

Customers still like personal interaction in a digital world

A new study from Verint and Opinium Research reveals that customer experience (CX) is considerably more nuanced than many businesses realise and they should focus on both traditional and digital interactions if they hope to keep up with South African customers.



Marije Gould, Verint VP of marketing EMEA.

Presenting the data to attendees of Customer Experience World at the Southern Sun Montecasino in Johannesburg, Verint VP of marketing EMEA Marije Gould urged companies not to forget the human touch.

“Digital channels such as websites, email and self-service portals are almost as prominent as telephonic conversations to resolve simple enquiries. However, once a complex query is involved, customers reach for the phone or head to a local branch. When the going gets tougher, we want a human to talk to.”

The study revealed that South African customers are very in favour of personal interactions:

- 86% of consumers in South Africa want direct person contact to remain part of customer service
- 83% of consumers in South Africa do not like dealing with companies that do not provide a phone number on their website
- 80% of consumers in South Africa prefer human customer service interactions to digital alternatives

Digital disruption changing business

“Digital disruption is changing business. The rise of smartphones and the mobile web has helped organisations reach customers and audience segments they never thought possible. Yet, while digital services may have created new opportunities for organisations, it is not without its challenges. The organisations that embrace digital may be on the pathway to success but those who do so at the expense of traditional customer service, risk falling behind.

“Some of the key findings in our research show that while cost is certainly an incentive for brands looking to adopt digital methods and automate elements of their customer service, it may come at a price. Organisations that rely too much on digital channels risk missing ongoing and meaningful relationships with customers. Overall, our research highlights that consumers want a human element to remain part of customer service, the complexity of the request heavily influences whether a customer will choose a digital or traditional channel, organisations are aware of the importance of the human touch in customer service, yet most business leaders are planning to implement more digital service options.”

Age is a factor

According to Gould, there is universal support across all ages for telephonic and person-to-person interactions. However, this is not a case of choosing one over the other. Customers are not shying away from digital channels. Self-service portals rival phone calls when someone seeks to investigate new products, manage their account or give positive feedback. There is also a generational distinction: people under the age of 50 are more drawn toward self-service portals and apps than older customers are.

“Digital channels bring the business world closer to audiences and 8 out of 10 customers want more personalised touches to their services, a number that has grown substantially since the previous year. The vast majority also noted that they would use digital channels more often, if the systems were intuitive and faster. South Africans, choosing the phone instead of the web, may be doing so in response to poor online interfaces.”

Security, trust head up worries

Companies must listen across multiple channels if they hope to create the best customer experience. However, this focus on personal services adds a massive responsibility: customers have a very high level of interest around how secure their information is. Nearly 90% of all the respondents rated this as very important and only marginally fewer wanted to know if their information could be accessed by third parties.

“Clearly, maintaining trust is key. The data that companies gather along the way is valuable and will lead to greater success if used correctly, if treated with respect and protected with the highest standard of security solutions. If not, the risk is great.”

“Customer interactions are reaching a tipping point into the digital world. Nevertheless, more traditional touchpoints, such as the telephone and branch visits, are not being left behind. Instead, the scope of interactions is expanding. Companies must be prepared to explore the new avenues, learn proactively about their customers and not leave security arrangements and assurances as afterthoughts.”

Level of complexity alters contact point

“Interacting with a brand or service provider can be complicated, and it requires empathy, emotional intelligence and ability to process information with a broad set of parameters. When we take into account the complexity of a request, we start to see more scenarios where digital customer service becomes the preference.

“When asked how they would interact with their service providers in a fairly simple customer service request, 64% of consumers will choose digital channels. While the phone is the most popular option (22%), email comes a close second (19%), while online account management (13%) and web self-service (12%) round out the most popular channels for simple requests.

“As the requests become more complicated, the reliance on human interaction becomes even greater. For complex enquiries, 60% of consumers will choose human interaction. Phone is the most popular (36%), while going in store ranks second (24%), still way ahead of the leading digital channel – email – with 10%. When the request is considered complicated, more than two third (67%) of consumers prefer human customer service. More than a third (34%) goes in store, while the phone comes next (33%). The nearest digital channel is email at 7%.

“However, when we look at very specific customer service situations, we start to see digital tools become more prominent and the relationship between complexity and dependence on human interaction becomes clearer.

“Communication is the beating heart of humanity, yet technology is increasing the ways we go about it. If you want to keep hearing what your customers have to say, never stop asking how they would like to be heard,” Gould concluded.

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