Channel Choice Best Practice Guide

PUTTING CUSTOMERS FIRST - THE NEED FOR CUSTOMER SERVICE CHOICE

eptica

An Enghouse Company

THE NEED FOR CUSTOMER SERVICE CHOICE

There's been a dramatic expansion in the number and range of channels that consumers want to use to contact and interact with brands, with the likes of web chat and social media joining email, the web and telephone, widening choice. Consumers want this choice – research from Harvard Business Review[1] found that 73% of customers use multiple channels during their shopping journey, for example.

And greater choice is not solely deflecting contacts from existing channels – in fact, 88% of consumers[2] say they are getting in touch more with companies compared to five years ago. Legacy channels continue to be used – some industries still receive a sizeable proportion of contacts via letter or even fax.

Customers are demanding channel choice. They want to have it their way – depending on the job they are doing, where they are physically and their demographic background. However, whichever channel they use, their expectations are rising in terms of the time they are willing to wait and the complexity of the queries they ask.

Failing to respond effectively will impact financial performance. For example, analysis by the Institute of Customer Service[3] found that brands that score higher for customer satisfaction outperform their rivals that score below average by 114% in terms of revenue per employee.

To investigate the channels that customers want to use, and when, we surveyed UK consumers to identify their preferences and expectations around the speed of response. The findings point to a requirement to offer choice to meet differing needs and an unwillingness to wait on the part of consumers. For example, 37% of people will hang up from a phone call if they don't get the answer they want from an agent in five minutes or less.

These trends have a major impact on the contact centre and how it is structured. Companies must be able to cater for different needs, offer the right choices and integrate channels to deliver a joined-up, efficient and effective experience. This guide highlights key findings from the research, along with best practice recommendations for companies looking to compete in a world of widening channel choice.

73%

Customers use multiple channels during their shopping journey

1.Source: Harvard Business Review, January 2017

2.Source: Eptica Automation Study

3. Source: 2020 Institute of Customer Service UK Customer Satisfaction Index

CHANGING CHANNELS ACROSS THE CUSTOMER JOURNEY

CONSUMER TASKS AND THEIR PREFERRED CHANNELS

Clearly, consumers all embrace different channels depending on what they are looking to achieve, the device they are using and the time they have available. Consequently, we looked at the different stages of the customer journey, from research to post-purchase and service, and asked consumers for their top three channel preferences at each of these stages.

THE CHANNELS THAT COUNT

No matter where they were in the journey or their demographic background, consumers preferred to use four key channels – web self-service, email, the telephone and chat. By contrast, social media (Twitter and Facebook) were not widely used, with the sole exception being giving feedback. Overall, 10% of consumers wanted to use Facebook and 7% Twitter to share their opinions with companies.

While usage varies depending on the stage of the journey, what comes out most strongly is the even split between these channels – for example, when it came to solving a routine problem 30% wanted to look up the answer online, 26% call, 25% use chat and 24% send an email. Companies need to be able to cater for all these requirements and resource them appropriately to provide the right support at each stage of the journey.

Only
10%
of consumers wanted to use Facebook to share their opinions with companies

MEETING THE NEEDS OF THE ENTIRE CUSTOMER BASE

There were also clear demographic differences, both between men and women and between different age groups. Men were much more likely to use social media than women, who in turn relied more heavily on channels that involved speaking to a customer service agent, such as web chat or the phone. Nearly four in ten (39%) of women preferred to pick up the phone to solve a complicated problem, against 29% of men, for example.

As the graphic below demonstrates, while some demographic differences are well-known, such as older people being happier to use the phone, there are also surprises, such as 16-24 year olds being the most likely to use email to research potential purchases.

16-24 year olds	Big users of digital channels and least likely to pick up the phone (for example only 21% would complain via a phone call, against 48% of the 55+ demographic). However, most likely to use email when researching prior to making a purchase.
25-34 year olds	The heaviest users of social media, and the lowest users of email across all age ranges. Do still want the choice to use other channels, such as chat, as well.
35-44 year olds	Still relatively major users of email and the lowest users of websites/web self-service to contact brands or find information.
45-54 year olds	The most likely to use chat. Below average users of email, except when solving a problem or making a complaint. Very happy to pick up the phone.
55+	Web-savvy (51% will research online), but the biggest users of phone and least likely to use social media. Will only use chat to find the answers to routine problems.

PREFERENCES ACROSS THE CUSTOMER JOURNEY

Researching prior to buying a product/service

Finding information via company websites/web self-service systems was the most popular choice, preferred by 41% of respondents. Given consumers desire to find information for themselves without being sold to, this is logical and points to a need to make information available in an easily accessible way for consumers.

Buying a product or service

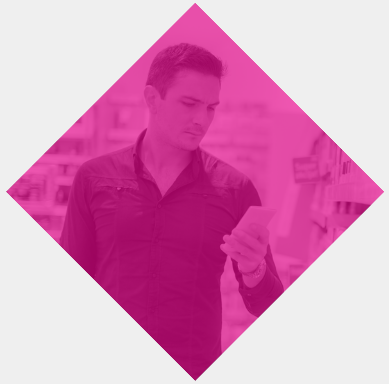
Over a fifth (21%) of consumers preferred to place an order online, followed closely by emailing/completing an online form (20%) and using chat or phone (both 16%). The first two options emphasis the transactional nature of this stage of the customer journey, with chat and the phone being better suited to more complex products or services, where consumers need reassurance that they are buying the right thing for their needs.

Chasing up an order (including delivery)

Consumers want the reassurance of interacting with a human when it comes to tracking their orders, with 37% choosing to call, 32% sending an email and 27% interacting through live chat. Given the relatively high cost of these channels and the routine, but important, nature of these conversations, companies could look to widen options for consumers – for example by offering easy-to-use order tracking facilities on their websites or apps.

Getting information after buying a product/ service

Modern products and services are ever-more complex, meaning consumers often need additional information to get the best use from them. A third (32%) wanted to use company websites to find this, meaning self-service systems and support forums need to be kept up to date and simple to access. Nearly a quarter (24%) preferred to email, again pointing to a need for comprehensive knowledge that can be used by agents.



Solving a routine problem

The range of preferences when it comes to fixing minor issues demonstrates graphically the need for channel choice. 30% wanted to be able to solve the problem through web self-service, 26% via phone, 25% via chat and 24% by email. This shows why companies must resource all channels effectively if they don’t want routine problems to lead to unhappy customers who have been forced away from their channel of choice.

Solving a complicated problem

The more complex an issue, the more likely consumers are to want to talk to someone, with 34% preferring to use the phone, ahead of email (25%) and web self-service (24%). This reflects the two-way nature of fixing a complicated problem, with multiple interactions within the conversation before the issue is solved.

Making a complaint

Even though social media makes it easy to complain publicly about service, the majority of consumers seem to prefer one-to-one channels such as email (41%), the phone (33%) or chat (20%). Just 8% wanted to use Twitter and 6% Facebook. This could be down to the greater ability to outline a complaint in detail via email and to be able to explain/negotiate over the phone.

Giving feedback (positive/negative)

At the end of the customer journey, consumers now expect to share their feedback on the overall experience. Again, the majority wanted to do this through one-to-one channels, with email/online forms being most popular (40%), followed by phone (14%). This was the strongest scoring stage of the journey for social media, with 10% preferring to share their opinions via Facebook. Whatever channel people use, it is key that brands collect, analyse, respond and act on the feedback if they are to improve their service moving forward.

THE NEED FOR SPEED

Wherever they are in the customer journey, and whatever channel they choose, consumers expect fast, accurate and consistent answers. They aren't willing to wait unnecessarily, particularly if they have routine questions – they want brands to value their time and make the whole process simple and seamless. Contact Babel[1] research backs this up- 1 in 20 UK customers consider that even waiting over a minute for a call to be answered is unacceptable.

RISING CUSTOMER EXPECTATIONS

As part of this need for speed, consumers are increasingly happy to help themselves – 83% of consumers[2] say they will use web self-service and 54% would get answers through chatbots or intelligent voice assistants, such as Amazon's Alexa or Apple's Siri.

Consumers want fast answers, whatever the channel. After all, from their point of view, they believe that if you can answer quickly on one channel you should be able to do the same on every other one.

For this reason, we asked them how long they were willing to wait to receive a satisfactory answer to their query across multiple channels and how long they would spend searching for information on a company website. For the telephone and chat channels we broke down the results further, looking at the time they would wait for the call/chat session to begin, and how long they would continue the conversation before giving up.

HOW CHANNEL EXPECTATIONS VARY

Analysing the results, they show that different, but related, channels group together in terms of customer expectations. For example, 52% of consumers wouldn't wait more than five minutes to be connected to an agent for web chat – exactly the same percentage as on the phone. Nearly two-thirds (65%) would abandon a call after 15 minutes if they didn't get a satisfactory answer, compared to 68% on a web chat.

The same pattern applied to Twitter and Facebook, although as we have seen these are not the preferred channels for most consumers surveyed. 57% wanted an answer within 30 minutes on Twitter, compared to 56% on Facebook.

Clearly, consumer expectations vary depending on the type of channel involved and whether there is a real-time conversation with an agent, compared to sending a message for a future response.

1. Source: Contact Babel 2019-20 UK Contact Centre Decision-Makers' Guide

2. Source: Eptica Automation Study

TIME PREFERENCES BY CHANNEL

Finding the answer on a website

The majority of consumers clearly want to find information quickly on company websites, with nearly two-thirds (65%) saying they won't spend more than 15 minutes looking for answers. However, others are happy to spend longer on a cumulative basis – 12% said they'd happily research on a site for between 1-24 hours!

Getting a response to an email

There is a preconception that consumers are willing to wait longer for a response on email than other channels (such as Twitter and Facebook). The fact that 17% expect an answer in 25 hours or over backs this up. However, the vast majority (61%) want a response within two hours – and 26% expect one within 15 minutes.

Having a phone call answered

Unsurprisingly consumers want their calls answered quickly, with 75% expecting to speak to an agent within 15 minutes. Nearly a fifth (18%) will hang up if their call isn't answered in two minutes, showing the level of speed now required.

Receiving a satisfactory answer via the phone

Of course, having a phone call answered is just the start of the interaction. 65% of consumers want to receive a response within 15 minutes or they will leave the call, and a further 17% will spend up to 30 minutes on the phone.

Waiting to begin a chat session

As with the phone, consumers want to speak to an agent quickly, with an identical number (52%) demanding the chat session begins within five minutes. Given that consumers seem to compare the phone and chat channels, companies need to ensure that they are dedicating similar levels of resources to both to ensure parity of experience.

Getting an answer within a chat

Consumers value the speed of online chat, with 68% saying they will leave if their query isn't answered within 15 minutes. 14% expect a response in two minutes or less, demonstrating the need to deliver fast, accurate answers via the channel.

Receiving an answer on Twitter

Consumers have high expectations when it comes to speed of response on social media. For example, 14% want a response within two minutes to their query on Twitter, and 57% expect an answer in under 30 minutes.

Receiving an answer on Facebook

Expectations on Facebook match those on Twitter almost exactly when it comes to speed. While 12% expect an answer within two minutes, a virtually identical number (56%) want a response within 30 minutes.

65% Won't spend more than 15 mins looking online

26% Expect a reply to email within 15 minutes

17% Will spend up to 30 min on a call

14% Expect an answer via chat within 2 minutes

57% Expect a reply tweet within 30 minutes

12% Expect a response within 2 min

IMPATIENCE IS GROWING

Companies may feel that while certain channels (Twitter, Facebook and answering calls/chat sessions) require lightning-fast responses, consumers using others (such as email) have lower expectations. This is simply not true – while there is some variance, the days of consumers being willing to wait days for an answer are long gone. For example, 61% of people want a response to email within two hours – only 17% are happy to wait for 24 hours or more. Companies, therefore, need to look at the SLAs they put in place for responding, particularly on email, and ensure they are meeting customer needs.

EXPECTATIONS FOR 5 MINUTES:

52%	Want call answered within 5 minutes
48%	Will end a chat session if their issue has not been dealt within 5 minutes
40%	Will leave a website after 5 minutes if they've not found the information they want
37%	Will leave a phone call after 5 minutes if their problem has not been solved
28%	Expect a response on Twitter in 5 minutes
25%	Expect a response on Facebook in 5 minutes
16%	Want their email answered fully in 5 minutes

DEMOGRAPHICS HAVE AN IMPACT

Understanding the demographics of your customer base is also vital to meeting their expectations in terms of speed. As the table below shows there is a balance between men and women, with each gender wanting answers more quickly than the other in four out of eight scenarios. For example, women are 11% more likely to leave a call after 15 minutes if they don't get a satisfactory response. By contrast, 17% more men want their emails answered within 30 minutes.

% WANT AN ANSWER WITHIN THIS TIMEFRAME

CHANNEL	AVERAGE	WOMEN	MEN
Web (up to 30 minutes)	**64%**	**68%**	**60%**
Email (up to 30 minutes)	**39%**	**30%**	**47%**
Phone – waiting for a call to be answered (5 min)	**51%**	**64%**	**47%**
Phone – call with agent (up to 15 minutes)	**64%**	**70%**	**59%**
Web chat – waiting for a chat to start (5 minutes)	**52%**	**56%**	**48%**
Web chat (chat duration) up to 15 minutes	**68%**	**65%**	**72%**
Twitter (up to 30 minutes)	**57%**	**56%**	**59%**
Facebook (up to 30 min)	**55%**	**53%**	**57%**

THE IMPACT OF AGE

When it comes to age, the 55+ group is clearly the most impatient, with the greatest number of this cohort wanting fast answers in seven out of eight categories. Email is the only one they are willing to wait for. For example, they are 23% more likely to leave a web chat after 15 minutes if they don't get an answer compared to 16-24 year olds.

CHANNEL	AVERAGE	16-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55+
Web (up to 30 minutes)	78%	69%	76%	68%	80%	87%
Email (up to 30 minutes)	39%	42%	48%	45%	39%	28%
Phone – waiting for a call to be answered (5 min)	51%	40%	37%	43%	57%	65%
Phone – call with agent (up to 15 minutes)	64%	55%	48%	57%	73%	77%
Web chat – waiting for a chat to start (5 minutes)	52%	44%	40%	42%	57%	66%
Web chat (chat duration) up to 15 minutes	68%	56%	60%	63%	72%	79%
Twitter (up to 30 minutes)	57%	54%	61%	51%	54%	62%
Facebook (up to 30 min)	55%	55%	57%	50%	53%	58%

HOW BRANDS CAN MEET THE NEED FOR CHOICE

The Eptica research demonstrates that offering choice (and delivering on your promises) is vital to meeting customer needs. This has a direct impact on the bottom line – the 2019 Eptica Digital CX Study[1] found that 79% of consumers would leave a brand if trust broke down. And the biggest factors that underpinned trust were making processes easy and giving satisfactory, fast and consistent answers. Fail to deliver the fast responses that consumers expect, on their channels of choice, and loyalty and revenues will suffer.

However, delivering this choice can be difficult for brands. They are receiving a rising volume of calls, emails, chat sessions and other interactions, often with static or diminishing resources at their disposal. They have to make tough choices about which channels to support and when. This was also demonstrated in the 2019 Eptica Digital CX Study when 44% of companies advertised chat – yet just 26% had it working when evaluated, potentially as resources had been redeployed to other channels.

Channels may have been added in a piecemeal way, with different teams responsible for each one, leading to silos that make it difficult to join up the experience. Agents may be focused and trained to work solely on one channel, again leading to resource issues and skills shortages if there are peaks of activity on specific channels.

1. Source: 2019 Eptica Digital Customer Experience Study

SUPPORTING CHANNEL CHOICE

Given these constraints how can companies deliver the fast, consistent and accurate answers that today's consumers are looking for across multiple channels? In our experience there are two best practice areas

1 BE WHERE YOUR CUSTOMERS ARE

Understand your customer demographics and ensure you are adequately supporting all the channels that they want to use. That means not switching off high-cost channels such as email and the phone, which are popular with all demographics across the customer journey.

However, bear in mind that customers are increasingly independent and are happy to self-serve around many queries, such as researching information or solving a routine problem. Give them the choice, and put in place self-service systems supported by dynamic, up to date knowledge bases. Strategically if you want to have direct contact with consumers, then make it very easy for them to email, phone or chat with you and dedicate the resources required to meet their expectations around speed and quality.

2 INCREASE EFFICIENCY BY EMPOWERING AGENTS

Contact centres have finite resources to spread across all their channels. That means companies need to focus on how they can increase efficiency to save agent time and improve First Contact Resolution rates to better manage the volume of interactions that they face.

Effective technology helps achieve this. Implement a single, centralised knowledge base that spans every channel to deliver consistent and accurate answers to both consumers and agents answering calls. Analyse incoming digital interactions and use this information to route them to the best available agent and provide templates to help deliver responses that agents can then tailor to individual customer needs. All of these measures increase efficiency and free up agents to focus on building empathy and engagement with consumers, adding value and improving the overall experience.

CONCLUSION

Customer experience is a key battleground for brands – as the Institute of Customer Service's research[1] shows customer satisfaction has a key impact on retention and revenues. Consumer expectations continue to rise, and with greater competition, it has never been easier for them to switch to a rival if they are unhappy. Customers will leave if they don't believe they are getting the best possible service – but not before telling friends and family both directly and on social media.

As the Eptica Channel Choice research shows, consumers want the ability to make contact on multiple channels, dependent on where they are in the buying process, their demographics and what makes their lives easier. They want companies to recognise their individual preferences and deliver tailored service that is fast, accurate and personal. They are time-poor, which manifests itself in a demand for quicker answers, whatever the channel – essentially, they want their time to be valued by the companies that they deal with.

Coping with these demands is not easy for companies – they need to respond to more queries, on more channels, more quickly, than ever before. That requires a joined-up approach that shares resources effectively to ensure they can support customers wherever they are in their journey and whatever channel they are using.

The message from the research is clear. Consumers expect channel choice and want to receive high-quality, efficient service however they make contact. Companies must ensure that they can have it their way if they want to retain consumers for the long-term and increase loyalty and effectiveness.

1 Source 2020 Institute of Customer Service UK Customer Satisfaction Index

METHODOLOGY

A demographically representative sample of 1,000 consumers from across the UK was surveyed in February 2020 for the Eptica Channel Choice best practice guide. They were questioned on:

- The channels they preferred to use to find information and communicate with brands at specific stages of the customer journey.
- The time they were willing to wait for a response/to search for information before they abandoned the process.

ABOUT EPTICA & ENGHOUSE INTERACTIVE

Eptica specialises in intelligent platforms that enable companies to place digital customer engagement at the heart of their strategy, driving excellent customer experience and deeper insight to create value across all operations.

Specialising in Natural Language Processing (NLP), Eptica makes the best use of AI and cognitive technologies for CX to help build trust between people and organisations:

AUTOMATED CONVERSATIONS
Help your customers help themselves: automate simple queries and free up agents to handle more complex interactions.

AUGMENTED AGENTS
Bring together technology and human emotional intelligence to deliver the most relevant and personalised responses.

CUSTOMER INTELLIGENCE
Convert digital conversations into actionable insights that advance CX and add value to your business.

Eptica is part of Enghouse Interactive, a leading global provider of contact centre software and service solutions that deliver enhanced customer service and transform the contact centre from a cost centre into a powerful growth engine, including:

OMNI-CHANNEL COMMUNICATIONS
Shift seamlessly between multiple customer interactions via audio, video, email, SMS, mobile, web chat and social media channels, all captured and archived in one place, without losing any data or conversation flow.

SELF-SERVICE, AI & BOTS
IVR, chatbots, enhanced consoles, knowledge bases, portals, voice biometrics and authentication ensure compliance while enhancing the customer experience.

CALL RECORDING & QUALITY MANAGEMENT
Call Recording (always-on & on-demand, multi-site) and screen recording modules, full indexing for quick omni-channel data searching, agent evaluation and training tools.

INTEGRATIONS
Integrates Customer Relationship Management (CRM), Customer Telephony Interaction (CTI) and third-party applications, so they can communicate and interact with one another.

ATTENDANT CONSOLE
Industry-leading attendant call routing and processing functionality that simplifies call flow management in complex.

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