Top CX Hurdles for Consumers and Contact Center Agents, and How to Fix Them

Based on surveys of thousands of consumers and customer service representatives

The verdict is in. According to Forrester’s 2016 US Customer Experience (CX) Index Report¹, consumers said that only 1 percent of US businesses deliver excellent customer service. The same research found that the state of CX remained stagnant among Canadian businesses, and none of the UK companies received an excellent score. Dwarfing road rage, tech support rage is not uncommon these days, as eloquently described by a recent New York Times article².

So, what could be the reasons for this? We decided to find out by simply asking. Our approach was to follow the pain in the customer service chain, along the lines of the Harvard Business Review article³, “Staple Yourself To An Order,” which focuses on the order management cycle and how it impacts CX.

WE STARTED WITH CONSUMERS FIRST. We asked 5,000 of them through Forrester Consulting what created the biggest pain point in the process of getting customer service from businesses across retail, communication service providers, banking and financial services, property and casualty insurance, health insurance, healthcare providers, utilities, and government. Allowed to pick up to two options, consumers cited the following three as their top pain points:

- Different customer service agents give different answers (41 percent)
- Customer service agents don’t know the answer (34 percent)
- I can’t find an answer on the company’s website (31 percent)

Following the trail of CX pain, we set out to understand WHY CONTACT CENTER AGENTS WERE NOT ABLE TO DELIVER KNOWLEDGEABLE AND CONSISTENT CUSTOMER SERVICE. We asked more than 2,000 agents through SurveyMonkey⁴ what caused the biggest pain in answering questions/resolving problems/executing a service process when they had a customer on the line. Their challenges, based on 615 responses, were in this order:

- Finding the right answers to customer questions (26 percent)

² https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/04/technology/why-tech-support-is-purposely-unbearable.html?_r=0
³ https://hbr.org/2004/07/staple-yourself-to-an-order
Different systems/information sources give different answers (25 percent)
Hopping from one application/window to another (20 percent)
Hard to keep up with all the new information/changes they need to know about (14 percent)
Other issues (15 percent)

Not so surprisingly, the top agent hurdles virtually mirrored those of consumers—after all, the experience chain is not that different from a manufacturing supply chain. The root cause of the challenges on both the agent side and the consumer side is the lack of an intelligent and unified omnichannel knowledge management (KM) system that can deliver fast, accurate, and consistent answers regardless of touchpoint—voice, digital, in-person, etc. The following best practices will help improve the odds of success of a KM system:

- Start with the 80-20 Pareto principle, developing answers for the most frequently asked questions
- Go beyond just documents and content to make answers easily findable for customers and agents by providing a variety of search options based on keywords, natural language, faceted search, etc.
- Leverage artificial intelligence (AI)-based reasoning to walk the customer or agent step by step to answers for complex questions or to guide them through service processes, just like a doctor would diagnose a health issue by conversing methodically with a patient
- Deploy the same consistent knowledge across all customer touchpoints
- Make sure to address people, process, and culture issues so the organization is committed to a sustained KM program for customer service excellence

Done right, KM delivers transformational benefits such as improvements in first-contact resolution, average handle time, average speed to answer, and speed to competency for agents. Moreover, many companies have experienced benefits specific to their industry. Here are some examples:

- Banking and financial services firms and healthcare companies have improved compliance with industry regulations that apply to customer service
- Telecom companies have reduced unwarranted handset returns and exchanges through better knowledge-enabled problem resolution for the consumer on their websites or through their contact centers
- Manufacturing companies have reduced unwarranted field service truck rolls the same way, while improving first visit resolution by leveraging knowledge to recommend the right spare parts and tools to make their first visit fruitful

In short, with a successful KM initiative, excellence in CX and AX (agent experience) will no longer be elusive. It will be ensured!

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