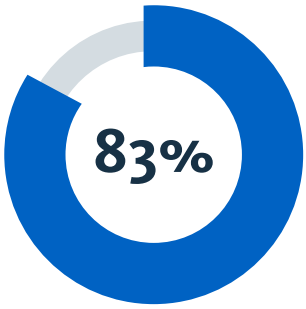
INSIGHTS REPORT

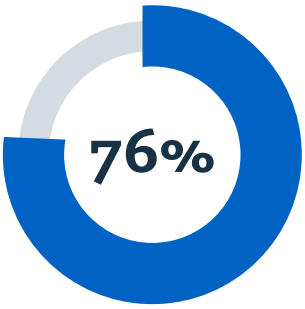
CALL CENTER FUNDAMENTALS:

Amplify customer satisfaction while reducing costs

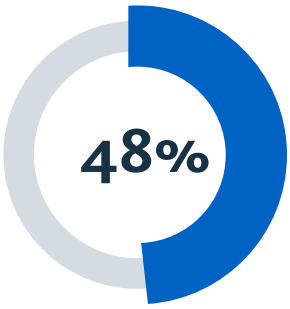
Think Company



83% of consumers expect their issues to be solved on the first try



76% of consumers expect brands to reply within 24 hours on social media



48% will switch brands to seek better customer service

The call center is at the heart of customer service, and consumer expectations are sky high. According to a 2022 Salesforce survey, 83% of consumers expect their issues to be solved on the first try[1]. Moreover, they want their issues solved quickly—almost four in five say efficiency is important to their satisfaction with call center service[2] and three quarters (76%) expect brands to reply within 24 hours on social media[3].

And if expectations aren't met? Almost half (48%) will switch brands to seek better customer service[4]. So, the stakes are large, and companies understand this. But call centers and customer service operations are expensive. Meeting customer expectations while keeping costs sustainable is an enormous challenge.

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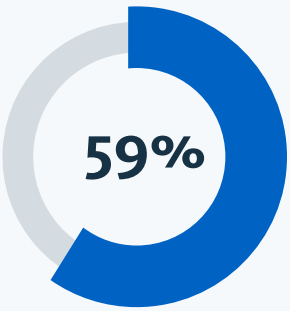
[1] Salesforce. State of the Connected Customer. 2022. Retrieved 13 September 2023.
[2] Panko, Riley. 5 Ways Businesses Can Improve Telephone Customer Service. Clutch. 27 April 2022. Retrieved 13 September 2023.
[3] Lanier, Saphia. The social media customer service statistics brands need to know in 2022. Sprout Social. 27 October 2022. Retrieved 13 September 2023.
[4] Salesforce. State of the Connected Customer. 2022. Retrieved 13 September 2023.

Reducing expenses while providing high-quality service

Human-to-human service is expensive, so call centers are trying to resolve more cases with less expensive, scalable automated or self-service solutions. But doing this while providing excellent service is difficult, because the majority (59%) of customers still prefer the phone over other channels[5], and most (61%) miss human interaction when using self-service[6]. Still, if faced with a choice between a lengthy hold time or going with an automated channel, four in five consumers say they would prefer the latter[7].

All of these different channels can cause frustration for customers if they need to move from automated systems to an agent, or work with additional agents, because so often they have to re-educate the company about their issue every time. Agents need to have complete information about the customer journey at their fingertips when they get on the phone or enter a chat. That includes information the customer may have given via an automated interaction.

But collecting this information, associating it with an individual **customer journey**, and presenting it to an agent in a useful format is no simple task. Companies typically offer various channels through which customers can seek support—phone, live chat, AI chat bot, email, social media, SMS text, and more—so there are many sources of information in many different formats. Agents either need to take notes during a call or the company must have an automated, typically AI-powered means of collecting data from the audio. Chatbots, text, and email information will all be in natural language. Dumping it all in a file and including prior agent notes, won't provide agents the information they need. They don't have time to read an entire file while the customer is on the line! It needs to be presented so the agent can grasp the situation in a matter of seconds.



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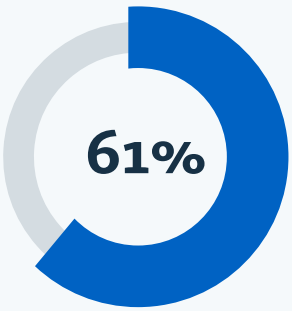

of customers miss human interaction when using self-service

consumers say they would prefer an automated channel to a lengthy hold time

[5] Salesforce. State of the Connected Customer. 2022. Retrieved 13 September 2023.
[6] Freshworks. Understanding the Complexity of Consumer Expectations. 2021. Retrieved 13 September 2023.
[7] Replicant. Survey: The Effects of Bad Customer Service and How Brands Can Fix It. 13 October 2021. Retrieved 13 September 2023.

Consistency and Omnichannel

Another challenge is the lack of consistency in policy application, procedures, and tools. Especially in large companies, agents overcome inefficiencies and other issues by coming up with unique solutions and employing alternative tools that may or may not be sanctioned by IT. In some call centers, these workarounds become Standard Operating Procedure.

Certainly, many of these workarounds may turn out to be innovations from which the entire organization can benefit. And even if the workarounds themselves aren't scalable, they likely point to areas that need improvement. Unaddressed, however, the differences in procedures and tools between call centers ultimately leads to an inconsistent experience and potential customer dissatisfaction.

Then there's the difficulty of retaining and training agents, which just over half of customer experience (CX) leaders say is their top challenge[8]. It's not hard to understand why. At any given time, more than three in 10 (31%) agents are actively looking for a new position[9], and the cost of losing, replacing, and training a single agent costs between $10,000 and $21,000.

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[8] Hanover Research. Customer Experience: 2030 Vision Report. 8x8. 11 May 2023. Retrieved 13 September 2023.
[9] Nice. Contact Centers - From Attrition to Retention: 2022 NICE WEM Global Survey. Retrieved 13 September 2023.

Metrics that support business goals

It's hard to get a sense of how call centers are performing, because it's difficult to determine which stats matter for determining success. Many popular stats aren't actually very useful.

For instance, many organizations use Net Promoter Score (NPS), but that's not really applicable to customer support. In a nutshell, NPS asks customers to rate on a ten-point scale how likely they would be to recommend a company's product or service to a friend or colleague. Does anyone actually share their experience and recommend a company's call center? It seems unlikely, so the question is artificial.

Another popular metric is the average or median call time, with the goal of reducing the amount of time spent on each call. It would seem this is a good measure, because the faster customer issues are resolved, the more calls an agent can handle, which increases productivity and lowers costs.

But reducing call duration isn't always a good strategy. Let's say a company successfully implants a self-service and AI chatbot strategy to resolve simple customer issues. As a result, agents will be tackling more complex cases, which will take longer to resolve, so median call time will increase. Just looking at the stat, it would appear that the call centers are under-performing, when in fact the company is using these expensive, valuable resources to their fullest capacity to focus almost exclusively on resolving hard problems.

Best practices for improving your call center experience

These challenges are not insurmountable. By following the following best practices, organizations can identify where they can make improvements to reduce costs and improve the customer experience for their call centers.

Learn how your call centers really operate

Before an organization can begin to address these challenges, the first step is to understand how its call centers *truly* work.

Begin by listening to calls to understand how the customer experiences your operations. Make sure to interview agents, not just supervisors and management, because what actually happens on the ground may be different from what managers perceive is happening. This way, you can discover how agents work and identify the barriers they face in providing accurate, timely solutions to customer problems.

Assess workflow across centers to map how cases are handled and handed off from one channel and agent to another. Creating a visual representation of the call center workflow will make it easier to identify bottlenecks and opportunities for optimization.

Once you've gathered all of this data, combine qualitative and quantitative data to get a holistic view. It's important to gather and synthesize both kinds of data. Quantitative data won't tell the whole story, and qualitative data doesn't have the statistical rigor of its counterpart.

Learn from your agents

Agents' spot solutions may have lessons for tool consolidation and process optimization that can be applied across the entire operation. After all, these agents are working on the front lines. Their experience and potential innovations are valuable—don't overlook them.

Enable omnichannel customer service

If you've not done this already, enabling omnichannel should be a top priority. It's not an easy lift. Implementing a seamless omnichannel customer service experience for customers is a complex technical task. It requires building out back-end systems to collect, analyze, and distribute data to multiple channels so customers have a consistent experience across channels. And if they leave one channel or have to move to another to solve their issue, when they return, they should be able to pick up right where they left off without having to tell their story yet again.

Most companies lack the internal expertise and/or resources to implement omnichannel customer support on their own, so it will likely require the assistance of a third-party technical expert to enable it effectively.

Use KPIs that truly reflect progress towards business goals

If the organization is trying to reduce costs per case, a basic metric like average call duration will not capture the entire story. Management will also need information on cases resolved through all other channels. These KPIs will be more complex to calculate but far more useful in showing the true health of the entire customer support operation because they capture the full context.

Once these KPIs are identified, make sure they are measured and tracked consistently. Also, make sure there's a plan in place to take corrective action when metrics veer in the wrong direction.

Success stories: Creating call center excellence

Every company has different business goals, so what works for one organization's call center network may not work for another. With this in mind, we'll look at two very different organizations we've worked with: a Fortune 100 telecommunications provider with tens of thousands of call center agents and a healthcare company that provides mental health and addiction services with no more than two dozen agents.

Empowering call center agents in a Fortune 100 company

The telecommunications provider needed to cut costs, which it hoped to accomplish by empowering agents with the customer information they needed when they needed it. Complicating matters, however, the provider was segmented into many different regional divisions and each served a different demographic. This meant they all had slightly different business goals and approaches.

To achieve their goals, the telecom provider partnered with us at Think Company, and we decided to form two separate, but highly collaborative teams. One team addressed the immediate needs of agents by improving navigation, adding functionality, and increasing accessibility. The other team took a long term view, designing features that would enable agents to communicate through chat and social media platforms. In this way, we could continuously improve the CMS platform for agents while creating a strategy for future enhancements that would create a more integrated view of the entire customer lifecycle.

Extensive research provided insight into how the customers' profile and needs differed from region to region, and the resulting data informed the creation of integrated resources for each agent, which decreased overall resolution time. And in 2020, when the pandemic required agents to work remotely, the telecom provider was able to rapidly build on their work to develop an interface for mobile devices.

Prioritizing personal relationships at a healthcare provider

The healthcare organization had very different needs. Certainly, the organization wanted to control costs, but their goal for customer service agents was to create relationships with patients who would often make recurring calls related to their treatment. **Research** was a large element of this project, because the healthcare company wanted to understand their patients and their needs.

After partnering with us, the healthcare organization discovered that agents needed to be able to input information more efficiently. Further, they needed more intuitive, faster access to data that would enable them to build stronger relationships, asking about their family or pets, for example. The solution involved **redesigning their Salesforce interface** to streamline the patient enrollment process, improve data input, and provide agents with the right information to solve call handling pain points.

After partnering with Think Company, the healthcare organization discovered that agents needed to be able to ***input information more efficiently****.*

Invest in a better call center experience and everyone wins

Controlling costs while improving call center service is a tall order, but it can be done. As these two examples demonstrate, though each call center's solution will be unique, there are themes and best practices that run through each. Begin by doing a deep dive into call center operations so you understand how they actually manage cases. Listen to your agents. Enable omnichannel. And create and track metrics that truly map progress towards your unique business goals.

If you'd like to learn more about how Think can help you overcome your call center challenges, our team of experts can help. **Let's talk**!

Think Company™