OMNI CHANNEL

WHY IT'S TIME FOR CUSTOMER SERVICE TO GO OMNICHANNEL

It's well recognised that consumers are increasingly choosing to use many different communication channels when transacting with customers. A survey at the end of 2013 for CRM software specialists Zendesk of 7,000 consumers in 7 countries showed that 67% of online shoppers had made purchases that involved multiple channels in the previous six months. But of those, only 7% were extremely satisfied that brands provided a seamless, integrated and consistent customer service experience across channels. 87% of the sample said that brands must work harder to create a seamless omnichannel experience for customers and a surprisingly high 37% of respondents expected to be able to contact the same customer service rep, by name, regardless of the channel they used. How many companies are there where they can do that? Contacting the same person across all channels may seem like a big ask but it does emphasise how quickly customer expectations are going up. In the Zendesk research 69% of respondents said that they believed that customer service expectations are increasing every year.

Earlier this year American customer service technology firm [24]7 conducted similar research in the UK. Their Managing Director for European Operations, Nick Mitchell, takes up the story.

THE RESEARCH

Working as a customer service or customer insight manager must feel at times like a really tough job. We've recently conducted research with TLF Research into customer service in both the financial services and utility industries and some of the findings revealed a whole host of customer service 'pet hates' most or all of which likely apply to all industries. Some of these issues included; companies not knowing who a customer is, despite having interacted with them previously; uninformed customer service agents unable to tell people the required information and the old chestnut, being left hanging on the phone for too long.

CHANGING CUSTOMER SERVICE EXPECTATIONS

But our most recent survey of more than 2,000 UK consumers about utility customer service also showed that customer service expectations are changing and that utilities are starting to meet those changing

demands. The new Omnichannel customer service - defined as predictive experiences across channels, devices, location and time - is already starting to take hold. In the UK, 92% of UK consumers are using a variety of different channels, from voice to chat to online and mobile, to communicate with their utility provider's customer service departments.

According to Google research in August 2012, 90% of customers cross devices in pursuit of a single goal like shopping, managing finances, and planning travel whilst two-thirds of consumers surveyed by Google reported using smartphones and laptops simultaneously.

So it is time for brands regardless of industry to take the next step on the omnichannel journey. They must make sure that consumers get the same quality of service every time they connect, irrespective of the channel they use. Businesses must also use the data they hold on their customers to predict intent and maintain the context of the situation so that customers can continue their interactions in a different channel, device, at a later time.

THE MOST POPULAR WAYS TO INTERACT WITH CUSTOMER SERVICE

Picking up the phone to speak to a utility provider was the most popular way to interact with customer service. But new channels are starting to grow in popularity and brands should be mindful of the requirement to maintain the context of the customer's situation and deliver the same standard of customer service as they move to a different channel.

LANDLINE 66%

ONLINE 50%

MOBILE 22%

LIVE CHAT 15%

IN PERSON 10%

FACEBOOK 7%

CUSTOMER SERVICE APP 5%
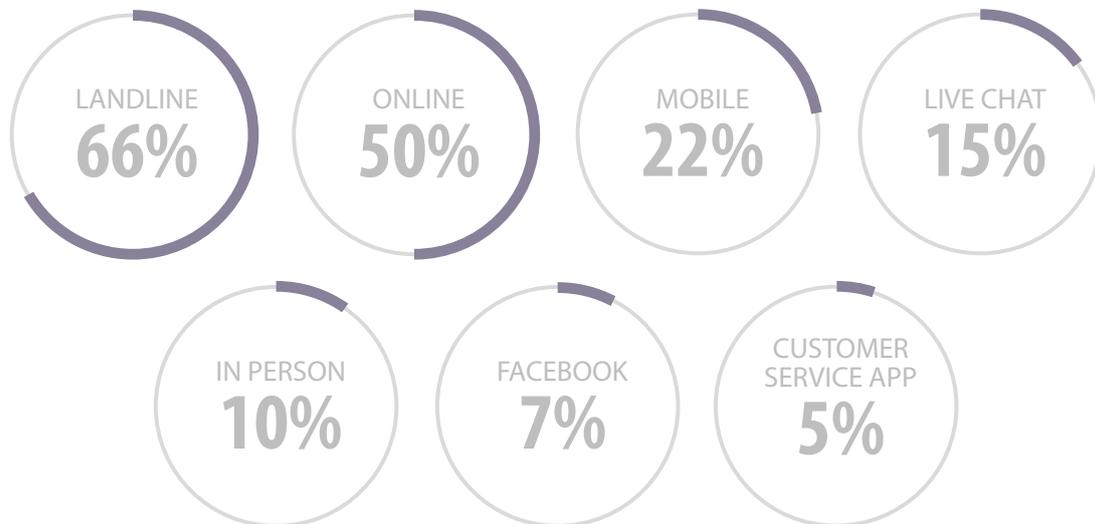
SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media is actually the fastest growing medium for customer service, especially amongst younger consumers. The figures for using Facebook and Twitter especially amongst 18-34 year olds, suggest that social media is a customer service channel that should not be ignored. Despite on-going media hype about apps and despite many utilities offering apps for customer service, only 5.6 per cent of those surveyed regularly used a downloaded customer service app on a smartphone or tablet.

USING BIG DATA TO MAINTAIN THE CUSTOMER'S CONTEXT

What was particularly interesting about the research was the fact that around one in five people admitted to getting frustrated when their utility firms do not know who they are or what the context of their situation is, despite having communicated via another channel previously. Now if someone interacts over the phone to complete a goal, for example, make a change to their account, and the customer then goes online and there is no recognition of the previous call, no wonder people get frustrated. You can imagine that this issue isn't limited to any single industry.

Another one in five would expect utility firms to know what they want based on previous contact they have had with them. Data is an incredibly powerful tool for any organisation to utilise and there is no question that most firms hold enough data on their customers to understand and predict intent and enable them to move seamlessly across a variety of channels, should they wish to do so.

Simply put, customers today expect a seamless, intuitive experience – one that maintains continuity, connectivity and context across all channels to simplify their lives. That applies to pretty much every industry, not just the utility and financial services industries we focused our research on. It's more than just offering your services over multiple channels. The differences between being a multichannel and omnichannel company are significant and apply to all of the components of your business. It's not just a matter of semantics but an adjustment in capabilities, business strategy and philosophy. It's about connecting the interactions across these channels to improve customer service.

The repercussions of not doing so could be severe. Consumers are becoming less inert about changing providers and suppliers, so getting omnichannel right should be a priority for all businesses.

Nick Mitchell is the Managing Director, EMEA at intuitive customer experience company, [24]7. Nick has a background of delivering IT supported transformation programs when he worked for organisations such as Logica and Andersen Consulting, while at [24]7 he works with some of Europe's most prominent brands to deliver a more intuitive and omnichannel customer experience.

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