

Supporting Customer Service Through the Coronavirus Crisisⁱ

Posted April 08, 2020. Authors Matthew Dixon, Ted McKenna, and Gerardo de la O



Summary: Among the company functions that are hardest-hit by the Covid-19 pandemic is customer service. An AI analysis of more than 1 million customer service calls showed dramatic increases in customer anxiety and frustrations, and reps struggle to effectively respond. To address these challenges, managers should arm reps with specific techniques for

reducing customer stress, optimize their remote coaching, and use collaboration tools that allow reps to tap each other’s knowledge and experience.

Most managers are struggling to navigate the impact Covid-19 is having on their organizations, but how the pandemic is affecting different parts of the enterprise varies dramatically from one department to the next. Where finance is grappling with critical questions of cash management, HR is dealing with stark choices about furloughs and layoffs, sales is trying to convince customers to continue to buy even as budgets are drying up, and IT is scrambling to support employees to be productive as they work from home.

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One of hardest-hit departments is often customer service. To better understand the impact of this crisis on customer service departments, our team at Tethr (an AI and machine learning venture) recently completed a study of roughly 1 million customer-service calls involving more than 20 companies representing a broad cross-section of industries. All of these calls took place between March 11, when Covid-19 was declared a pandemic by the WHO, and March 26. Our analysis used a proprietary 250-variable algorithm that allowed us to score the effort level of a customer’s interaction — ranging from “difficult” to “easy” for the customer to accomplish their goal — as well as the underlying drivers behind those scores.

In short, the analysis paints a troubling picture for customer experience and customer service leaders.

In just two weeks, the average company in our study saw the percentage of calls scored as “difficult” more than double from a typical level of 10% to more than 20%. Issues related to the pandemic — from unexpected travel cancellations to appeals for bill payment extensions and

disputes over insurance coverage — dramatically increased the level of customer emotion and anxiety in service calls, making a job that is hard for reps on a normal day far more challenging.

One company in our study saw financial hardship-related calls, among the most difficult for reps to handle, increase 2.5 times in the span of a week.

But the high effort level for customers of these Covid-related calls is only partly a function of customers' anxiety. Another big contributor is the fact that reps — most working from home for the first time — now find themselves without the infrastructure (like a reliable phone connection) or support (peers and managers available to lend a hand) they once enjoyed in the contact center. As a result, they may struggle more than usual to help customers. For instance, we measured a massive uptick in instances of both customers and reps saying, "I can't understand you," and some companies in our study saw hold times balloon by as much as 34 percent and escalations (calls sent up the chain of command) skyrocket more than 68 percent.

Such a dramatic increase in customer effort is bad news for managers as high-effort interactions are far more likely to lead to churn and far less likely to result in any sort of new sale. For one company in our study, difficult interactions had only a 6% chance of resulting in a cross-sell or up-sell, compared with a more than 80% chance that an easy interaction would. And, among customers threatening to defect, those who had had a difficult interaction had less than a 4% chance of accepting the company's "save offer" (a promotion to entice them to stay) as compared to a 20% probability for customers whose interactions were scored as easy.

So, what can companies do to help reps navigate this difficult situation? We've identified three tactics that savvy service leaders are pursuing.

1. Arm reps with techniques that help them reduce customer frustration.

Making an already difficult situation worse, many reps are still shackled by standard customer-service policies (such as rules about extending bill payments) that pre-date the pandemic. Thus they hide behind policy and indicate that they're "powerless to help" far more often than they would under normal circumstances. In fact, in our sample, we found that low-performing reps were 27% more likely to hide behind policy on Covid-19 related calls than their higher-performing peers. So it's critical to update policies to reflect the current reality and reduce opportunities for reps to use outdated policy to avoid solving customers' problems.

Other rep behaviors that increase customer effort include conveying uncertainty, using negative language and thoughtlessly routing customers elsewhere. A “redirect” is when a rep passes the buck — for instance, saying “I suggest you try contacting...” or “I can’t help you but maybe they can.” Redirects require customers to wait and then explain their problem again, a seeming waste of time. In our study, low-performing reps were 38% more likely to use “redirect” language on Covid-19 related calls than high performers were.

The clear answer to these challenges is to empower reps to make exceptions in order to solve the customer’s problem, but changing service organization culture and policies can be a long journey. In the meantime, equipping reps with language techniques to reduce customer effort, even if they can’t make exceptions, can lead to better outcomes.

Techniques such as “advocacy” can convey that the rep is on the customer’s side. Saying something as simple as “Let’s see if we can figure this out together” can make all the difference in whether a customer leaves an interaction frustrated and disloyal or not. In prior research, advocacy language reduced customer effort by as much as 77%.

One home services provider we work with used targeted coaching of reps on advocacy and similar techniques and saw customer frustration and effort abruptly fall. On March 10, more than 40% of their Covid-related calls conveyed customer frustration; by March 23, just 7% did. Similarly, the percentage of calls scored as difficult dropped from more than 20% to 7% in the same period.

2. Prevent managers from reverting to bad coaching behaviors.

Progressive service organizations have long since moved away from the sort of “structured” coaching that once dominated contact centers. Instead of finding an hour a week to review a handful of calls with each rep (which can be seen as punitive by reps and disconnected from their day-to-day work), managers today look to weave their coaching into daily workflow. This “integrated coaching” happens in short bursts — before, immediately after and even during customer calls — and research shows that it can improve team performance by 12%. In fact, the best managers spend more than 75% of their coaching time on this type of coaching.

With reps no longer on the contact center floor, however, managers lack the visibility they once had into their reps’ work patterns (who is on a call, who has a free minute to connect, etc.), making it hard to find moments to engage in integrated coaching. The tendency, then, is for managers to revert to bad habits and old behaviors, namely scheduling one-on-one time for each rep once a week and focusing on metrics such as call length rather than behaviors.

The good news is that integrated coaching can be done virtually. A home products manufacturer we work with has made a significant commitment to this type of coaching and was initially concerned that their forced work-from-home environment would scuttle any progress. However, they found that with a few small-but-important adjustments, they were able to prevent managers from reverting to old behaviors. As one leader explained, “We had to make sure our managers were doing more open-ended questioning with their reps to find out how their calls were going — what they were feeling good about and what they were struggling with — and scheduling several mini-check ins across the day with their people using video conferencing to mimic the cadence and structure of integrated coaching sessions.”

3. Use collaboration tools to help reps tap into the wisdom of their peers.

We’ve written previously about the importance of fostering collaboration between reps. Service organizations like T-Mobile’s that enable and encourage reps to tap into one another’s expertise perform 50% better than organizations that force reps to stick to the script and seek answers only from management.

Creating this sort of “network judgment” climate, however, is difficult under normal circumstances and even harder when reps are no longer sitting side by side in the contact center. Fortunately, modern collaboration tools like instant messaging and Slack can create workspaces for reps to connect in near-real time to get advice and perspective from colleagues.

Managers at one travel-and-leisure company in our study told us that the first thing their reps do at the beginning of their shift is to start up a group chat on the company’s collaboration platform. “The traffic on that channel is constant — from the first minute of the shift to the last, reps are peppering one another with questions and offering suggestions.” The company’s VP of service also reported that reps are quick to correct misinformation if anyone gives incorrect guidance to a peer, helping the company to avoid costly compliance failures.

The Covid-19 pandemic has put service reps, managers and leaders under pressure they’ve likely never experienced before. But with a focus on the right skills and support from able managers and peers, there’s no reason that service organizations can’t successfully navigate and even flourish during these trying times.

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