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The Future of Customer Support

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From SMS to speech analytics, the next generation of customer support will help companies deliver a better customer experience.

It's no secret: As technology has grown, attention spans have shrunk. Instead of novels, for instance, consumers today read tweets. Instead of two-hour films, they watch six-second Vines. And instead of shopping with just one brand, they shop with many.

In fact, more than half of consumers (56 percent) say that the number of brands they consider has increased significantly over the past 10 years, and 46 percent say they are more likely to switch providers today than they were 10 years ago, according to Accenture, which values the "switching economy"—the potential revenue up for grabs in the United States due to changes in consumer spending patterns and switching rates—at \$1.6 trillion, an increase of 29 percent since 2010.

"Many established companies are reacting too slowly to the needs of today's 'non-stop customers,' and consequently, they are seeing both a customer exodus and a decrease in their revenue potential," says Robert Wollan, senior managing director, Accenture Strategy. "While many companies have been chasing the

opportunity digital brings, they have not addressed the root causes of the problems that are exposed when they don't execute well. Companies have been focused only on 'doing the same things better' when these issues really require them to 'do things differently.'"

This is especially true in the realm of customer support, observes Maxwell Luthy, director of trends and insights at New York-based trend firm TrendWatching. "It's a more competitive landscape out there," he says. "There's been a pretty massive shift in corporate culture from thinking that maximizing shareholder value is the be-all, end-all of existing as a business to understanding that maximizing your offering for consumers will benefit all stakeholders—whether they're shareholders, employees or customers. Because of this, I 100 percent believe that customer service and customer experience are becoming more important to businesses. And rightly so."

Their newfound importance means that customer support, service and experience will evolve rapidly in the next two to five years as companies embrace new technologies, channels and strategies in order to take advantage of the swelling switching economy. Here are nine predictions for what the future holds:

1. Companies will press "play" on video support.

Thanks to FaceTime and Skype, consumers are used to video chatting with their friends and family. In the near future, they'll also expect to video chat with brands, according to Luthy, who points out that 75 percent of Kindle Fire HDX users who require tech support seek it by using the Amazon tablet's "Mayday" button, which offers live on-screen video customer support 24 hours a day.

“If you can FaceTime your mother-in-law, you’re going to start to wonder why you can’t FaceTime your bank manager. So, I think you’re going to see a lot more video connection between businesses and customers in the coming years,” predicts Luthy.

Video will have implications not only for IT, but also for staffing and training. “I think video is very powerful for certain help-desk applications, but it’s going to bring about some very interesting workplace questions,” explains Scott Sachs, president of SJS Solutions LLC, a contact center consultancy based in Malvern, Pa. “It’s going to take a different type of individual to provide good customer service. You’re going to have to educate your workforce, for instance, because non-verbal cues are very, very powerful; from a quality perspective, rolling your eyes or smirking during a call could all of a sudden be considered poor performance. Likewise, someone who has purple hair and three earrings might not be the best person if they’re going to be talking to senior citizens. There are some very interesting dynamics that companies are going to have to figure out.”

2. SMS support will soar.

Video isn’t the only channel that’s poised for growth. SMS text messaging also is ripe with opportunity, according to Sachs.

“I’m not sure why SMS hasn’t taken off yet, because watching my kids—everything is SMS and texting,” he says. “If I’m sitting on an airplane and my flight’s delayed, why can’t I send a text message to ABC Airlines real quickly to find out when the next flight is versus calling the airline or searching their website? Something’s missing there, so I think there’s a huge opportunity in the next few years for SMS to establish itself as a channel for customer support.”

3. Data will give brands a 'sixth sense.'

Companies are adopting a wealth of technologies—including social media, GPS, iBeacons, mobile apps, wearables, smartphone “sniffers” and facial recognition, just to name a few—capable of collecting consumer data. Companies in the next few years will learn to leverage that data not only to respond to customer service inquiries, but also to predict them, suggests Luthy suggests, who says customer will demand to have the same experience interacting with customer service reps that they have shopping with e-tailers like Amazon—which knows your identity and purchase history every time you visit its website.

“Customers won’t tolerate brands that have impersonal service, so companies will need to develop a sixth sense about their users,” Luthy says. “If I call to make a complaint, by the time the customer service rep answers the phone they’ll already know what my complaint is going to be because they’ll know what my history is, what my preferences are, etc.”

The Holy Grail, according to Sachs, will be preventative customer service. “The potential is there to understand the customer journey,” he says. “By having ‘big data’ you can see where the customer started their trip with an organization and determine the who, what, where and why that leads to customer service issues in the first place, then try to improve them.”

4. Customer support will continue its migration to the cloud.

The rise of cloud-based services has made multi-channel customer service and support as accessible to small and medium-sized companies as it is to large companies—and will continue to do so in the immediate future, according to Sachs.

“In the old days you needed a chunk of money up front—whether it be \$100,000 or \$1 million—to buy all the hardware and software for a contact center,” he says. “With the cloud environment, you have access to these tools for \$80 a month per seat. And you no longer have to go to one company for voice, one company for chat, one company for email; they’re all integrated. As a result, companies that never had customer service organizations can now have them.”

5. Speech analytics will grow in popularity.

Sachs thinks more companies in the next few years will deploy speech analytics within their customer service organizations. The tools—which collect and analyze audio data in order to detect things like customer emotion and stress, the reason for the call, products mentioned, etc.—can help companies quickly identify consumers’ needs, wants and expectations, then work to address them.

“If you send 100 calls to your CEO where a customer says, ‘I want to cancel,’ all of a sudden there’s going to be some attention to whatever the root cause is of customers’ issues,” Sachs says. “Speech analytics is such a fabulous tool to find out or flush out across the whole organization where functional issues exist.”

6. Customer experience will become a democracy.

Customer service increasingly will become a two-way street, predicts Luthy, who says brands like Uber have pioneered the practice of democratized customer experience by allowing drivers to rate passengers in the same way that passengers can rate drivers.

“Often, the greatest impact on the customer experience is other customers,” Luthy says. “Because platforms like eBay, Airbnb and Uber have two-way transparency, people are beginning to understand that they have a responsibility to ensure better service not just for themselves, but for everyone. So, we’re seeing more businesses reward polite customers and punish impolite users to improve the customer experience and customer service, and you can expect to see more unique takes on that in the future.”

7. Consumers will expect a strong finish.

In the future, the most important leg of the customer journey might just be the last leg, according to Luthy.

“E-commerce is booming, with 75 percent growth in U.S. e-commerce spending is expected by 2019,” he says. “A lot of the products and services we’re buying online are physical and need to be delivered. Brands are going to be competing at this last touch point of delivery, so companies going forward are going to need to deliver a little more than the goods. In terms of customer service your strategy should be to go the extra mile at the last mile by making it very easy for people to return your products, making sure your products show up in the best condition possible and perhaps even bundling in surprises that wow your customer when they receive their package.”

8. More companies will appoint Customer Experience Officers.

To oversee all of these trends, and others, a growing number of companies will appoint C-level customer service executives—Chief Customer Officers, Customer Experience Officers, etc.—Sachs predicts. Whether these positions will stick, however, is an unanswered question.

“It will be very interesting to see what happens with the Customer Experience Officer,” Sachs says. “Will they be just a flavor of the month, like many of the other quality movements we’ve seen over the past few years? Or will this person really own an end-to-end process—starting at customer awareness and continuing through customer attrition—and be able to make and own a budget where they can invest in the right areas to make the customer journey better? Right now it’s a big question mark.”

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