CONTACTBABEL

The Inner Circle Guide to Omnichannel

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Serenova®

The Inner Circle Guide to Omnichannel (UK) - 2nd edition

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Serenova helps contact centres harness the power of the cloud for seamless customer experiences. By drastically reducing the complexity and frustration associated with multiple legacy tools, Serenova delivers first-class insights into data and performance.

With the industry's most massively open API architecture, Serenova's customers can effortlessly integrate with existing systems and instantly scale to meet demand, without sacrificing performance, reliability, or security.

Only Serenova lets businesses rapidly deploy an always-on, highly secure, true multi-tenant and instantly scalable contact centre solution using a pay-as-you-go model. From small shops to global enterprises, Serenova puts organizations in command of the customer experience with a smart, powerful, and reliable omnichannel contact centre platform.

Contact:

Serenova Headquarters

7300 Ranch Road 222, Bldg. III, Ste. 200

Austin, TX 78730

Phone: +1 (800) 411-4700

Serenova UK

Abbey House, 1650 Arlington Business Park

Theale, Reading RG7 4SA

Phone: +44 (020) 3006 8280

w: www.serenova.com

e: info@serenova.com

Twitter: http://twitter.com/serenovashine

LinkedIn: https://www.linkedin.com/company/serenova

Headquartered in Austin, Texas, Serenova also has operations in Canada, the United Kingdom and Australia.

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LEARN MORE
US: +1 (800) 411-4700
UK: +44 (020) 3006 8280
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Deliver Powerful Customer Experiences with **Serenova**

Serenova enables contact centres to deliver powerful customer experiences with our highly secure, instantly scalable, omnichannel CCaaS platform.

With Serenova, your customers can interact in the channel of their choice, reducing frustration and improving their experience. And Serenova reduces the complexity and frustration associated with multiple legacy tools while providing deep insights into contact centre performance.

> "Companies with the strongest omnichannel customer engagement strategies retain an average of 89% of their customers, as compared to 33% for companies with weak omnichannel strategies."
>
> **— Aberdeen**

INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

"The Inner Circle Guide to Omnichannel" is one of the Inner Circle series of ContactBabel reports. Other subjects include Cloud-based Contact Centres, Self-Service, Outbound & Call Blending, Workforce Optimisation, Customer Interaction Analytics and PCI DSS Compliance, and can be downloaded free of charge from here.

The Inner Circle Guides are a series of analyst reports investigating key customer contact solutions. The Guides aim to give a detailed and definitive view of the reality of the implementing and using these technologies, and a view on what the future holds.

As well as explaining these solutions to the readers, we have also asked the potential users of these solutions whether they have any questions or comments, and we have selected six of the most popular to ask to the report's sponsor. These branded Q&A elements are distributed throughout the report and give interesting insight into real-life issues.

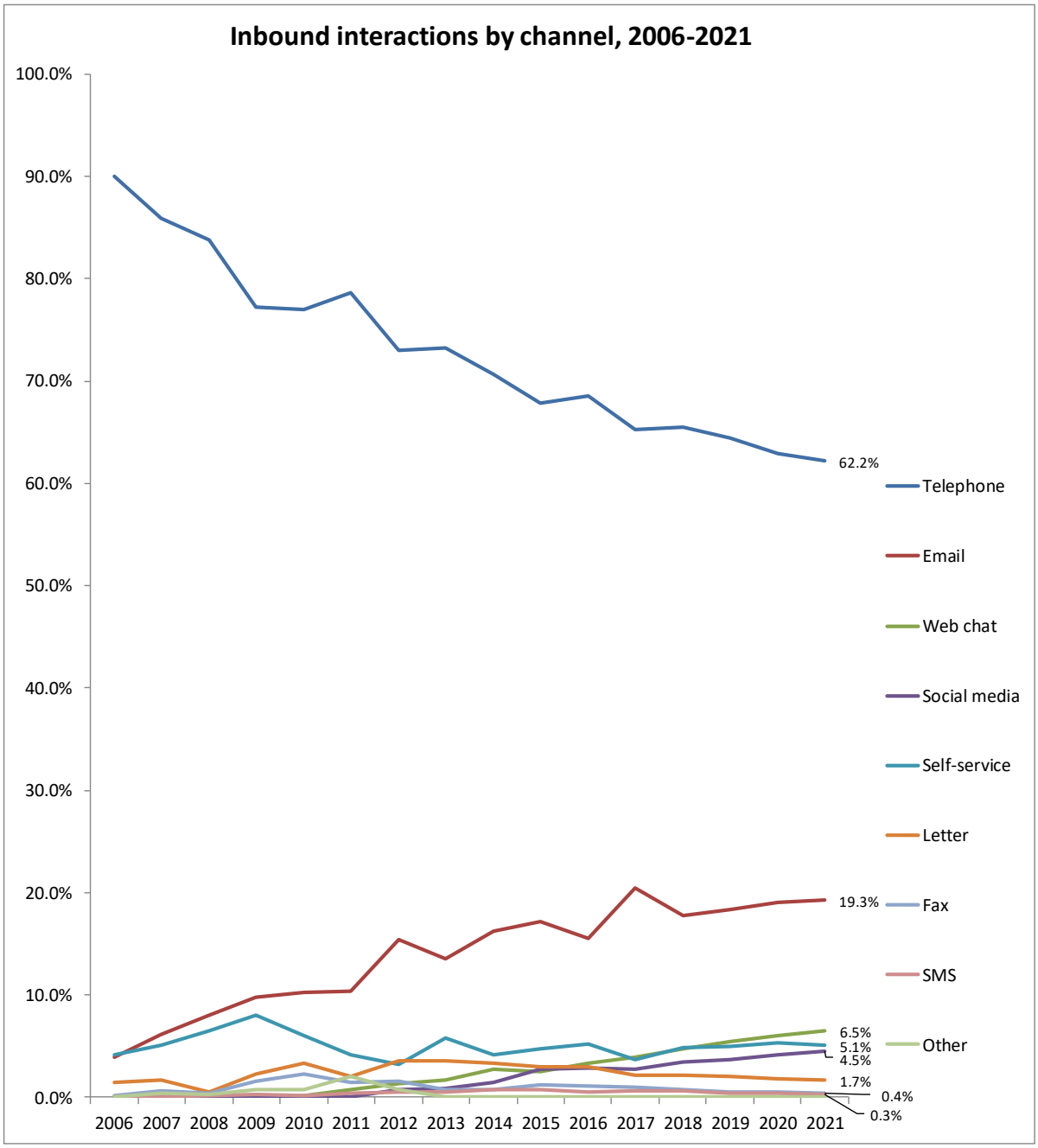
Statistics within this report refer to the UK industry, unless stated otherwise. There is a version of this report available for download from www.contactbabel.com with equivalent US statistics.

"Small" contact centres are defined in the report as having 50 or fewer agent positions; "Medium" 51-200 agent positions; and "Large" 200+ agent positions.

CHANNEL USAGE: PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

The following chart shows the proportion of inbound interactions by channel since 2006, with predictions shown until the end of 2021. The most obvious thing to note is that telephony has declined from 90%, and that email has risen to around 20%. Non-telephony communication accounts for over one third of inbound interactions in UK contact centres, showing that the capability to handle both voice and non-voice communication effectively is vital for the industry: hence, omnichannel.

Figure 1: Contact centre inbound interactions by channel, 2006-2021



Year	Telephone	Email	Web chat	Social media	Self-service	Letter	Fax	SMS	Other
2006	90.0%	3.9%	0.1%	0.0%	4.2%	1.5%	0.2%	0.1%	0.0%
2007	85.9%	6.1%	0.1%	0.0%	5.1%	1.7%	0.6%	0.1%	0.4%
2008	83.8%	8.0%	0.3%	0.0%	6.5%	0.5%	0.4%	0.2%	0.3%
2009	77.2%	9.8%	0.1%	0.0%	8.0%	2.3%	1.6%	0.3%	0.7%
2010	77.0%	10.2%	0.2%	0.0%	6.0%	3.3%	2.3%	0.2%	0.8%
2011	78.7%	10.4%	0.7%	0.0%	4.2%	2.1%	1.4%	0.4%	2.1%
2012	73.0%	15.4%	1.3%	0.7%	3.2%	3.6%	1.6%	0.5%	0.7%
2013	73.2%	13.5%	1.7%	0.9%	5.8%	3.6%	0.8%	0.5%	0.0%
2014	70.7%	16.2%	2.7%	1.4%	4.2%	3.3%	0.8%	0.7%	0.0%
2015	67.8%	17.2%	2.5%	2.8%	4.8%	3.0%	1.2%	0.7%	0.0%
2016	68.5%	15.5%	3.3%	2.9%	5.2%	3.0%	1.1%	0.5%	0.0%
2017	65.3%	20.5%	3.9%	2.8%	3.7%	2.2%	1.0%	0.6%	0.0%
2018	*65.5%*	*17.8%*	*4.8%*	*3.4%*	*4.9%*	*2.2%*	*0.8%*	*0.6%*	*0.0%*
2019	*64.5%*	*18.4%*	*5.4%*	*3.7%*	*5.0%*	*2.1%*	*0.5%*	*0.4%*	*0.0%*
2020	*62.9%*	*19.0%*	*6.0%*	*4.1%*	*5.3%*	*1.8%*	*0.5%*	*0.4%*	*0.0%*
2021	*62.2%*	*19.3%*	*6.5%*	*4.5%*	*5.1%*	*1.7%*	*0.4%*	*0.3%*	*0.0%*

The number of inbound calls that agents handle is expected to decline slightly in the next four years as call lengths increase and simple interactions continue to move off the live voice channel. The easier, more transactional contacts will be increasingly handled through web self-service (computer and mobile), web chat or social media, meaning the average voice interaction will be a more complex process, requiring longer to handle successfully, a pattern that has already emerged.

The rise in social media and web chat interactions means that the overall number of interactions will not decline as quickly, but the widespread use of self-service and expected investment in service automation in the digital channels will mean overall live interactions decline slightly.

Figure 2: Relative changes in inbound channels, 2017-2021

Inbound channel	Compound annual growth rate (CAGR), 2017-21
Inbound voice (minutes)	-2.0%
Inbound voice (number of calls)	-2.4%
Email	4.6%
Self-service (telephone)	-0.1%
Web chat	15.5%
Social media	8.4%
Inbound agent positions	-0.7%
Overall inbound interactions	-0.5%

Contact Centre 2.0: Enabling Customer Service in the Digital Era

Today's consumer has changed the ways in which they expect to engage with companies. While long-established channels such as the telephone, email, and company websites are still the most used, many consumers now prefer to use a myriad of new technologies including text messages, chat, and social media. Ignoring these new channels – and not being able to connect these channels throughout the customer experience – exposes companies to the risk that some customers will choose not to do business with them.

At a time when customer expectations have never been higher, getting it right is more important than ever. With the shift of media consumption and digital behaviour, businesses must ask - are we delivering the kind of customer service that allows our customers to communicate in the way they want and the way they are growing accustomed? For example, if a consumer sends an email and then follows up with a call, will the agent who receives the call know that the customer has already reached out for help or what was done on their behalf? Besides being time consuming and expensive to the business, the organisation now must address the same customer issue more than once - it makes customers unhappy and sends a message that they are not important to your organisation.

Contact Centres MUST Evolve to Address the Need for Omnichannel

To keep pace with this, contact centres are evolving to allow agents and customers to seamlessly pivot interactions from channel to channel and across devices, with all the data, context – and experience – intact. Enabling a true omnichannel customer journey capability means that agents are able to see the path a customer has taken to reach them, provides them knowledge of the customer's personal situation, and allows them to identify the best approach to address a customer's concern based on historical data without having to go through the extensive practice of manually obtaining information such as name, phone, account number, and reason for call.

Companies who have made the commitment overwhelmingly report that the benefits to customer relationships and organisational alignment far outweigh the required effort. To realize these benefits, below are a few tips to get your omnichannel strategy started:

1. ***Analyse your customers*** - You want to be where your customers are. Ask how they would like to be contacted – either via email or phone discussion, what social communities and online tools they use. Monitor social channels to see where your brand is being discussed the most.

2. ***Roll out new channels thoughtfully*** - Take the time to make sure the initial customer experiences are positive ones. Train agents so they know how to take on the new channel or channels.

3. ***Involve the agents early*** - To make a new approach in the contact centre successful, you must have agent buy-in.

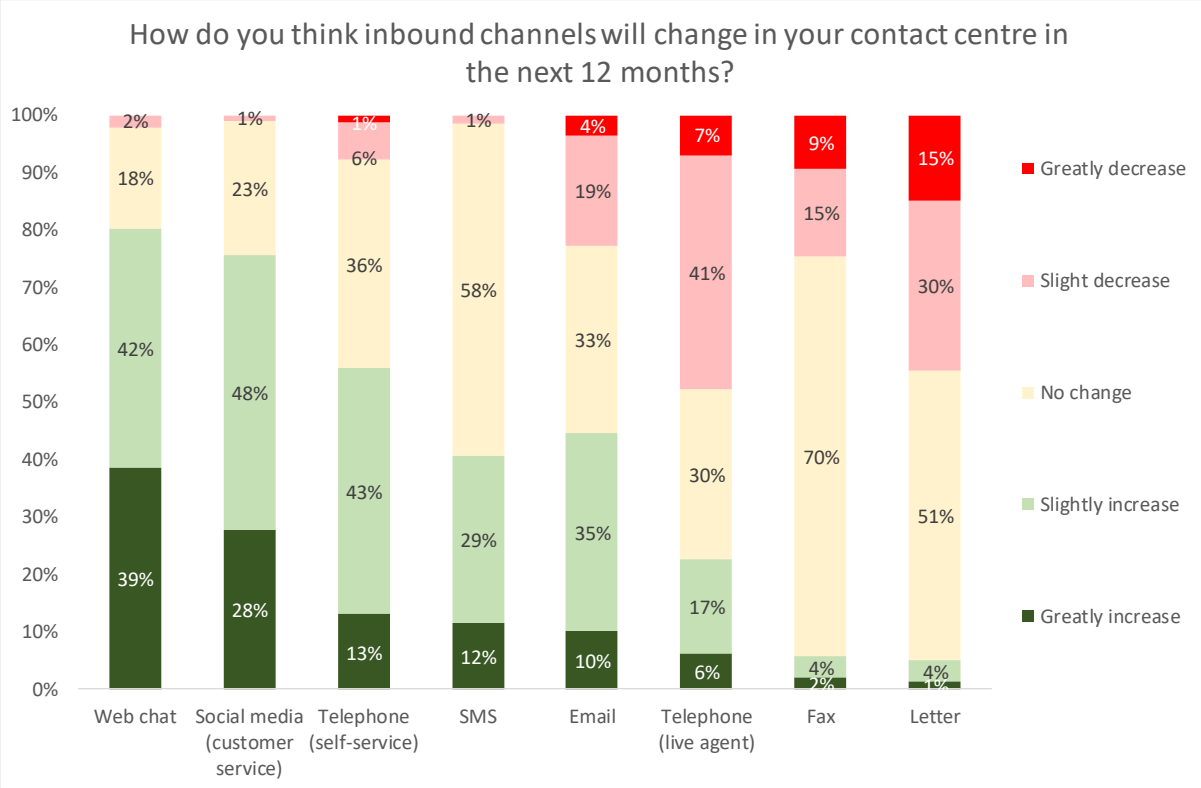
4. ***Implement the right tools and technologies*** - You'll need a scalable platform that supports every channel: phone, email, live chat, SMS, social and whatever comes next. Ideally, every channel will be viewable and accessible on one screen for seamless pivots.

5. ***Be selective about the agent desktop*** - The best approach is to be very aggressive about what applications end up on the agent desktop and drive a more limited level of application aggregation instead of pursuing a grand, total redesign.

6. ***Measure success*** - Customer engagement leaders must develop new means to measure success, shifting from call centre-centric measurements like wait times, dropped calls, and first-call resolution to instead focus on metrics that allow for gauging the impact of a collective set of engagements on overall customer satisfaction.

A question was asked to survey respondents about how each inbound channel will change, allowing us to judge if any alterations in the use of channels is due to real changes at a contact centre-level, or is more of a statistical blip caused by a different set of respondents providing data each year.

Figure 3: How do you think inbound channels will change in your contact centre in the next 12 months?



The traditional media of letters and fax will have a net decline, although still have their place in the likes of the insurance, medical and manufacturing industries. Once again, more survey respondents believed that live telephony channel volumes would drop (48%) than thought they would rise (23%), a finding that has grown each year, and which signals a definite trend in the industry.

Strong growth is once again expected in web chat and social media customer service interactions (and SMS, from a very low base), with email volumes still predicted to grow although at a much lower rate than previous years. Telephony self-service is expected to grow once again this year, with its twin benefits of customer convenience and low cost still very much relevant. New approaches, such as visual IVR, are likely to encourage further use of self-service. Although not shown on this chart, around half of respondents offer an app or mobile service option for customer service.

The rise of non-telephony channels suggests that these are becoming increasingly popular with customers. However, individual channels may work well in isolation, but to provide consistently good customer experience, they must be seamlessly linked as part of an omnichannel strategy.

DRIVERS FOR OMNICHANNEL

There are two main factors that influence contact centres within any vertical market: the need to provide profitable (or at least, cost-managed) service, and customers' requirements and preferences for contacting organisations.

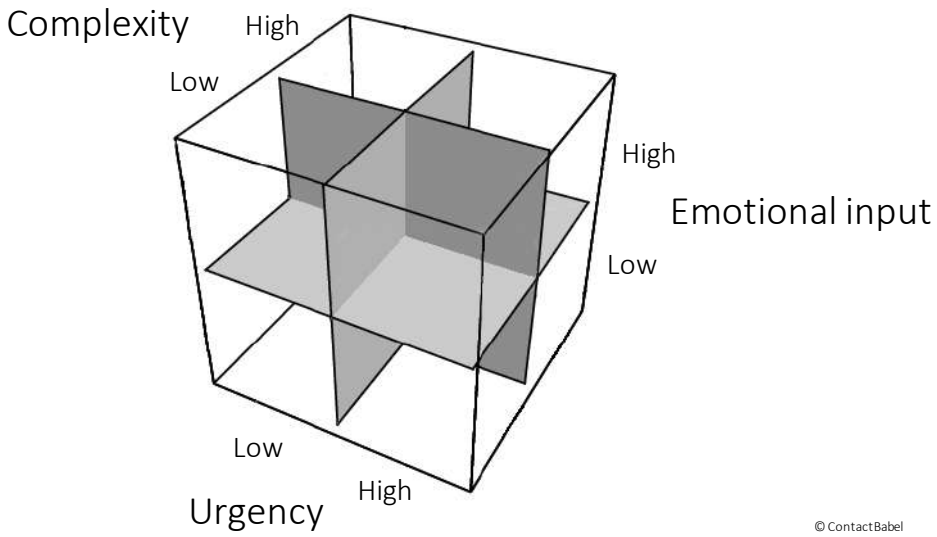
It is not only the nature of the specific business vertical market that needs to be considered. The urgency, complexity and emotional importance of the interaction is perhaps at least as important as the nature of the business that is being called: for a customer calling a bank, a simple balance request and an urgent call about the progress of the mortgage application are very different types of call, and should be treated as such.

CUSTOMER DRIVERS FOR OMNICHANNEL

THE CHANNEL OF CHOICE

The Customer Interaction Cube (below) is a structure developed to categorise the different types of customer interactions that businesses have to handle, considering the urgency, complexity and emotional input of the interaction from the customer's perspective. Businesses could use this to analyse their volumes of each type of interaction, cross-referencing it with other variables such as the time of day these types of interaction are received, and the customer demographic preferences seen elsewhere in this report in order to support the relevant channels through the promotion of alternatives to live calls, and the correct levels of resourcing. Doing this will not only improve the customer experience, but also reduce the cost of service through anticipating the likely resourcing required and even proactively engaging with the customer on lower cost channels first.

The Customer Interaction Cube



Using this 2x2x2 cube as a structure, there are eight types of interaction: combinations of either low or high urgency, complexity and emotional input. Our hypothesis is that each of these eight interaction types may best be suited to specific channels, and that both business and customer could benefit from matching channel with interaction type.

The examples shown below of various scenarios and the channels most suitable for these are suggestions, and will differ between customer types, businesses and vertical markets, but may offer a tentative framework for readers to build their own scenarios. It should be noted that the results of the customer survey that follow this section suggest that different age groups and socioeconomic segments have their own views on how they prefer to contact a business in each of these cases. Primary and secondary channels are suggested, but will differ between organisations and customer types.

Figure 4: The Customer Interaction Cube and suggested associated channels

Emotional importance	Urgency	Complexity	Examples of interaction	Primary channel	Secondary channel
Low	Low	Low	Meter reading; casual product research	Self-service	Web chat
Low	Low	High	Instructions on how to program a TV remote; find out about proposed planning / house building	Email	Phone
Low	High	Low	Top up mobile credit; check payment has been made	Self-service	Phone
Low	High	High	Details of how to make an insurance claim; understand mobile roaming charges before imminent trip abroad	Web chat / self-service	Phone
High	Low	Low	Book train tickets for important engagement	Self-service	Phone
High	Low	High	Complaint about incorrect billing	Phone	Email
High	High	Low	Simple question about imminent desired purchase (e.g. delivery, personalisation, return policy)	Web chat	Phone / social
High	High	High	Household emergency advice; 999	Phone	Web chat

her variables that could be considered alongside these that will impact upon the suitability of channels:

- Demographics
- Ownership of smartphone / broadband impacts upon channel availability
- Time of day (i.e. is this an out-of-hours enquiry? Is the customer at home, at work, or travelling?)
- Whether the request is specific to an account, or a generic issue (i.e. is it necessary to pass through security first?).

While the 2x2x2 cube can help businesses to estimate the current and potential volumes and resourcing required to serve the customer base, it is important to remember that similar types of customer interaction may require very different handling depending on circumstances. For example, a query about product delivery may be a small part of a wide-ranging research process carried out by a particularly thorough prospective customer, or may be asked by a customer who has just realised they've forgotten about an important birthday and needs immediate, accurate information.

McKinsey talks about the 'moment of truth' in customer interactions[1], often occurring when the customer has an unexpected problem or has a high emotional stake, when long-term loyalty and customer advocacy can be won or lost depending on the outcome and the way in which it is handled. Businesses and their representatives should be aware that these relatively rare occurrences offer great opportunities. Recognising and handling these moments of truth appropriately – moments which are defined as such by the customer, not the business – will have a far greater long-term impact on customer satisfaction and loyalty than the dozens of competently-handled, forgettable interactions that may have happened previously.

Although the 2x2x2 cube gives some indication of the types of interaction that are more likely to be 'moments of truth', which businesses may choose to be handled by their more experienced and empathetic agents, they are by their nature difficult to predict. Current real-time speech analytics solutions can indicate a measure of stress in the customer's voice, flagging this up to the agent within the call, but agents should be in any case capable of recognising this without technology. In any case, if the customer has already tried two or three other channels without success, even the most competent and empathetic agent will find it difficult to turn the moment of truth around positively.

[1] http://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/organisation/our-insights/the-moment-of-truth-in-customer-service

For this reason, it is vital to take a true omnichannel approach, which offers a high and consistent level of service and knowledge across each channel. Equally important is the freedom for agents to act in way appropriate to the situation – for example, if a 'high-emotion' interaction happens on social media, which can't be handled on that channel (e.g. it needs to go through security, or is too complex and lengthy for a non-voice channel), the agent should be given the license to place an outbound call to that customer in real-time, rather than advise them to call the contact centre. While this will impact upon the social media channel's service levels while the agent is away from it, the moment of truth offers the opportunity to lock-in that customer's loyalty. For contact centre operations traditionally run on a structured command-and-control basis, this may sound chaotic, but businesses have to decide if the occasional relaxation of their own procedures is an acceptable trade-off for providing the customer with something that they truly value. Agents need to be given *carte blanche* to deliver in 'moments of truth', and the training and support to recognise when this is happening.

This is not to say that 'moments of truth' necessarily have to be handled by a live agent. The popularity of self-service runs deep in the customer base, and the only reason that many customers abandon self-service at the point of crisis in order to ring the contact centre is only because self-service cannot deliver what they need. If companies focused their efforts on providing more sophisticated and reliable self-service applications, there is no reason why these could not deliver at least as much customer benefit at these moments of truth.

For example, if a passenger misses their plane, they are then likely to engage in a long and complicated discussion with a live agent (either at the airport or in a contact centre), involving alternatives, connections and payments. If, on missing the last call for the plane, the customer were immediately provided with an SMS or email detailing the various options available to them, which they could then select and rebook at once, this would be more convenient for the customer and significantly reduce the cost of service to the business. Perhaps more importantly, the customer would feel that the airline is looking out for them, creating long-term loyalty out of the negative experience of missing a plane.

The survey of 1,000 UK consumers carried out for this report attempted to understand which the channels of preference would be in cases of high emotion, urgency and complexity through presenting survey respondents with three hypothetical scenarios:

High emotion: **notifying a company that an incorrect item has been sent to them**. This was chosen as a high emotion interaction, as being sent an incorrect item is often frustrating: not only has the desired product not arrived, but the customer is then left with the problem and effort of returning the item. This is not a particularly complex interaction, and in many cases will not be particularly urgent.

High urgency: **checking the arrival time of a flight that the customer is meeting**. This is likely to be an urgent interaction as it is very time-sensitive. Complexity is very low - as the required information is simply a time - and in the majority of cases, should have a fairly low emotional impact.

High complexity: **receiving guidance on completing a mortgage application or tax form**. This is likely to be a complex and long interaction, but is unlikely to have especially high levels of urgency or emotional response.

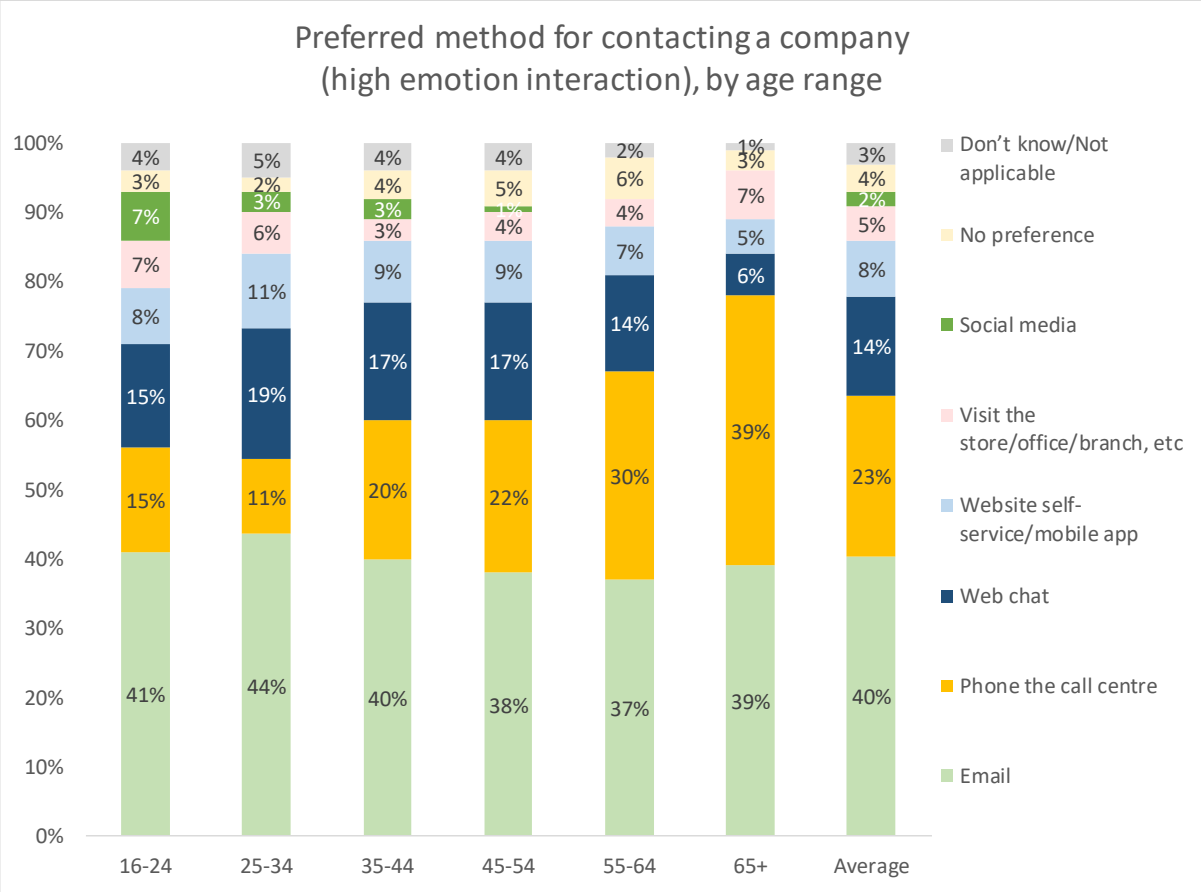
HIGH EMOTION INTERACTIONS

Consumers taking the survey were asked to imagine that a product they had ordered from a company had arrived but was incorrect. In this circumstance, they were asked which would be their preferred method for contacting the company to notify them that this was the case.

The most popular option was to email the organisation, with 40% of respondents choosing this method. The second most popular, at 23%, was phoning the contact centre, and web chat also made a strong appearance, with 1 in 7 respondents choosing this as their preference.

There was a strong pattern based on the age of the survey respondent and their preferred channel: the older demographics were far more likely to pick up the phone, although email was also popular with these age groups. Web chat was a popular option with all except the oldest demographic.

Figure 5: Preferred method for contacting a company (high emotion interaction), by age range



HIGH URGENCY INTERACTIONS

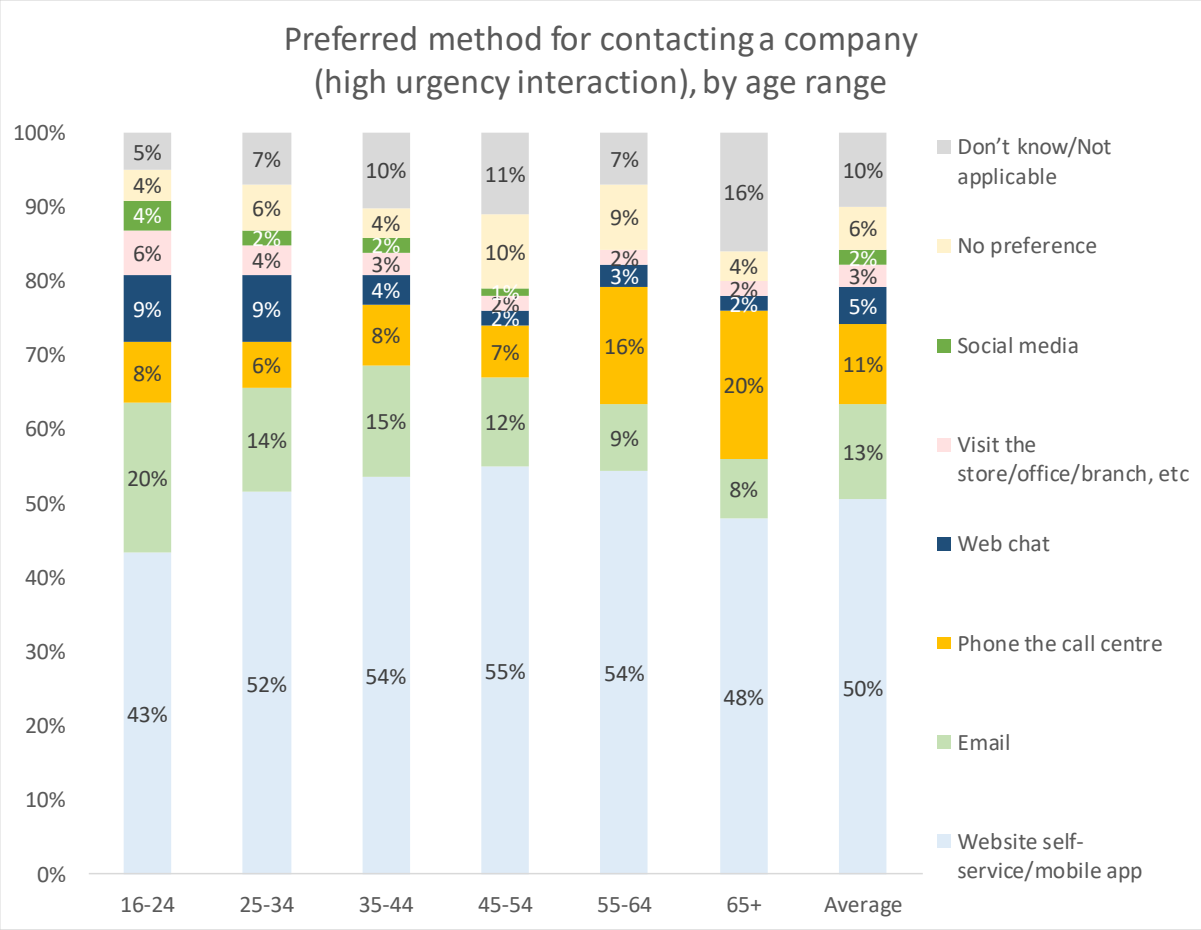
Survey respondents were asked which would be their preferred channel of choice in a situation where they were meeting somebody from a plane and needed to confirm the time at which to be at the airport.

By far the most popular channel was that of web self-service/mobile app, with little pattern being shown depending on the survey respondents' age range in the case of this channel.

Amongst older demographics, calling the contact centre was seen as a preferred option by a considerable minority, with email generally being restricted to younger demographics.

Despite the immediacy offered by web chat and social media channels, few respondents stated that these would be their preferred method of interaction even in high urgency cases.

Figure 6: Preferred method for contacting a company (high urgency interaction), by age range



HIGH COMPLEXITY INTERACTIONS

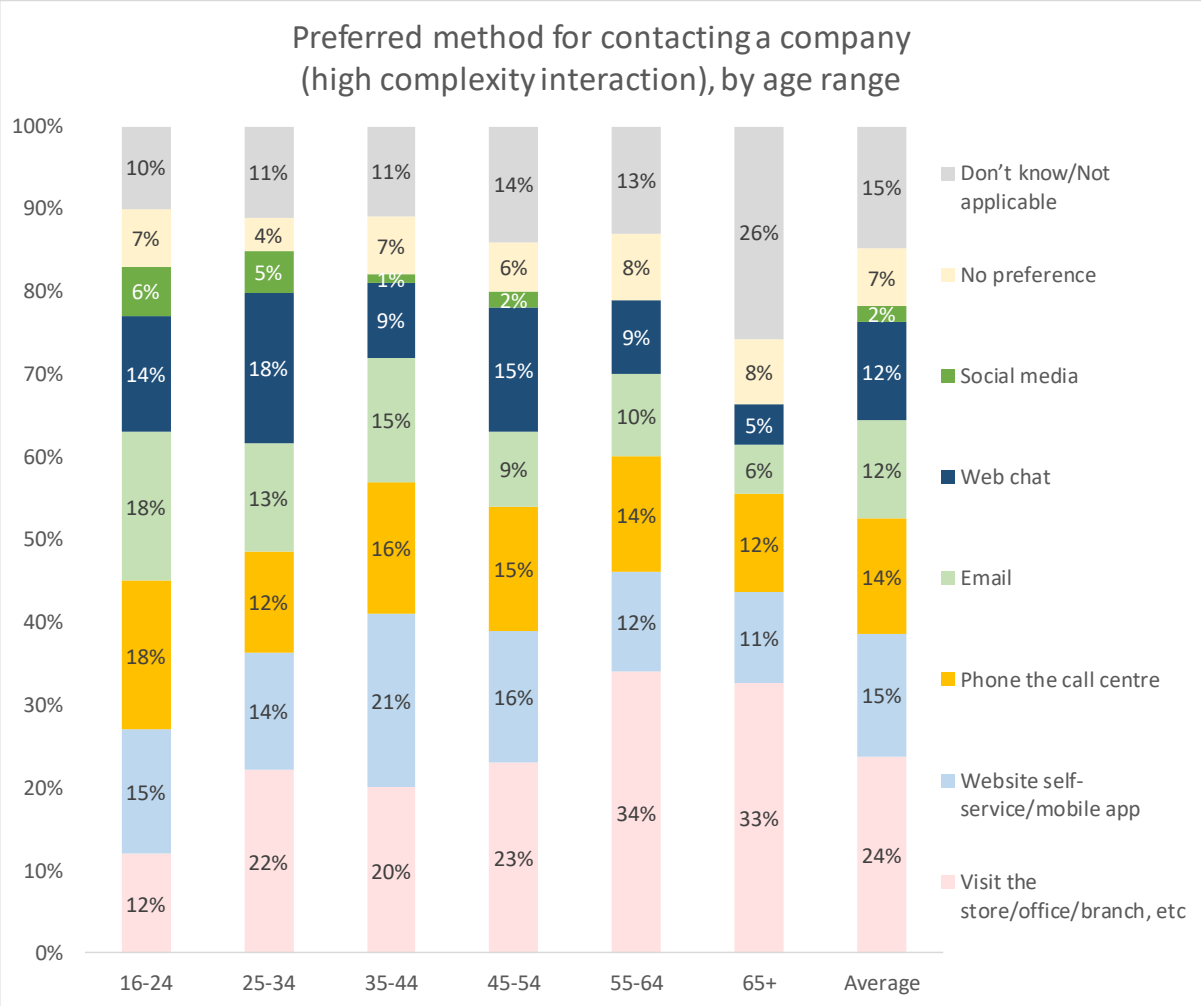
For highly complex interactions, such as getting expert guidance with a tax form or mortgage application, the most popular contact choice was a physical visit to an office or branch, which was much more popular with the older demographic.

Calling the contact centre for advice, or using self-service had similar popularity to each other across most age groups.

It is noticeable that web self-service was a much less popular option for complex interactions than it had been for urgent enquiries.

Web chat was also seen as an appropriate primary channel for complex interactions by a significant minority of the under-55s, whereas email is generally much less popular than it had been for high emotion interactions, possibly due to the probable requirement for back-and-forth communication.

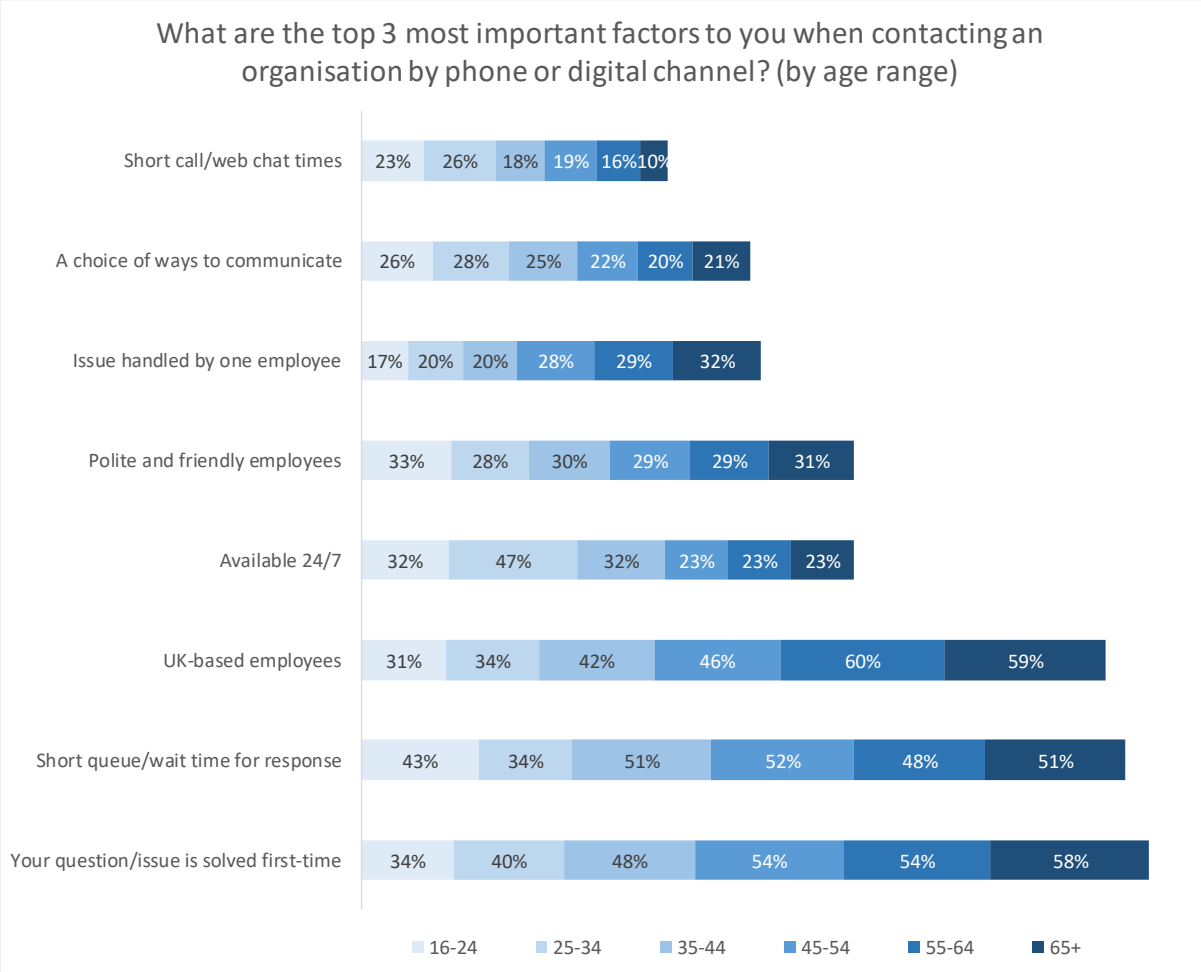
Figure 7: Preferred method for contacting a company (high complexity interaction), by age range



ContactBabel commissioned the research firm Aurora Market Research to carry out a survey of 1,000 UK consumers. One of the purposes was to identify any differences in opinion between organisations and customers about what were the most important customer experience factors when contacting an organisation.

Figures below are expressed as the percentage of each age group that expressed an opinion.

Figure 8: What are the top 3 most important factors to you when contacting an organisation by phone or digital channel? (by age range)



The previous chart shows the importance of various customer experience factors as an aggregated bar chart, segmented by age so as to show the factors that were of most importance to customers in each age range. Aggregating the results allows an understanding of which factors were placed in the top three overall, while also providing insight on age-related opinion.

For example, 34% of the youngest age group (16 to 24 years old) stated that first contact resolution was one of their top three most important factors, whereas 58% of the oldest age group (over 65 years old) placed this in their top three.

This consumer research has some interesting findings when comparing consumer attitudes to a survey which asked businesses about what they considered customers valued the most:

- both businesses and consumers agree that first contact resolution is the most important single factor impacting upon customer experience when contacting a business
- a short queue/wait time for response is also seen as being an important part of the customer experience
- having UK-based employees is seen as far more important to customers than businesses believe
- having long opening hours is important to customers, whereas businesses place this amongst the least important customer experience factors.

When considering these findings from the perspective of the various age ranges, the importance of first contact resolution is considerably higher in the older age ranges, as is having UK-based employees. There is also a pattern that older age-groups are less likely to be happy with being passed between agents.

Younger customers place very significant importance on longer opening hours, with this factor being voted by 25-34 year-olds as being even more important to them than first contact resolution.

Younger customers are also more likely to value having a choice of ways to communicate with the organisation, and further evidence for this age group's valuing of its time can be seen in relatively high importance being placed upon short call/web chat duration. However, the youngest age group are not willing to sacrifice courteous service for time saved, as they are also the group that most frequently places 'polite and friendly employees' in the top three factors.

At first glance, omnichannel / multichannel does not seem to place particularly highly – 'having a choice of ways to communicate' is only placed in the top 3 CX factors by around 25% of consumers. However, omnichannel is vital to the most important factor of all – having the issue resolved first-time – as true omnichannel provides a single view of the customer across channels, allowing seamless movement between channels without changing agents, losing context or making the customer repeat themselves.

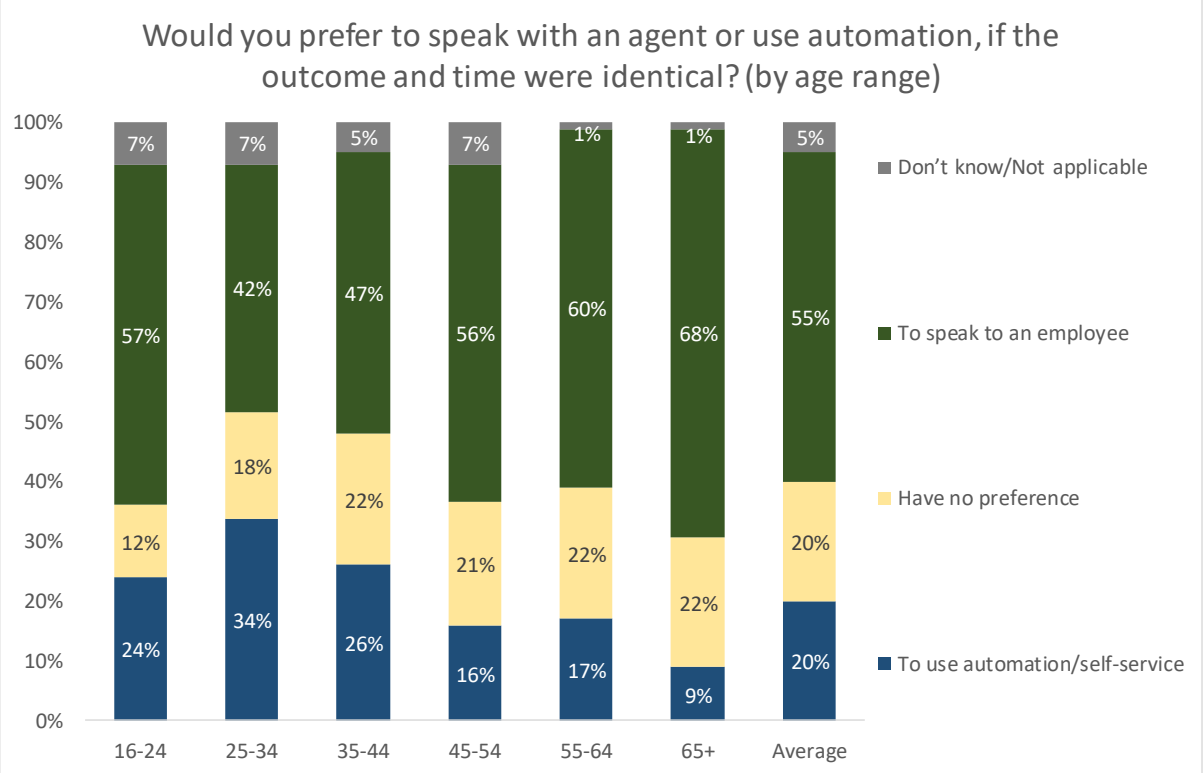
Some might think that omnichannel is only a step along the way to the real end-goal: full AI-enabled automated service. However, even if this were possible today or in the near future, the customer base does not view this as their ideal outcome.

In order to gauge the level of acceptance and expectation around fully-automated customer contact, 1,000 UK consumers were asked whether automation or human assistance would be preferable to the customer base in circumstances where the customer effort, time and outcome **were exactly the same**. Bearing in mind the rapid advance and uptake in digital self-service, the findings were quite surprising.

Looking at the age group of the customer base, older demographics feel more strongly about human contact, with 25-44 year-old customers most likely either to have no preference or to choose to use automation. This fits in with the previous findings that this section of the customer base places more value on their time, whereas the older demographic prefers to have their issue resolved first-time by a single employee.

Bearing in mind that this question emphasised that the outcome and customer effort/time **would be identical** in each case, the results show that the customer base at present is not yet at a stage where automation is generally seen as being even on equal terms with human contact, let alone the preferred method of contact with a business. As such, an omnichannel strategy rather than an automation strategy would seem to be preferred by the majority of customers.

Figure 9: Would you prefer to speak with an agent or use automation, if the outcome and time were identical? (by age range)



END-USER QUESTION 1:

TO WHAT EXTENT ARE BUSINESSES THAT YOU WORK WITH BETTING THAT DIGITAL AND SELF-SERVICE WILL OVERTAKE TELEPHONY IN IMPORTANCE?

Most of our customers are looking at digital as a complement to the direct interaction with their clients and customers, rather than betting that digital or self-service will overtake telephony. Self-service must have clear options to move to assisted service, or digital engagements with complementary “click to engage” alternatives. We’ve found that the contact centres we work with must provide easy escalation paths to customers when it is required. Many customers love the convenience of self service and digital channels but they also expect that when a self-service channel fails, an immediate alternative is available to satisfy their expectations. Many times that escalation path means talking

CHEAPER COST OF SERVICE?

Businesses want to balance quality with cost. Profitability is always at the forefront of any decision for commercial organisations, and the uptake of automation and digital channels promised high-quality service at a fraction of the cost of a phone call.

While digital channels have a reported cost advantage over telephony, the differential is not as large as it could be. Based on the findings in the "UK Contact Centre Decision-Makers' Guide", relatively low levels of automation are being used to answer either emails or web chat, and this is a significant opportunity for businesses and solution providers.

Figure 10: Cost per inbound interaction (phone, social media, email & web chat)

Channel	Mean	1st quartile	Median	3rd quartile
Phone	£4.00	£5.53	£3.29	£2.38
Email	£3.37	£5.00	£3.09	£1.96
Web chat	£3.82	£5.50	£3.00	£1.98
Social media	£3.07	£5.50	£2.50	£2.00

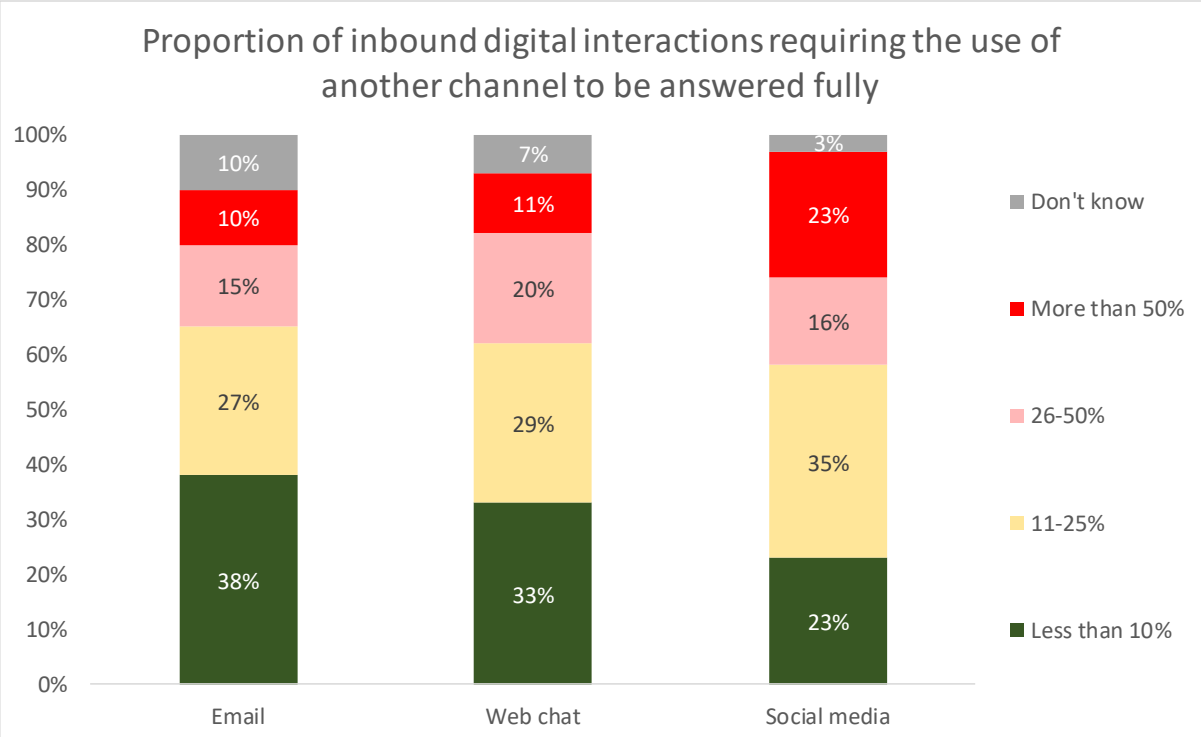
The low levels of automation being used to handle many digital channels certainly impacts upon cost. This is exacerbated when the initial digital interaction is insufficient to answer the customer's issue, leading to an alternate channel being used. If an organisation is operating in a siloed multichannel fashion, rather than as an integrated omnichannel environment, this movement between channels may require the customer to repeat their issue and the context and history to be lost, damaging the customer experience and inflating the cost of the interaction to the business.

Survey respondents were asked to estimate the proportion of digital interactions that required the use of another channel to be answered fully. 38% of respondents stated that fewer than 10% of their emails could be answered fully without recourse to alternative channels, with 10% stating that more than half of their emails needed supplementary channel assistance.

One-third of respondents report that fewer than 10% of web chats require another channel to answer the query fully, with 11% stating that more than half of web chats require movement to another channel, which is likely to be negative for the customer experience.

23% of respondents state that more than half of social media requests have to be completed via another channel, perhaps because of the public nature of the channel, and that customer identity verification is not as straightforward as with voice.

Figure 11: Proportion of inbound digital interactions requiring the use of another channel to be answered fully



A follow-up question was asked about the reasons for using another channel. While this question specified the email channel, it is likely to apply to other digital channels as well as they face many of the same challenges.

Two interlinked responses came out clearly ahead: that the multiple, back-and-forth nature of the queries are quicker to answer on a call; and that complex issues are better handled with a phone call rather than an email.

The ability to take customer through security checks more easily in a different channel was also considered important (i.e. given a top 3 place) by 58% of respondents, and 37% considered that email agents do not always have access to the sources of information that they need to answer the question fully, an issue that omnichannel implementation should resolve.

Figure 12: Reasons for using another channel to answer emails fully

Reason for using another channel	1st	2nd	3rd
Multiple / back-and-forth queries, which are quicker to answer on a call	37%	30%	18%
Complex response which requires a phone call	32%	43%	17%
Need to take them through security checks before query can be answered	22%	9%	27%
Need access to other sources of information not available to email agents	7%	11%	19%
Regulations or legislation	1%	5%	6%
Sensitive / confidential information which requires a letter to be sent	1%	2%	13%

THE OUTBOUND OPPORTUNITY

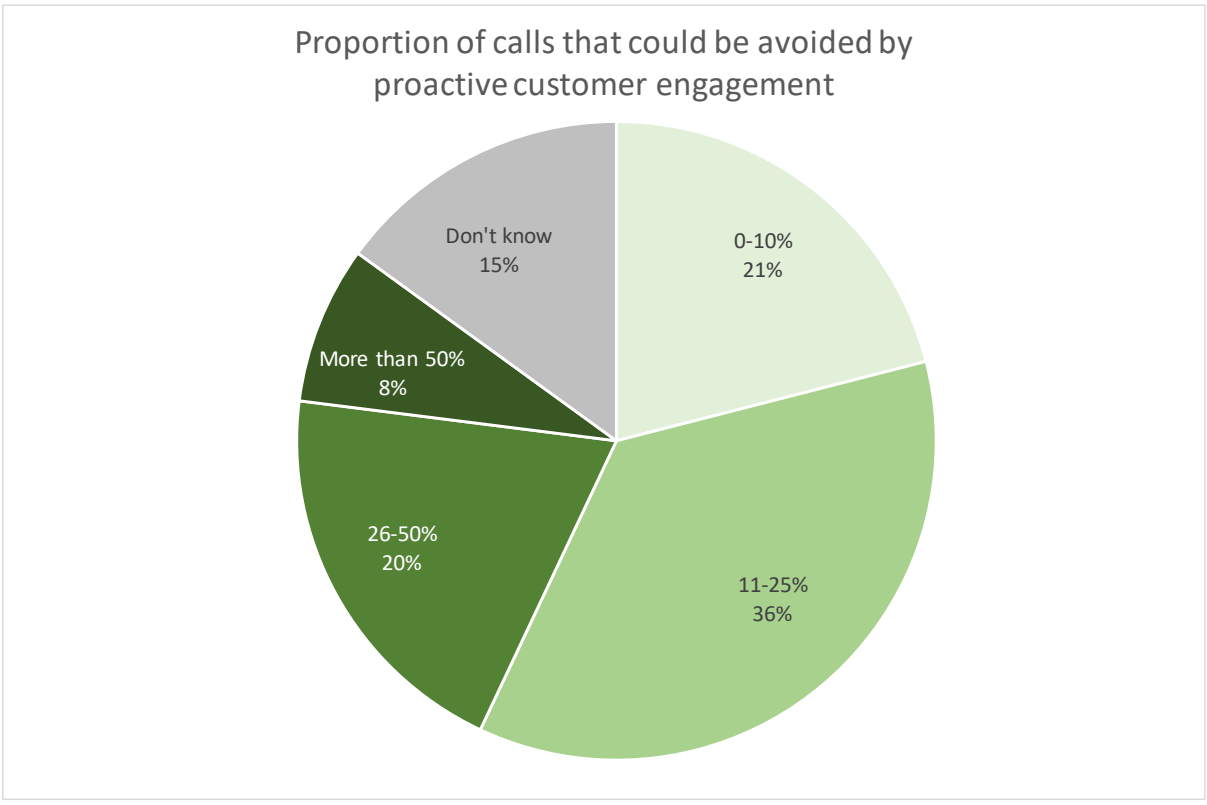
It is important to note that omnichannel isn't simply about managing inbound interactions. Identifying opportunities for proactive outbound customer contact allows businesses to avoid unnecessary inbound calls while improving the customer experience, in that they are presented with useful information without having to make any effort.

Survey respondents were asked what proportion of inbound calls could be avoided by engaging the customer before they felt the need to call the business.

28% of contact centres reported that more than a quarter of their inbound calls could be avoided if more proactivity was used, which would make a huge difference to costs (especially through automated outbound communication), as well as having a positive effect on customer experience.

Businesses should analyse the type of interactions that they receive into their contact centre, and to see if there is a cost-effective way of proactively handling these. The opportunity is certainly there for the industry as a whole to manage the inbound demand more effectively than is being done so at the moment. If the 20% of unnecessary inbound calls could be avoided through proactive outbound customer contact, the UK contact centre industry would save £5.6bn each year.

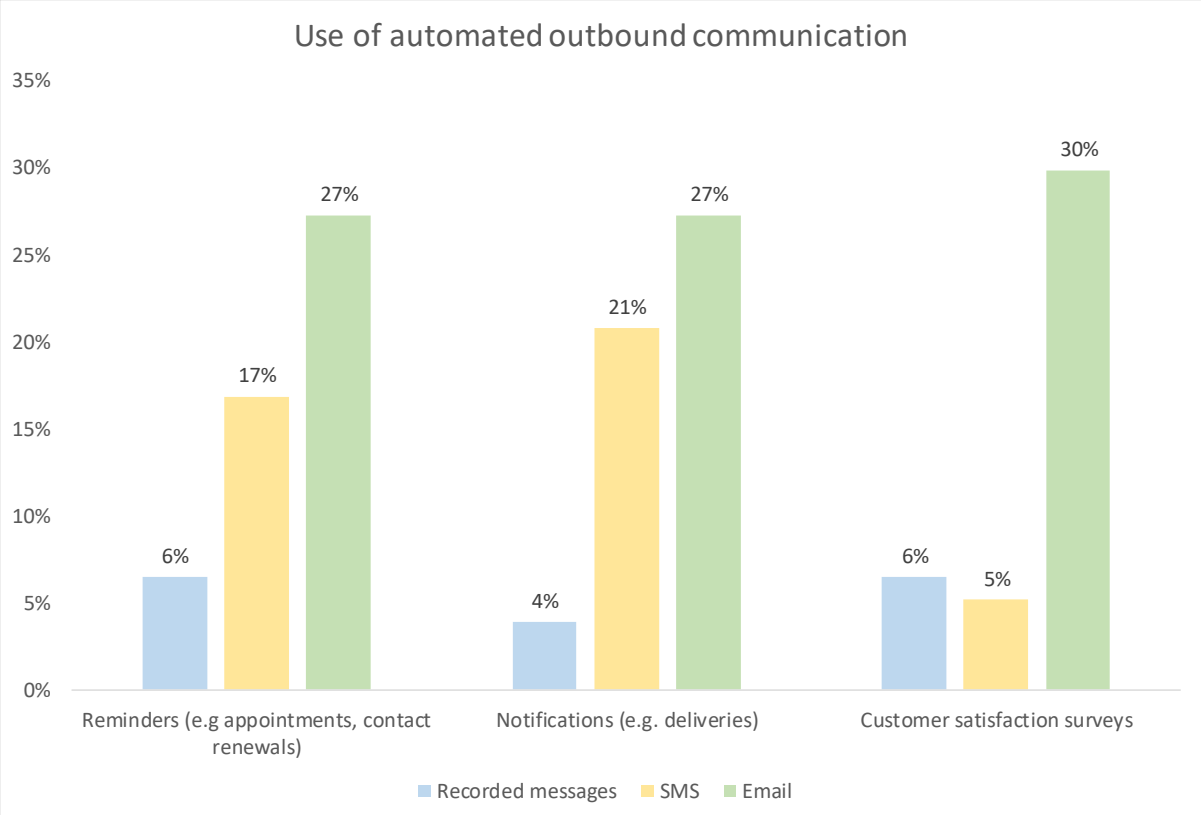
Figure 13: Proportion of calls that could be avoided by proactive customer engagement



While the majority of targeted outbound contact is carried out by agents, the opportunity exists for automated outbound service to expand - such as sending reminders and notifications to customers through an automated process - thus significantly reducing the cost to the business while improving the overall customer experience. Many customers will choose to seek clarification or a status update at some point in the buying process through making an inbound interaction. By sending a pre-emptive outbound message, the business is proactively assisting the customer to manage their interaction. Customer journey analytics can identify which customers are most likely to require information, and when. Business processes can be realigned so that these customers are presented with information at a time appropriate to them, thus avoiding a likely inbound call.

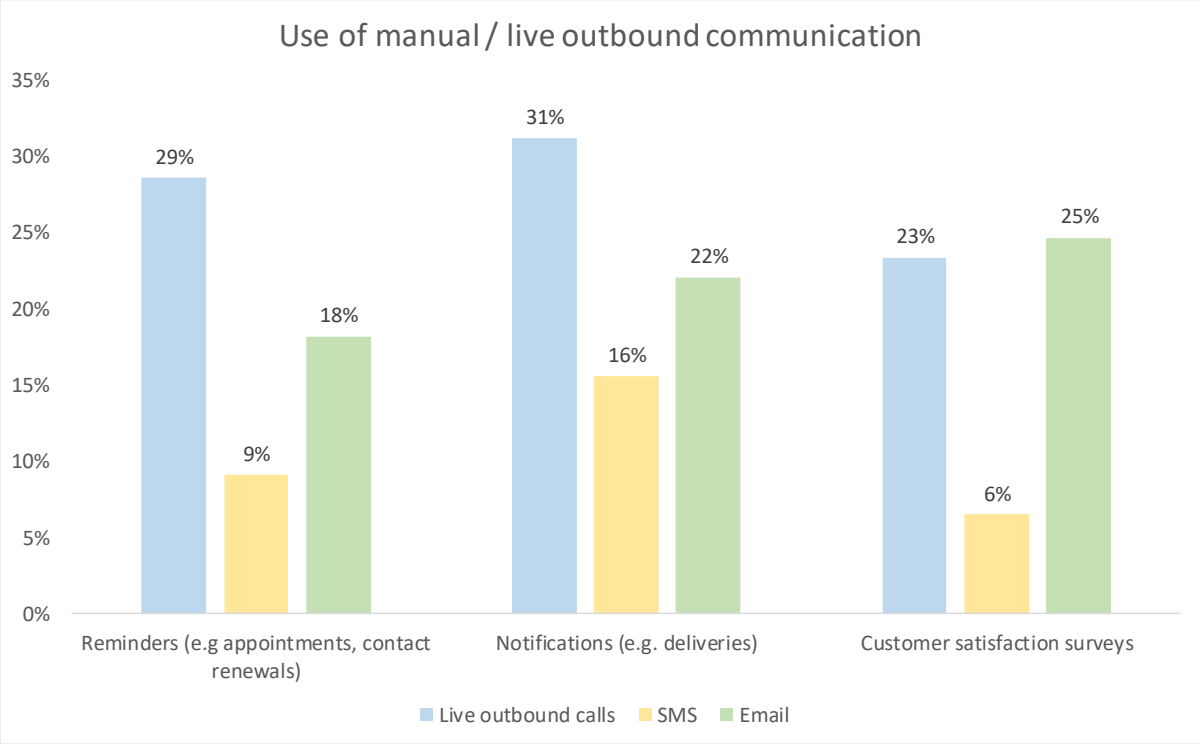
Automated SMS messages are used by around 20% of UK contact centres, mainly for notifications and reminders. Email is used also for outbound customer satisfaction surveys, and a small minority of respondents use recorded messages (which will usually include an IVR session to capture customer input) for this purpose as well.

Figure 14: Use of automated outbound communication



Live outbound calls are much more widely used for reminders, notifications and customer surveys, with 16% of respondents allowing agents to notify customers manually about deliveries etc. via SMS. Manual email is used in around 20-25% of cases as well.

Figure 15: Use of manual / live outbound communication

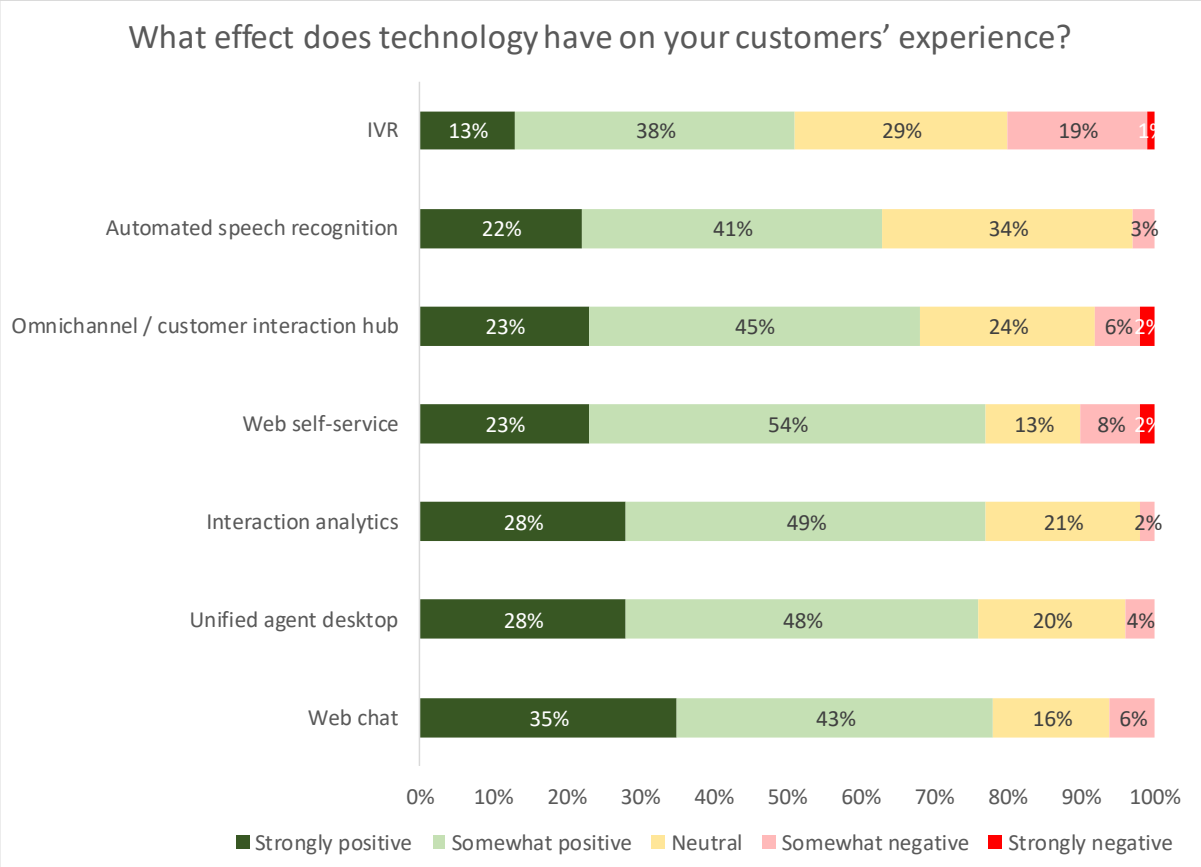


Businesses were asked about the effect that the technology that they used had on their customers' experience.

Web chat was seen as having the most positive effect, in that it provides an immediate opportunity for a customer to contact the business without picking up the phone. Closely linked with this, web self-service is also seen as positive for customer experience by over three quarters of survey respondents.

While IVR and automated speech recognition were viewed as being generally positive by more than half of respondents that used these solutions, they were the most likely to be seen as providing a neutral or negative customer experience.

Figure 16: What effect does technology have on your customers' experience?

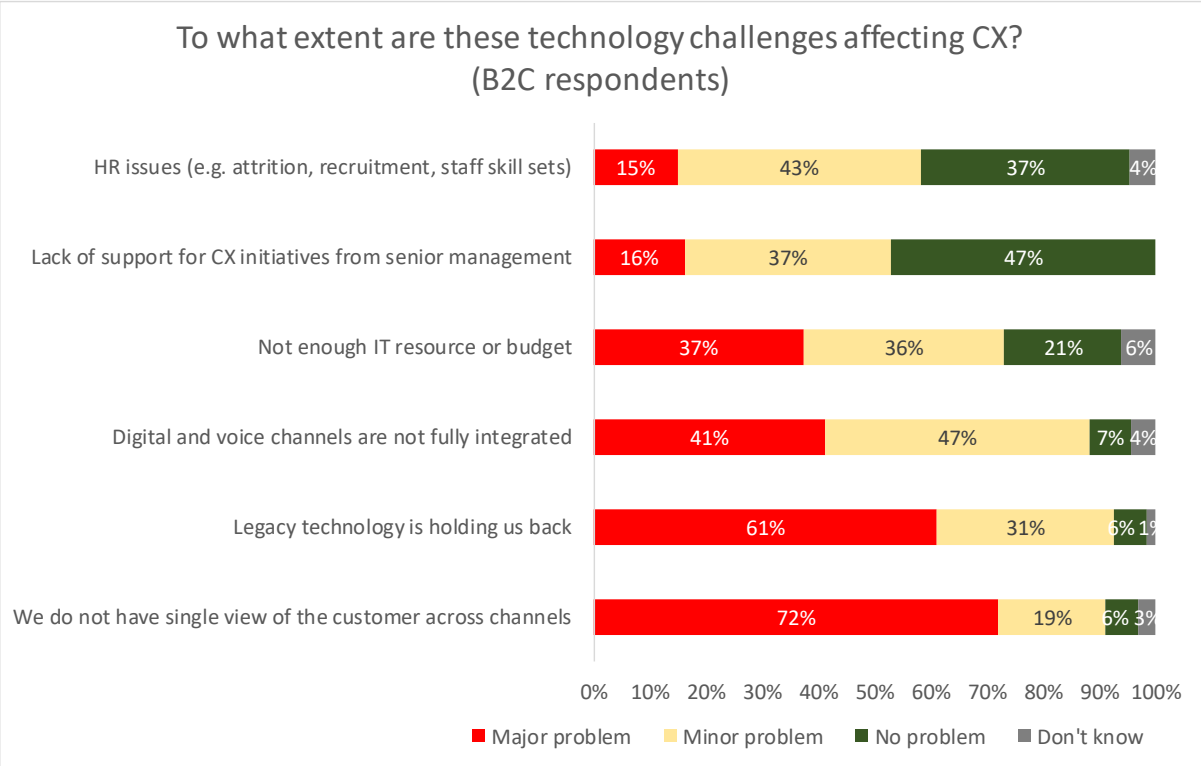


Respondents were also asked about the extent to which technology challenges were affecting their ability to improve their customers' experience.

For B2C respondents (i.e. businesses which sell to the consumer), technology challenges affect customer experience significantly more than is the case with B2B respondents.

In particular, 61% of respondents state that it is a major problem for them that their existing legacy technology is holding them back, and 72% state that not having a single view of the customer across channels is a major problem for them.

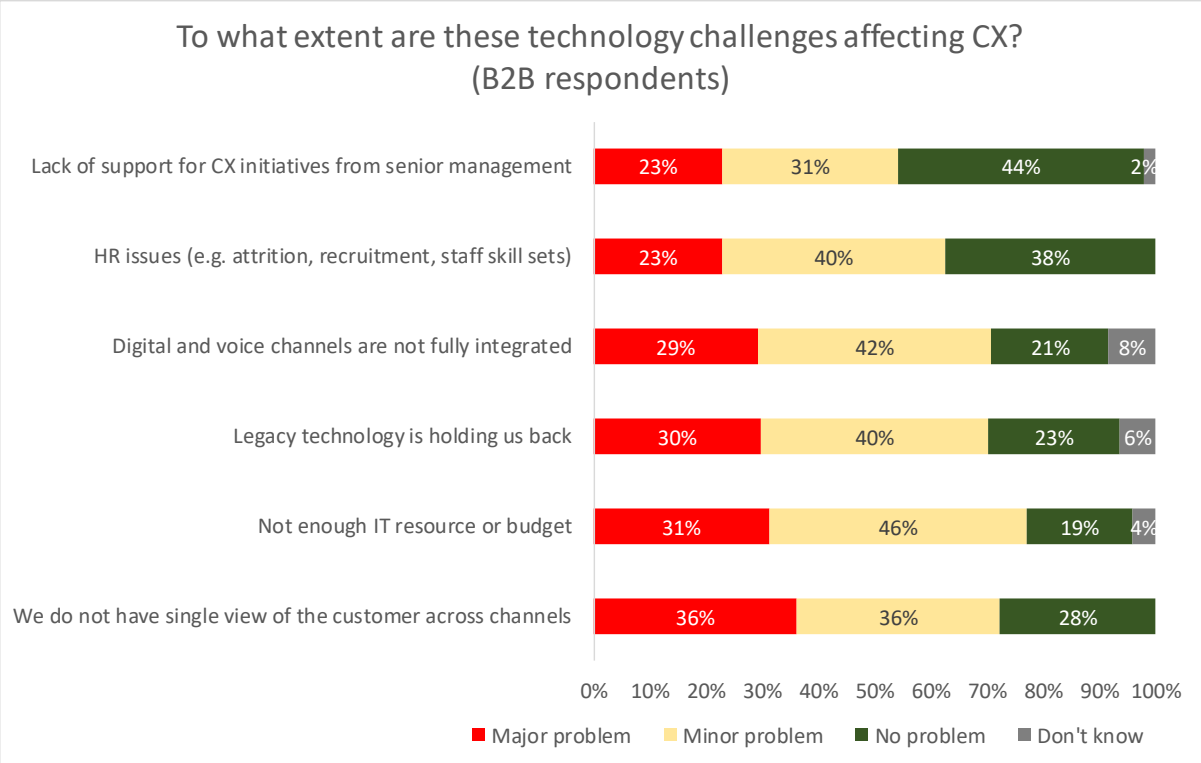
Figure 17: To what extent are these technology challenges affecting CX? (B2C respondents)



B2B respondents were less likely than their B2C counterparts to flag up major technology challenges, although it is noticeable that 36% of B2B respondents stated that not having a single view of the customer across channels was a major problem for them.

Issues around HR (such as the availability of suitably qualified and experienced IT resource) and a lack of support from senior management for customer experience initiatives are seen as being less of an issue, although 23% of B2B respondents still state that these are major problems for them.

Figure 18: To what extent are these technology challenges affecting CX? (B2B respondents)



Looking at CX-related technology challenges from the perspective of company revenue and number of customers, it is the organisations with the most customers that are most likely to be having trouble gaining a single view of the customer, and these operations are also most likely to be restricted by their existing legacy systems. 86% of respondents with more than 10m customers stated that the single view of the customer was a major problem, compared to 10% of respondents with fewer than 10,000 customers.

The lesson that can be learned from these findings is that while individual channels (such as web chat) are seen to work well for customers, making them work together and having a single view of the customer across channels is still a major problem for many businesses.

EMAIL

Email was the first of the non-voice digital channels to be used, and is still by far the most well-used, having been mainstream for well over 10 years.

Email should stand as a salutary lesson that it is not businesses that make new channels a success, but customers. Put bluntly, email in its first incarnation failed almost entirely. Too many businesses rushed to push customers to this new channel - commonly supposed to be cheaper than voice - without having the processes, solutions or staff to manage this properly. What happened next can be understood as a 'herd inoculation': enough customers had enough bad experiences from enough organisations that the entire channel was discredited, even for those businesses which were providing a reasonable service through email or just keeping a watching brief.

With email response times stretching into many days, if not weeks, the companies failed to understand that any communication with the business has a degree of urgency to it, else why would they be trying to speak with the business at all? Of course, even when a response was eventually provided, the issue might have gone away, or been dealt with by calling the contact centre, meaning that customers' existing confidence in the voice channel was further reinforced at the expense of the email channel. It is also the case that email does not fit the type of enquiries that people make in some cases, such as the need for quick, simple and confidential information (such as an account balance), and the increasing requirements for identity checking places a cap on the usefulness of email as a channel for some types of business.

It took many years, much investment and the coaxing of customers to try new channels again for email to emerge as being credible. Of course, businesses and customers now both realise that email is more suitable for some interaction types than others (the rise of web self-service has meant email is no longer the only online communication method available), and complex issues such as complaints, or other enquiries requiring a formal paper trail are well-suited to email. In fact, much of the demise in the letter and fax as channels can be traced to a direct replacement by email. Email is also an excellent outbound channel, providing reassurance, great levels of detail and attachments, and is able to link to other specific areas of information via hyperlinks. As an inbound channel, it has inherent weaknesses: an inability to carry out customer authentication and to carry out a real-time 2-way conversation being amongst them, as well as the lengthy wait to get a response. In the longer term, it is likely to be superseded to some extent by more immediate online channels such as web chat and social media. It does however have the advantage over virtually every channel that there is no queue time at all - the customer writes the email and presses 'Send' immediately - a 'fire and forget' interaction.

Usually, it is the retail respondents which report the greatest proportion of inbound traffic as email, with the B2B manufacturing and services sectors also reporting high levels of email, as in past years. The former's email volume is often driven by sales via a website, with TMT/IT's more about technical support.

The insurance sector again shows reasonably high levels of email after many years of very little activity, and this may be due to a change in working practices which allows customers and intermediaries to send through documents via email rather than by the more traditional fax and letter.

Figure 19: Inbound interactions that are email, by vertical market

Vertical market	% of inbound interactions that are email
Services	28%
Manufacturing	27%
TMT	25%
Outsourcing & Telemarketing	23%
Retail & Distribution	20%
Finance	19%
Transport & Travel	17%
Insurance	15%
Public Sector	12%
Housing	11%
Utilities	12%
Average	20.5%

As with previous years, emails are proportionally less important for large contact centres, although this gap has shrunk over recent years.

Figure 20: Inbound interactions that are email, by contact centre size

Contact centre size	% of inbound interactions that are email
Small	23.3%
Medium	19.2%
Large	17.0%
Average	20.5%

The cost of email has risen compared to last year, and while it is usually a little lower than live telephony (which tends to be around £3.50 - £4.00), it is considerably more expensive than a self-service session. This may indicate that emails – in a similar way to live phone calls – are getting longer and more complex, as the easier work is handled through self-service.

Figure 21: Estimated cost per email

	Email cost
Mean	£3.37
1st quartile	£5.00
Median	£3.09
3rd quartile	£1.96

Do you need an email response management system?

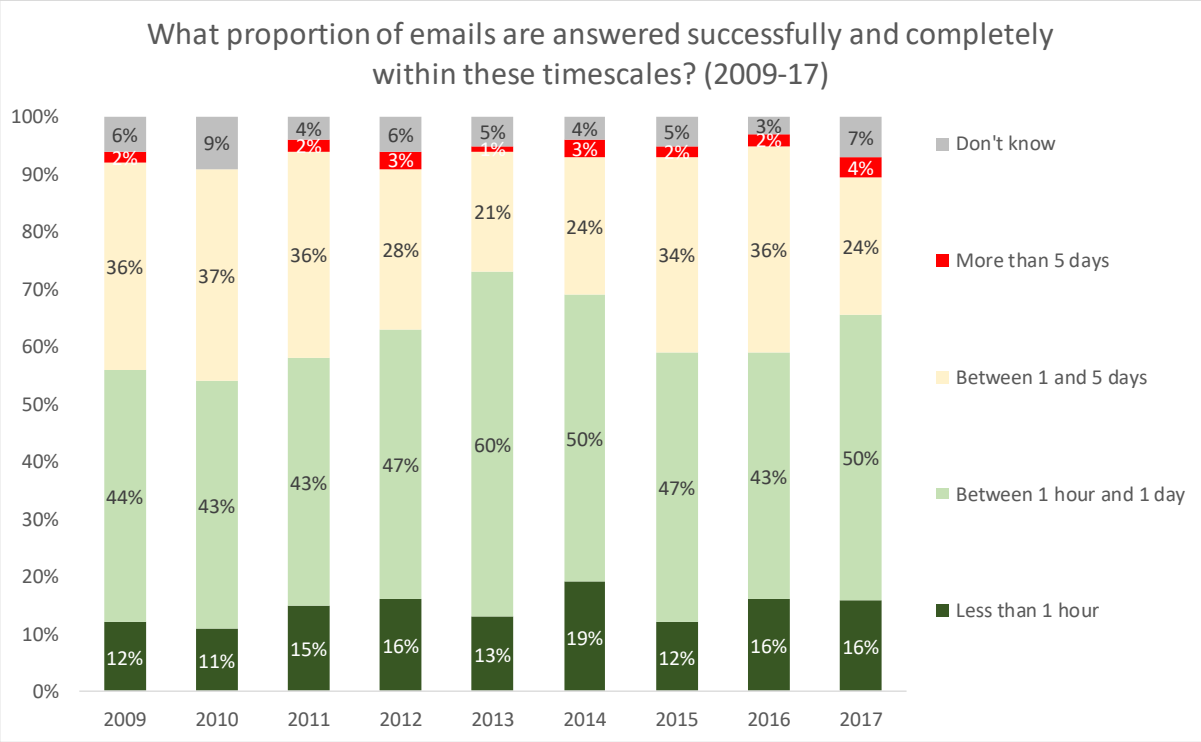
An organisation that has relatively small volumes of email will tend to handle it initially on an ad-hoc basis, often using Microsoft Outlook to do so. At some point, the contact centre will realise that costs are going up and quality going down, and that they need to implement the more sophisticated email response management system. What signs are there that show this is the right time to do so?

- While there is no fixed figure for email volume, as it will depend on the complexity and time required to handle each one, organisations receiving greater than 100 emails per day are likely to have issues handling and tracking them
- There are a significant number of customer telephone calls that refer to emails that were sent, but which never received a response
- Prioritisation and routing of emails to agents with specific skills sets is no longer a matter of a few minutes of management time
- Email handling times are not going down, despite most being about a small number of topics
- Complex emails may take days or even weeks to resolve, and different agents may be working on similar types of issue without even realising it, thus duplicating the effort
- There is a lack of flexibility in dealing with spikes in email traffic, as it is too difficult to bring secondary email agents to bear without damaging the voice channel's service level
- Visibility and accuracy of service levels for email channel is worse than that for the voice channel
- It is difficult to report on the content of the emails received, as this has to be done manually.

For businesses that handle substantial volumes of email, while it is not suggested that they should aim to answer an email in the same amount of time that it takes to complete a phone call, it is desirable to manage all interactions closely to consistent business rules, and to act quickly if service levels slip. Too often it seems, contact centres have become so used to managing the telephony queue that they neglect digital interactions. The result is that digital response times (mostly email) have historically been sacrificed to meet telephony service levels, although there have been steady if unspectacular improvements in the response rates in recent years.

In 2015, reported email response handling times reversed the improvements of recent years, especially in the all-important 'less than 1 hour' segment. In 2017, improvements were seen in the proportion of emails answered the same working day (up to 66%), while those taking more than 1 day has decreased to 28% (although there are a higher proportion of respondents that simply do not know). Taking longer than one day to answer an email runs the risk of the customer losing patience, and going elsewhere or phoning the contact centre, placing a greater cost burden on the business than if they had just called in the first place.

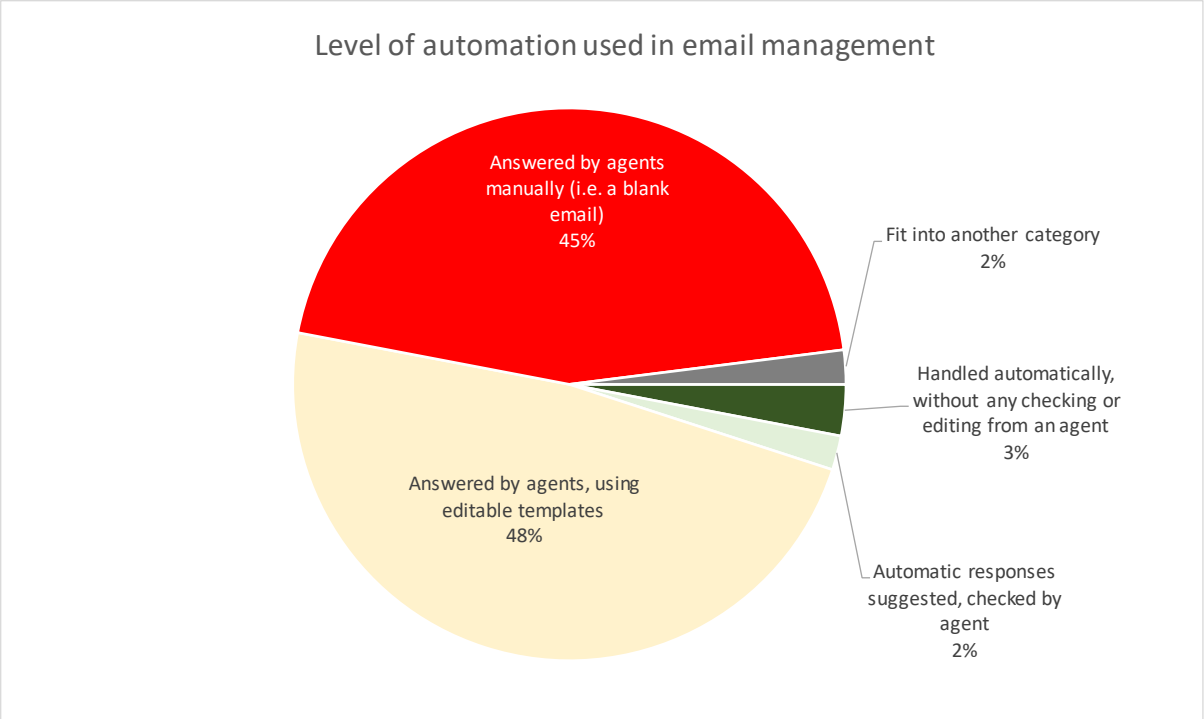
Figure 22: What proportion of emails are answered successfully and completely within these timescales? (2009-17)



The most popular methods of answering inbound email are to use agents, rather than rely on automation. 48% of emails are answered by agents who start with templatised, editable responses and change them accordingly, thus not having to compose every email from scratch, but also being able to draw from a common pool of knowledge. Starting with a blank email and letting agents complete it themselves is not only likely to take longer, but also leads to an increased risk of poor grammar, spelling and punctuation, as well as a less consistent response. However, 45% of emails are still answered in this way.

Only 5% of emails have automated responses, (these statistics do not include simple automated acknowledgements), and of those, around half have to be checked by agents before sending. As such, the reason for the low cost differential between email and telephony is explained.

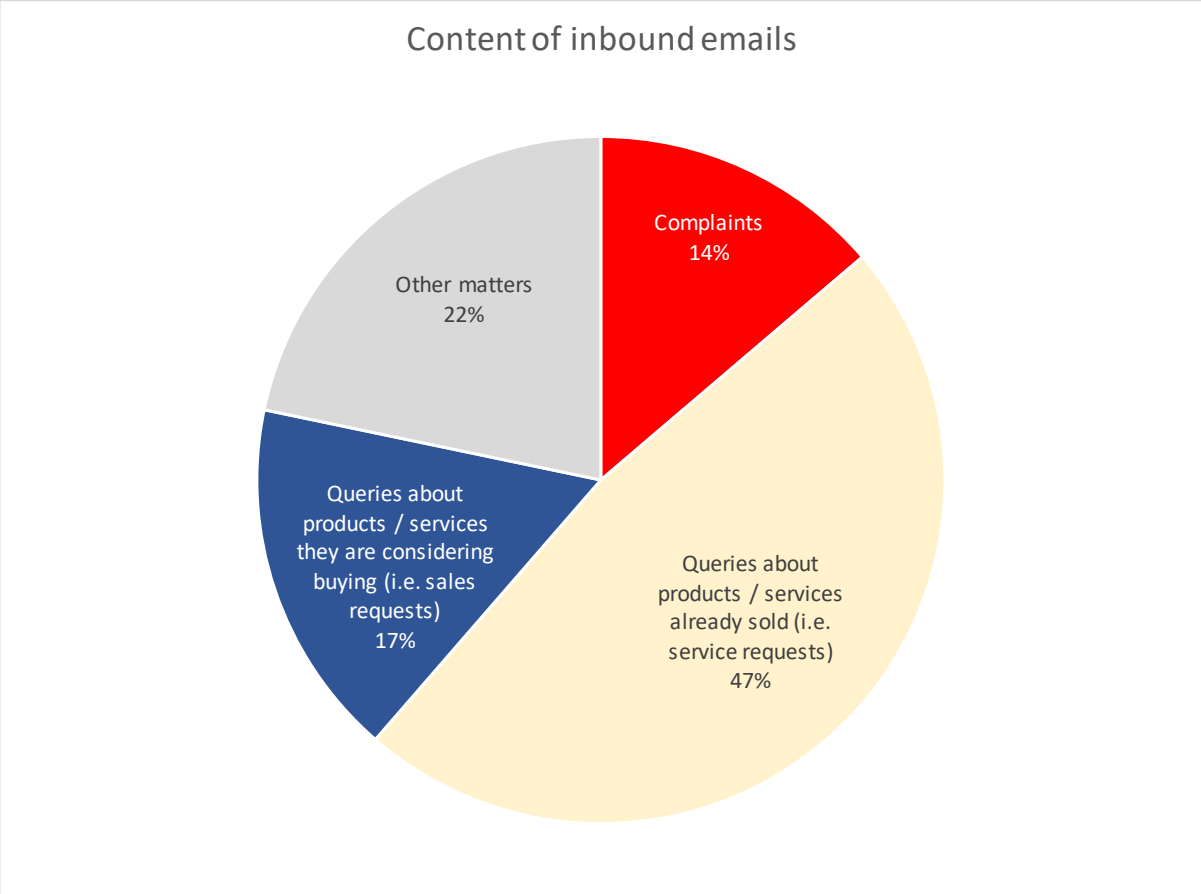
Figure 23: Level of automation used in email management



Respondents state that 47% of their inbound emails are queries about products or services that have already been bought, with only 17% being from prospective new customers, who have queries about products or services which they are considering buying.

Complaints represent around 14% of inbound email traffic for our respondents, compared to the telephony complaints figure which is consistently well below 10%.

Figure 24: Content of inbound emails



WEB CHAT

Most web chat (or instant messaging / IM) sessions act by offering a live assistance option to the process of web browsing. Like email, it has been around for many years, but only very recently has started to grow volumes to the extent where it has become a mainstream channel.

Web chat offers an organisation a chance to cut costs through running more than one chat session at a time with customers, using the time that a customer spends reading and replying to an agent's response to deal with other customers concurrently. Some solution providers have stated that an agent can deal with 4 or more web chat sessions at the same time, but whether this is a sustainable model for the agent or provides an acceptable quality of service for the customer is quite another question (and one that is answered later). Agents can respond to frequently-asked questions by using 'hot-keys', which provide templatised answers and can escalate queries if required, but current levels of automation are low.

Web chat has often been used as a 'point of crisis' channel, for example, to convert an online shopping basket into a sale by providing timely service, or if a browser is paused on a webpage too long, perhaps as they can't find what they are looking for. In such cases, there are two main benefits to the business in providing web chat: revenue maximisation, and the avoidance of unnecessary calls.

Web chat can also act as a safety net for the customer if an online self-service attempt fails. An analogy can be made with voice self-service, where a failed session is often ended with the customer 'zeroing-out' - pressing zero to get in touch with an agent. Failed web self-service sessions may end with a phone call being made, but web chat can avoid a number of these, which is a cost saving for the business, and better for the customer as well.

Many customers – and not just the younger generation - are often accomplished Instant Messengers, and will be keen to use the web chat option with the businesses they work with. However, web chat is in reality most useful for general information and sales purposes, as many users aren't taken through security processes, meaning the agent can't help with specific account queries; the same usually applying to email. Putting some form of trusted biometric device on a PC or mobile device (such as a thumbprint reader) which then assures the businesses' system of the user's identity could possibly overcome this issue. Alternatively, and more simply, there doesn't seem to be any reason why the web chat agent can't ask the standard security questions to the customer via chat, but this is still rarely done today, perhaps as some customers are wary of giving out personal details online.

One form of value-added web chat functionality is a Virtual Agent, which may appear to a browsing website visitor to be a human agent, offering web chat. However, it is an automated piece of software which looks at keywords or natural language and attempts to answer the customer's request based on these, including sending relevant links, directing them to the correct part of the website or accessing the correct part of the knowledge base. If the virtual agent cannot answer the request successfully, it may then seamlessly route the interaction to a live web chat agent who will take over. It is possible that the browser will not even realise that any switch has been made between automated and live agent, particularly if the web chat application is sophisticated enough to pass the context and the history to the agent, although some businesses believe it is best practice to identify clearly between virtual and real agents.

Most virtual agents encourage the visitor to engage with them using natural language, rather than keywords. The virtual agent will parse, analyse and search for the answer which is deemed to be most suitable, returning this to the customer instantly. Many virtual agent applications will allow customers to give all sorts of information in any order, and either work with what it has been given, or ask the user for more detail about what they actually meant. Having been unconsciously trained over the years to provide their queries in a way which standard search functionality is more likely to be able to handle (for example, a couple of quite specific keywords), customers must be encouraged and educated to use natural language queries in order for virtual agents to be able to deliver to their full potential.

The virtual agent application is different from standard search functionality, ignoring bad punctuation or grammar, and using longer phrases rather than just searching on keywords. Sophisticated applications attempt to look for the actual intent behind the customer's question, trying to deliver a single correct answer (or at least a relatively small number of possible answers), rather than a list of dozens of potential answers contained in documents which may happen to contain some of the keywords that the customer has used. The virtual agent application may also try to exceed its brief by providing a list of related questions and answers to the original question, as it is well known that one question can lead to another. Solution providers and users train the system to pattern-match the right words or association of words with the correct result: the application, unlike older forms of web search techniques, does not simply guess what the customer wants, or how they will express themselves. Through 'listening' to what the customers actually say - perhaps through a mixture of large quantities of audio and text – the initial set-up configuration can achieve a good accuracy rate, which benefits over time as a positive feedback loop is established. Solutions that gather and differentiate customer requests and results from multiple channels, noting the difference between them, have an even better success rate.

Virtual agent functionality 'understands' the context of what the customer is asking, with the result being more akin to that of an empathetic human who also has had access to what the customer has been trying to do. For example, if asked "When can I expect my delivery?", the context and the required answer will be different depending on whether the customer has placed an order and is enquiring about its status, or has only a hypothetical interest in turnaround times in case they decide to place an order.

When the virtual agent application has low confidence that it has returned the correct result, it is able to escalate the customers query seamlessly to a live chat agent, who then has access to the self-service session history, enabling a greater chance of a successful resolution without repetition. (It is generally considered best practice that escalations to real agents are not hidden from customers). The eventual correct response can be fed back to the automated virtual agent (and the knowledge base underlying it), which will make it more likely that future similar requests can be handled successfully through automated agents.

Proactive and reactive chat: originally, web chat was reactive, relying upon the browser to initiate a conversation. Businesses then decided to go on the offensive, popping up chat boxes and encouraging customers to start conversations. Some more sophisticated customers are unfazed by this, but overly-insistent use of web chat can put some customers off entirely.

There are various levels of intelligence that can be used to support proactive chat more effectively. If the customer has logged in, it is possible to identify them, and take into account past channel preferences, purchase history and other relevant information in order to personalise the experience, (for example including details of relevant offers to that customer).

As an aside, some contact centres report that those experienced in playing online games - are particularly suited to the fast-paced, text-oriented nature of web chat, and some businesses are actively recruiting such people to work as web chat agents. It is also worth commenting that although offshore customer contact has received a mixed press, many of the negative issues surrounding offshore are not applicable to the multimedia channel, such as the possible mutual incomprehensibility of accents.

Web chat is experiencing strong growth in its availability in the UK, although volumes on average are still only 3-4% of all customer/business interactions. There is no reason why the user uptake of web chat will not continue: it works well for customers as providing an immediate response, and with multiple concurrent chat sessions per agent, it can be a lower cost channel than voice for the business to support, although cost differential between phone and web chat are not dramatically different, as so much of the web chat work carried out is still non-automated. Solution providers report that web chat is currently being trialled by numerous businesses, often at a limited, or departmental level so they can assess the suitability of the channel for a company-wide rollout, and understand what needs to be done to ensure full implementation is a success.

The cost of a web chat is stated to be a little lower than a phone call (£4.00) and a little higher than an email (£3.37), but the differential is not as significant as might be expected from a channel that can be at least partially-automated, and which offers the opportunity for multiple concurrent sessions.

Figure 25: Estimated cost per web chat

	Web chat cost
Mean	£3.82
1st quartile	£5.50
Median	£3.00
3rd quartile	£1.98

43% of respondents using web chat offer the option immediately to all website visitors, with 57% only doing so at some specifically-triggered point in the interaction.

Of these 57%, the most frequently used trigger for web chat was when a visitor went to a specific page, with other triggers being when a customer was on a page for a certain amount of time, and at the point of sale, although these are much lower.

Figure 26: Stage in the website visit where web chat is offered

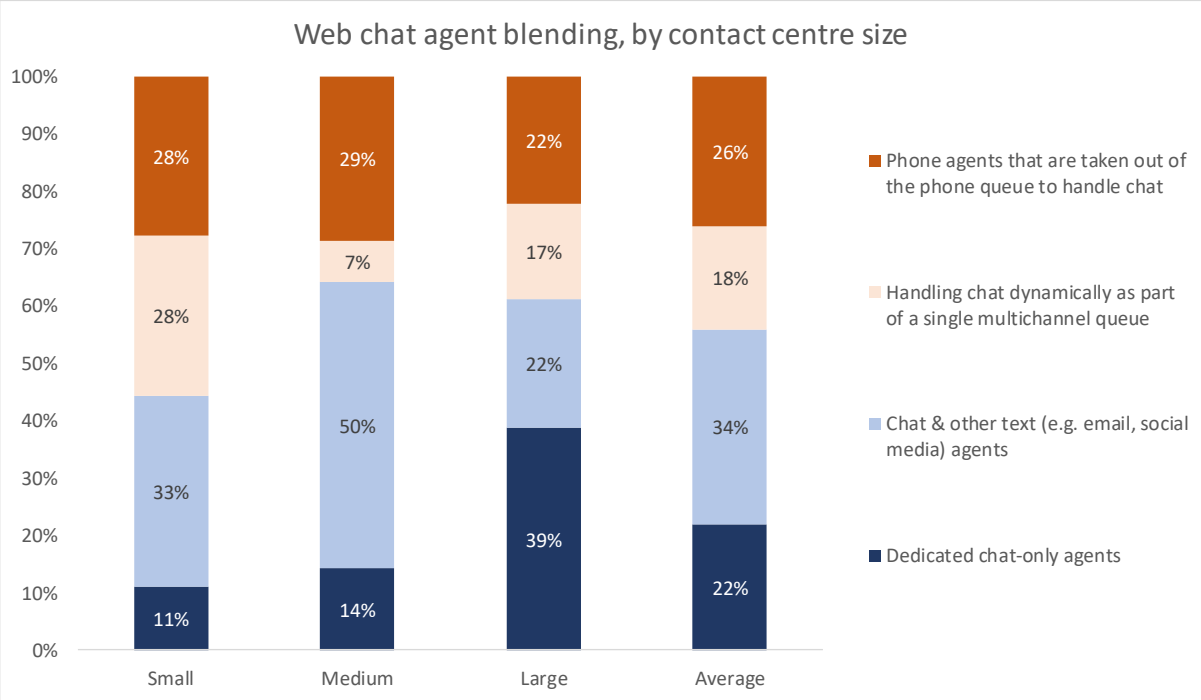
Point at which web chat is offered to the website visitor	% of respondents
If the visitor has visited a specific page	69%
If the visitor has been on a specific page for a certain amount of time	31%
At the point-of-sale / checkout screen	21%
If they had been identified as a specific type of customer (e.g. high value, prone to defection, etc.)	14%
If the visitor has visited a certain number of pages	3%

Respondents from larger contact centres are more likely have dedicated chat-only agents, rather than taking phone agents out of the queue to handle web chats on an ad-hoc basis, probably because chat volumes are more predictable in high-volume businesses.

Multi-channel text agents (e.g. handling social media or email too) are popular in small and medium respondents' contact centres.

Small operations are more likely to be using a single multichannel queue that also includes handling calls.

Figure 27: Web chat agent blending, by contact centre size



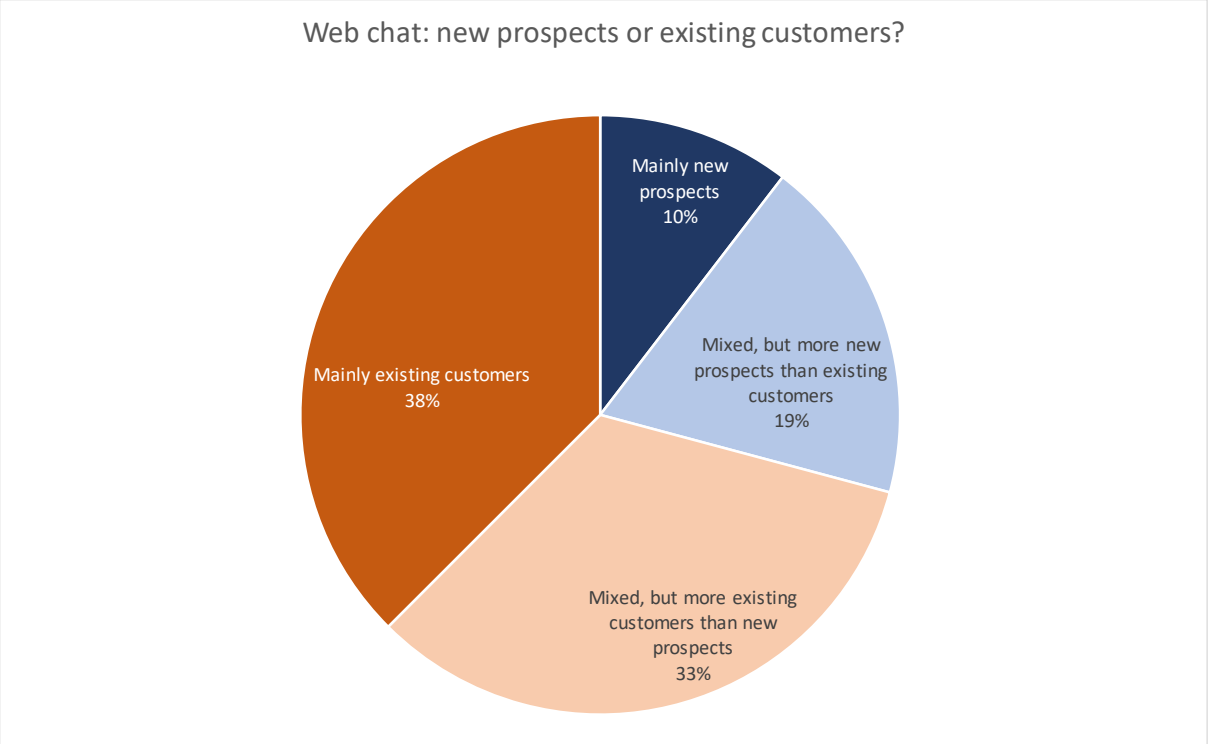
One of web chat's strengths is the ability to have agents handle multiple chats concurrently. Some vendors have stated in the past that agents could run five or six concurrent chat sessions: the reality seems to be that two sessions is a reasonably consistent average, with a peak of three or even four if required, but which is not possible on a long-term basis.

Figure 28: Concurrent web chats per agent

	Average number of concurrent web chats	Maximum number of concurrent web chats
Mean	2.0	3.6
1st quartile	2.8	4.5
Median	1.9	3.2
3rd quartile	1.0	2.0

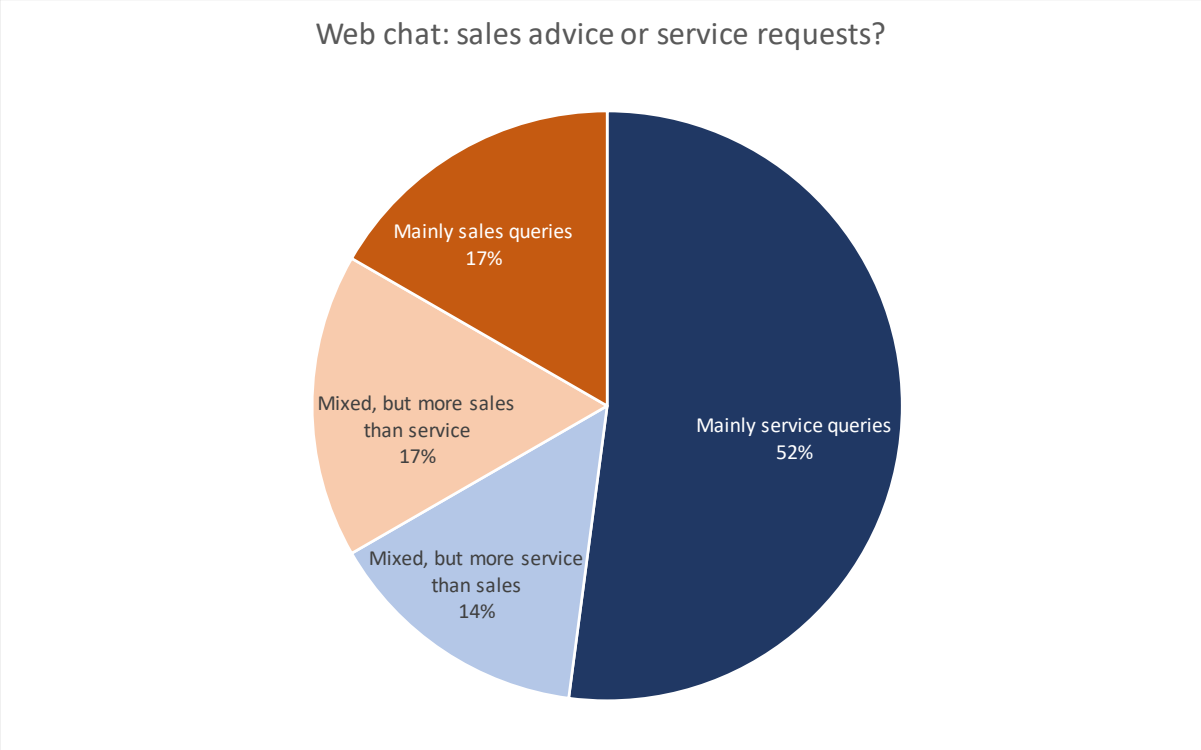
Most respondents indicated that web chats are mainly carried out with existing customers, which fits in with previous research showing that sales operations are less likely to be using web chat. This provides opportunities for an omnichannel-enabled operation to pull up existing customer records so that the agent has a better idea of how best to serve the customer.

Figure 29: Web chat: new prospects or existing customers?



This finding is further supported by the nature of most web chat: 52% of respondents state that their web chats are mainly about servicing existing products and services, with only 17% of respondents stating that they deal much more with sales queries than service requests.

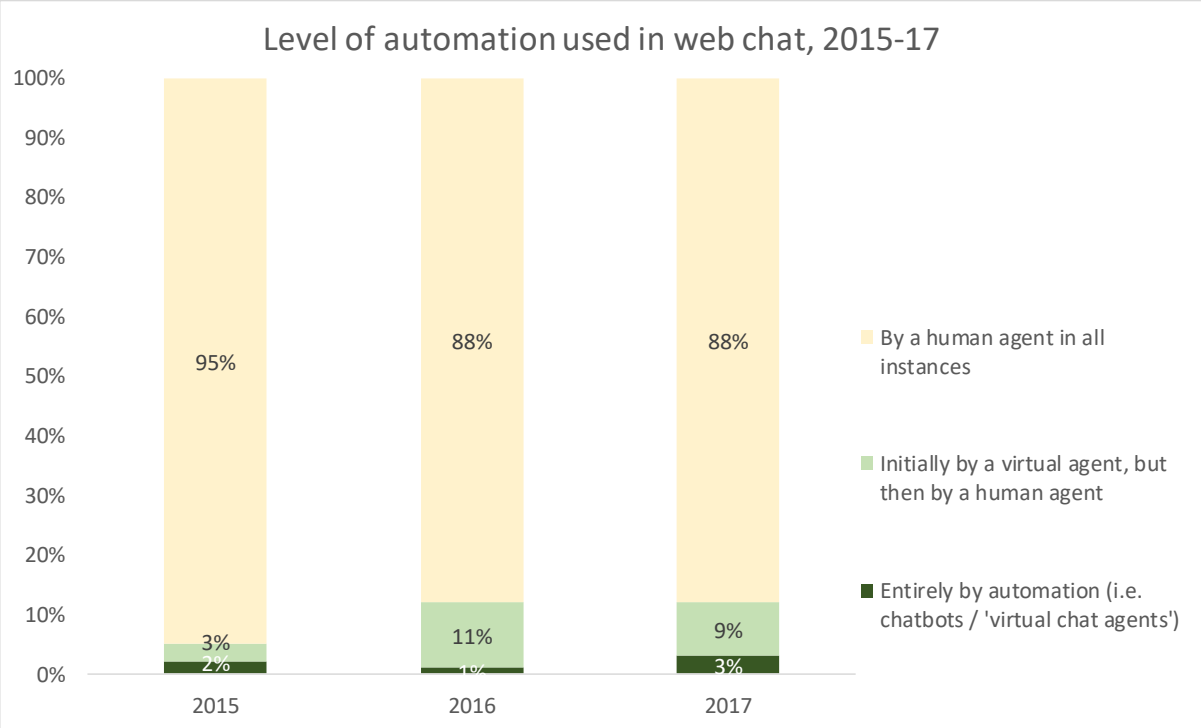
Figure 30: Web chat: sales advice or service requests?



As the cost of web chat is similar to other channels such as email, voice and social media, there is considerable room for increasing efficiencies and lowering costs.

Whereas only 5% of web chats had any automation involved in 2015, this has grown to 12% in 2017, mainly as a result of initial handling by automated chat bots which may then hand off to live agents where appropriate.

Figure 31: Level of automation used in web chat, 2015-17

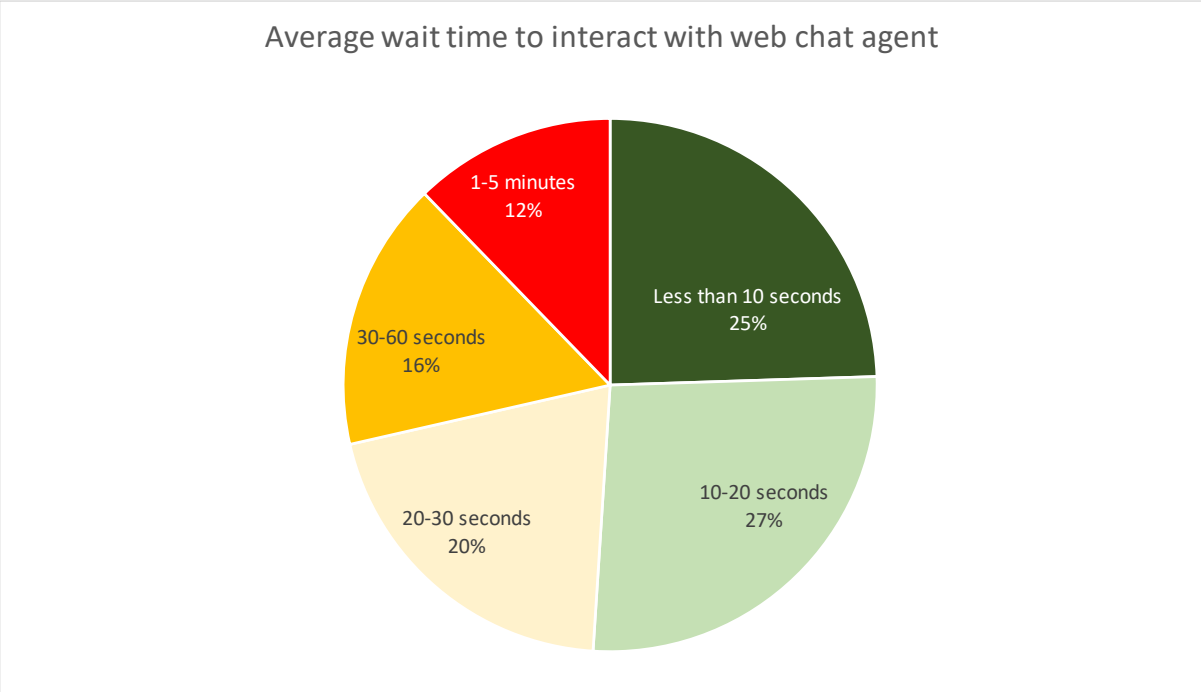


Respondents indicate that the typical wait for a web chat session is actually less than that of a phone call.

25% of respondents have an average wait time for web chat of lower than 10 seconds, with a further 27% stating that the average wait time is 10-20 seconds. Maintaining this level of accessibility for customers will reinforce their positive experiences of web chat, and will encourage customers to keep using the channel, not only when contacting a specific business, but also in general.

Little research has yet been carried out into the expectations of customers around web chat service levels, but it is reasonable to expect a channel being presented as an alternative to phone to have similar service level expectations and reality. If only 12% of web chats take longer than 1 minute to initiate, then we can expect customers to flock to this channel enthusiastically, as these service levels are generally superior to that of voice.

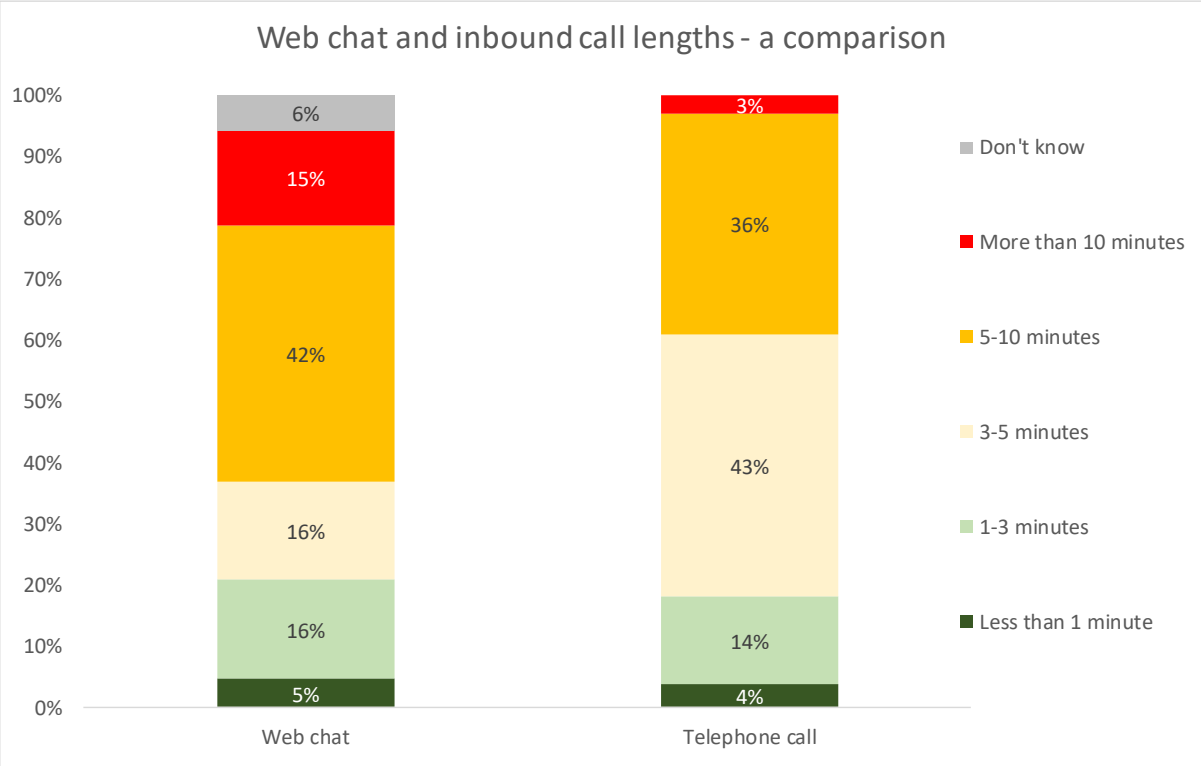
Figure 32: Average wait time to interact with web chat agent



Further comparing the experience of web chats with telephone calls, the survey finds that 57% of web chats take longer than 3 minutes to complete fully, as agent multi-tasking and the time taken to type differs from the experience of handling a phone call.

Comparing web chat and telephone side-by-side, the customer will usually experience a longer overall length of interaction over web chat: although similar proportions will take less than three minutes, 43% of calls take between 3-5 minutes, compared to only 16% of web chats.

Figure 33: Web chat and inbound call lengths – a comparison



Tips for using chat and cobrowsing successfully

Understand the role that you want web chat to have within the customer contact mix. Do you see it as a replacement for email? Or is it more of a call avoidance strategy? Or is it perhaps a way to close the sale? Without understanding this, it'll be difficult to measure its success. Some businesses will offer web chat and cobrowsing only to their premium customers, or to those who are in the final stages of purchasing but who have stalled.

Choose the most suitable metrics for what you're trying to achieve. If web chat is about revenue, then perhaps focus on sales conversion rates, rather than average handle time, in order to encourage agents to make the most of cross-selling and up-selling opportunities.

Some customers may use web chat as an initial method to ask tentatively about products and services. The solution should provide the option to continue the conversation via a phone, or to send relevant documents and videos.

Work with the solution provider to determine what a reasonable and realistic number of concurrent web chat sessions might be. While it is theoretically possible for an agent to cope with four or more conversations at once, the reality is that this is unsustainable over long periods or with complex issues. It is far more realistic to expect a well-trained agent to deal with perhaps two or three conversations concurrently, and this should be fed into your workforce planning system. However, it may be that agents who deal with both telephony and web chat find it too difficult to deal with multiple chat sessions as well, and will deal with only one chat at a time.

As with any real-time interaction channel, monitoring traffic is vital to success. Plans need to be made to handle web chat spikes and providing estimated wait times to those in a web chat queue will allow them to choose a self-service, phone or email option instead.

Plan how web chat will integrate with existing customer service channels. It is possible to run web chat as an entirely separate, siloed channel, but customers expect to be able to move between channels seamlessly. Being able to treat web chat interactions in the same way as other communication channels means that resources can be spread across channels as and when needed.

Sophisticated web chat solutions allow for 3-way chat, so that an agent can bring subject experts into the conversation as required.

Consider using a trial, in a discrete department, product or service area. This will allow you to understand what works and what doesn't, in a relatively low-risk environment. Changing a small number of variables will also provide a more accurate understanding of how web chat affects customer service levels, customer satisfaction and revenue. It will also provide information about the types of customer and queries that web chat is likely to be used by and for.

Make customers aware that you're offering web chat, by promoting it through existing, higher-cost channels such as within the telephone queue's recorded announcement.

While web chat is an increasingly popular channel to offer to customers, the current reality is that it is being used as a direct replacement for live telephone calls, with very limited use of automation or value-added features. Although customers are increasingly comfortable with initiating chat sessions, the visual nature of this channel and the increasing use of smartphones means that opportunities exist for businesses to leverage customers' increasing acceptance of web-based communication to provide deep functionality, a richer customer experience and improve their own profitability.

Co-browsing (or web collaboration), which sometimes includes form-filling and page-pushing as a sub-set of functionality, is a very intensive, one-to-one channel, often used for high-value customers or in those cases where it is quicker and more effective for an agent to take over the reins than to talk the customer through the process. While it has been useful for certain businesses, processes and customers, it is difficult to make a case for it on a cost-saving basis alone, although it will encourage the completion rate of sales, and as such, improve profitability.

Co-browsing may be used to help customers fill out forms, or to complete online transactions, and may be done in conjunction with a concurrent telephone call or web chat. Unlike page-pushing - which is a one-way movement of information from agent to customer - and screen sharing - where the agent takes control of the customer's desktop - co-browsing is a true two-way collaboration tool. Either the agent or the customer can control the cursor or enter data into fields, and business rules can be set up so that the agent does not see or enter sensitive information.

While it is not a cheap option, cobrowsing, particularly in association with a telephone call or web chat, can be an effective way of closing a high-value sale. It is, however, currently used in few UK organisations.

Web RTC & Video

While not a channel in itself, WebRTC (Web Real Time Communications) is an API definition that supports browser-to-browser applications for voice calling, video chat, and P2P file sharing without the need of either internal or external plugins[2].

The announcement[3] that Apple would support WebRTC within its WebKit engine that runs the Safari browser was a major step forward for next-generation customer support, enabling voice, video and collaborative communications directly from a website without the need for additional software. Google Chrome, Mozilla Firefox and Microsoft Edge also support Web RTC.

[2] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/WebRTC

[3] https://webrtc.ventures/2017/06/webrtc-support-in-safari-11/

While mainstream use of click-to-video has been a very long time coming, WebRTC offers the opportunity to businesses to engage customers face-to-face where appropriate, offering the browsing customer a route straight into the contact centre without any breaking of channel or extra effort.

WebRTC allows customers to start a video or voice call from the web browser (which may be via a desktop computer or smartphone, perhaps as an escalation from an existing web chat session), which means the organisation's website can then offer video or voice contact centre functionality in a seamless manner, with customers able to request live communication with the business without the need to download specific software or seek out the phone number and break off from what they are doing on the website. Two-way video communication is likely to be of more interest to mobile users, as their smartphone device already comes enabled with a camera and microphone, unlike many desktop computers which may not have this functionality or whose users have it disabled. One-way video, to protect users' privacy, is perhaps a more likely option in many instances, as is click-to-call.

Video agents as a step towards more personalised, high-quality customer contact. The customer will be able to see to whom they are talking, through a multimedia PC or mobile device, assuming the broadband requirements are met.

There are a number of cultural and business issues to consider:

- Customers may prefer the impersonality of non-visual contact, and may be uncomfortable with the agent seeing them in a domestic environment, which would suggest one-way video may be more popular
- Eye contact is critical for establishing trust and 60% of the communication process is actually visual. For sensitive purchases such as financial services, being able to see the financial advisor can help to establish trust and put the customer at ease. The entire contact may be captured and distributed electronically for further reference
- Verbal abuse, a major problem for some agents, may decrease in a virtual face-to-face setting, however, agents may feel their privacy is decreased if they are on camera, especially one-way, and the incidence of disturbing crank calls may increase
- The contact centre environment will need to be altered to impress the customer, and voice agents will need to be trained in visual communication.

This application has potential, especially in a sales environment, and with technical support, where the agent shows the customer what they mean. Various businesses - usually banks - are already using video kiosks to offer virtual branch banking services in areas where physical branches have closed. Currently, customers are more likely to find that video is not being used to show a company's agents in a live environment, but as part of a supported multimedia service experience, with the agent sending relevant recorded video clips either via chat or email.

The rise of social media as a customer service channel has often been *de facto*, in that customers have actively sought out the company's Facebook page or Twitter account to communicate with it, even if the company originally had a social media presence only to disseminate information. For the foreseeable future, ContactBabel expects social media to remain a relatively minor channel in terms of overall number of interactions compared to telephony, but one with the potential to be strongly negative - to punch well above its weight - and many senior executives within most companies are treating the channel with a great deal of respect.

Despite the relatively low levels of customer interactions via social media, the high-profile nature of this channel and the possible magnifying effects of negative comments means that social media is viewed as being far more important than baseline interaction statistics would suggest. Some savvy customers, knowing that their public complaint or issue will be dealt with quickly, prefer to go straight to a social media channel rather than wait in a telephone queue. Others might choose the social channel after they've had a bad experience on another channel, such as waiting on hold for a phone agent.

Uniquely, social media has taken off as a customer service channel as a result of customer demand, rather than businesses' enthusiasm for promoting a cheaper service channel. For some customers, social media can provide a very positive experience with a very low pain point, and at virtually no cost of time or money: the customer complains, loudly and in public, so the business reacts quickly and effectively. For the customer, this is great: it is the business for whom the popular methods of social media handling are not optimal: not only do they have to carry out their business in public, reacting quickly and without being able to authenticate the customer's identity, but they often cannot handle the query without resorting to another channel such as phone or email, which provide more privacy and functionality. In such cases, they are not even seen by the outside world to be reacting quickly and effectively, or to have solved the problem. Both customers and companies are finding out what works with social media and what does not. Crucially, as with any channel, success will only come when a channel delivers a successful experience for both sides of the equation.

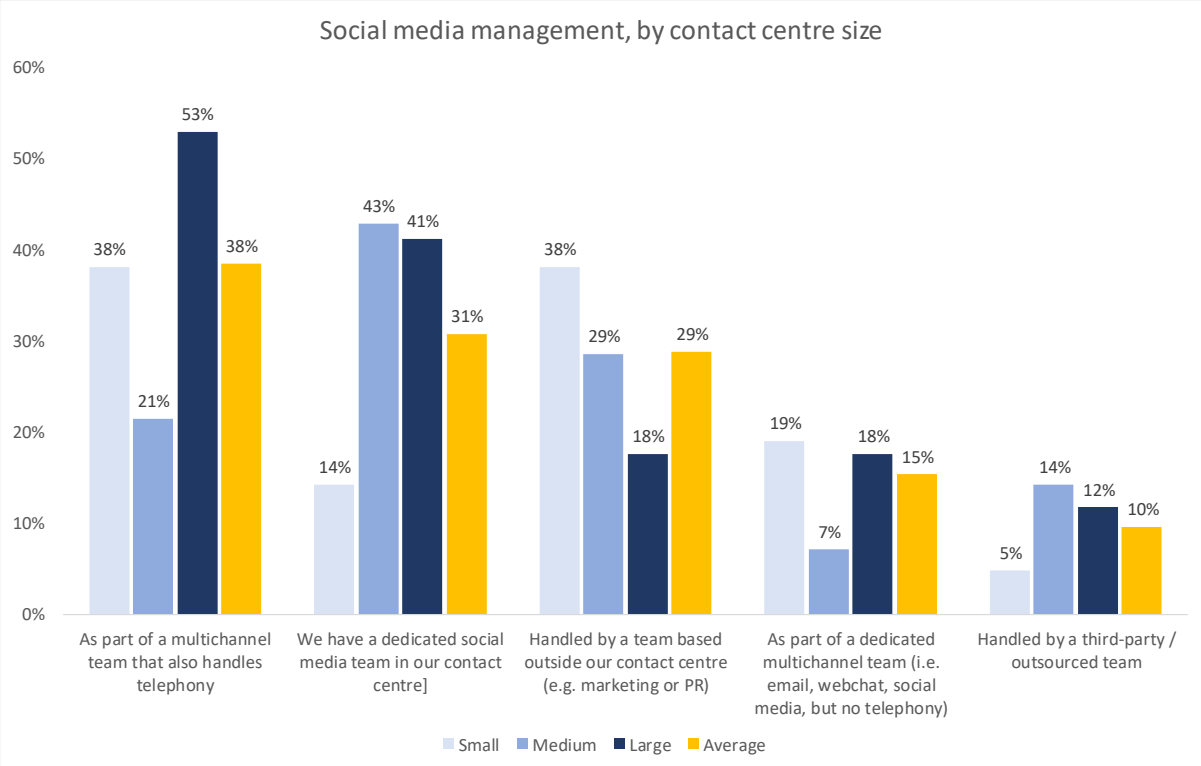
SOCIAL MEDIA MANAGEMENT AND OWNERSHIP

Most respondents report that social media is now handled by an in-house team based inside the contact centre. 29% report that it is handled by internal marketing, PR or corporate communications, with 10% letting an outsourcer or agency handle it. This change implies that social media is being viewed and treated as more as part of a wider omnichannel strategy, rather than as a standalone channel.

31% of respondents reported that they have a dedicated social media team working within the contact centre (much less so in smaller operations), and 15% have a dedicated multichannel team working within the contact centre location but which does not answer telephone calls. (NB multiple choices were allowed, so totals may add up to more than 100%).

When considering the management of social media by contact centre size, larger operations are far more likely to have a team within the contact centre – whether dedicated to this activity, or as part of a multichannel strategy. Small and medium operations are more likely rely upon a non-contact centre-based corporate team to handle their social media.

Figure 34: Social media management, by contact centre size

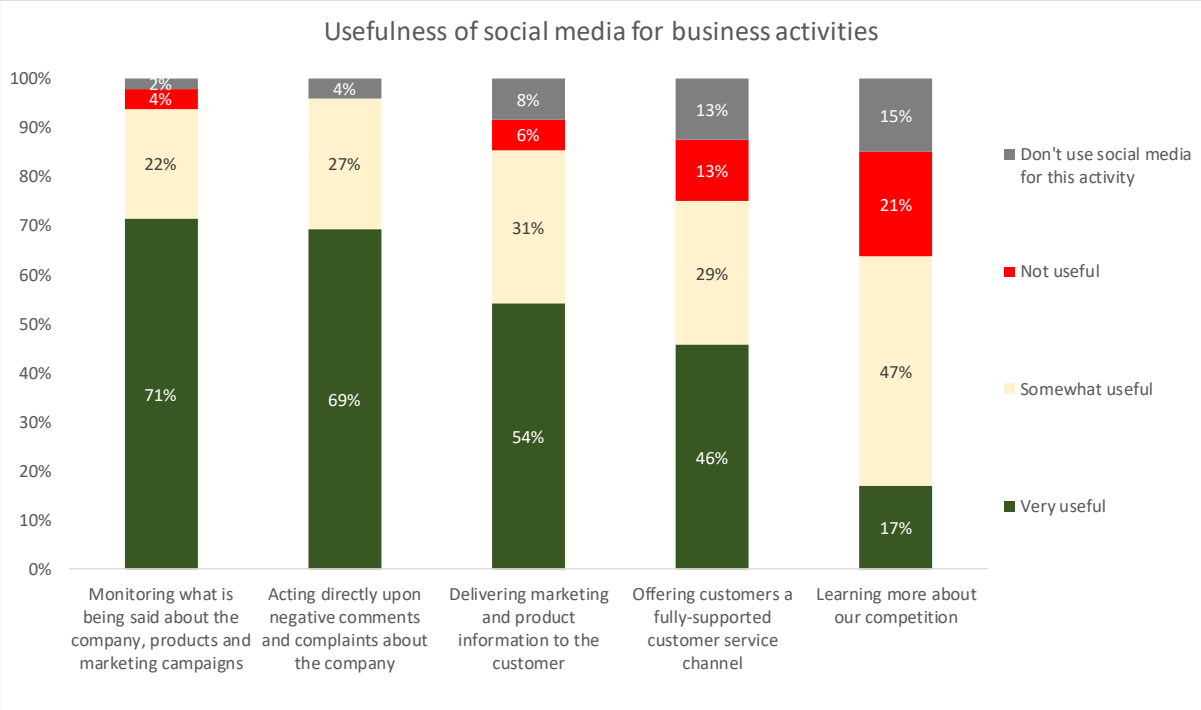


The propensity for customers to complain on social media is actually seen by many businesses to be helpful: 69% of respondents that offer social media as a customer service channel consider it to be extremely useful for acting directly on negative comments and complaints picked up from customers.

In previous years, there were very mixed opinions on whether social media is actually providing customers with a fully-supported customer service channel. However, 46% now feel strongly that they are doing so, whereas only 13% feel that they are not.

Social media is not felt to be supporting the business to learn more about its competitors: it may be that businesses are focusing their efforts upon learning what their customers are saying about their own products and services, rather than worrying too much about the competition.

Figure 35: Usefulness of social media for business activities

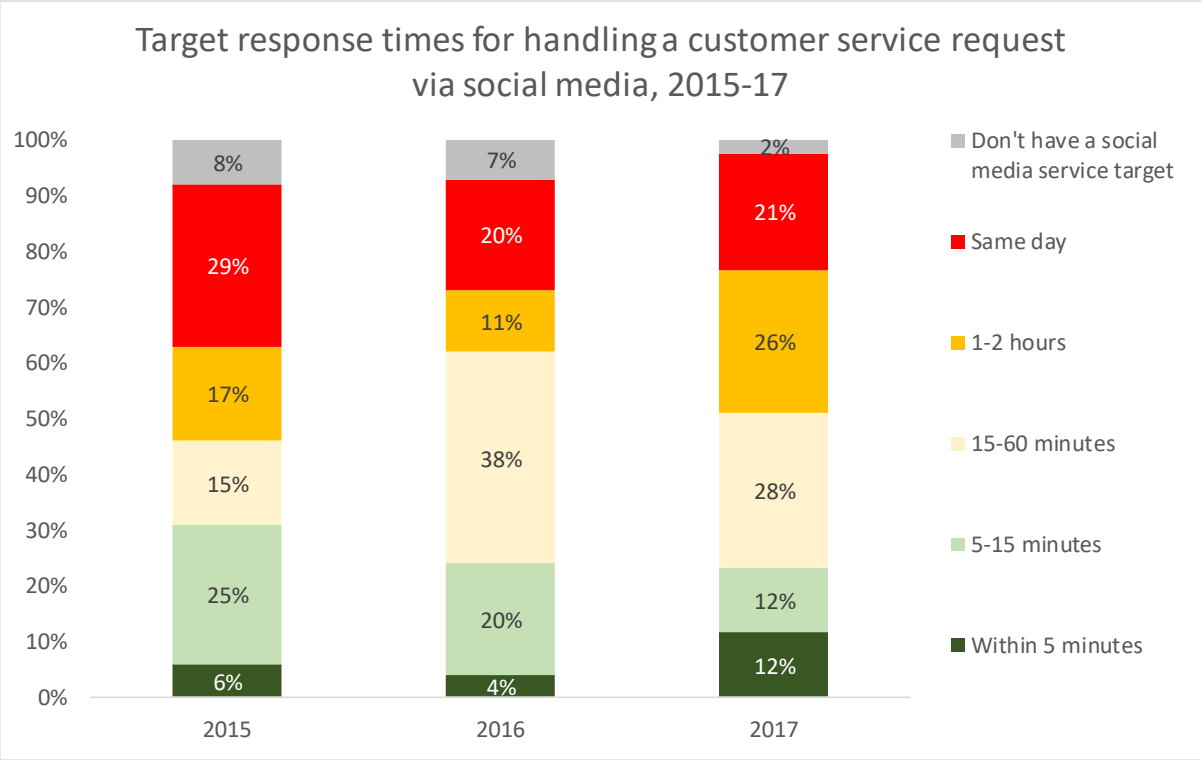


There is some debate about the best way to handle social media inquiries. While it is possible for requests via social media to be analysed (often by keyword spotting), prioritised and then routed to the agent team most capable of dealing with these specific inquiries, it is not just the same as a phone call or web chat. A quick response is expected, with the attendant pressure that such a service level places upon the organisation, but social media does not exist within the same one-to-one paradigm as other customer service channels.

Target response times for handling a social media customer service request are somewhere between a phone call / web chat on the one hand (i.e. a maximum of a few minutes), and an email on the other (i.e. the same working day).

52% of respondents try to answer within the hour, but 47% state that they will probably take longer than an hour but less than a day. Only 2% do not have a service level target at all.

Figure 36: Target response times for handling a customer service request via social media, 2015-17



Tips on providing customer service via social media

- Despite the pressure that social media puts onto a business, younger generations are the most likely to express a preference for communicating with businesses in this way. They are also more likely to complain about problems on social media, so supporting a social media customer care plan is vital to winning and keeping this section of your customer base.

- Social media does not have to refer only to the likes of Twitter and Facebook. Customers are growing increasingly more sophisticated at seeking out help themselves, with many preferring to attempt to find their own solution via customer communities before contacting a business, although this can be a very hit-or-miss approach.

- Be aware that age has a particularly strong role in the choice of customer communication channels. Generally speaking, older generations are more likely to choose the phone as their primary channel, whereas younger customers will look at digital channels.

- 80% of customers trust recommendations from other customers. The downside to this, of course, is that customers will also take a negative criticism of a product or company very seriously.

- By keeping a Twitter feed or Facebook page up-to-date, an organisation can reduce inbound call traffic at a time when a particular issue is causing a spike of calls, for example, if bad weather threatens to close schools.

- Blending social media with other forms of customer communication can mean that agents get a more well-rounded view of what customers are actually thinking. Knowledge sharing between agents, especially where new information is put in a timely fashion into the knowledge base, will assist both agents and self-service customers.

- Just because the customer has initiated a social media interaction does not mean that a business has to stay on that channel to resolve it successfully. Customers may like to receive an outbound call from the agent, as this may provide the opportunity to go into further detail, and to resolve the issue entirely.

FACEBOOK MESSENGER, WHATSAPP AND INSTAGRAM

With Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp both having well over 1bn active users and Instagram over 800m, organisations should at least have a watching brief over these tools where customer contact is concerned.

The applications have the benefit of familiarity with customers, and businesses may wish to investigate including these types of interaction within their agents' web chat screen. As many users live their lives permanently logged into these applications, there is an ease-of-use and ubiquity associated with them.

The applications allow historic records of interactions to be kept (which is not the case with all users of web chat), and there is a great advantage over social media such as Twitter and Facebook: messages are private, which not only allows customer identity verification, but also will reduce the damage to a business through public negative messages. Unlike most web chat, these applications allow the sharing of images.

The familiarity of these applications will work in favour of agents as well as customers, which will reduce training time and cost. Businesses will also need to consider what is an acceptable service level for these channels: as detailed elsewhere the report, web chat is perhaps closest to the telephony channel's service level target, whereas social media is more akin to email. Although Messenger/WhatsApp/Instagram are types of social media, they will be used as web chat from the customer's perspective, and should be resourced according to similar expectations.

WhatsApp, especially, is often used as a closed, group-based application, and there may be pushback from segments of the customer community that do not currently associate the use of these applications with business communication. The challenge to businesses will be to persuade customers that letting them into their social circle is worth the effort.

Regardless of the familiarity that customers and agents have with new communication tools, channel hopping and the need for these various channels to work together (not siloed) in a unified omnichannel experience will continue to remain a large concern. Organisations must be aware of the customer's intent and journey as more channels continue to become available.

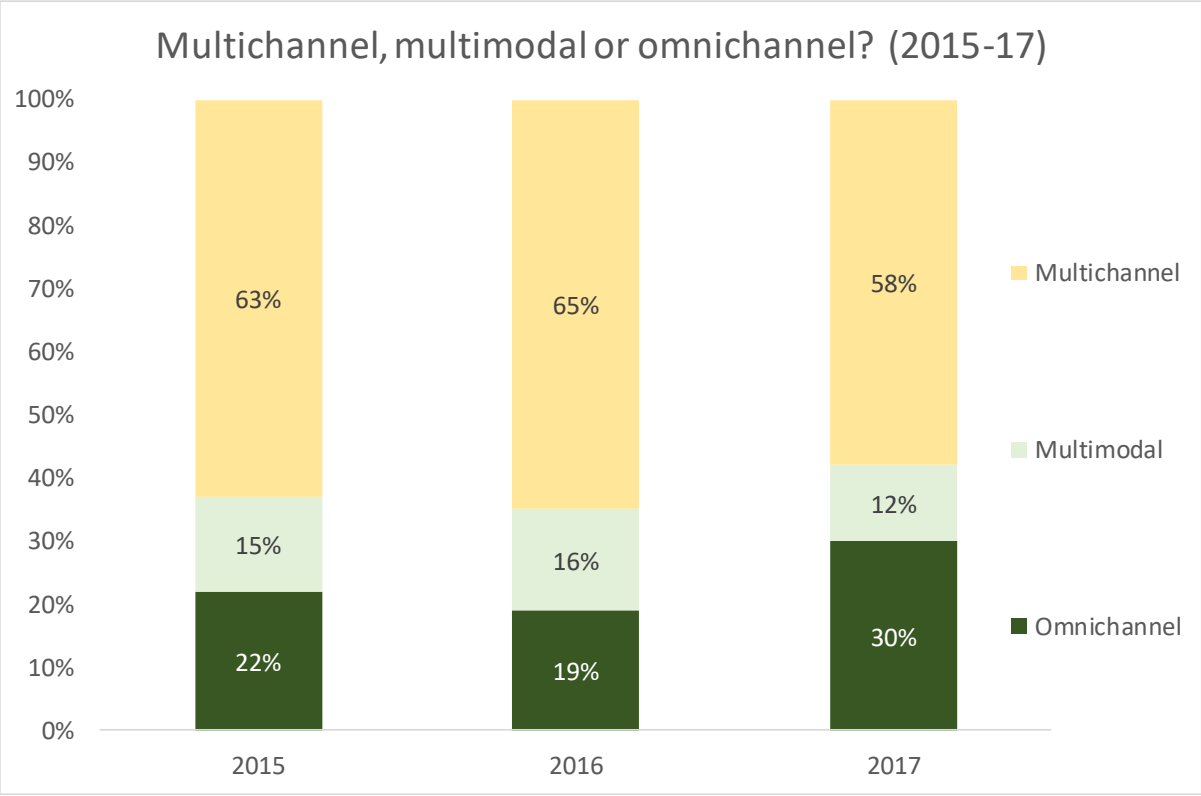
THE SINGLE VIEW OF THE CUSTOMER

Recent years have seen the word 'omnichannel' introduced as describing the goal of customers being able to contact (and be contacted) through any channel - switching between them during the interaction as appropriate, while taking any relevant data and history along with them – with a single, unified view of the customer's journey being available to the agent.

For the purposes of describing how far along the omnichannel process our survey respondents are, those who offer multiple communication channels to customers were asked to place themselves into one of three categories:

- Multichannel: "We offer a choice of channels to customers (i.e. several of voice, email, social media, web chat), from which they can use one in a single interaction. If they change channel, the context and history is lost"
- Multimodal: "We offer a choice of channels, and customers can use more than one in the same interaction (e.g. an agent can send an email or SMS to a customer while they are talking on the phone)"
- Omnichannel: "We offer a choice of channels, and can use more than one over multiple interactions, while retaining the history and context of the original enquiry. Relevant information follows the customer across channels and interactions".

Figure 37: Multichannel, multimodal or omnichannel? (2015-17)



In 2017's survey, 30% of respondents described themselves as omnichannel, with 12% assessing themselves as multimodal and 58% multichannel.

A factor based on contact centre size seems to be emerging - smaller, sub-50 seat operations were more likely to identify as either multichannel or multimodal than larger operations – as the investment and process optimisation involved in moving to a true omnichannel environment is significant, with the platform, infrastructure, applications and resources available to identify, route and switch interactions between agents and channels seamlessly while keeping all relevant data gathered in the course of the interaction requires major effort and investment. Additionally, the relatively low volumes of digital interaction in smaller operations will make major investment less likely.

Respondents believe that there are three main barriers to omnichannel, any of which in isolation would be hard enough to overcome, but together appear to be quite daunting:

- the technology platform does not support a single view of the customer
- there is insufficient budget to carry out the required changes
- business processes are siloed and separate.

While these inhibitors to omnichannel are certainly formidable, they are not insurmountable. From a technical viewpoint, the starting point is to have a single integrated platform that is capable of identifying a customer regardless of the channel which they choose to use. This will involve mean evolving from the siloed, channel-focused point solutions that were put in place to handle a specific need, and using a services architecture that is extendable to different channels in the future. It is also important to have a master dataset for product and customer data which is a single source of information that can be drawn upon in real-time by any customer, agent or self-service application through any channel.

A key aim of omnichannel is to provide a consistency of customer experience, and this requires access not only to the same master dataset, but also that the same knowledge bases and business logic must be applied equally. There must be real-time data flow and updates between channels and databases, as without this, consistency is impossible. Putting such systems and processes in place will not only allow the seamless escalation of service requests within channels, but also gives the business a chance to use their automated systems to react to an escalation before it reaches a live agent, deflecting the cost while fulfilling the service request more quickly. For example, analysis of past interactions may indicate that if a particular customer has placed an online order, they are likely to ring the contact centre within 2 days to check on its progress. Making the IVR aware of the customer's history means that this call can be intercepted before it reaches an agent, and a personalised IVR experience (with the option to "Check your order status") will reduce customer effort and the time and cost of the agent who would otherwise handle this.

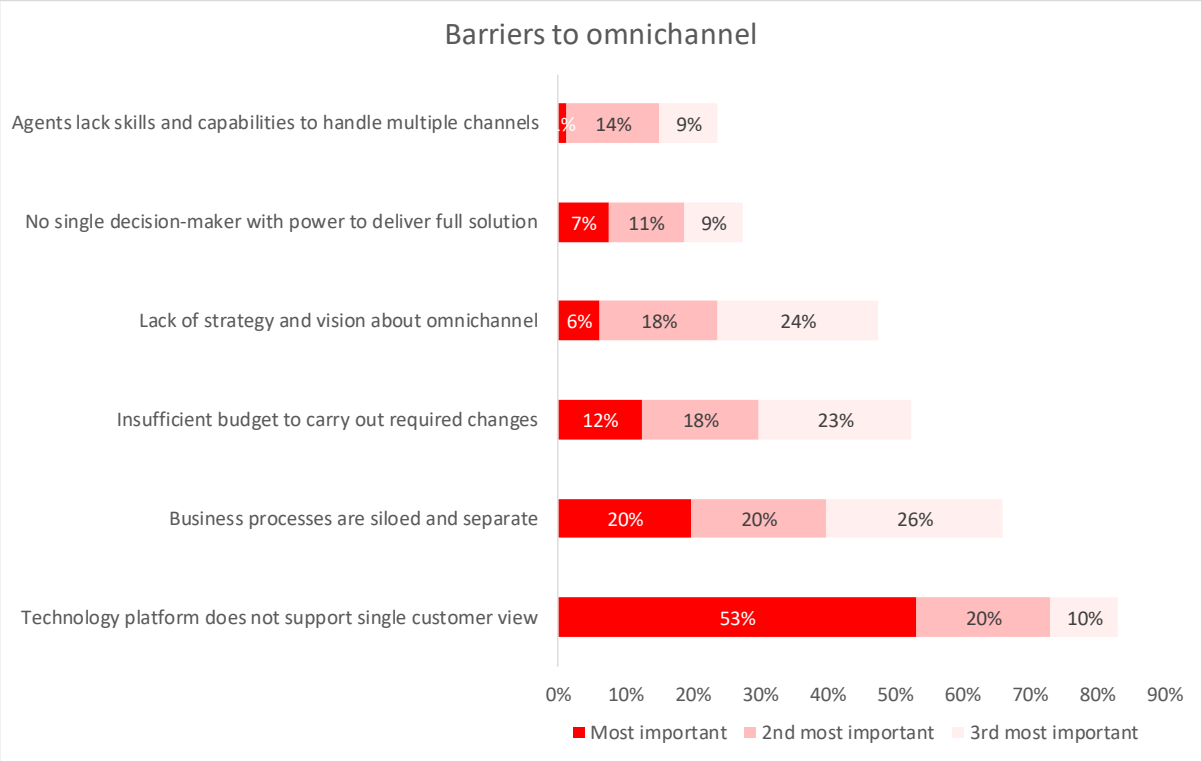
For businesses which are currently handling multichannel interactions successfully, there will be little appetite for starting over with an entirely new customer contact infrastructure. The industry is now talking about customer engagement hubs / centres, defined by Gartner as:

"…referring to a logical set of technologies and business applications that are engineered to provide customer service and support, regardless of the interaction (or engagement) channel. The goal of the CEC (Customer Engagement Centre) is not only to provide service to customers as they move among communications channels — including social media and community forums — while retaining the customers' context, but also to deliver the appropriate business rule to determine the next best action, information or process with which to engage the customers."

This approach allows businesses to leave their working databases, CRM and multichannel contact applications and infrastructure alone, while being able to update and view an individual's customer record at any appropriate point in the customer journey.

For most businesses, applying an omnichannel strategy to existing customers may be easier than offering the same capabilities to new prospects who are not on the customer database. In order to pass through any relevant interaction history and context between channels, the customer must first be identified, and this is far easier to do the customer has logged in, allowing the system to verify them and access past information.

Figure 38: Barriers to omnichannel

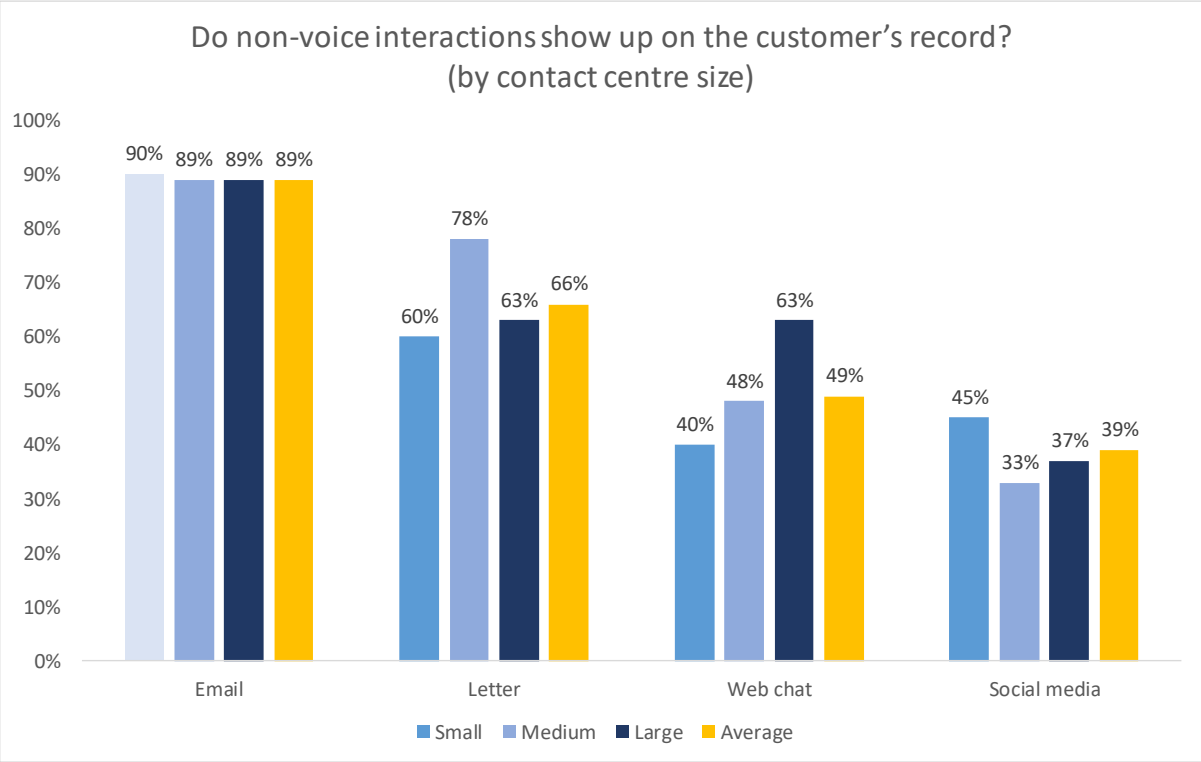


Concern that agents lack the skills and capabilities to handle multiple channels is not seen as one of the major inhibitors, as the majority of respondents do not feel that this holds them back from offering customers a full omnichannel experience.

The siloed nature of channels can be shown in the chart below, which shows just how far many contact centres have to go: a large proportion of respondents do not even update customer records with details of non-voice interactions such as web chat, letters or social media interactions. Without this relatively basic information, omnichannel is impossible to achieve.

However, one positive finding is that customer emails will tend to be linked to the master customer record: the challenge is to make sure that all interactions are.

Figure 39: Do non-voice interactions show up on the customer's record? (by contact centre size)



END-USER QUESTION 2:

WE CAN'T REPLACE ALL OF OUR LEGACY TECHNOLOGY. WHAT DO WE NEED TO DO IN ORDER TO GET A SINGLE VIEW OF THE CUSTOMER ACROSS ALL CHANNELS?

There are several approaches you could use to obtain a consolidated view of the customer without a rip & replace tactic.

One would be to explore if your existing channels can be integrated through backend systems. This might be as simple as consolidating information from each channel and then presenting it inside of a system or database via a wire frame on the agent's desktop. You would need some automation to align the displayed information with the customer record in much the same way you pop a customer information screen to the agent today. The agent would then have the visibility into the customer's history across channels while servicing the customer in a particular channel.

Another approach may be to overlay a cloud-based contact centre solution over your legacy applications and use open APIs to drive updates between the cloud solution and legacy solutions. The benefit of this approach is that you then can leverage the cloud for security and reliability, while keeping your existing infrastructure in place.

The final suggestion would be to selectively implement newer cloud-based technology in an incremental fashion – by business unit, by channel, by region. The prioritization of which ones to do first can be determined by assessing the impact and determining which business unit could best leverage the flexibility and new functionality that you'd receive by moving to the cloud.

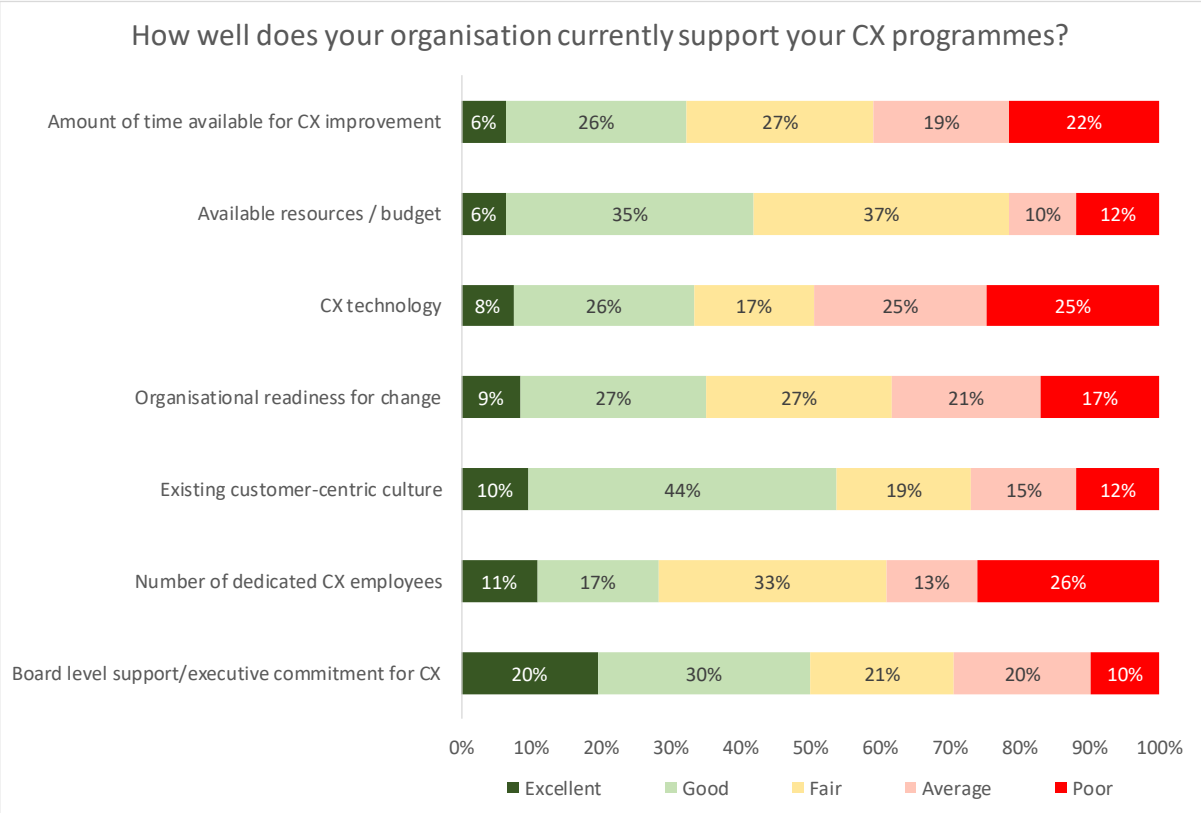
CONSTRAINTS ON OMNICHANNEL

Respondents were asked how well their organisation currently supported their customer experience programmes. In the main, the results were not particularly positive, with half of organisations stating that their CX technology was either poor or average, and almost 40% being lukewarm about their organisation's readiness for change.

On the positive side, more than half of respondents stated that the organisational culture was already customer-centric and 50% commended their executives' commitment, so it appears as though it is the execution of CX improvement rather than the acceptance of the concept itself which needs to be improved.

Having said that, the widespread finding that there were not always enough time and resources for CX improvement shows that having a CX culture does not easily or necessarily translate into actual action to improve CX.

Figure 40: How well does your organisation currently support your CX programmes?

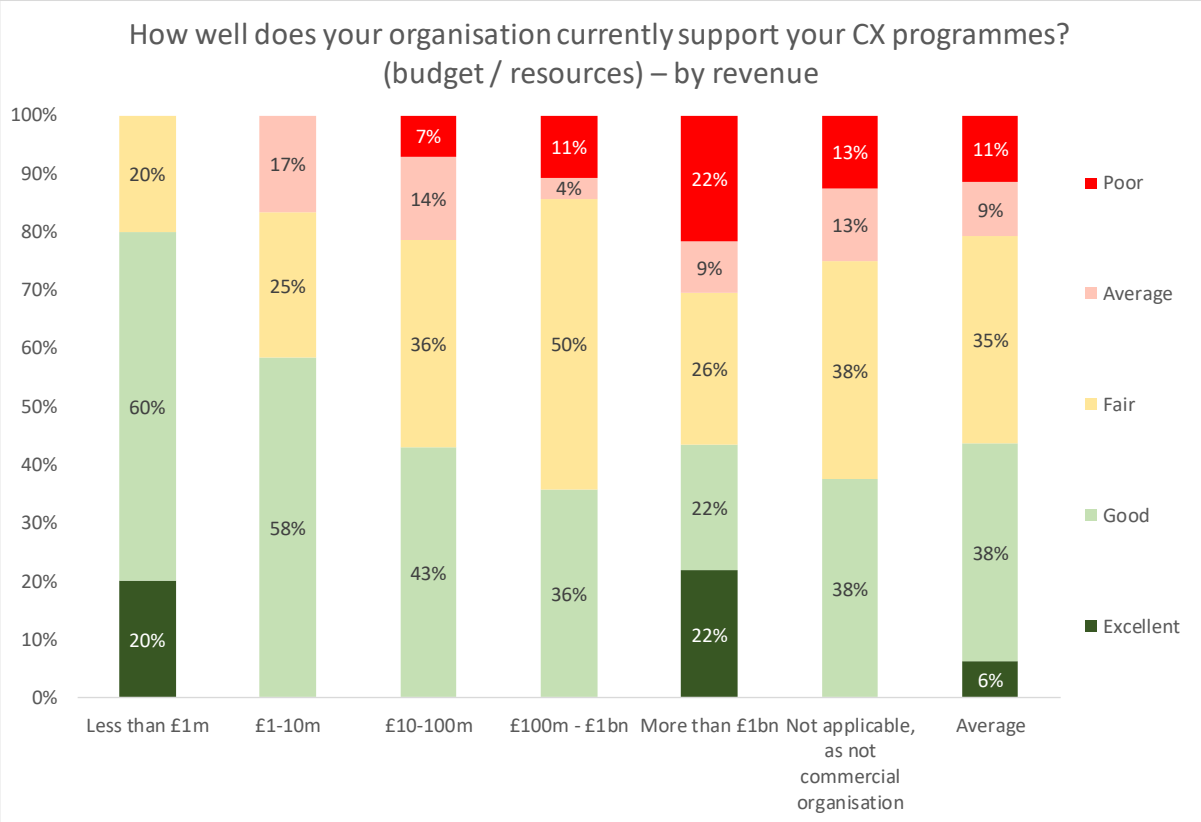


It is worth investigating organisations' support of their CX programmes in a little more depth within the next two charts, which look at the availability of budget and resources when segmented by revenue, and the impact of contact centre size on CX technology, which was identified as one of the main reasons for the lack of omnichannel.

Looking first at the availability of budget and resources when considering the revenues of the organisation, we might expect to see that smaller organisations with less revenue would have greater problems in allocating budget and resource to support their CX programme.

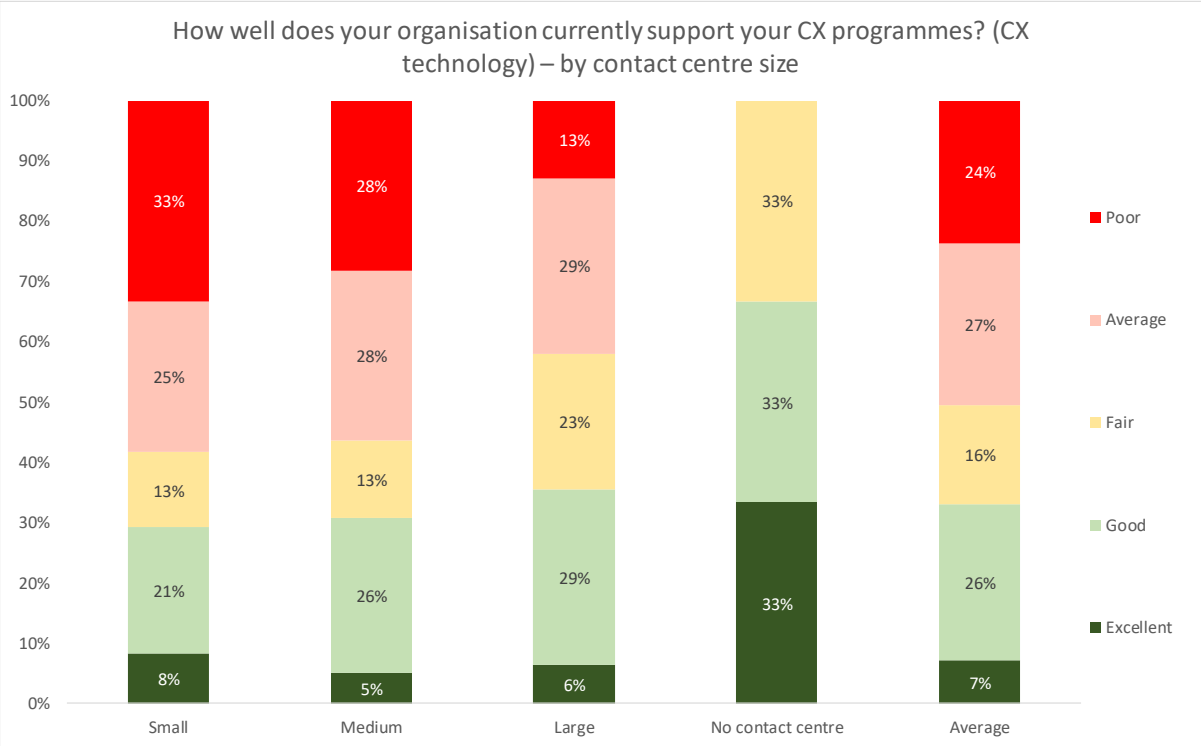
In fact, 80% of the smallest businesses surveyed are generally happy with their allocation, and the greatest levels of budgetary and resource discontent are found in organisations with the highest annual revenues.

Figure 41: How well does your organisation currently support your CX programmes? (budget / resources) – by revenue



When considering the capability of customer experience technology by the size of the contact centre, there are very significant proportions of respondents at every level who ranked their CX technology as being poor or average. As you might expect, those that do not have a contact centre are least likely to be dissatisfied with the level of CX technology, but even those within the largest contact centres cannot be said to be uniformly delighted with the technology that they have in place.

Figure 42: How well does your organisation currently support your CX programmes? (CX technology) – by contact centre size



GETTING OMNICHANNEL RIGHT

FROM MULTICHANNEL TO OMNICHANNEL

Without a single platform or customer interaction hub, the complexity of handling multiple channels increases greatly each time a new channel, device or medium is added to the customer service mix. The only constant is that - regardless of the method they choose to communicate with the business - customers want accurate, timely information delivered in a form with which they are happy. The challenges for the business are to provide a high quality of service which is consistent across the channels and to do so in a cost-effective manner. To do this, and break down the boundaries between contact channels that has been stifling the potential of non-telephony contact, a platform is required which automatically captures, processes, routes and reports on customer interactions and related activities based on a company's specific business criteria, providing a view of each and every customer interaction. Customer interactions through channels such as voice, e-mail, fax, instant messaging and activities such as work items must be handled according to business-defined processes and strategies, avoiding the problem of rogue interactions that are left outside normal workflows, or favouring one channel (often, voice) to the permanent detriment of others.

The universal queue approach – which has been around for many years – can set priority levels to incoming calls, e-mails and chats, and offers the functionality to blend inbound and outbound calls into a single queue to allow agents to move between media as required. This approach also facilitates a single view of the customer across all channels, which is one of the key ways to improve the quality of service offered, as well as improving the agent's confidence and morale.

Such is the theory. The reality for most businesses is that the requirements of their customer base, along with the opportunity to cut service costs have thrust numerous new channels into the customer service mix, leaving them with the headache of deciding how to implement and integrate new technology, recruit and train agents appropriately, and forecast and schedule the right staff to handle these new types of interaction. The easiest and quickest option has been to treat each channel separately, having agent silos and treating each interaction as being independent rather than part of a wider customer journey. If the customer changes channel, or contacts the business later about the same issue, they tend to have to start again from the beginning.

The "omni" element to omnichannel (meaning "all") can be understood as reflecting the customer's experience of interacting with the business: to them, an organisation's separate internal workflow and siloed systems are not just irrelevant, they are unseen. Omnichannel requires the breaking down of boundaries, not only between channels but also the ownership and management of the various relevant business processes and departments affected by customer interactions. This is why successful omnichannel implementations will require a senior management sponsor, with the authority and remit to make changes in any and all appropriate business units.

It is important to realise that omnichannel is not simply about implementing the right technology. While omnichannel obviously involves supporting multiple channels consistently along the customer journey, it is vital to understand and create the business process workflows that occur within each interaction type, not simply across customer service channels, but also reaching into the back office, financial and order management systems, the distribution process and any other business activity that is affected by the initial customer contact.

‘Consistency’ is a concept that should be at the forefront of any discussion of omnichannel, as it is perhaps the key to a successful customer interaction, and applies to many of the elements within this strategy:

- Look-and-feel / branding across channels
- Unified knowledge base, both for the self-service and live agent environment
- Consistent pricing and stock levels available across all channels
- Single customer history, including the current customer journey and context of where they have been, updated across channels in real-time. This is particularly important at the boundary between self-service and live agent interaction: currently, the context and experience of the customer is usually lost once the move into the live agent environment - breaking down this boundary is vital to a successful omnichannel experience
- Functionality offered should be consistent where possible: for example, while it is not suitable to fill in a loan application on public social media, it is possible to carry out a web chat about a specific question on the loan application form while on the website.

END-USER QUESTION 3:

WHAT ARE THE STEPS WE NEED TO TAKE TO TURN OUR MULTICHANNEL CONTACT CENTRE INTO AN OMNICHANNEL CONTACT CENTRE?

While multi-channel and omnichannel are often used interchangeably, they mean very different things, particularly when it comes to customer experience. Multi-channel means that while a customer support centre can handle your interactions in numerous channels – web forms, chat, phone, etc., there is no guarantee that the there is a consistent customer experience across these channels. In addition, if the same customer contacts a centre on multiple channels, many times an agent won't be able to see the various channels that the customer has reached out through. This can cause a lot of frustration for the customer as he or she may need to repeat information multiple times, in multiple formats.

With true omnichannel capability, if a customer uses different methods to contact a centre, an agent has full visibility to the various channels the customer has used as part of their customer journey. This also gives a contact centre the ability to provide a consistent customer experience across channels. Having omnichannel capability enables a customer to begin an interaction in one channel, e.g., chat, but then transition to phone if needed, all while staying engaged with the same agent.

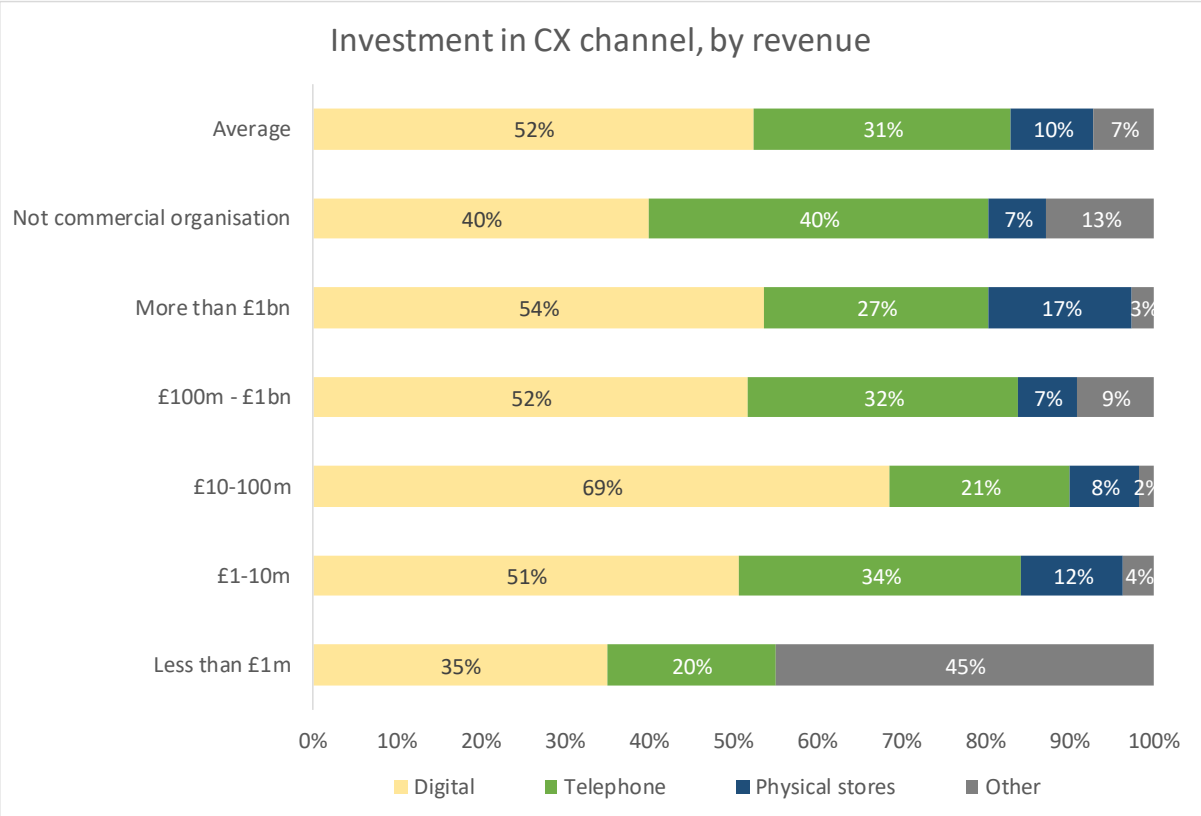
If you are looking to transform your contact centre from multi-channel to omnichannel, you first must ensure that your cloud contact centre provider enables true omnichannel capabilities. This means that the agent can see all interactions in one single screen, rather than toggling between multiple screens or tools. In addition, you may need to think about training agents differently, depending on the interactions that they may now handle. For example, agents may need different training if they'll be answering questions on a social media platform like Facebook as compared to answering questions via text or phone. Finally, you also need to think about how many interactions a given agent may take or the types of interactions an agent may take. You may have an agent who is incredibly strong on the phone or via chat, but needs additional training for email-based inquiries. As you transition to an omnichannel contact centre, you must consider both the technology and change management in your centre for a successful transition.

Although the availability of budget and resource is often stated by contact centres as being the main reason for sub-optimal systems and processes, digital channels are receiving considerably more investment than the traditional telephony channel, so this concern should less affect those implementing omnichannel.

The chart below shows that many mid-sized businesses are embracing the digital channel as a way to give themselves a level playing field when competing against much larger organisations. Respondents with £10-100m in revenue state that 69% of their CX investment is going into digital channels.

It is also noticeable that non-commercial organisations (such as the public sector) are spending proportionally more on their telephony than other respondents, perhaps as many are behind the telephony technology curve.

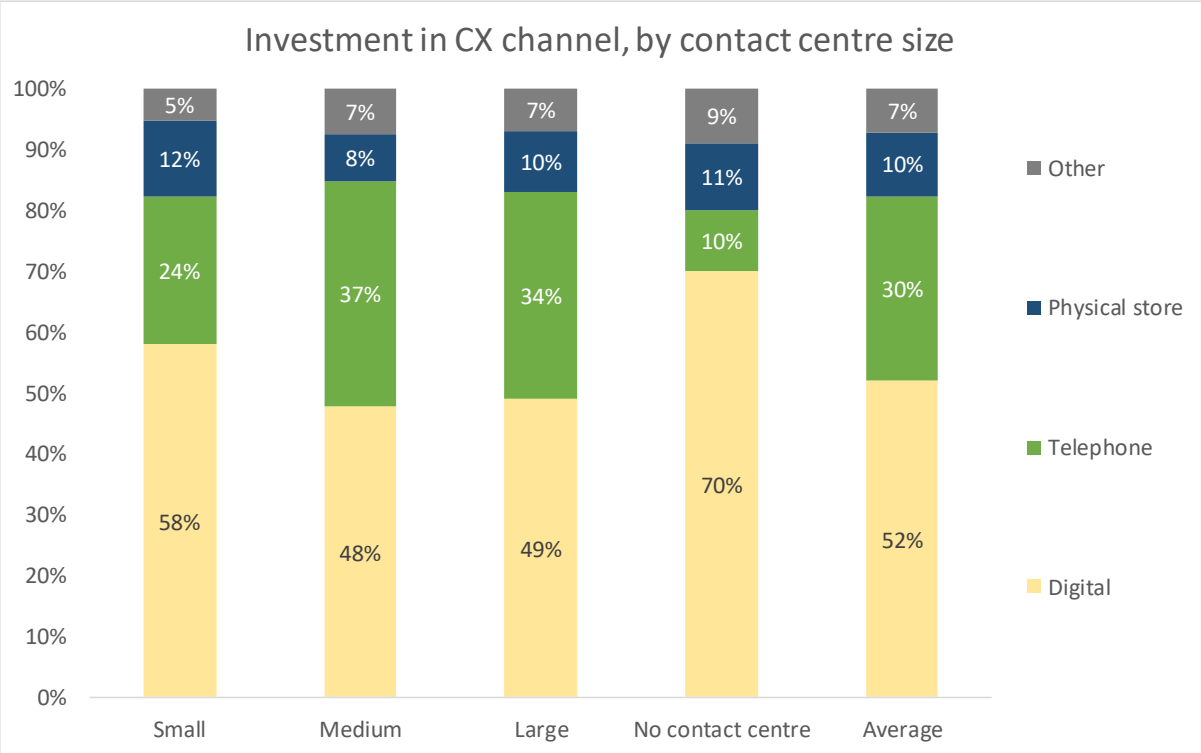
Figure 43: Investment in CX channel, by revenue



The following chart shows investment in customer communication channels segmented by contact centre size. Unsurprisingly, those with no contact centre spend a very small proportion of their investment on the telephony channel, with digital channels receiving the majority of CX investment.

As might be expected, the proportion of CX investment spent on the telephony channel generally increases as a contact centre size goes up, although it should be noted that even in organisations with the greatest amount of telephony, investment in digital channels is still proportionally higher.

Figure 44: Investment in CX channel, by contact centre size



While these findings can be seen as being generally positive for the future of omnichannel, businesses should remember that telephony accounts for around two-thirds of inbound interactions, and should not be neglected.

The following table gives a close analysis of UK contact centres' IT investment priorities over the past three years. The percentages in the table are based on the proportion of respondents over the past three years placing the specific solution within their top 5. By using this historical data, patterns start to emerge, showing the solutions that are gaining the most interest over the years, and those which are losing their appeal.

Figure 45: Top 5 most important areas of contact centre IT expenditure in the next two years (proportion of contact centres placing solution in their top 5, 2015-17)

Technology solution	2015	2016	2017
Omnichannel (i.e. getting channels to work together)	42%	50%	55%
CRM / Agent Desktop Software	48%	56%	53%
Back-Office Integration	39%	45%	48%
Self-Service (DTMF IVR, Speech Recognition & Web Self-Service)	20%	30%	33%
Email Management	41%	37%	31%
Web Chat	38%	31%	29%
Desktop Automation & Analytics	19%	25%	27%
Performance & Quality Management	26%	25%	25%
Workforce Management	19%	29%	24%
Management Information Systems	30%	25%	22%
Mobile Service	15%	13%	19%
Social Media	21%	20%	18%
Cloud	18%	17%	16%
Interaction Routing (including ACD/CTI-like functionality)	17%	14%	14%
Speech Analytics	9%	8%	13%
Hardware (including PCs & servers)	19%	13%	12%
Call Recording	19%	6%	12%
Gamification	8%	9%	11%
Homeworking	14%	9%	11%
Virtual Contact Centres	7%	10%	8%
Telephony Infrastructure (including IP)	10%	12%	7%
Outbound Automation	6%	5%	5%
Voice Biometrics	4%	3%	3%
Video/Web RTC	0%	4%	2%
Headsets	7%	3%	2%

Omnichannel - which is defined within this part of the survey as getting the various channels to work together - is placed within the top 5 priorities by 55% of respondents (an increase on 2015's figure of 42%), and is higher than any other solution. The various supporting applications, such as web chat, email management systems and social media have significant proportions of respondents placing them within the top 5, especially the former two solutions, although it is noticeable that these numbers are falling year-on-year as implementations actually happen.

PROVING ROI

While differing from business to business, moving from multichannel to omnichannel is likely to require significant investment in platforms and business process reorganisation. As with any investment or restructuring, the business has to be convinced by the financial improvements that will follow.

In order to quantify the business case for omnichannel, businesses should consider how the following potential improvements could affect them:

- analysing and forecasting how many of each interaction there are can provide a baseline for measuring ROI and cost
- increasing cross-selling and upselling rates by making sure that the customer does not abandon the interaction through frustration caused by channel switching, and by responding to queries in an informed and timely manner
- increasing customer satisfaction and potentially reducing the cost of service by personalisation and offering service through the customer's preferred channel
- increasing customer loyalty and lifetime value through providing superior and proactive service at the moment of truth
- decreasing unnecessary calls by handling queries correctly early in the customer journey and using proactive outbound customer service to avoid unnecessary calls
- taking advantage of many customers' preference for self-service by offering a powerful and consistent experience across all channels which will reduce inbound call volumes
- implementing a cross-channel knowledge base which will provide consistent information to customers and agents regardless of channel
- if using a single vendor, consider the reduction in the cost of managing multiple vendors, point solution maintenance and upgrades that a single unified solution can bring
- a movement from self-service to live service in an omnichannel environment offers the opportunity for customer identity authentication to take place before the agent is involved, reducing cost and call length and improving service levels
- having the context and customer history on the agent's screen will reduce call lengths and decrease customer frustration
- having a single workforce management solution that can handle multiskilled resourcing in an omnichannel environment will improve service levels across all channels, and reduce time spent on manual scheduling. Intraday changes based on actual volumes within each channel will further optimise resources

- if a one-off issue (for example, related to a specific marketing campaign) suddenly becomes a major topic of customer interactions, templatised and consistent answers can be shared quickly across channels
- automatically moving agents quickly between channels based upon real-time interaction volumes improve service levels, removes the time taken to assign resource manually and a unified omnichannel desktop environment means that agents do not have to log onto multiple applications manually
- a consistent and up-to-date knowledge base shared across channels means that it is more likely that a query will be successfully answered early in the customer journey, improving customer satisfaction and decreasing the duplication of effort and unnecessary cost as customers will no longer have to seek an answer through an alternate channel
- improving first contact resolution rates on non-voice channels will decrease inbound call volumes and improve the customer experience.

Businesses may wish to quantify volume of interactions that they received by type, perhaps using the 2x2x2 cube matrix shown earlier in the report. This will allow the identification of the types and volumes of interaction that are suitable for self-service or non-voice interaction, which will allow them to focus on the areas of greatest potential.

The measurement of omnichannel success is likely to be significantly different from the typical efficiency metrics associated with the contact centre. There is likely to be increased focus upon customer-related metrics, such as NPS, customer effort and customer satisfaction, but it is vitally important to understand the more traditional measurements such as wait time, first contact resolution and interaction transfer rates also impact directly upon the customer experience, and consequently, customer satisfaction scores.

As time progresses, businesses are also more likely to include metrics such as number of channels used and % of calls deflected by self-service in order to appreciate and quantify the effect of the omnichannel experience upon the customer.

END-USER QUESTION 4:

HOW DO WE MEASURE THE ROI OF OMNICHANNEL? ARE THERE ANY QUICK WINS WE CAN USE TO SHOW OUR SENIOR MANAGEMENT?

Serenova One of the better measurements is the number related to "First Contact Resolution." This is the number of customers who resolve their issue, problem or inquiry on the first contact, as compared to multiple interactions. Another way to think of this is the number of times a customer must contact you, no matter what the channel, to resolve their issue or inquiry. This metric is also useful in showing a contact centre where processes can be improved in the customer journey.

For example, if you have ecommerce capability on your website, you likely also offer a confirmation that the order has been placed. However, if you don't also provide a delivery timeline, a customer may contact your centre multiple times to determine when the order will be delivered. If you see contacts increase around order delivery, you'll want to map automatically communicating delivery information into your customer journey. Paying attention to and monitoring "First Contact Resolution" can give you a quick win in reducing the customer effort and the number of interactions required from your agents. As the percent of "First Contact Resolution" increases, that should also increase your customer satisfaction or NPS (Net Promoter Scores).

Mapping the customer journey as part of implementing omnichannel not only highlights areas for improvement, but having omnichannel in and of itself often improves customer satisfaction and NPS scores. Customers are no longer frustrated about communicating in multiple ways about the same issue, only to repeat it again in a different channel. Since agents have a full view of all of the interactions that a customer may have had with the contact centre, he or she can provide a more meaningful experience to the customer.

Another KPI that reflects the benefit of digital enablement and omnichannel strategy is the overall cost to serve number. As we all know, automated digital channels are less expensive than more traditional support approaches. If you can streamline the number of interactions required and the level of effort or time consumed in each interaction, your cost to serve will reflect the savings of those efforts.

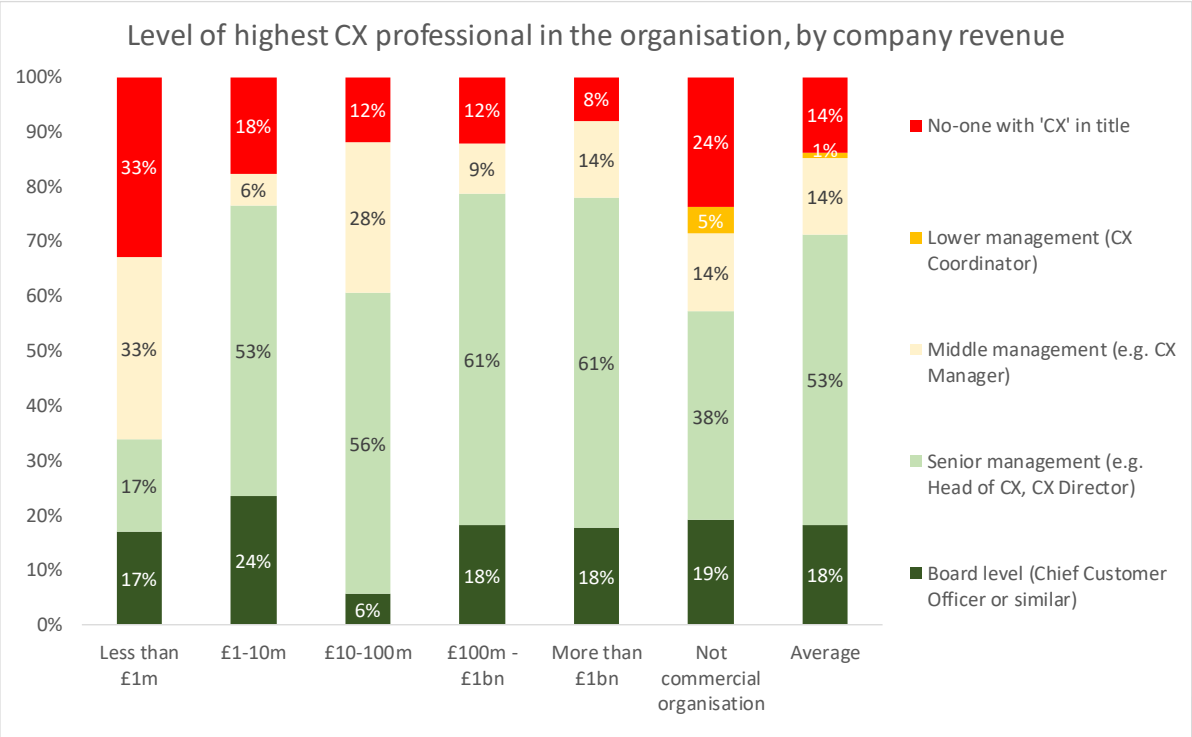
One of the major issues to overcome within most organisations that offer service across multiple channels and devices is this: who actually owns the space? Telephony is established as a contact centre function, and some other non-voice customer channels also fall under its auspices, but social media is often still owned by marketing (who may also lay claim to mobile strategy), and the wider self-service functionality may be a remit of the IT function. This fragmented and inconsistent ownership of multichannel customer contact functions means that maintaining the same high and reliable standard of information and service across channels has become an even more considerable challenge, and the path to true omnichannel even more fraught.

It may not be possible or even desirable for a single unified group to take charge of all such functions. However, because the customer neither knows nor cares about the internal structure of the organisation, a bridge between the channels must be created to ensure that a customer experience does not break down if the initial channel cannot handle all the customer's requirements effectively, and the growth in cross-functional customer experience teams is a response to this issue.

A question was asked to survey respondents about who in their organisation was responsible for customer experience. Governance shows how seriously CX is being taken, and how capable organisations will be of driving radical and successful CX programmes, including omnichannel, which are likely to impact on many existing fiefdoms.

The chart below shows clearly that small organisations are far less likely to have a dedicated customer experience professional working within them. Even in the very largest organisations surveyed, only 18% had a CX professional at board level, although there is often representation for CX at very senior management level.

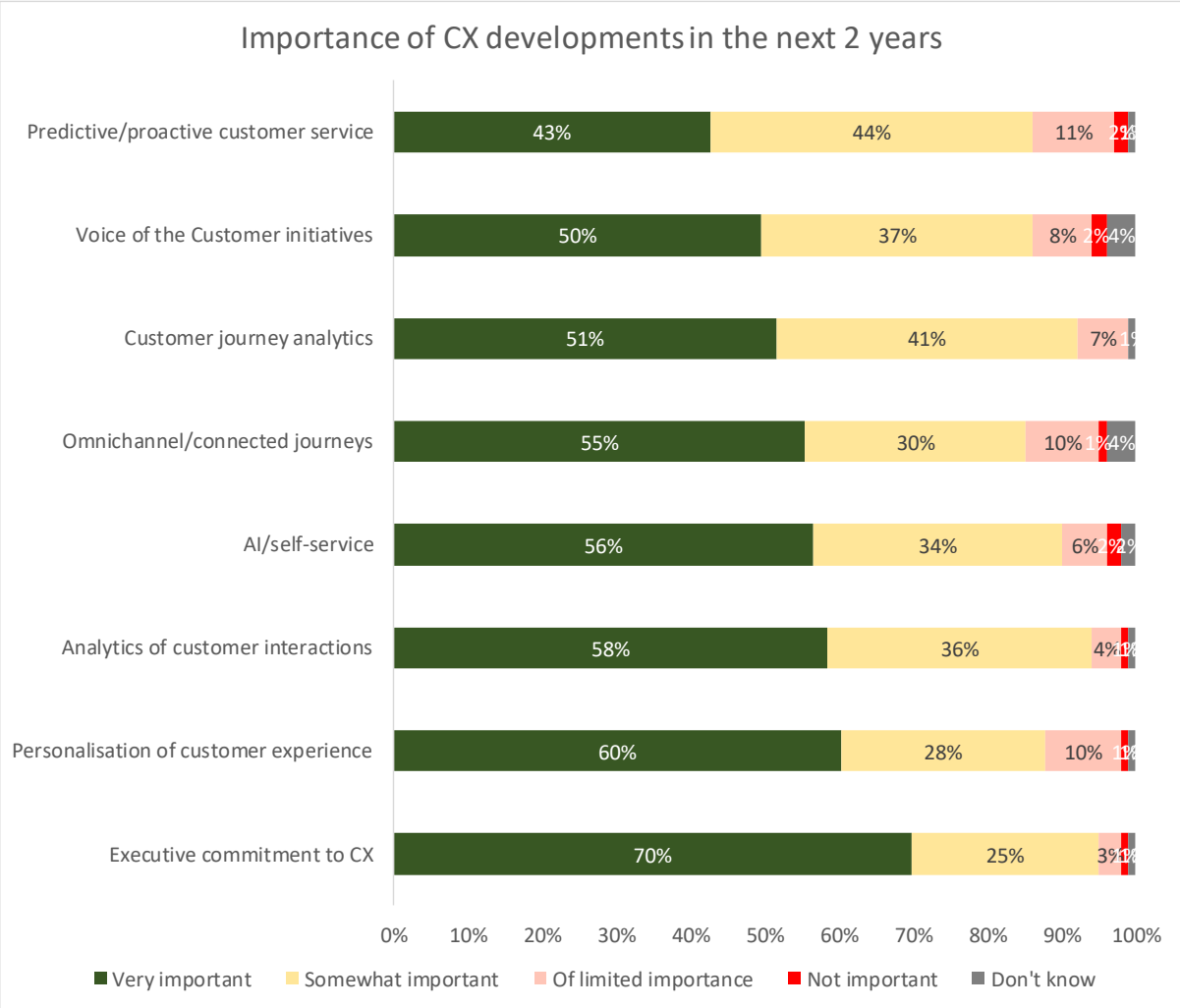
Figure 46: Level of highest CX professional in the organisation, by company revenue



Survey respondents were asked their opinion on how important various customer experience developments would be to their organisation in the next two years.

Perhaps the most striking finding was that the most important factor determining future success was not technology-related, but rather a requirement for the continuing and strengthening executive commitment to improving customer experience, without which the multi-departmental CX initiatives could flounder. Successful omnichannel demands a high-level champion to make departments work together for the good of the company: without this, few omnichannel implementations will fully succeed.

Figure 47: Importance of CX developments in the next 2 years



END-USER QUESTION 5:

OMNICHANNEL INCLUDES SOCIAL MEDIA, PHYSICAL SHOPS/STORES, FIELD SUPPORT, BACK OFFICE, ETC., ALL WORKING TOGETHER ALONG WITH VOICE AND DIGITAL CHANNELS. HOW CAN WE PLAN AND MANAGE THIS CHANGE INTERNALLY SO EVERYTHING WORKS AS IT SHOULD?

The first step is to map out the customer journeys that reflect how customers typically engage with you. At each hand-off point within the journey, you need to enable the next point in the journey to have an awareness of the previous steps. So, when a store associate approaches a customer and identifies them through passive RFID, a GPS-based check-in or some other method, the business systems need to present the associate with the history of the customer's journey. The associate then knows that the customer has been shopping at the online website, asking for product details via an online chat and can approach the customer with the knowledge of what they have been looking at and direct them to the product or comparable products aligned with their interest. Likewise, when the customer later goes online or calls the support centre about a return, the agent will have that full visibility into the customer's journey and the details of their recent store purchase.

- Gather as much information as possible from customers, through analytics, customer surveys or preferably both: many businesses are doing this through a voice of the customer programme. The aim is to understand which business processes are working, which are suboptimal and perhaps most importantly, which are most valued by the customer. Omnichannel is a journey, so focusing upon those areas which are most obviously broken will make sense, both from the customer's perspective and also in proving the concept to stakeholders within the business

- While the vision and strategy should be distinct and all-encompassing, the implementation can be done in phases that immediately impact upon the customer experience and prove ROI

- Set measurable objectives, using metrics that are directly related to the desired outcome. For example, if one of the aims of the omnichannel project is to reduce customer effort, it would make sense to consider first contact resolution rates, rather than agent occupancy rates, for example. Metrics that are able to demonstrate ROI should be chosen wherever possible, in order to demonstrate to and reassure stakeholders elsewhere in the business that the project is achieving financial success. As elements of the omnichannel journey go live, behaviours and outcomes that support these metrics should be tangibly rewarded

- As with any large, cross-departmental project that may need to alter the culture of the organisation, omnichannel will require a project champion at a senior level, with the authority and vision to influence and create change wherever required, backed by and reporting to a sponsor at the highest level of the organisation. Create a cross-functional organisational overlay that represents the interests of each interested party

- Identify as many of the customer journeys as possible (and their business owners), tracking them across channel, into the back office, financial and distribution systems, and back out towards the customer. If some channels are owned by different departments (e.g. social media is often run by marketing), pitch the benefits of having the contact centre deal with customer interactions, allowing the marketing department to concentrate on their core job

- Using a tool such as the 2x2x2 cube matrix shown earlier, identify volumes and uses associated with each customer channel, segmented by variables such as customer demographics and intent if possible. Identify the potential moments of truth and the knowledge and data required at each stage in the journey to identify gaps

- Make a point of learning from the people who have actually been handling interactions over different channels, and have the contact centre agents work alongside them to understand what's different in these channels

- A platform or hub will be required that allows every channel to access and update the customer's master record as and when required, with real-time synchronisation being of vital importance. Within each individual channel, consider the potential use of further automation: for many businesses, non-voice channels still rely upon manual input and there are considerable opportunities to reduce cost and improve data consistency

- Accept that omnichannel customer contact is an ongoing process, to be revisited and continually improved as the nature of business, customer preferences and new channels further evolve.

END-USER QUESTION 6:

IS THERE ANYTHING THAT SUCCESSFUL OMNICHANNEL IMPLEMENTATIONS / PROJECTS HAVE IN COMMON? ANY PITFALLS TO AVOID?

Successful omnichannel implementations map out the customer journey prior to diving in. And it is helpful to map the customer journey alongside the corresponding agent experience. This is important because the customer's experience in their journey is often dependent on the agent's ability to help guide them or keep them on-track as they progress through the steps of their journey. Mapping out both sides of the interactions along the journey allow for insights into ways to automate steps or to proactively respond in anticipation of what typical customers will ask for next.

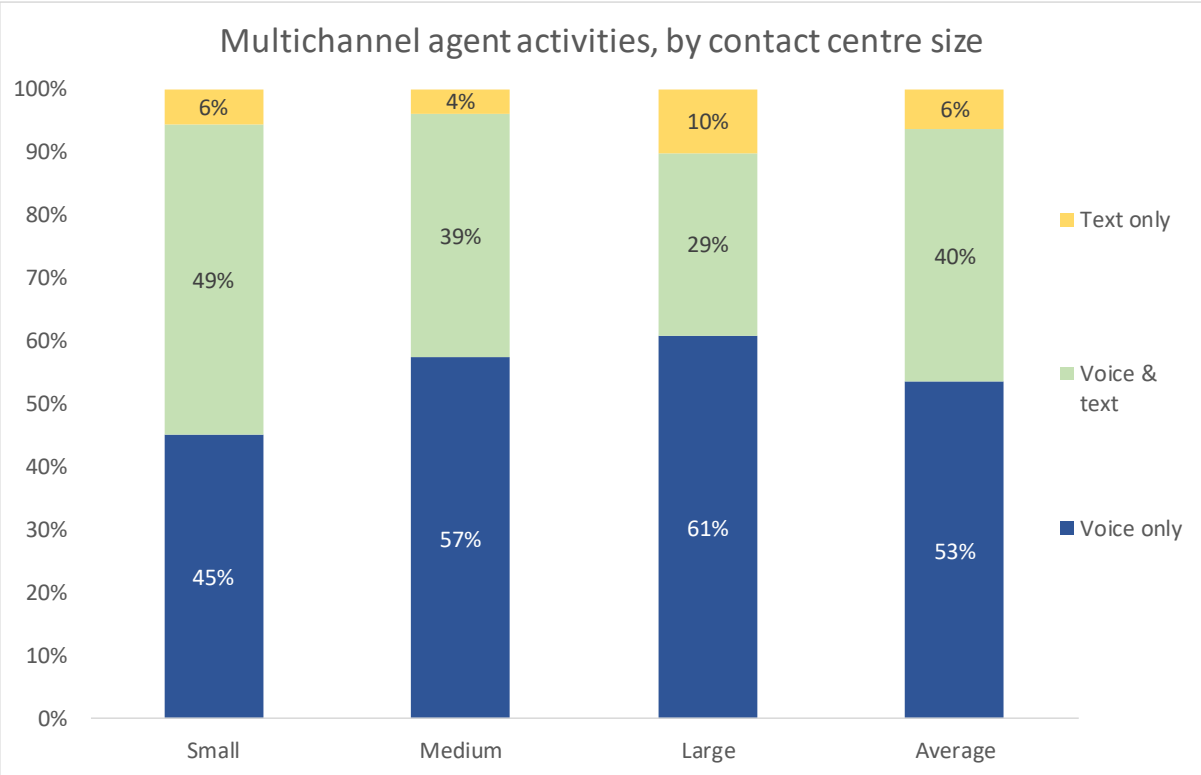
One of the biggest pitfalls is for implementation teams not to think through a "day in the life" of the customer when developing strategies. One example is when developing self-service capabilities, not allowing for an escalation path and the effect that will have on the customer's experience. You also need to think through the training that agents may need as they handle multiple types of interactions vs. phone only or chat only.

There is no general agreement within the industry on how best to deal with digital channels, although there are genuine reasons to encourage digital/voice blending. On one side, there is a case made that letting agents answer non-voice interactions makes the job more interesting for them, lowering attrition and improving skills. The other side to this says that the skills required by digital agents are different from voice agents, and that it is difficult to find the agents to do both jobs. Both sides make sense logically, and historically, of those contact centres which use voice/digital blending, only around 1 in 5 have experienced problems finding the right staff for these types of role, a figure that decreased each year that it was surveyed.

Survey respondents were asked a question of how they used agents to handle multichannel. In medium and large contact centres, around 60% of agents handle only voice, with around 5-10% handling text only (including email, web chat and social media).

As has been found in previous years, smaller contact centres - which tend not to have the depth of resource available to operate a dedicated single channel teams - are far more likely to have agents moving between voice and text interactions as required. This approach, whether ad hoc or through a more formal blended approach, has been proven many times in past years' data to be positively correlated with improved agent attrition. This is not to claim causality, but that a variety of work may impact positively upon agent engagement and attrition rates is a point to consider.

Figure 48: Multichannel agent capabilities, by contact centre size



Simply because a contact centre uses the same agents for digital and voice does not mean that all operations use the same level of blending. For some operations, it is a strategic decision which has been invested in with the right levels of technology and training being provided. For others, it is a necessity, with agents encouraged to answer a few emails in slack call times. Small and medium operations - which in the past may not have had sufficient digital volumes or the investment available to formalise the blending by forming a universal queue to deal with all types of interaction - are now as likely to use a universal queue as the ad hoc method. Many larger contact centres prefer to use dedicated digital groups.

However, this preference of many larger contact centres to form specialised digital groups may not provide the same levels of service. Previous years' data indicated a formalised blending environment, such as a universal queue, has a beneficial effect on email response times. Respondents using a formal blended environment reported that twice as many emails were successfully handled within an hour, although the proportion being dealt with in the same working day were fairly similar, regardless of whether formal blending, ad-hoc distribution of work, or dedicated email teams were used.

Some operations find it successful to dedicate a number of agents to a single activity, and have others acting as a pool of blended agents that move quickly to the activity where they are needed. Workforce management systems can take into account the times of day when each channel is used most (for example, phone volumes are considerable on Monday mornings in most banks), and schedule resource accordingly.

Businesses should be aware that the cross-channel omnichannel model may require the agent to move between channels within a single interaction, so may desire that all agents should be able to use all channels to at least some level of competence.

An omnichannel strategy aims to support the customer throughout any and all interactions that they have with the company, reducing their effort, with the goal of providing a high level of customer experience that translates into a long-term, profitable relationship.

As part of this, technology and business processes can be combined to give the customer an experience that is tailored to their requirements, rather than offering the same interaction options each time, regardless of who the customer is, and what they are trying to do.

As seen earlier in the report, customers have different channel preferences depending on their requirements and the sort of people that they are. Yet personalisation does not stop there. This section describes some of the opportunities available for businesses which want to make their customers' experience truly personal, while optimising the cost and outcome for the business as well.

ANALYSING CUSTOMER INTENT

Customer interaction analytics can provide a solid understanding of why customers are calling. Categorising types of calls, and then analysing them for the occurrence of similar types of words and phrases can give an insight into the reasons for customers' calls. For example, a category such as 'sales' might be analysed for patterns, and it is discovered that the words 'delivery' and 'website' are mentioned in a disproportionate number of them. Listening to some of these conversations, it may be found that the website does not highlight delivery times effectively enough, leading to unnecessary calls to the contact centre, rather than the customer purchasing on the website.

The automatic categorisation of calls, based on the types of words and phrases that typically get used within these types of calls, is a starting point. Analytics solutions can then add non-audio data, such as desktop activity or account status, and the tracking of word usage compared with its historical use (e.g. a 300% rise in the use of the phrase "can't log-on" after a software upgrade) can quickly indicate and identify issues that can be handed to the relevant department much more quickly than typical inter-department channels could usually manage. Regular references to competitors and their products can be captured, analysed and passed to the marketing or pricing teams to provide them with real-life, rapid and accurate information upon which to base decisions. This categorisation gives a starting point for analysis, meaning that businesses can listen to the right calls rather than getting them randomly or employing large numbers of people to get insight from customers' calls.

This information can be matched against customer profiles, or those which have recently carried out specific actions, in order to predict why they are calling, and either offer the correct self-service option, or proactively communicate the required solution before they even call.

PREDICTIVE ANALYTICS

Predictive analytics is a branch of analysis that looks at the nature and characteristics of past interactions, either with a specific customer or more widely, in order to identify indicators about the nature of a current interaction so as to make recommendations in real-time about how to handle the customer.

For example, a business can retrospectively analyse interactions in order to identify where customers have defected from the company or not renewed their contract. Typical indicators may include use of the words “unhappy” or “dissatisfied“; customers may have a larger-than-usual volume of calls into the contact centre; use multiple channels in a very short space of time (if they grow impatient with one channel, customers may use another); and mention competitors’ names. After analysing this, and applying it to the customer base, a “propensity to defect” score may be placed against each customer, identifying those customers most at risk. Specific routing and scripting strategies may be put in place so that when the customer next calls, the chances of a high-quality customer experience using a top agent are greater and effective retention strategies are applied.

A branch of predictive analytics - predictive behavioural routing - uses insights gathered from historical calls and the analysis of customer communication types in order to choose the agent whose skills and characteristics are most likely to achieve a positive response from the next caller in the queue.

Predictive behavioural routing uses millions of algorithms to decode the language used by agents and customers, in order to understand their state of mind, personality, communication style, engagement levels, empathy and transactional attributes (such as ability to overcome objections, willingness to sell, success rates, the number of times that supervisor assistance is required, etc.). Through analysing historical interactions, each customer can be matched against a specific personality style. When this customer calls again, they are identified through the IVR or the dialling number, and the call is then routed through to an agent whose performance when interacting with this specific personality type has been seen to be positive. This increase in empathy and the matching of communication styles has seen these matched agent-customer pairings get significantly higher sales closure rates and better customer satisfaction scores.

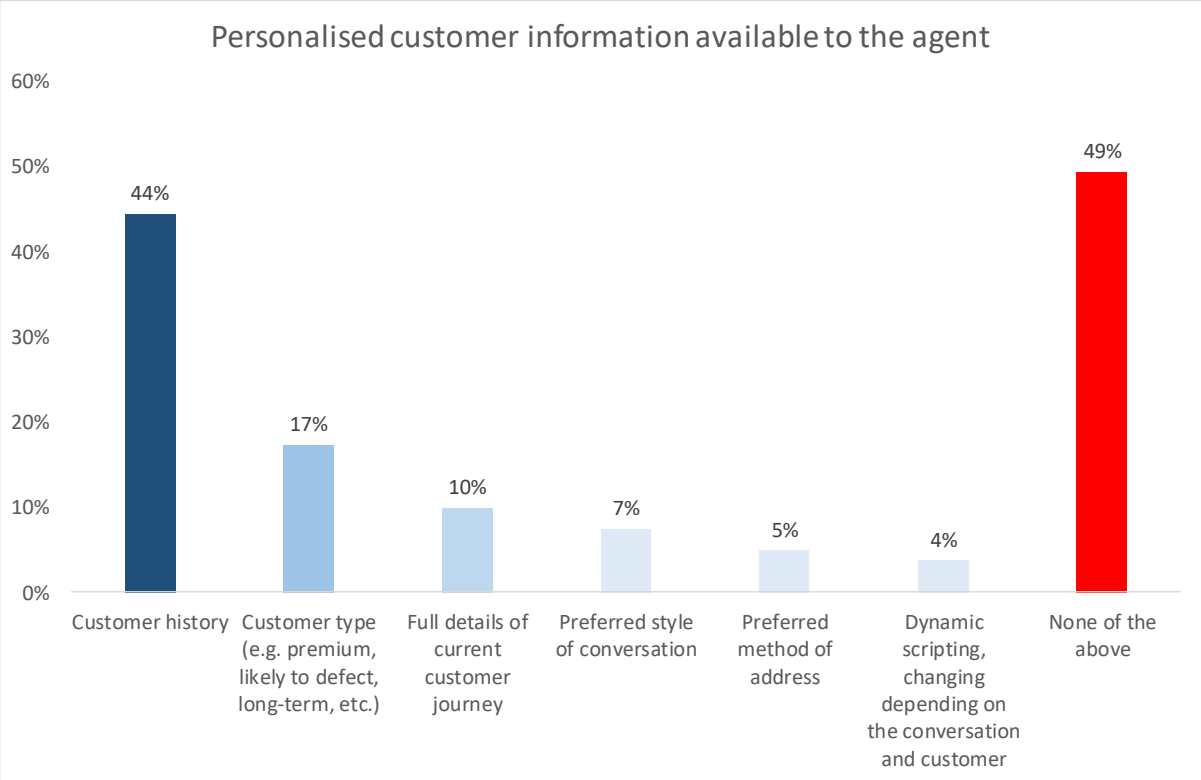
Predictive behavioural routing has its roots in communication-based psychological models for assessing personality type and identifying behavioural characteristics. One vendor’s solution, for instance, is based upon a personality model developed in the 1970’s to assist NASA with astronaut selection; the premise of this model is that individual personality type can be derived from a person’s use of language. By understanding the type of customer, calls can be routed to agents who are best at handling the caller. Agents who are skilled at handling many types of callers' personality styles can be saved for callers whose character type is unknown, perhaps as this is the first time that they have called.

By tracking agent performance across various personality types, information can be fed into the performance management process to help that agent improve, and agent capabilities are regularly reassessed to promote optimal routing.

HELPING THE AGENT TO HELP THE CUSTOMER

Once the customer has been identified and the call has been routed to the agent, greater personalisation of the interaction becomes possible. Agents need relevant information about the customer and the issue they wish resolving to be available at a glance, without having to search manually for it, or keep the customer waiting while they try to understand the situation. Integrated desktop solutions can remove the need for agents to log into multiple applications, assist them with the navigation between applications within the call, and make sure that customer data is gathered from the correct places and written back consistently to any relevant databases without the need to navigate through multiple systems. This not only increases speed and accuracy, but allows the agent to concentrate on the customer, and on any alerts or suggestions that the desktop application is making about where to take the conversation next.

Figure 49: Personalised customer information available to the agent



Surprisingly, only 44% of contact centres report that the agent even has a full view of the customer history, including any non-voice interactions, and only 10% have a view of the full customer journey.

Away from live phone calls, using artificial intelligence (AI) for analytics will allow the business to provide customers with personalised service before they even require it. AI will be able to predict what the customer is likely to meet next, based upon analysis of other customers with similar circumstances in the past. This move to proactive customer service is a step further than what is currently widely-used - automated emails or SMS providing an update about delivery times, for example - anticipating sources of frustration or the need for assistance before the customer has even realised it, on a personalised basis. Machine learning - which will be able to identify patterns within data automatically, without requiring an analyst to direct it - will give analytics even greater scope and power.

CUSTOMER JOURNEY ANALYTICS

Driven by the need to get beyond the siloed nature of multichannel interactions, customer journey analytics aims to gather together the various data sources, triggered processes, and customer touch points involved the customer interaction in order to optimise the overall customer journey. By fully understanding the customer experience, businesses can identify and rectify inefficiencies, helping to break down the boundaries between channels and between the front office and the back office.

Customer journey analytics goes beyond the measurement of individual interactions and touchpoints. Sophisticated analytics solutions use data inputs from multiple sources, both structured and unstructured, in association with journey maps, which are produced by employees in multiple roles within the organisation who document how various processes currently work and how they could be optimised.

In the past few years, a widespread realisation amongst businesses that the complexity of the customer journey has increased in line with the number of new devices and channels available to customers to communicate with the business has led to the initiation of customer journey projects, backed by new management positions coming under the wider 'Customer Experience' banner.

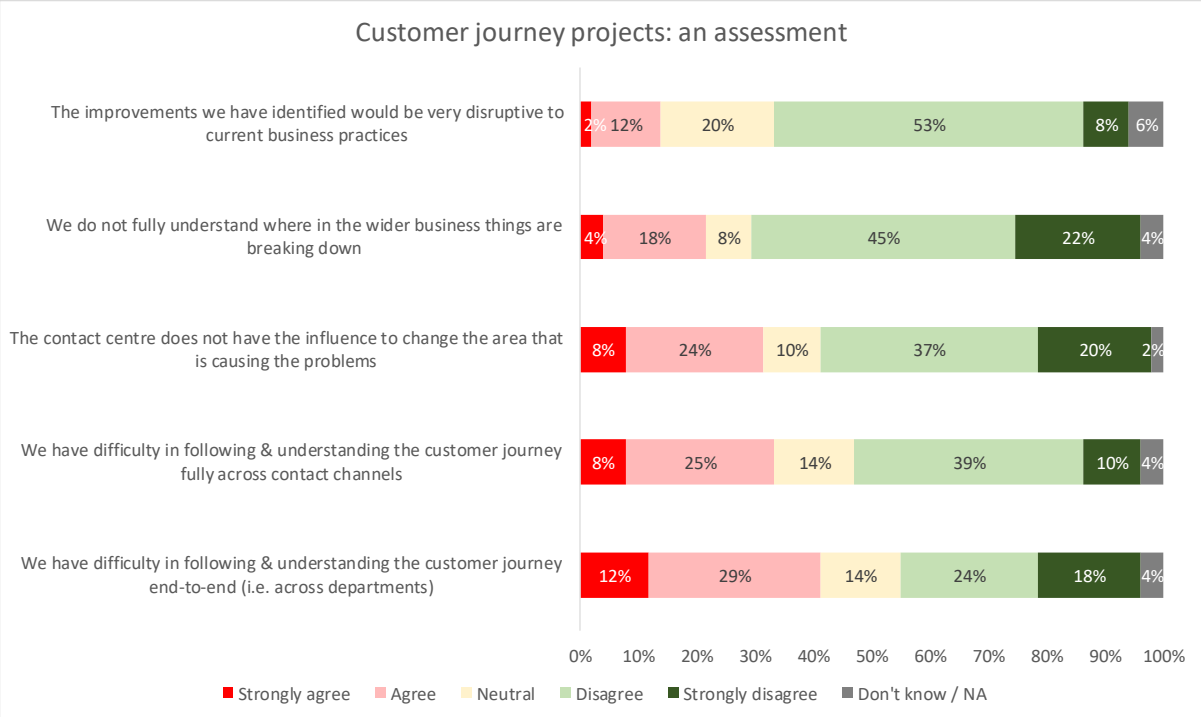
This is particularly the case in larger contact centre operations, where businesses are increasingly looking at the effectiveness of back office processes that can impact upon whether the customer has to contact the business multiple times.

Customer effort and engagement is very dependent upon effectiveness by which channels work together, as well as the level of first-time contact resolution. Proactively engaging the customer at the appropriate time within the customer journey has an opportunity to reduce the effort required for the customer to fulfil their interaction completely. As part of a wider omnichannel engagement, businesses must seek to understand how and why customers prefer to engage with them, optimising the flow of information throughout any connected processes and channels so that the organisation becomes easy to do business with.

Respondents using a customer journey project reported generally positive outcomes. 57% either disagreed or strongly disagreed that the contact centre does not have the influence to change the area that is causing the problems.

Although only 22% of respondents state that they do not fully understand where in the wider business things are breaking down, 41% find that they have difficulty in following and understanding the customer journey across departments, with 33% struggling to follow it across channels.

Figure 50: Customer journey projects: an assessment



OMNICHANNEL ANALYTICS

There is an increasing requirement for omnichannel analytics, including email, text chat, IVR and web browsing sessions, to get the full picture of the customer's real journey in a single interaction, in order to identify and improve any channels that failed to fulfil their requirements. Improving self-service optimisation is often a quick win that can provide immediate economic benefit to businesses: in the UK, a mean average of 9% of calls that go into an IVR system are 'zeroed-out' - rejected by the customer in favour of an operator - and in the US, a staggering 26% fail the self-service test.

Businesses using customer interaction analytics to review these failed self-service sessions will be able to categorise many of them in order to improve the processes at a macro-level. Common findings from the analysis of these calls is that the IVR system was poorly worded, menu choices were not intuitive, or did not match current service choices. Other failures occur through mistakes in IVR routing, and there may also be problems with a lack of customer awareness that various activities can be carried out by self-service.

Integrating desktop data analytics into speech analytics allows businesses to tag valuable data automatically - such as account ID, product name and order value - from CRM, helpdesk and other servicing applications to recorded interactions. This additional desktop data can be used to enhance automated classification, which allows more targeted and efficient analysis centred on key business issues, such as customer churn, differences in call handling patterns between employees, frequency of holds/transfers associated with order cancellations and upselling and cross-selling success rates. The use of desktop data analytics also allows the business to view the agent’s desktop activity (for example, are they spending too much time in particular applications, are they navigating the screens efficiently, etc.), and to understand how much time is being spent in each section of the call.

The next step is to get rid of the silos between channels, allowing the customer to be identified at the beginning of their ‘journey’, and for the business to be able to analyse the efficiency and effectiveness at each stage, whether mobile app, website, self-service application or live call. The end goal is for businesses to understand where customers make their choice, where they drop out, and where the profit is within the multiple processes along the customer journey.

Longer-term, future customer contact is likely to become along polarised lines: for everyday, mundane tasks, the customer will choose the website or mobile app for self-service, leaving the contact centre to deal with those interactions which are complex or emotive for the customer (as well as there being demographics for whom the contact centre will continue to be primary). With the website becoming the first port-of-call for many customers, the analysis and understanding of the success (or otherwise) of pre-call web activity is a valuable source of knowledge about how effective the main portal to the business is being, as well as being able to give businesses greater insight into why people are calling.

Manually analysing thousands of web sessions and linking them with specific customers and their phone calls is impossible, so there is a great potential for omnichannel analysis. Adding in relatively minor channels such as social media, web chat, SMS and email will make the mix more complex, and more potentially suitable for analysis. It is also certainly worth mentioning that some solutions also analyse the customer's pre-call use of self-service via IVR, providing the agent with a background on the caller's recent experience and offering the chance to improve self-service process failures.

Including social media, email and text chat into the analytics equation is increasingly important, and while many vendors have multichannel/omnichannel analytics within their overall customer contact analytics solution, this functionality is not yet used to anywhere near the same extent as speech analytics. This lack of uptake may have many reasons:

- the social media channel is often the responsibility of the marketing function within a business, whereas customer contact analytics - being focused on speech at the moment - is usually under the remit of the customer contact operation, meaning that harmonious, integrated analysis across channels is that much more difficult
- for most businesses, interaction volumes for email, chat, social media and other non-voice channels are far lower than for speech, so consequently there has been less urgency in analysing these
- there may not be a single unified view of the customers' interactions across channels, as is the case in a siloed operation
- it can be more difficult to identify customer in non-voice channels such as text chat or casual web browsing, so the depth of insight available may be that much less.

Having said that, most solution providers seem quite definite that multichannel/omnichannel analytics will grow in importance. While being able to optimise customer contact within each siloed channel, or being able to monitor the quality of an email or chat agent in the same way that businesses are now using analytics to improve the performance of a phone-based agent is useful, the real key is to include all of the stages along the customer journey. For example, understanding where potential customers drop out; the overall effort that the customer has to put in; the point at which buying decisions are made; bottlenecks in processes; the suboptimal points where customers get confused and have to place a call into the business - these are the promises that customer journey analysis makes.

There will come a time when all data generated within a business will be able to be cross-correlated to provide insights not only to the customer contact department but also to parties such as marketing, operations and finance, so they have greater insight about issues such as price elasticity and revenue maximisation. The ability to prove to senior management that the actions and insight held within the contact centre has a distinct and measurable impact on the entire company – and as such is not simply a cost centre - is likely to improve its visibility and credibility which should help to create a long-term holistic view and assist further investment.

The 'tell-me-why' and discovery modes of customer contact analytics will improve over time as better accuracy and more powerful processing provides richer and more joined-up data for analysis, and the inclusion of non-voice channels show the full picture of customer contact and its intent. There will also be major efforts to link analytics to proving profitability, including identifying "moments of truth" (points at which buying decisions are made, and long-term loyalty can be won or lost), and being able to predict and manage customer churn.

This personalised approach can also leverage the information that mobile and especially smartphone devices can provide, assuming that privacy regulations allow. On moving from self-service to assisted service, mobile service applications should gather the browsing history, customer information and the context of the session in order to pass this to a live agent. Smartphones are enabled with GPS tracking, so businesses should look to use this capability to deliver better customer experiences where possible. In fact, the inherent capabilities of the mobile device offer businesses huge opportunities to impress their customers, including location-specific information, such as local broadband outages, or the ability to use photo-taking functionality on the phone to provide the agent with a clearer picture of the situation (which may be particularly useful for insurance claims, for example).

SMS and outbound calling also offer opportunities for businesses to deliver proactive customer service through the mobile channel, creating a positive attitude. Furthermore, location-specific device information also allows businesses to deliver timely service and relevant marketing messages which can be positives for the customer at that specific place and time.

Contextual data provide a great opportunity for businesses to deliver timely personalised service in a cost-effective and profitable manner. The nature of mobile devices means that businesses potentially have the opportunity to know more about their customers and their specific requirements and preferences than ever before.

This includes:

- Customer identity: once the customer has identified themselves, such as by logging on, or through the mobile phone number, this allows the agent to access their existing customer history in the same way that would be done so on a phone call into the contact centre.
- Geographical information: smartphones are GPS-enabled, allowing agents to see where customers are, and to direct them to the nearest shop, for example.
- Historical activity: if the customer has been browsing a mobile website or app beforehand, the information that the customer browsed previously may be useful for the contact centre agent to have to hand, in order to see and understand what the customer has already tried to do.
- Stored data: the mobile device may have data stored that identifies the customer, such as account number, that can speed up the interaction and make it more effective.
- Collected information: the mobile device may also be used to capture and share information with the business such as photographs or videos. It may be possible to automate a two-way interaction: for example, a customer may use their mobile phone to scan a QR (quick response) code on a product. Using the information on the code, as well as the customer's input into the app about what they are trying to do, the customer may be directed to the correct place within business's self-service function in order to solve the issue that they have. This can take the contact centre out of the equation altogether, resulting in reduced costs for the business and a quicker and more effective customer experience.

CHECKLIST: KEY ELEMENTS TO ACHIEVING YOUR OMNICHANNEL STRATEGY

- The overall omnichannel strategy should be clearly explained, and broken down into achievable aims and goals
- Anything that does not lead directly to implementing the strategy should be sidelined
- Align KPIs with what you want to achieve. If some traditional customer metrics don't support the strategy, don't be afraid to lose them
- The executive sponsor should have authority across departments, and have the ability to break down silos
- Talk to customers and understand what is broken, what works well and what they value most
- Customer journey analytics can identify processes that can be redesigned if they are wasteful, broken or inefficient. Remember to include back-office processes, fulfilment and third-parties if the customer journey uses these
- Have visibility and measurement along the customer journey, not just for individual channels
- Use analytics tools for text and desktop applications, as well as voice
- Identify the agent skills needed and those which are currently present: train and recruit accordingly
- Use an interaction platform capable of routing and handling multiple channels and cross-channel interactions with a single set of business and routing rules
- The platform should preserve context and history across channels, with no need for the customer to repeat their issue
- Connect the customer with the right agent: workforce management should be for all channels, not just voice, and have the capability to include knowledge workers and the back office if necessary
- Agents should have access to a single up-to-date knowledge base and a unified desktop application with all relevant applications and data
- Consistency across databases should happen automatically in real-time without the need for manual intervention or duplication
- Use closed-loop performance management – use regular assessments, measure process improvements, skills gaps etc.: omnichannel is an ongoing process.

Businesses' interactions with customers are becoming a highly-polarised mixture of the automated and the personalised. Moving a large proportion of interactions onto self-service works for businesses, and is increasingly popular with a customer base that is becoming more sophisticated and demanding in what it expects from self-service.

Having said that, our consumer surveys show that there is still a preference for human contact, even if the effort and result with the same as using automation. As time progresses and confidence in self-service continues to increase, there is likely to be a movement towards preferring automation. In the meantime, businesses pursuing an omnichannel strategy should always remain aware that telephony is still the largest channel and is likely to remain so for the foreseeable future.

A greater understanding of the customer journey and experience will lead organisations to appreciate the customer's perspective more fully. Making existing channels more user-friendly, for example through Web RTC or visual IVR, will help to evolve the customer experience without making them retreat to more familiar forms of communication which may not be as cost-effective for the business.

Analysis and prediction of customer actions will support proactive outbound customer contact, answering a customer's query before they have even initiated an inbound interaction.

The future will likely see greater transparency of an organisation's systems, sharing information from a single knowledge base and master customer record with any relevant employee, and making much of this available to the customer as well. Some organisations may also share their customer interaction performance with customers, making the wait times per channel available and allowing customers to take control of how they communicate with the business.

A few years down the line, we can expect to see self-service using increasing amounts of artificial intelligence, with personal technology applications seeking out the best deals on offer, or interacting with a business on behalf of customers. This leads to the conclusion that many customer-agent interactions will be exceptional, such as a complaint, an urgent or complex issue or a technical query that an FAQ or customer community couldn't solve. It is also likely that whole segments of the customer base who don't want automation at all will be handled directly by live agents in many cases.

Many self-service scenarios suggest a world in which customers speak directly to 'intelligent' systems, but the world of the 'virtual intelligent personal assistant' (VIPA) turns this idea on its head, postulating an e2e world (in which systems talk to systems), where the customer delegates many of their business interactions to a pseudo-intelligent device. The VIPA is something which isn't yet widely available, but is being driven by improvements in technology and the desire of the customer to get the best deal with the least effort. The most widely-used (albeit basic) versions of the VIPA are iPhone's "Siri" and Amazon's "Alexa", which provide basic web search functionality based on speech recognition. However, they are still a very long way from being true VIPAs.

Storing information on a VIPA device - such as personal preferences, financial details and individuals' physical profiles - is the first step, and one can be done today. Customers of the future will instruct the device to research the best deals for products and services, and to come back to the device's owner with the best selection. The VIPA would 'call' the relevant contact centre (which would in fact be either a number of back-office company systems or possibly a live agent in some cases) and even purchase the best deal without having to involve the owner in any way. The same principle applies to customer service: using the 'Internet of things' means that, for example, utilities meters would send their own readings to suppliers on request, and a manufacturer can detect when a part on an appliance is about to fail, and organise a replacement part and engineer visit with the customer's permission.

VIPAs may be used in association with intelligent agents which roam the web for answers to questions or situations, and could act as a third-party broker between the customer and a business. Price comparison sites act today as a type of first-generation smart assistant, but are entirely reliant on accurate and complete data inputs being provided by suppliers and the site's owners. If VIPA technology could be relied upon to work, and standards of interoperability between VIPA and businesses were implemented, then this immediate and extensive market knowledge could create a 'perfect market' for commoditised products and services, with major impacts on existing businesses.

There seems little doubt that omnichannel as we understand it today is by no means the last or greatest challenge to customer contact that businesses will have to face in the foreseeable future.

ABOUT CONTACTBABEL

ContactBabel is the contact centre industry expert. If you have a question about how the industry works, or where it's heading, the chances are we have the answer.

The coverage provided by our massive and ongoing primary research projects is matched by our experience analysing the contact centre industry. We understand how technology, people and process best fit together, and how they will work collectively in the future.

We help the biggest and most successful vendors develop their contact centre strategies and talk to the right prospects. We have shown the UK government how the global contact centre industry will develop and change. We help contact centres compare themselves to their closest competitors so they can understand what they are doing well and what needs to improve.

If you have a question about your company's place in the contact centre industry, perhaps we can help you.

Email: info@contactbabel.com

Website: www.contactbabel.com

Telephone: +44 (0)191 271 5269