trends-for-2021

Creating On-Brand Customer Experiences from Anywhere

The fact of the matter is that your customer experience is intrinsically tied to your customer service team.

For today's modern customers, it's often the case that the only person they'll ever interact with at your brand (if they choose to interact with your brand at all) is a member of your customer service team.

A customer service agent is now the main touchpoint between a consumer and a brand; in the eyes of the consumer, **the agent is the brand.**

The Role of Service Agents in the Modern Customer Experience

Let's think back to the questions we posed earlier about creating a seamless customer experience for someone visiting your website. If pages aren't easy to navigate, links are broken, or a potential customer simply cannot find what they're looking for, what are they going to do?

If they're really interested in your brand, they'll reach out to your customer service team.

It's how that interaction unfolds that can be the difference between someone buying a product from your business and someone swearing off your brand forever and siding with one of your competitors.

In truth, when looking at the customer experience as a whole, a single customer service interaction can make or break how someone feels about your brand.

According to our research, after a poor customer service experience, **38%** of consumers say they **tell their friends and family to stop buying from a brand**, and **35%** of consumers are likely to **share their experience online.**[5]

What's more, **53%** of those same consumers **will stop buying from the brand themselves**, with **64%** reporting that it would only take **two to three poor customer service interactions** for them to stop doing business with a brand for good.[6]

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[5] Ibid.
[6] Ibid.

This data points to the fact that today's consumers are stringent in deciding how and where to spend their dollars, and that the margin for error is much smaller than you might otherwise think.

When there's so much on the line, businesses need to be more vigilant than ever in creating positive experiences that customers will want to share with their friends, family, and peers, and will keep them a customer of your brand for the long term.

After all, it can be up to five times more expensive to acquire a new customer than it is to retain a current customer.[7]

This means that after a poor customer experience, not only is that customer relationship on the line, but your business's overall reputation and bottom line are also put at risk.

At the end of the day, customers will be stickier and more loyal if they have an emotional connection with a brand. They want to feel seen, heard, and valued by your business, not just for the money they're spending with you but for who they are as a customer.

And customer service teams play a major role in that connection.

In our survey, **80% of consumers feel more emotionally connected to a brand** when customer service solves their problem.[8]

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[7] https://www.forbes.com/sites/jiawertz/2018/09/12/dont-spend-5-times-more-attracting-new-customers-nurture-the-existing-ones/
[8] https://info.stellaconnect.com/ebook/customer-service-trends-for-2021

Keeping Customer Service Agents Engaged and Motivated

It's important to note that front-line agents need to be set up for success to not only effectively work, but to continue to grow and improve while working remotely. Having a second monitor and a headset is nice, but having the right tools, technologies, and data at your fingertips is even better.

One of the best ways to guarantee that they're being set up to do their best work is by creating culture and processes that keep them engaged.

You need to ensure you're giving your team the tools, resources, and guidance needed to deliver great, on-brand experiences for your customers, no matter where they're working from.

To keep your agents engaged and motivated while they're remote, there are a few key tactics you can start implementing today.

First, make sure that working remotely does not mean that your agents can no longer tap into or experience your company culture.

Whether it's virtual happy hours, team lunches, or after-work events like trivia, preserving your company culture plays a major role in the morale of your employees, especially now when the past year has been challenging for so many.

Second, it's likely that your team has processes in place for showcasing recognition of team members in the office.

Without being in the office to share stories, learnings, and lessons, it can be tough to make sure your employees are still being recognized for their hard work.

But taking time to showcase their wins and highlight the impact they're having on improving the experiences of your customers is pivotal for your team, as well as the entire organization.

Third, and finally, investing in obtaining and utilizing customer feedback can be a game changer for your service organization.

Customer feedback should be at the core of every business because, ultimately, it's pivotal to enabling your customer service team to succeed.

When your agents can see in real-time the impact that they're having on your customers and hear praise first-hand, it validates the importance of the work they're doing and can be a huge motivator for continuing to deliver great customer experiences.

The Value of Utilizing Data and Customer Feedback

First-hand customer feedback is a gold mine of opportunity for learning, not just for your customer service team, but for your entire business.

By working on the front lines of customer communication, agents have access to a wealth of insight on the full customer experience. As a result, support teams can become strategic business partners to other teams within a company, like your marketing and product teams, to share their findings.

And luckily for brands, most consumers are willing to share their feedback and input when something goes wrong. Of consumers we surveyed, **52%** are likely to **share their feedback directly with the brand after a negative experience.**[9]

When it comes to the world of support, this line of communication with their customers gives brands direct access to understanding a situation from their customers' point of view, and gives their teams guidance on how to better handle similar situations in the future.

But not all feedback is created equal. In fact, there are multiple different ways to collect customer feedback, and various data points and metrics you can uncover.

Questions to Ask When Collecting Customer Feedback

Were we able to solve your issue? This question can be tied back to First Contact Resolution (FCR). By asking this question, you can gauge how effectively your agents are communicating with customers, and how many customers are ending their conversations with your agents without actually having their question answered or their problem solved.

How likely are you to recommend our brand? This question can be tied back to your Net Promoter Score (NPS). By asking this question, you can gauge whether or not your customers are likely to leave the interaction feeling positively about your brand and willing to share that experience, or if something has gone wrong and they don't feel confident recommending you.

How easy was it for you to get your issues resolved? This question can be tied back to your Customer Effort Score (CES). By asking this question, you can gauge not only the types of inquiries your customers are coming to your team with, but also how easy your agents are making things for your customers by taking the lead to implement solutions on their behalf.

How satisfied are you with our brand/services? This question can be tied back to your Customer Satisfaction Score (CSAT). By asking this question, you can gauge whether or not a

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[9] Ibid.

customer is happy with your brand, your services offered, and even your individual agents that they interacted with.

And while direct feedback from your customers is great for understanding what went wrong and how you can improve, positive customer feedback is equally important.

Our research shows that **86%** of consumers would be more **likely to leave feedback regarding a positive customer service interaction** if they knew the agent would directly benefit from it.[10]

We mentioned this earlier, but it bears repeating: agents are most motivated to do great work when they feel appreciated for what they do.

In this remote work environment where feelings of isolation can create chasms between brands and their front-line teams, collecting direct customer feedback can help keep agents engaged in their work, motivated to bring their "A" game to each customer interaction, and plugged into their organizations' customer success strategies.

In truth, collecting customer feedback is a business-critical initiative that drives product innovation, brand loyalty, process efficiencies, and improvements in the overall customer experience.

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[10] Ibid.

Understanding Modern Customers to Create Great Customer Experiences

In recent research, Boston Consulting Group has found that **call center volume has increased by 14%** for certain industries since March of 2019.[11]

Customer service teams are in higher demand than ever before. At the same time, customer expectations are higher than they have ever been, while customer loyalty is dwindling.

Below, we're summarizing the four main pillars for understanding modern customers and, ultimately, for giving them great customer experiences.

Pillar 1: Meeting your customers where they are, and helping them how they want to be helped.

Modern customers want brands to be available on the channels they prefer to use, when they prefer to use them, and to understand their needs before they even know they have those needs.

For many businesses, that means a pivot to more automated and tech-forward ways of providing support, like chatbots. Automated technology can be particularly useful when it comes to easy questions, like finding out a brand's return policy, but not all channels are created equal.

Despite their tech-savvy ways, **43%** of consumers today say that the **phone is the most likely channel** for them to seek out when they have a customer service issue, followed by email (28%) and chat (23%).[12]

It's clear that to create a really successful customer service experience, brands need to combine innovation with optimization. Continuing to invest in new channels is critical, but can only be successful if it's paired with a strategy focused on making your current support channels even better for your customers.

Pillar 2: Making it easy for customers to engage with your brand, and your agents.

2021 is going to see a renewed focus on the human aspect of the customer experience.

As we've mentioned before, customers have become used to transactional relationships with brands, where they research and purchase products in a silo, receive their purchases directly to their homes, and may never interact with the brand again outside of their purchase.

[12] Ibid.

But when they do interact with your brand, what does that experience look like?

If your website has roadblocks that make it difficult for them to reach a member of your support team, or even just navigate from one page to another, each frustrated click deepens the divide between your brand and your customers.

Ensure that you make it as easy as possible for your customers to navigate through an online experience with your brand, regardless of whether or not they speak to someone.

Pillar 3: Understanding and optimizing toward metrics that reflect how your customers feel about interacting with your front-line team.

Collecting real-time customer feedback is imperative for success today.

You need to understand how your customers feel after interacting with a member of your team, and how you can optimize their experiences.

If you don't already have an effective customer service feedback strategy in place, you're missing out on a huge opportunity to hear directly from your customers about what went wrong, and then using that feedback to help improve your agent performance.

Not having a system in place for collecting feedback from your customers means you lose out on this insight and are left with an incomplete view of your agents and their performance.

Pillar 4: Investing in hiring, ongoing coaching and training, agent enablement, and the empowerment of your customer service team.

Consumers care about customer service.

They want to know that the brands they're spending their money with value them as a customer, and will do what they can to meet your needs and resolve your issues. If they have a negative view of your support team, they may jump ship to a competitor and never consider doing business with your brand again.

In 2021, the role of the customer service agent is going to be more important than ever.

Ensure your organization is investing in the tools your team needs, providing coaching for your front-line agents, and holding ongoing 1:1 meetings to keep reps on track with their goals and in-line with brand values.

Why Investing in
Customer Service Matters

Modern customers' expectations are constantly changing, and your business needs to understand those expectations in order to keep up.

If you don't, you risk falling behind your competitors and losing customers that may have otherwise stuck with your brand for years to come.

By investing in your customer service agents, you're giving your front-line team the resources they need to be able to meet those expectations

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