

# Quality info

Volume 25, Issue 03

Fortnightly, Free soft copy

1<sup>st</sup> May 2023

## CUSTOMER CARE How Important Is Your Call?

### For many, not very

Does this sound familiar? “Welcome to [insert company name here], the [corporate slogan or superlative]. All of our agents are busy serving other customers. Your call is important to us. Please stay on the line for the next available agent. Your call will be answered in the order in which it was received. Your waiting time is approximately...”

It would be kind-hearted to believe in the company’s sincere desire to serve, and reasonable to be kind to the person who eventually answers your call. Of course the company wants to address your concern; it wants and needs your business, right?

Well, that depends. Unless you are exceedingly kind, lucky, or just implacably cheerful, you’re probably not going to be happy with your “customer experience,” even if you’ve achieved the goals of your call.

The roster of annoyances is long and familiar. Regardless of all the corporate happy talk, we have good reasons to suspect that what many companies would really like is for us to go away.

### Worst of the worse

*Breaking news! Film at 10!* Actually, not—this 2018 *Forbes* article will not be news to you, and little has changed since then. According to the article, the five industries most hated by customers, according to the American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI) ranking at the time (from worst to best), were:

- Cable (customer satisfaction rating of 62%)
- Internet providers (62%)

- Health insurance (73%)
- Airlines (73%, down 3% from the previous year)
- Wireless phone service providers (74%)

While some of those industries improved slightly, things haven't changed much overall during the past five years. The most recent (2022) ACSI ratings show (worst to best):

- Internet providers (64%)
- Cable (66%)
- Health insurance (73%)
- Wireless phone service providers (74%)
- Airlines (75%)

Except for airlines—with a rating that improved slightly despite torturous seating, imploding schedules, and various annoying nickel-and-dime charges—most of customers' ire is directed at these companies' call centers, the prime, usually only, customer interface.

### **Who you gonna call?**

The modern verb *ghosting*—a friend or colleague who suddenly stops returning your calls and emails and drops out of sight—might well apply to what many experience during “customer support.” Oh, if you could only speak to a person! Often, you can't—and in some cases, you never will. Having a problem with Facebook? That's too bad. Operators are not standing by.

The pandemic only made this bad situation worse. A June 2022 article in *Bloomberg* estimated that, due to staff shortages, the average wait time for callers tripled from 2020 to 2022.

Not surprising, the aforementioned industries rank about the same or even lower when it comes to customer satisfaction with their call centers. Here again are those most recent overall ACSI customer satisfaction ratings, this time compared

with benchmarks for their call centers (industry averages are weighted by companies' market shares):

- Internet providers (overall 64%; call center satisfaction 61%)
- Cable (66%; 65%)
- Health insurance (73%; 73%)
- Wireless phone service providers (74%; 71%)
- Airlines (75%; 78%)

Help is not on the way—unless you believe that chatbots and AI will compensate for the lack of staffing.

### **Tell it to the bot**

With the advent of AI, chatbots are becoming more fluent than ever. Some tout them as a success for their shorter response times and more accurate routing of customer requests. Smart Tribune, for one, considers chatbots an enhancement of the customer service experience. Likewise, although its very name may arouse suspicions, ChatBot.com cites several sources that speak well of the bot experience, in which 62 percent of consumers would prefer it to waiting to speak to an agent.

On the other hand, an article in *Forbes* cited a study by CGS that states 86 percent of consumers prefer human interaction. Additionally, 71 percent said they would be less likely to use a brand if no human service reps were available to them.

Nonetheless, the same article reports nearly 70 percent of IT professionals believe AI can improve operational efficiency, and more than 50 percent thought it could improve the customer experience. More than 70 percent of companies already have some form of it in place, and 84 percent believe it is essential to their success in the next three years.

The robots have come for us, and they are not going away. While companies spent \$7.6 billion on AI applications in 2018, that market is projected to rise to \$107.3 billion by 2025.

Experts notwithstanding, it's a safe bet to say people don't "like" chatbots. But the bots have no feelings on the matter. True, basic problems can be dealt with expeditiously via chat or email—just as long as your trouble fits that company's template of "issues."

This is where chatbots will fall short. If they don't recognize your problem, no one will. See? No problem.

It goes without saying that companies can save a lot of money by replacing operators with 'bots—but there, I've said it. Calls for profits will be answered before yours.

The question few companies will honestly answer is what their acceptable customer attrition rate is. (*Churn* is an alternative term.) For a few industries (such as those previously cited), the company knows the customer has no recourse. Cost also limits how far down the road a company will go with unsatisfied customers. Corporate policy will set those limits while continuing to assure customers of their good intentions—and little will change.

### **A shining example and a ray of hope**

To give credit where it's due, many companies and customer service reps actually do provide great service. And the reps who do their job well deserve credit for their patience with irate, sometimes irrational customers whose beef may or may not be legitimate.

I'll cite my own pleasant surprise: When my ancient house's aged Honeywell thermostat quit, I called the 25-year-old toll-free number inside the unit and actually reached a person who looked up the model, walked me through the troubleshoot, pronounced the unit dead, and advised me on the type of thermostat I needed to connect to my old-timey, two-wire system (no IoT thermostat for me, thank you). I went to Ace Hardware, bought the right model, and was back up in an hour—an excellent outcome for late autumn in Wisconsin.

The salient points in my own customer satisfaction were 1) the long-term product and customer support signified by a phone number that was still good decades

later; and 2) reaching a person who knew his stuff, answered questions, and steered me right.

So, though it seems increasingly rare, customer service excellence is not unheard of.

Companies continue to rhapsodize about clients for life, customer retention, and building loyalty to the brand. Perhaps those values can be built into AI. Given the pace of technological advancements, it shouldn't take long to find out.

### **Courtesy Quality Digest**

**Readers may please note that D. L. Shah Trust brings out two e-journals on a fortnightly basis. These are mailed to those persons or institutions who are desirous of receiving them:**

**These two e-journals are:**

- 1. Safety Info**
- 2. Quality Info**

**If you or your friends or colleagues wish to receive these journals, you may send us an email requesting for the same. There is no charge for these journals. Our e-mail address is:**

[dlshahtrust@yahoo.co.in](mailto:dlshahtrust@yahoo.co.in) or [haritaneja@hotmail.com](mailto:haritaneja@hotmail.com) or [dlshahtrust@gmail.com](mailto:dlshahtrust@gmail.com)

**You can also access these journals on our website: [www.dlshahtrust.org](http://www.dlshahtrust.org)**

**Published by : D. L. Shah Trust,  
Room No. 16, 1<sup>st</sup> Floor, Gool Mansion,  
Homji Street, Mumbai 400 001  
email: [dlshahtrust@yahoo.co.in](mailto:dlshahtrust@yahoo.co.in)  
Ph: 022-22672041  
Subscription: Free on request  
(soft copy only)**

**Edited by : Hari K Taneja, Trustee,  
D. L. Shah Trust  
email: [dlshahtrust@gmail.com](mailto:dlshahtrust@gmail.com)  
Phone: 022-2309 6529  
Subscription: Free on request  
(soft copy only)**