

Tools and Tech Driving Value in Customer Service

The pace of change in retail customer service in recent years has been profound, with new technologies and tools both meeting and driving heightened consumer expectations. The abrupt and shocking changes to the retail landscape driven by the Coronavirus pandemic have brought this issue into even sharper relief, as millions of consumers increasingly rely on virtual channels of service to meet their needs. In this environment, taking a step back to assess where the industry stands and where it is headed is a valuable step in planning for a future of increasing challenges and opportunities.

Radial and CFI Group surveyed 500 online shoppers early this spring to understand their experiences across the customer service journey, from self-service in digital properties to the contact center. The resulting feedback underscores the ongoing needs and opportunities for retailers to invest in the tools and technology that support both customer self-service and value-added agent interactions.

COMFORT WITH SELF SERVICE REMAINS ROBUST

As in prior waves of our survey, respondents continued to say that when encountering an issue they usually tried to address it on their own, typically through the company's website or mobile app. Only 30% said that they had contacted customer service directly without at least some attempt to self-serve in their most recent experience. More generally, 83% of our respondents report that they use self-service options when brands explicitly offer them, an increase of seven percentage points from the same time last year.

While the effort customers will expend to self-serve certainly varies, our data show that large majorities are at the very least

willing to log in to brands' website and mobile applications to be able to address their questions and concerns. Among the respondents, 65-85% reported that they expect to have to authenticate to receive product or service support, place orders, track the status of an order, file a complaint, or address a billing inquiry. However, they expressed more reluctance to log in to address issues with the self-service tools themselves: 45% said that they felt they should not have to authenticate in order to obtain technical assistance with a brand's website. Customers clearly are not excited about the prospect of expending extra effort to help brands make their tools work properly.

In addition to the continuing acceptance and usage of web and app-based tools and the effort required to use them, our survey shows customers having a growing comfort level with the artificial intelligence (AI) tools brands have increasingly deployed to extend self-service functionality into their contact center operations. 33% of respondents reported that they would be "very comfortable" interacting with AI mechanisms that at least match the capabilities of popular consumer services such as Apple's Siri, the Amazon Alexa, or Google Home - an increase of nine percentage points from one year ago. Overall, 58% expressed some degree of comfort in interacting with these systems.

Though our survey also indicates that on average, customers' perceptions of the effort they need to put into getting their service issues addressed have increased slightly, the findings above, combined with rising overall satisfaction ratings, suggest that so far brands are generally deploying self-service technologies in a productive way.

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REACHING OUT FOR HELP

When self-service gave way to the need to reach a person, however, our respondents reported using the full range of channels available, whether phone, email, chat, online contact forms, or social media. While two-thirds said that they had used only one channel of communication with customer service, many used more (e.g., chat and phone; social media, email and phone; etc.) for an overall average of 1.6 channels. Usage of multiple channels did not appear to imply a negative overall customer experience, however: respondent ratings of satisfaction were the same whether respondents used one or more than one channel to interact with customer service.

The survey looked deeper into this issue by asking respondents to tell us their most preferred channel for interacting with customer service. As might be expected, the most preferred channel by a significant margin was phone, ranked the first choice by nearly half the respondents. However, very nearly as many respondents included email or interactive online chats among their top two customer service channels. While social media very squarely came in last place in preference for customer service interactions for a solid majority of respondents, 19% ranked it among their top two choices.

There are some indications that the impact of being able to use one's preferred channel for customer service may vary substantially depending upon what that channel is. On the whole, being able to use one's preferred channel for customer service had only small impact on ratings of customer service in the survey results, with those who did so scoring only 3% higher on overall satisfaction with their recent experiences than those who did not. However, respondents preferring email or social media were markedly more satisfied when they were able to use these channels, underscoring the value of robust offerings via these channels even though they may serve a relatively smaller proportion of customers. By contrast, customers preferring to use the phone or interactive chat were only marginally less satisfied with their customer service interactions when they could not use those channels. Taken together, these findings reinforce the need

for retailers to ensure a well-integrated experience across various service channels.

KNOWLEDGE IS POWER IN AGENT INTERACTIONS

A majority of our survey respondents continue to report that the fundamentals of their customer service agent interactions remain sound, and generally find the agents they dealt with to be knowledgeable, well-trained, and having the tools they need to be of help.

61%
of respondents report
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Among the tools brands increasingly arm their agents with are systems with more detailed information about past customer interactions, including their purchase histories and other prior contacts. We noted in our survey last spring that customers have a strong expectation that agents will have access to this information, and our current survey results show that this expectation persists: more than

three-quarters of our respondents said that they expect agents to have this information on hand. Brands appear to be rising to this challenge, with the number of respondents reporting that agents had the tools required to assist them increasing eleven percentage points from last year, to 61%.

We pressed this year's respondents a bit further on the issue, asking them to detail how much value they found in agents' having access to their account history. All but a very few reported that they either felt positively or, at a minimum, unbothered by agents having this knowledge in hand. More intriguingly, 66% said that they value agents' ability to reference prior interactions and purchases, and just over half of these respondents said that they *actively seek out brands with these capabilities*.

The survey results show that the investment many brands have made in their service tools, technology, and personnel continue to gain traction among customers. The ongoing challenge for brands is to continue to nimbly build upon these foundations to deliver even higher-quality omnichannel customer service experiences. Those that do have a significant opportunity to deepen customer relationships in meaningful ways that promise to extend well beyond our current crisis.

About CFI Group (cfigroup.com)

Since 1988, CFI Group has delivered customer experience measurement and business insights from its Ann Arbor, Michigan headquarters and a network of global offices. As founding partner of the American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI), CFI Group is the only company within the United States licensed to apply customized ACSI methodology in both the private and public sectors.

About Radial (radial.com)

Radial Inc., a bpost company, is the leader in omnichannel commerce technology and operations. Premier brands around the world confidently partner with Radial to deliver their brand promises, anticipate and respond to industry disruption, and compete in a rapidly evolving market. Radial's innovative solutions connect retailers and customers through advanced omnichannel technologies, intelligent payments and fraud protection, efficient fulfillment, supply chain services, and insightful customer care services – especially where high-value customer experiences are critical.