

A+ Customer Service – Customers Will Accept Nothing Less.

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Customer Service in 2024 means delivering on customer expectations and then some. Technology is always with us, from our offices to our homes and in every form of transportation in-between. So customers expect 24/7 communication and service. They want immediate attention and instantaneous satisfaction. In B-to-B and B-to-C organizations alike, the Customer Experience (CX) teams strive to elicit assessments that include: "It was totally seamless"; "The experience is consistently excellent"; "They were so helpful"; "We trust you" and "We will be back again soon."

Around the world, companies are focused on meeting demanding customer expectations, while addressing profit pressures, and preparing for an AI-driven future. McKinsey's 2023 State of Customer Care Survey, among senior leaders at 340 companies with \$100M – \$10B in revenues, found CX executives have multiple priorities – Customer experience, Improving overall operations, Revenue generation, and Technology.

AI Plays an Important Role

In the past year, there has been dramatic growth in AI tools, including large language models (LLMs) that analyze language and respond to incomplete phrases and unstructured speech. Over 80% of companies in the State of Customer Care Survey are investing in generative AI or plan to do soon. Banking, telecommunications, and travel and logistics organizations are leading the way in utilizing digital interaction, especially AI to deliver better than expected customer interactions.

In the 2023 Sprout Social Index, 81% of marketers responded that AI has already had a positive impact on their work. Brands are using chatbots, virtual assistants and other AI tools to manage more requests, personalize recommendations, provide 24/7 coverage, and efficiently help customers with simple requests. For simple requests and more, many people of all generations want to communicate with brands through social media. According to Meta, 74% of online adults feel more connected to a business when they can message them directly, and 66% are more likely to do business with or make a purchase from a company when they can connect through messaging.

Customers Expect Communication via Social Media

Notably, these transactions often shape company reputations. From Starbucks to Disney to Lego, today's iconic brands have online consumer communities. Consumer use of social media to interact with brands has altered the power dynamic between consumer and brand. Today consumer experiences, good and bad, can be immediately amplified to large audiences with a simple share or repost. Companies need to ensure they are monitoring what customers are saying about them online: They must have effective feedback channels, address customer issues immediately, and actively provide actionable solutions when problems arise.

Customers have a more favorable view of brands that contact them with proactive customer service notifications. In the past, superior customer service was evaluated by response speed alone; today it is evaluated by speed **and** quality of care. 70% of consumers expect companies to provide personalized responses to customer service needs (Sprout Social 2023).

Customers Want to Speak with a Human Being

Across age cohorts, consumers prefer to speak with a customer service representative when they want help and need support. A recent McKinsey survey of 3,500 consumers of varied age demographics, indicates that live phone support was among the most preferred method of getting help. And while 35% of Gen Z'ers (18-28 year-olds) spend 4+ hours online daily, on platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, Discord, Reddit, Twitch, Be Real, surprisingly the preference for human interaction for support applies to this age group as well.

According to Shaun Abrams, IMSA Search Global Partners Life Science and Healthcare Practice Head, "While AI might have its benefits in streamlining many day-to-day tasks, it will not be able to replace the human-to-human interaction a recruiter can offer a client." However, customers don't want phone service **all** the time. They want options, the ability to use whichever channel suits their needs at the moment. Email remains an essential channel, as an addition, a back-up, or a primary means of outreach for older consumers. Premium customers expect customer service support over the phone, on demand.

Data Privacy is an Increasingly Important Issue

While customers expect companies to know them and provide personalized feedback, customers are very concerned about protecting their data. According to a recent EY Future Consumer Index that surveyed 23K+ consumers in 30 countries, "data security concerns have increased over the past 12 months because of a higher awareness of data breaches, leaks and cyberattacks. Over 61% are concerned with ID theft, 59% about data security/breaches, and 54% about the company they share their data with being hacked."

CX Success Depends on Strong CX Leaders

According to Forrester research, "64% of CX leaders expect to have larger budgets in 2024 for CX initiatives." Companies looking to build strength in this area need leaders who understand the importance of investing in technology that can create a better customer experience. But the investments are only as valuable as the processes created and their successful implementation.

Best-in-class companies of the future will rely on strong CX leaders who build customer-focused actions into company goals. Training, supported by mentoring and coaching, upskilling and reskilling are all essential, along with selective outsourcing to strong partners and cross-company collaboration and knowledge sharing, particularly around customer data and insights.

And being able to anticipate your client's needs is essential. Shaun Abrams asserts, "In today's market, our clients feel that it's more important than ever that they receive a personal touch with the service they receive on their searches. There's no one-size-fits-all solution, and the more we can show our clients that we're capable of tailoring our approach to their needs, the more likely they are to engage in our services."

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