



Busting in the Contact Center: **What Customers Really Think**

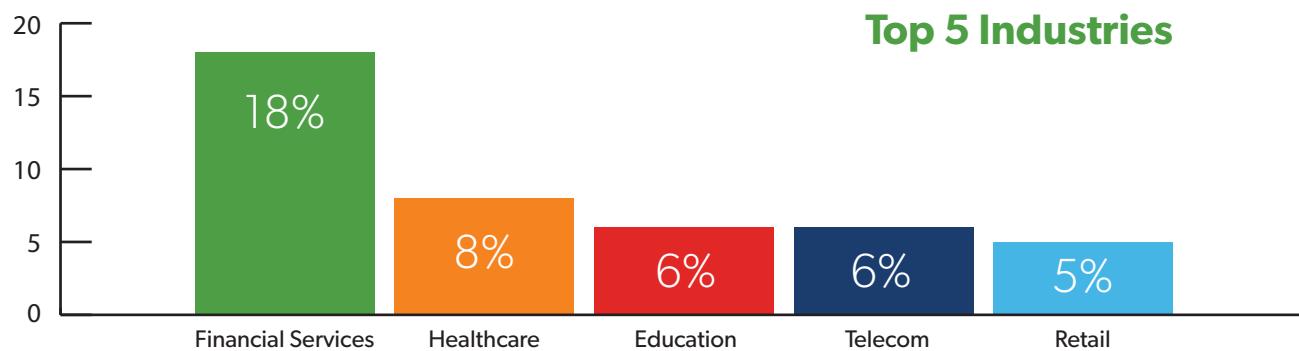


Myth Busting in the Contact Center: What Customers Really Think

As a contact center professional, you know your customers' most common questions, not to mention their complaints. You know what they think about your products and services. Perhaps more than anyone else in the company, you know what they expect.

Yet, according to our latest survey, there's still a significant difference between what organizations believe their customers want—and what those customers actually want.

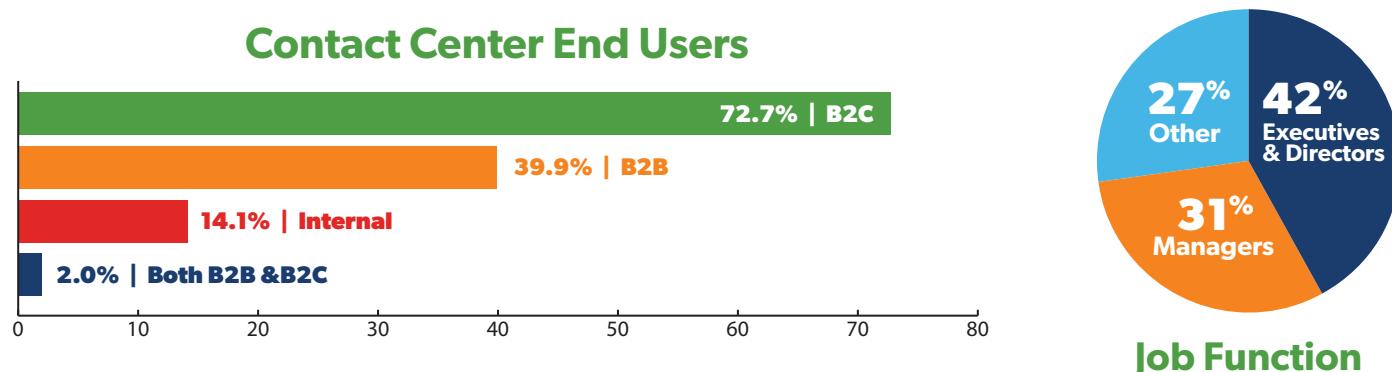
This summer, we surveyed contact centers from companies large and small, in the U.S. and abroad, to get their perspective on the customer experience. What do their customers consider most important, and do those priorities align with their team's priorities?



We received responses from nearly 600 contact center professionals. Then, we compared those responses to a recent Harris Poll, sponsored by inContact, which surveyed the customers themselves. The Harris Interactive study included 2,028 respondents (aged 18 and over) which the objective of gathering direct consumer insights about their online and phone purchase and service experiences during the busiest shopping months of the year. (August - January)

The bad news: There is a clear gap between what contact centers think and what customers think.

The good news: With the right knowledge, those same contact centers can easily adapt to their customers' expectations. Here, we shed some light on the topic.



WORKING IN DIFFERENT WORLDS

Contact center agents are typically the first to know what customers are asking for or complaining about. Nevertheless, our survey shows that they lack critical knowledge of what those customers expect. So, why the disconnect?

“If you’re on the front lines of a contact center, you’re hearing those customer insights first-hand, but that doesn’t always translate up to the top.”

One reason might be the difference in perceptions between front-line agents and their supervisors. Of the total respondents surveyed, the majority were managers, directors, and other executives who oversee customer service operations, rather than providing it directly.

“If you’re on the front lines of a contact center, you’re hearing those customer insights first-hand, but that doesn’t always translate up to the top,” says Tamara Beane, client manager for World Vision. “I don’t think it’s that companies don’t know about customer perceptions. It’s more that the right people—the decision makers—don’t know.”

Whether it’s between companies and their customers, or agents and their supervisors, the disconnect must end. Let’s start by presenting the facts...

Fact 1: Customers believe that companies put more effort into selling than they do providing excellent customer service.

Comparing the Harris Poll with the ICMI survey, four out of five of consumers (or 80 percent of respondents) agreed with this statement. Yet, only 12 percent of contact center professionals believed this statement was true.

Even if contact centers are making customer satisfaction a top priority, those customers aren’t getting the memo. “No matter how great the organization’s intentions are, their actions are still focused on making money above anything else, because that’s what customers are experiencing,” says Justin Robbins, community manager at ICMI.

By now, we've all heard about the infamous contact center agent who refused to end a customer's service. While this level of disrespect is unusual, it is also symptom of the "sales first" mentality within many organizations. When employees are getting paid to upsell, then that's what they will try their best to do.

"Some people believe that agent was abusive because he was using a script," says Robbins, "but it was also because they were holding him accountable for customer retention. His actions were a cry for help."

"We often get blinders on in the call center because we're required to sell something as part of the closing," adds Mike Granberry, a former call center director with Time Warner Cable. "If I'm a consumer who wants you to fix my cable box, and then you want me to add another service, I'm going to feel that."

Do you believe companies put more effort into selling than they do providing excellent customer service?



80%
of customers said yes



12%
of contact center professionals said yes

On one hand, a solution might be to segment the sales function from the customer service function. Some call centers handle this by directing customers to a different representative for sales pitches. So, creating separate siloes for those tasks can be a good strategy. But this silo approach can also be problematic for a consistent customer experience.

The best approach, says Robbins, is to train and hold employees accountable in both service and sales areas. "This will reduce contact time, build trust with customers, and create well-rounded experts within the company."

When it comes to the latter strategy, using talking points versus scripts can be an effective sales technique. "There's some freedom in that and it enables agents to have a natural conversation," says Beane at World Vision. "And even more importantly, you need to review and revise those talking points on a regular basis, with the goal of keeping them warm, considerate and genuine."

Regardless of the approach, organizations must remember that call center support is ultimately a way to encourage further sales, says Randy Rubingh, business author and StubHub's senior director of customer service. "If you look at service as a sales function, that can go a long way toward improving the customer's overall experience."

Fact 2: Customers are very likely to switch companies if they have a bad customer service experience.

Can one bad experience impact customer loyalty? Nearly 90 percent of customers give an overwhelming "yes." Meanwhile, less than 20 percent of contact center respondents believe customers will jump ship.

What accounts for this difference of opinions? One likely reason is that call center professionals know how hard it can be for customers to switch, especially when it comes to cable, phone, or utilities in areas with limited options.

Nowadays, though, more competition is always on the horizon. Robbins gives the example of electricity deregulation in Pennsylvania. Until 2011, the state's residents didn't have much of a choice between electricity companies. But after just one year of deregulation, 25 percent of customers had switched to alternative suppliers.

Would you switch companies after one bad customer experience?



From alternative energy to car sharing to streaming TV, the competition is building in almost every industry, says Beane. "As these services become more accessible, and more promoted, companies without excellent service will lose big."

At the same time, recent Forrester research shows that customers are much happier when they have the option to switch services. In response, phone and related companies are moving away from contracts, unlocking their customer relationship and relying on great service as the differentiator.

"We get too focused on other metrics because they are easier to fix. Quality is the toughest one to tackle," says Granberry. "You need a robust, internal quality program where it's a partnership between the supervisor and agent, listening to calls together."

It's also helpful to know how many customers are sticking around. Yet, based on the 2015 ICMI report, 44.3 percent of companies are not measuring customer retention. While nearly 80 percent are measuring customer satisfaction, almost half of them have no idea if they're customers are staying loyal.

Fact 3: Customers expect companies to let them choose their follow-up or proactive communication options.

Between text, phone, email, chat, mobile apps, and social media, there certainly isn't a shortage of communication channels. However, a lot of companies continue to force customers into one or two traditional channels, rather than letting them choose what they want. Results from our survey show that 86 percent of customers are looking for more contact choices, but only 37 percent of contact centers think this is true.

More specifically, the majority of customers expect at least six channels of communication to be available, according to the 2015 inContact/Harris Poll. In addition, those customers expect both agent-assisted and self-service channels to be available.

Customers that expect companies to let them choose follow-up or proactive communication options:

87%

Contact center leaders that think customers want to choose follow-up or proactive communication options:

37%

Now more than ever, consumers expect a personalized service experience. This means the ability to set their own channel preferences for proactive or follow-up communications. "How may we contact you?" is a question that matters to customers.

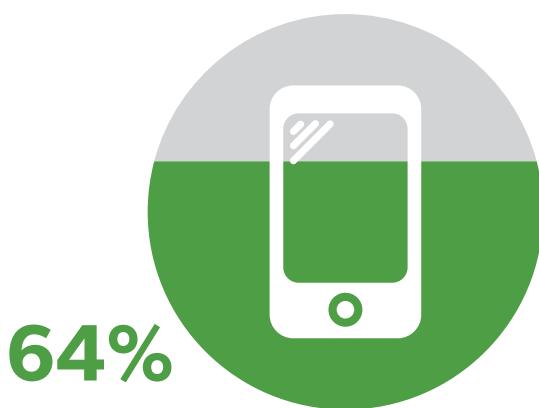
"A lot of organizations don't even ask that question, and the rest of them offer only one channel," says Robbins with ICMI. "Customers want some way of staying in contact, but they also want a choice. For instance, when they're traveling on business, text might be preferable to yet another email or voicemail."

Fact 4: Customers expect to be able to contact the same company representative across channels and repeat contacts.

In the Harris Poll, 64 percent of customers said they expect to continue talking to the same agent on the phone as they were via online chat. And two-thirds (67 percent) expect to call the same company representative they worked with previously on an order or service issue.

Nobody likes repeating their problem to multiple agents, so it's easy to empathize with customers. It's also easy to empathize with the majority of contact center professionals (about 80 percent) who disagreed with this statement.

QUESTION: Do you expect to be able to continue talking to same rep on the phone as you were via online chat?



of customers said yes



of contact centers thought the answer was yes

Unless you're a small business with limited customer calls, dedicating one agent to each customer is simply not feasible. Plus, it may not serve the customer's needs, since different agents specialize in different areas.

What is feasible is doing everything you can to make each interaction as seamless as possible. If you've ever had to explain the same issue to multiple representatives, you already know the frustration that happens as a result.

"As a customer, my time is invaluable to me, and that's what is driving these numbers," says Robbins. "Honestly, I don't care who I talk to, I just don't want to have to explain myself more than once."

Fortunately, there are a lot of tools to help. Make sure you have intelligent routing in place. Find out what the problem is, and direct that customer to the right group of agents. In addition, you need software that tracks the case history. And of course, each agent must take detailed notes, and the next agent needs time to review those notes.

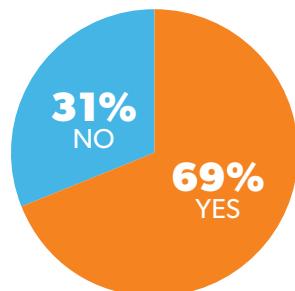
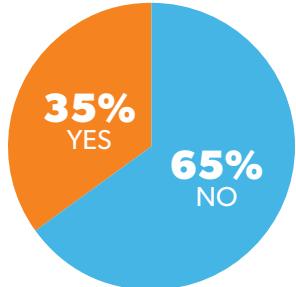
Ultimately, how can I remove the barriers and give my agents the tools and insights they need to make the customer experience seamless? To stay competitive, that's a question that every decision maker in every contact center needs to ask, answer, and act upon.

Fact 5: Customers are willing to pay more for a product or service with a good customer service reputation.

If this final fact seems implausible to you, you're not alone. Only 35 percent of contact center respondents agreed with this statement, versus nearly 70 percent of customers. And the customer service experts we interviewed had a hard time believing it, too.

"Service reputation is a factor and price is a factor, but you can only go so far on charging more for good customer service," says Rubingh.

QUESTION: Are you willing to pay more for a product or service with a good customer service reputation?



QUESTION: Do you think customers are willing to pay more for a product or service with a good customer service reputation?

"Customers always want the lowest price possible, so I don't see them paying extra for customer service," adds Granberry. "They expect good service across companies, so they're looking for that, plus the best deal."

Like every question, the answer depends on who you ask. But based on our research, it's clear that customers place a premium on great service. For some customers, that might mean 24/7 online support. For others, it might mean faster shipping with a flexible return policy. Every customer is different, but if you're listening to them, some clear trends will emerge in terms of what they value most.

EXPECT THE BEST

Consumer behaviors and expectations are clearly shifting. So it only makes sense that the methods and metrics used in contact centers need to shift, too.

"We don't get the 'simple questions' anymore," notes Rubingh. "Now the questions are more complex, because anything that's easy will be addressed online. Customers expect the representative to be more knowledgeable than ever before."

Therefore, companies must invest in their agents with the level of respect and authority they deserve, says Robbins. "We owe it to our customers and ourselves that contact center agents are well-trained, and that they have the authority to do their jobs," he says.

“ We don't get the simple questions anymore. Customers expect the representative to be more knowledgeable than ever before. ”

Those companies also need to invest in the right tools for the job. "Our software makes it easy for agents to keep track of each customer's history, issues, and overall journey," says Madelyn Gengelbach, VP of Strategic Marketing at inContact. "As a result, those agents are able to truly empathize with the customer, and provide the service they expect."

Meeting those expectations all starts by putting the customer's experience first. "We need to stop asking, 'how do we fit this customer in the box we need them to so we can keep our systems in place?' Instead, we should be adapting our systems to fit our customers' needs," says Beane. "We need to focus less on process and focus more on relationships."

About ICMI

The International Customer Management Institute (ICMI) is the leading global provider of comprehensive resources for customer management professionals — from frontline agents to executives — who wish to improve customer experiences and increase efficiencies at every level of the contact center. Since 1985, ICMI has helped more than 50,000 organizations in 167 countries through training, events, consulting, and informational resources. ICMI's experienced and dedicated team of industry insiders, trainers, and consultants are committed to helping you raise the strategic value of your contact center, optimize your operations, and improve your customer service. ICMI is a part of UBM plc (ubm.com), a global events-led marketing services and communications company.

About inContact

inContact (NASDAQ: SAAS) is the cloud contact center software leader, helping organizations around the globe create customer and contact center employee experiences that are more personalized, more empowering and more engaging today, tomorrow and in the future. inContact continuously innovates in the cloud and is the only provider to offer core contact center infrastructure, workforce optimization plus an enterprise-class telecommunications network for the most complete customer journey management. Winner of the 2014 CRM Magazine Rising Star Award, inContact has deployed over 2,000 cloud contact center instances. To learn more, visit incontact.com.