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TRENDS

Connecting Experiences From Employees to Customers

5 Trends Shifting Priorities and Strategies in the
Modern Contact Center



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The contact center feels as though it is trapped in an almost constant state of change and evolution. Just as the throes of the pandemic-induced shift in work have calmed, work has changed yet again as hybrid models take hold and teams manage the people, processes, and platforms that empower a new/newer/newest platform for engagement. Meanwhile, across the enterprise, customer experience (CX) strategies are also evolving as customers demand more-finely-tuned contextual engagements that put them at the center of every experience process. Now we are kicking off a new era of evolution with artificial intelligence (AI) in the mix, rapidly accelerating innovation and forever shifting the expectation for access, ease, and personalization. This has put new pressure on contact center teams to more fully embrace their role in the larger CX ecosystem as experience-driven enterprises look to amplify growth opportunities and not get left behind in the name of massive digital transformation. This report zeros in on key trends that are pushing the contact center to evolve into a strategic business asset and hub of customer voice and intelligence, powering the experience enterprise forward with durable, profitable customer relationships.

BUSINESS THEMES



New C-Suite



Future of Work



Matrix Commerce



Next-Generation
Customer Experience

IT'S TIME FOR CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE CLARITY

The contact center sits at the epicenter of CX delivery—but the contact center is not the sole function in an organization responsible for the delivery of customer experiences. This may sound counter to much of the buzz in the contact center market that focuses more on how a single team can “own” CX and less on the customer. But it is the truth.

Engagement, experience, marketing, service, selling, and communicating now happen everywhere, unafraid to cross functional and departmental boundaries. These individual points of engagement and communication—be they social media posts tagging a brand, calls into a contact center, completing a form, attending an event, or having a conversation with a salesperson in a local store—are cumulatively part of a customer’s experience. When a customer complains about a brand on social media, perhaps taking time to share a scathing video on TikTok, is that a Marketing or a contact center concern? Who owns what? Does Marketing respond or make the call to *not* respond? Does Service reach out and attempt resolution? What if nobody responds, setting off even more frustration in an already-frustrated customer? When the rubber meets the road, who has what part of CX, from the good to the bad and all of the workflows in between?

The bottom-line question here is why people are still fighting over who owns CX.

The reality of CX is that while teams fight for ownership of a process, customers are growing increasingly disillusioned with the friction—both intentional and unintentional—in *their* journey. Customers believe that customer experience is owned by them—that they are masters of their own experience destiny. They have come to expect certain creature comforts such as 24/7 digital access and intuitive, intelligent self-service. More importantly, customers believe that their customer experience is delivered by one entity. They do not (and should not) differentiate between experiences delivered by Marketing as opposed to those delivered by agents in the contact center. In fact, what they *do* notice is when those experiences diverge or fail to connect.

Employees have also had an awakening and are just starting to express their expectations for experiences. They crave self-determination, hoping to seize some level of control and to work for an organization that empowers success. Any roadblocks in the way of that personal satisfaction—yes, once again those moments of intentional or unintentional friction—are being outright rejected as part of how work gets done. This is why the moments of disconnection, disjointed engagement, and a failure to deliver the value the customer expects have become so frustrating. When a customer’s experience falls flat, it is most often the employees that are left to shoulder the blame. Contact center agents face the music, and much like the ultimate punishment that a customer can dole out, the employee too has learned to just walk away.

So If CX Is Not a Function, What Is CX?

CX is an enterprisewide strategy that seeks to deliver and capitalize upon the collective sum of engagements, interactions, and communications with an organization that a customer may experience and positively reflect upon, either actively or passively. These experiences impact how customers perceive individual interactions and how they react to ongoing engagements. Some experiences are big, and others are small—although the impact or influence of individual experiences/interactions does not necessarily correlate with how “big” an experience is. Something seemingly small may have an inordinately large influence on how individual customers perceive and characterize their view of a company/brand. This collection of a customer’s experiences culminates in an overarching behavior and attachment directly tied to the journey a customer chooses across the holistic customer experience.

There is considerable research quantifying the business benefit of positive customer experiences—or even the rumor or reputation of positive experiences.

- 68% of customers are willing to pay more for products and services from a brand known to offer good customer service experiences.¹

- A net promoter score (NPS)—the quantification of a customer’s likelihood to recommend a company, product, or service to a friend or colleague—of a “promoter” carries a customer lifetime value that’s between 600% and 1,400% higher than a “detractor” score.²
- 78% of consumers will do business again with an organization that is known for great customer service, even after that company makes a mistake.³

The impact of negative experiences, especially when a service, support, or contact center experience goes badly, also has been well documented:

- 65% of consumers admit that a negative customer service interaction has caused them to consider switching brands.⁴
- 80% of consumers say they would rather do business with a competitor after a single negative experience.⁵
- 76% of consumers admit they would stop doing business with a company after just one bad experience.⁶
- Consumer Affairs found that 57% of one-star reviews were directly related to a poor customer experience, overwhelmingly involving a poor chatbot engagement.⁷

With more business outcomes directly tied to experience outcomes, CX has never been more scrutinized. Teams across CX, especially those in marketing, commerce, customer service, support, and the contact center, are being pressured to drive a modern growth engine that engages in more directed, personalized, and contextual engagements with customers and prospects. The functional silos across CX should be melting away under this pressure, but all too often, the walls are somehow fortified, creating individual fiefdoms of experience. The end result is the delivery of the exact experiences customers loath: disconnected engagements leveraging only part of a customer’s history with an organization.

THE DAWN OF THE EXPERIENCE ENTERPRISE

It is the customers—and their propensity to walk away from an organization, taking their wallet with them—who have forced a cultural shift in organizations. In the experience enterprise, CX is the common strategy that guides and empowers teams. It becomes the blueprint for prioritization of change such as initiatives related to technology modernization and cloud migration, and not just for the sake of driving to the cloud for operational performance and efficiencies but because the cloud can open up opportunities in the realms of scale, speed, innovation, performance effectiveness, and efficiency.

The experience enterprise is a connected enterprise ready to meet the connected customer when and where the customer decides.

It is a shift that has been a long time coming as individual teams have evolved from operational deployment teams into centers of functional excellence within an experience-driven enterprise. Sales' role becomes that of revenue-optimization engine, whereas Marketing helms growth identification and amplification. Service becomes a key communication channel, proactively resolving issues and scaling one-to-one engagements that derive value for customers. Across all functions runs a common call for AI-powered, data-driven solutions to guide customers as well as employees through processes. Guided selling, self-service support, and focused hyperpersonalization to drive brand loyalty and advocacy begin to feel like shared services rather than individual, independent, disconnected functions or teams.

The Contact Center's Role

This shift has most acutely impacted the contact center, pushing Service as a whole out of the shadow of being an “operational cost center” and into the light of being a hub for profitable relationship-driving via purpose-built connected experiences. This move, where all three skill sets of CX delivery—selling, servicing, and marketing—must be executed by agents and supervisors, turns the contact center into a strategic growth hub for the experience-driven

enterprise. In the same way that marketers are expected to drive growth incorporating sales and servicing skills and Sales is expected to flex brand and service skills in revenue optimization initiatives, Customer Service—and the contact center specifically—also will be part of this shift to holistic CX growth that is executed across the entire enterprise.

Whereas operational contact center leaders would fret about hiring the optimal universal agent as a cost-saving mechanism, CX-centric enterprises will seek out agents who also serve as brand ambassadors, storytellers, and sales problem solvers.

This new kind of agent will also demand a new toolset, empowered by AI, that is purpose-built to deliver carefully curated, secure, and predictive recommendations and next actions and total visibility into the customer, who may be communicating across a widening connected channel landscape. The challenge posed by this trend is that regardless of where an organization is on its own cloud journey, customers and employees will expect to witness innovation in action.

Traditional thinking will assume that the only way to achieve such an AI-empowered enterprise is to totally replatform—via a highly disruptive total rip-and-replace—to become a fully cloud-native environment. But that simply isn't feasible or necessary for all organizations. The reality is that not all modernization is dependent on AI and that AI can be applied even when legacy systems remain in place. Although this may not be a popular statement, it is nonetheless true: Not everyone is ready or willing to move completely into a public cloud environment. Furthermore, *on-premises* should not be considered a dirty word but rather should be seen as a challenge to deliver innovative cloud services atop these on-prem tools. Having a slower, more measured modernization path shouldn't mean that an organization can't take its place as an experience enterprise.

The ability to capitalize on the experience economy will hinge less on infrastructure absolutes than on an organization's ability to quickly and seamlessly adopt innovative services that have

been prioritized by customer need and employee demand. The shift to a cloud infrastructure can and should be done at the realistic pace of the business, with purpose and intention.

Two connected experiences, between the customer and the employee, will intersect in this connected suite of solutions that can integrate data about the customer from across the enterprise while simultaneously feeding systems of engagement and transaction with the intelligence, segmentation, and real-time knowledge of the customer as events, big and small, occur.

The experience enterprise will connect the customer to a connected and collaborative CX ecosystem spanning centers of excellence that traditionally exist in sales, service, and marketing departments. It will extend the demand for robust customer engagements across teams such as contact centers; customer success; product management; and even channel, partner, and field service teams. The innovative solutions will share and connect teams via data, progressively adding to the full picture an organization needs to have for any given customer.

TRENDS RESHAPING THE MODERN CONTACT CENTER

To realize this demand to operate as an experience enterprise, the contact center is navigating key trends that impact everything from the technology deployed and where work will happen to how the quality of an employee's experience is going to affect the quality of customer experience delivery.

1. Employee Training Gets a Reboot

In this age of the digital-first, AI-empowered contact center, the number of tools and technologies at an agent's fingertips has increased exponentially. This has delivered new heights of productivity and agent performance. It also has turned the contact center agent into a technologist and AI-prompt engineer. Yet traditional training in the contact center focuses

more attention on streamlining operational efficiencies so the contact center can achieve efficiency metrics set by leaders in Operations and Finance. Training ordinarily centers on increasing efficiency, understanding company policy, or coaching agents to more effectively address problems or complaints.

Training for the modern contact center is shifting quickly to address technology skill gaps and bolster new preparation focused on improving customer experiences. Thanks to agent and supervisor tools, training now includes communication skills coaching to keep empathy at the center of conversations. These conversations now span multiple channels, necessitating training on effective communications across multiple forms and formats. This is where AI, more specifically generative AI, has been introduced to agent toolkits, quickly generating content and optimized responses.

Training now also includes primers on effective selling techniques for when opportunities arise to recommend products or offer new solutions to customers. As the experience enterprise advances, training will also need to include cross-functional education on forging partnerships across the sales, service, and marketing dynamic, giving contact center agents new tools for fully understanding and leveraging tactics and campaigns being deployed as part of the holistic CX strategy. Although corporate policy training will still be a contact center must, agents will also need to be connected to the overarching CX strategy.

2. Business Intelligence Adds New Dimension to CX Metrics

For decades, the metrics and measures of success in the contact center have focused on operational metrics that speak to optimizing operational costs of the business. Metrics focus on driving down time spent on calls, increasing the number of calls managed, and lowering head count. But now the C-suite and CX leaders are shifting the paradigm of decrease into an attitude of abundance, focusing on quality of issue resolution, profitable next steps of satisfied customers, and the contact center's contribution to overall revenue health in its role as part of the vanguard of customer experience delivery.

CX measures have also matured beyond metrics such as customer satisfaction and NPS as businesses look to capture more salient and high-fidelity signals from customers to understand where and how their experiences will impact the bottom line of the business. Measures including impact on customer lifetime value (CLV) or tracking business impact associated with intentional strategies and actions that materially change an NPS have started to take hold, because of their direct tie to business and revenue outcomes and their ability to better inform next-best strategies in CX. Business intelligence (BI) has already been introduced to most contact center solutions, especially cloud-based contact-center-as-a-service (CCaaS) solutions that often include out-of-the-box robust analytics across agent performance and call details and analytics.

However, in this age of the experience enterprise, contact center analytics will provide real-time business analytics that bind sales-, service-, and marketing-derived intelligence to optimize business actions in the real-time context of the customer. Agents and supervisors can have access to relevant visualizations that track their individual and group contributions to business strength, armed with AI-powered recommendations for where and how to expand their influence and impact on CX outcomes enterprisewide. These analytics and measures will start to stratify to deliver tactical analytics to support agent performance and business analytics and provide transparency into how the contact center is meeting business goals—including operational and efficiency measures. Contact center BI will also shed light on strategic metrics that prove the contact center’s impact on CX strategy and profitable growth.

3. Intentionally Mining Communications Gold

As an isolated island in CX, the contact center has long held some of the highest-fidelity real-time, highly coveted intelligence: the literal voice of the customer. Although voice-of-customer (VOC) initiatives have sprung up in other parts of the enterprise—most notably customer review and user-generated content initiatives that come out of marketing teams—the data and impact of these programs pale in comparison with the power of direct verbatim-ready

voice. As technology platforms have advanced to include native talk-to-text transcription and some advanced tools including real-time AI-powered analytics of calls, teams across the entire enterprise are eager to understand what is being collected and how it can be leveraged outside of the contact center.

But the transcripts are only part of the data gold. A customer record that includes agent notes discussing history, attitude, preferences, or even future plans becomes an intelligence feast for product development, marketing, and sales teams looking for deeper insights into customer motivation and propensity. The conversation that skilled agents leverage to create immediate bonds with an at-ease customer could contain nuggets of insight that add depth and color to an otherwise-bland documentation of a transaction.

Savvy chief marketing and chief revenue officers are also starting to investigate how workflows powering smart routing through self-service and live contact center engagements can impact the overall customer journey and pave the path to purchase. What is often thought of as operational exhaust that impacts agent productivity and benefits the customer by routing to the right agent to address specific issues can also inform other CX workflows and should likely be informed by the same corpus of data to ensure that customers are kept on a consistent journey regardless of which department initiated a campaign, initiative, or point of data collection.

Content is perhaps the greatest additive to intelligence the contact center can deliver to the entire enterprise CX ecosystem. Sharing an agent's historical knowledge of issue resolution and that gut understanding of how a customer "usually reacts" is invaluable and is no longer being overlooked by organizations on a transformation journey that looks beyond the technology and data assets available to inform profitable journeys. These are organizations that believe that their people are their superpower—and increasingly these people are being supported and empowered by new AI tools that can help codify gut instinct into corporate strategy intelligence.

4. The Customer Trust Deficit Increases to All-Time Highs

For several years, accelerating during the global COVID-19 pandemic, trust became a commodity touted as a feature in brand values and product descriptions. Yet time and again, customers were left feeling let down by that lofty promise. Customers have always struggled with trust, but especially in their dealings with the contact center. “Agents don’t know me.” “Reps don’t care.” “I never heard back from anyone.” “I had to keep asking for a manager, because nothing was happening.” Contact centers have faced criticism based on agent tone, communication style, or their access (or lack of access) to customer accounts or because agents were bound by business rules that felt counter to a customer’s demands.

Now, with the addition of AI into the mix, customer trust continues to waver, because the average consumer simply does not fully trust AI today. According to a recent 2023 study, 52% of U.S.-based consumers did not trust AI and 67% expressed concern about the safety of generative AI.⁸ Specific to the contact center, although customers expect 24/7 digital-first self-service problem-solving, there is still a bit of hesitancy about fully and entirely embracing AI-powered tools such as bots.

In the contact center, it has already become clear that customers have a set idea of how they do—and do not—want to engage. Rage-shouting “agent” at an interactive voice response (IVR) system has transitioned into “gaming” chatbot interfaces to shorten the bot-to-human-interaction escalation. Although multiple studies indicate that customers are willing to engage with automated bots and assistants to receive better assistance and that self-service knowledge bases and problem-solving are welcome in the context of specific issues or problems, consumers have made it clear that bots and digital assistants are not replacements for human agent interaction. Attempt to circumvent that preference, and trust is eroded and unlikely to return.

5. AI Fatigue Forces CX to Sharpen Focus

Model mania, fueled by the spectacular introduction of generative pretrained transformers (GPTs) and large language models (LLMs), has captured the attention of the broad population, accelerating the capacity for these advanced models and techniques to emerge from the once-rarified air occupied by data scientists, model architects, and Ph.D.s with expertise in everything from behavioral change to decisioning and analytics. With ChatGPT's becoming part of the modern vernacular, it is fitting that utilizing these GPT tools is a hot topic. Rest assured, this moment of oversaturated furor shall pass. AI, from natural-language processing to generative tools and automated workflows, will normalize and become an expected part of business operations. AI, in all forms, will change how we look at processes, from content creation to customer experience delivery.

With any hype cycle comes the predictable downslope as cynicism and a touch of reality kick in. Although still on the upswing of the hype, AI will inevitably face a new round of skeptics and naysayers. AI is not new—and neither are LLMs or GPTs. The difference now is the new ways these models have been applied. The advent of OpenAI's ChatGPT has arguably been one of the first times the mass consumer population has been invited to interact and “play” with generative AI, making its creative capacity as mainstream as Apple's Siri suggesting the next song on a playlist. How we emerge from the skepticism will define how organizations advance with AI. If we emerge with more focus and a sharpened strategy for where, why, and how AI models will be purposefully applied, organizations will reap significant rewards in productivity, engagement effectiveness, and the capacity to truly deliver differentiating experiences.

In the contact center, AI has been working behind the digital scenes for years, optimizing everything from routing to scripts to the send time of follow-up communications. Now, as employees have started to play with various AI tools and have seen the conversational prompts and reasonably good content these models can create, the expectation will be that

these tools become part of that success solution kit provided by employers to ensure employee success and satisfaction.

Where the fatigue from AI will fade will be in situations in which agents can deliver faster resolutions and better recommendations, fulfilling customers' expectations for value from their service experience. These AI applications will largely go unnoticed and be kept secret from the customer; the exception will be in cases of self-service or bot experiences where customers (bringing us back to the trust discussion for a moment) expect transparency that notifies them when AI has generated a response. Even though consumers believe that they can absolutely differentiate between AI- and human-created content, the betrayal of not being told—of being fooled by the machine—could create an unintentionally negative experience.

Organizations will need a clearly articulated strategy for how AI is applied and how transparency of AI decisioning is shared across all experiences. Questions about when and where employees or customers should be informed that content or assets have been generated by AI will need to be resolved and documented. Policies that mandate human interaction and intervention with AI will need to be established, especially as industry groups and regulatory bodies push for “human in the loop” standards to ensure that AI is being deployed for good and under human supervision.

For example, when should AI be “credited” with a knowledge center response? What are the parameters that demand a “generated by AI” tag on brand images served as a response to a digital service engagement? Are feedback loops being included to further train the accuracy of responses generated by AI, who gets to be part of the feedback loop, and what happens if an employee or a customer opts out of being part of the process? The fatigue is real, but the rewards of AI are far too impactful to the business to allow fatigue to turn into failure.

CONCLUSION

Perhaps the biggest contact center trend of all is the progression from an operational necessity to a strategic business asset that extends well beyond Operations, Finance, or even Service. This front line of CX delivery cannot luxuriate in the naive belief that it “owns” customer experience, nor can it be denied a seat at the CX strategic table. Underpinning it all will be tools, data, and workflows that connect and achieve a state of decision velocity that accelerates experiences forward.

But, as many in the contact center keenly understand, technology isn’t always easy to modernize or transform. It can be a wildly disruptive and painful endeavor. Although some aspects of the contact center already have witnessed massive transformation and the modern cloud-native contact center is a reality that is alive and well in companies large to small, not every company is ready or able to make that shift at a moment’s notice. Some have started their modernization journeys in small steps, isolating critical processes, capabilities, or workflows that must be in the cloud to achieve maximum value while working in the background to plan and prepare for any future migrations. Others will stick with their highly customized, business-critical on-premises solutions that their bottom lines can’t afford to have disrupted in the name of cloud innovation.

As organizations look to stay ahead of the trends outlined in this report, Constellation Research recommends asking hard questions of internal service, IT, and communications teams to better understand where there is opportunity to modernize and advance the CX agenda.

- Where are we on our cloud journey? Is total modernization an option, or will a more measured and phased approach be necessary? Will an on-premises or a hybrid model be part of our operational needs?
- What data, intelligence, and shared measures can be created and elevated across CX so the contact center becomes an integral partner for success and not a separate line item?

- How much disruption can the organization afford? Most organizations can afford minor discomfort but can't abide total shutdowns that can come from massive transformation projects. Do the vendors across your CX ecosystem know and understand how to deliver innovation throughout this modernization journey? How will they support this cultural and technological shift?

By design, these questions are not intended to be answered in isolation. In fact, tight partnership and collaboration across IT and digital, security, sales, and marketing teams will be critical. Customer experience in this omnichannel age is an enterprisewide team sport. Although the contact center is arguably the star receiver, there are many other players on the field. It's time to showcase the customer intelligence and customer engagement prowess of the contact center and give it a well-earned seat at the strategy table.

ENDNOTES

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Liz Miller is a vice president and principal analyst at Constellation Research focusing on the org-wide team sport known as customer experience (CX). While covering all core pillars of CX (sales, service, and marketing), Miller spends time zeroing in on the business demands on today's chief marketing officers, the evolution of customer engagement, and the rising requirement for a new security posture that accounts for the threat to brand trust. A 28-year marketing veteran, Miller offers strategic guidance on the leadership, business transformation, and technology requirements to deliver on today's CX strategies. She has worked with global marketing organizations on transforming everything from business models to messaging to stay competitive in the shifting digital landscape. She examines the key trends modern CMOs face, ranging from the realities of engagement in the trust economy to how marketing has become enterprise security's greatest threat and critical champion.

Prior to joining Constellation, Miller oversaw research, programs, and content for the Chief Marketing Officer Council, developing thought leadership agendas for CMOs around the globe. Miller also counseled numerous organizations on core messaging and competitive advantage, working with marketing, advertising, and security solutions. Miller is a skilled moderator, facilitator, and speaker, engaging C-suite executives in hundreds of industry webcasts and roundtables, keynote presentations, and panels around the globe.

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