

THE DO'S AND DON'TS OF GREAT CUSTOMER SERVICE

“Press 1 for Billing... Press 2 for Sales...
Press 3 for Product Information...”



INTRODUCTION

Have companies gone too far when it comes to automated customer service options? How important is it for the customer to have some type of interaction with a live person? And how does an organization strike a balance between the two?

In the customer service arena—which largely centers on the call center—a constantly shifting digital landscape makes it difficult to match evolving customer demands with service capabilities in real-time. Companies also face pressure to reduce operating costs even as they strive to meet rising customer expectations.



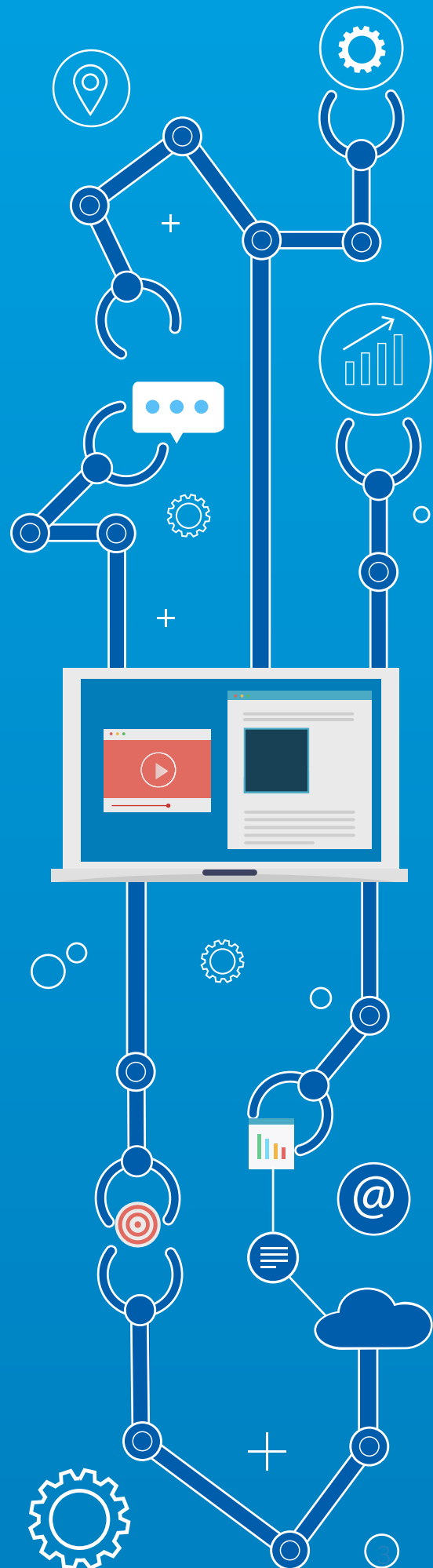
A 2019 Trend Watch published by ICMI concluded that:

- **Chatbots help customers help themselves.**
According to Gartner, 25% of customer service and support operations will integrate bot technology across their engagement channels by 2020. Bots are ideal for helping customers to serve themselves and work well for first-level support and answering frequently asked questions, leaving more complex issues for agents.
- **Artificial Intelligence (AI) will handle 15% of all customer interactions by 2021.**¹ The future of AI is in offering guidance to the customer before they ever need to talk to a human; or in presenting useful information during an interaction with an agent.
- **Contact Center Robotic Process Automation supports customers and agents.**² The article noted that while bots and AI help to drive the customer experience, they do not help call center operations. Solutions such as contact center robotic process automation (RPA) focus on the customer experience while also emphasizing agent development, performance, and engagement. This approach can help to improve operational efficiency and productivity and reduce costs.

With new approaches emerging every year, leaders need to evaluate how different technologies will impact their entire operation—from both the customers' and agents' perspective. We explored these issues with customer service industry experts. Read on for a list of recommended ***Do's and Don'ts***.

¹ <https://www.gartner.com/smarterwithgartner/4-trends-gartner-hype-cycle-customer-service-customer-engagement/>

² <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/mckinsey-digital/our-insights/the-next-acronym-you-need-to-know-about-rpa>



Do Offer Automation to Reduce Costs, *Don't* Make Customers Work Too Hard

Companies of all sizes and shapes turn to call center automation technologies.

“Many will say they use automation to give good customer service, but really they want to reduce their costs,” says Demetric Anamateros, Senior Vice President Customer Service & Enterprise Network Engineering at Hughes Network Systems. The result is that they try to force customers down a path rather than meeting their specific wants or needs—which may include speaking with a live agent.

“Customers want less friction, more choice,” he says.

According to Ceralytics, a technology platform company, customer friction is anything that impedes your customer from engaging with or buying your goods or services, or which pushes them away from wanting to buy from you again.

It's that “push away” pattern that should concern companies the most. It can be measured by an **effort score**—how much effort a customer has to exert to resolve an issue, purchase or return a product, get a request fulfilled, or find answers. Post-transaction surveys can help to determine an effort score.

One common misstep that leads to the push away pattern is offering self-service with an endless menu of options.

At the Hughes customer support centers, Mr. Anamateros says, the Interactive Voice Response technology, or IVR, can “listen” in on calls (through speech recognition capabilities) while customers are making their selections. If the IVR recognizes a caller using a cuss word, the system will immediately route the call to a universally-trained agent who is equipped to handle any type of call.

“Why take someone who's angry and make them even angrier,” he reasons.

When technology works and it's easy, customers will use it. But they do not want to have it forced down their throats. When people don't use an automated service that is an equally compelling piece of information to analyze. Figure out why they're not using it and make it more user friendly, he adds.

Of course, sometimes customers want to make a call and speak to a live agent. For that reason, it makes sense to have transactional matters handled through automation, with the option for person-to-person interactions. Those moments likely require an agent to have emotional intelligence and intuition.

“What you're starting to see is AI and bots offloading the simpler transactions, which reduces the number of agents, or headcount, necessary. At the same time, it leaves the more difficult situations requiring higher skilled agents. The call center job itself then becomes a much higher skilled, higher-level job,” he says. Automation and bots essentially assist agents in creating that frictionless environment.



What's Your Effort Score?

The following types of questions can help determine a customer effort score.

“To what extent do you agree with the following statement: The company made it easy for me to handle my issue.”

“How much do you agree with the following statement: This service chat helped me resolve my issue easily.”

“How much do you agree with the following statement: The company's website makes shopping easy for me.”

Do Show Customers You Understand, Don't Constantly Upsell

Customers want you to know them: who they are, what they want, and what they like. Using AI, most companies now provide personalized recommendations and services. Yet, more and more are learning that those recommendations must be subtle.

“You can't use data to create the impression that 'I'm watching you.' It must be nuanced. You can make recommendations for a product or service based on a customer's usage and behavior, but only if it is aligned with the service you're providing,” says Mr. Anamateros. Recommendations must be balanced; customers do not want to find themselves having to fend off constant upselling.

Targeted recommendations require substantial amounts of fresh, structured data that can be evaluated in real-time. When companies first begin the data capture process, it can be overwhelming. They have to decide how personal they want the relationship with their customers to be. A common mistake, he says, is that companies find most of the data they collect is focused on “What more can I sell you?” rather than on “How can I better serve you?”

Altering how data is viewed and used can enable a company to better demonstrate that it cares about customers. That applies to also knowing what customers expect from their customer service interactions.

“Customers don't like to be put on hold. They don't like to wait, or to have dead air on a phone call. They don't want to be handed off,” says Ellen Martz, Senior Director, Customer Service at Hughes. “If they want to speak to a manager, they want to speak to a manager. We work hard to pick up calls and have a live agent available within 30 seconds.” Similarly, customers want their emails and social media posts to be responded to and they want the person who responds to be knowledgeable.



Do Make Customer Service a Differentiator, *Don't* Get Locked into Assessing Old and Dated Metrics

Today, consumers are willing to pay a little more for service. The shift from products being the prime commodity means there is a big line item on balance sheets dedicated to the cost of providing service. It can be challenging to quantify the value that good customer service delivers.

“At what point does your reputation stop you from growing,” Mr. Anamateros asks. “If people have a bad impression of the business, like they do with the Division of Motor Vehicles, they don’t expect good service. If they get it, they think it’s incredible.”

The key is to determine whether service—or lack of it—is impacting your sales, retention rates, or installs.

“If your business is the only game in town, then it might not matter—until the competition comes. Then, you have to ask, ‘Is it worth it? And at what cost does it make sense?’” he says.

To determine the value of service, it’s best to move away from the more traditional ways of measuring success which focused on productivity: how fast a call was processed or how little time an agent spent with a customer. Instead, measurements should look at the degree to which employees engage with customers and whether customers are happy.

“You have to look for that sweet spot in providing service. Often the focus is to get through the call quickly and get it done, without really caring for the customer. But it is not an assembly line. It’s not always about pushing the metrics as low as possible. It’s more about making smart choices regarding which combination of metrics and targets are most applicable for an organization. It’s a balance of evaluating the value for both the company and the customer,” he explains. “If as an example, a business decided that giving ‘mediocre’ service was good enough, then they should definitely not make the customer wait for it. Conversely, delivering great service may be worth a little longer wait from the customer’s perspective.”

A great way to measure whether customers are happy is by using surveys that are sent out after major interactions or different points along the relationship continuum. At Hughes, any survey response that scores below a 4 receives a call back.

“If someone is going to take the time to complain, don’t ignore them. Listen to them,” he advises. “While you have to be thick skinned, responding individually to feedback not only helps to salvage that relationship, but it provides input for future changes.”

Also, give customers multiple ways to provide feedback, including social media.

“Good brands have set high goals on what to expect in service and response. Social media has allowed people to be able to express their opinions in tremendous ways. It’s enabled many companies to stand up and pay attention to all the voices. Those that are the loudest draw attention to pain points that need to be addressed. We’re able to be lot more attentive to customers because we’re drilling down to get the details,” says Ms. Martz.



By soliciting honest feedback beyond what traditional call metrics might conclude, Hughes has been able to implement solutions to improve a range of situations.

For example, “We’ve changed the explanation to our bills and added more help videos. We know customers need an explanation on service and satellite usage. We’ve found that those who are most educated are the happiest. So, we spend great effort on onboarding and helping customers to understand the nuances of satellite internet service. They may be used to cable, so we work hard to bring them along,” she says.

Do Empower Your Agents, Don't Treat Them Like Children

Another approach to understanding the customer service landscape is to ask the agents for input.

“We spend quite a bit of time talking to agents. We ask them, ‘Tell me how we make your life miserable? And how we make our customers’ lives miserable?’” Mr. Anamateros says.

They may not have received proper training. They may lack the tools they need. Or, they may be managing too many tools. Regardless, talking to agents directly—and building an environment of trust—will often yield a wealth of insight.

“We actively collect input from employees, particularly those on the frontline, because they see it first,” says Ms. Martz. “Our install team may notice a hiccup in repair visit scheduling. We might also see an online customer complaint to mirror that, with essentially both sides echoing the situation.”

“We also invite the dialogue with customers,” she says. “If we see something negative on social media, we engage right up front, in as gracious a way as we can. Many companies are afraid to do that. They shy away from taking on those negative online comments, hoping they’ll go away. But when we proactively engage, the customer sees a genuine attempt to resolve the issue. When we make a concerted effort, they appreciate that. As a result, we’re doing much more listening these days. We no longer dismiss any issue of any kind.”

“We have a core set of social media moderators. Our most senior customer support agents are trained to handle all issues, whether it’s technical or billing related. They’re trained in how to engage with customers,” explains Ms. Martz. “We want it to be a positive experience. At the end of the exchange, we want customers to be better off.”

“It’s good to give the agents guidelines but make them feel like they’re not going to be penalized by making a mistake, especially if they’re trying to help a customer,” Mr. Anamateros stresses. “Treat them like people, not like children.” In this way, they can be empowered to make appropriate decisions.

In the end, Mr. Anamateros says, the best test for whether you’re succeeding at great customer service is to ask: *Was it a pleasant enough experience and even easier than I expected?*

Hopefully, the response is: **Press 1 for Yes!**

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