



Report

Give the agents wings

The pivotal role customer service agents play in successful brands, and the technology enabling them to fly

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Introduction

In our highly technological world, "digital" became a synonym for self-served. In an age when everything is expected to be immediate, available, personalized and simple, self-service became the goal for brands. This shift sped up during the COVID-19.

How does this change the way contact centers and retail shops engage with customers? Can self-service, whether via bots or other platforms, replace the agents' assisted channels? With the maturity of AI technologies and the ability to run a complete automated conversation between machine and human, what will be the advantage of a human agent, if any?

Over recent years, we learned that contact centers, although eulogized many times, are here to stay. But their role is changing. Agents will become a one-stop-shop, owning the end-to-end customer relationship for any issue relating to products or services. This will require the right tooling, knowledge management and skillset. Technology presents countless opportunities to improve processes, but it is engaging interactions with real people that create lifelong brand loyalty. How aware are agents of the vital role that they play in cultivating successful brands today? What barriers hinder them from adding real value to the customer experience? Put simply, are they empowered to excel in today's complex business environment?

To find out, we conducted an extensive global market research survey to determine the future agents' role in a digital setting. We surveyed 3,000 consumers, 100 customer relationship management (CRM) decision makers in Tier 1 telecommunication companies and 150 of their customer agents. The findings were revealing, indicating:

- **Agents are essential to consumers.** They want quick and efficient resolutions, expecting technology to be available to them to achieve this. But they still rate highly skilled agents as key to excellent customer experience (85%)
- **Decision makers see excellent customer service as critical to business success.** They believe good relationships grow sales (84%), brand perception (78%) and recommendations (69%)
- **Agents don't know their value.** They are less likely to think they help grow sales (-29%), brand perception (-18%) or recommendations (-12%). The growing the number of services (73%), the need to be multi-knowledgeable (62%) and increasing customer interactions (51%) are holding agents back
- **Technology is not the great enabler it should be.** Decision makers give low scores to many automated tasks, while agents admit they still get pulled into dealing with everyday minutiae
- **Progress is on the cards.** Leaders want to take action to improve their technology and empower agents, adding 52% more system automation and intelligence in the coming years

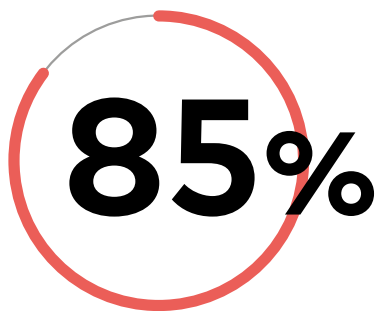
In this report, you will find more on each of these findings and what that means for your organization as you look to unleash the potential of your agents to build memorable customer relationships.

Agents are the engine of business

People are turning more and more often to the convenience of online to make purchases and ask questions. That became even more true during the COVID-19 pandemic, and we expect the trend to continue. But people are still at the heart of brand success.

Consumers accept the role that technology now must play in their interactions with brands: most (84%) want easy access to various channels and information so that they can get answers quickly and easily.

Yet still, for four in five consumers (85%), highly skilled agents who can handle any type of issue are pivotal to excellent customer experience, adding the "wow" factor that builds brand love.



of customer's rate high skilled agents as key to excellent customer experience

Q. How important are each of the following elements of customer service when it comes to delivering an excellent customer experience (i.e., delivers a WOW! factor)?
Source: Amdocs CRM of the Future Survey 2021 (consumer survey results)

According to consumers, the biggest driver of excellent customer service was the quality of service or "getting the basics right". However, when it came to what consumers consider vital for the agent experience, they clearly said they want an excellent experience that goes beyond technology: knowledgeable staff (71%), a quick resolution (70%), 24/7 access (64%) and easy access to the agents – these factors will drive success.

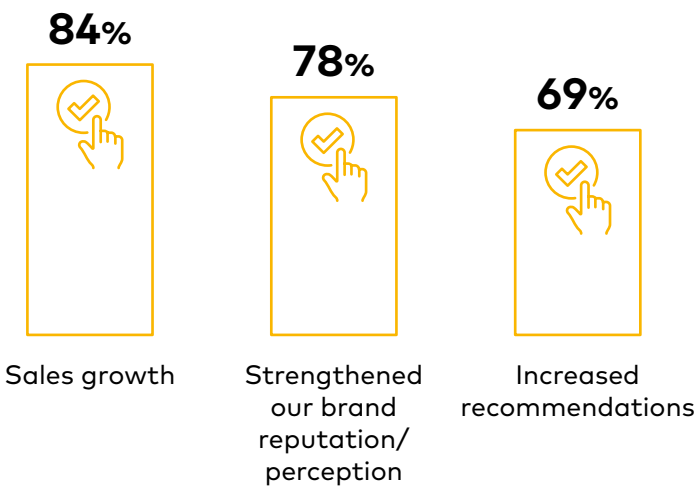
CSPs must improve standards across customer experience, delivering an experience that goes beyond technology. This is since **70% of consumers are likely to switch brands** if they were offered a better/more advanced customer service experience by another provider.

Decision makers agree that agents are central to going beyond what technology can offer consumers.

The leaders we spoke to are confident that excellent customer service is key to business success, helping grow sales (84%), strengthen brand perception (78%) and boosting the chances of word-of-mouth recommendations (69%).

The essential agent perception gap

Impact of positive customer experience



Q. How important is excellent customer service in delivering against the following areas?
 Source: Amdocs CRM of the Future Survey 2021 (CRM decision makers and agents survey results)

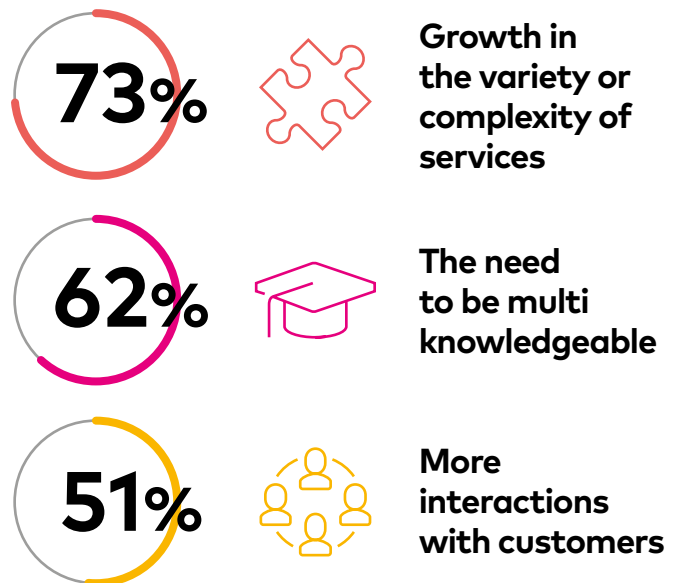
While consumers and leaders believe in the incredible value of customer service agents, agents themselves are not as sure of their vital strategic role.

They are much less likely to believe they help grow sales (-29%), strengthen brand perception (-18%) and increase recommendations (-12%).

Why the perception gap? Agents are overwhelmed. They are experiencing a crunch, stuck between sky-high consumer demands, and rocketing systems and services complexity. Without sufficient bandwidth, even the most skillful, knowledgeable agents are finding it impossible to focus where it counts.

It might be assumed that the number of assisted interactions between the agent and the customer has reduced due to an increase in online adoption during the pandemic, but the reality is quite the opposite. In fact, the number of assisted customer interactions is more than ever before thanks to increased online adoption in the ongoing pandemic. At the same time, technology and services are complex, ever-changing and hard to keep pace with.

Challenges agents face in meeting customer service demands



Q. To what extent is it challenging for customer care/service/sales agents to manage the following aspects of customer service today? (Those rating 5 – extremely challenging and 4 – challenging)
 Source: Amdocs CRM of the Future Survey 2021 (Agents survey results)

The impact of imperfect tech

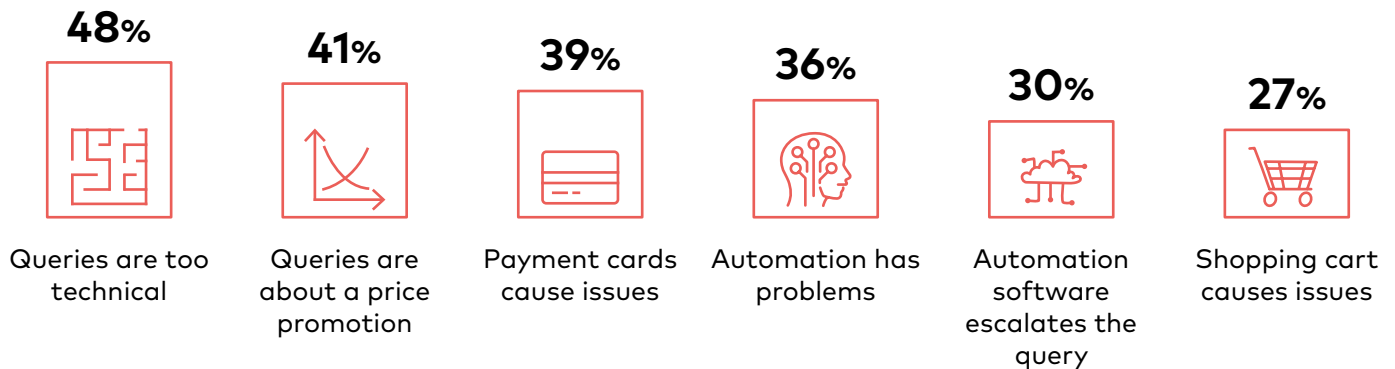
Digital systems have been built up over time, often creating a complex web to navigate.

With as many as six systems in place to complete customer processes and an average of three required for every single request, digital adoption is far from seamless for contact center and retail agents. Too many systems – which are often slow and lack integration – are taking up agent time, forcing them to invest energy and time into manual processes rather than concentrate on the customer at hand.

Even one in four unassisted interactions (e.g., virtual assistant, chatbots, telephone automation, mobile apps or online portals) require agent intervention. Much of the time, these interventions are for everyday issues that automated technology should be able to solve.

Agents told us they get involved in unassisted interactions for a number of different reasons. The most common reason is that the queries are too technical for the unassisted technology to handle, suggesting that customers put their trust into skilful agents to solve their complex tasks.

Reasons for agents stepping in to help resolve an unassisted customer query



Q. What are the main reasons for you having to step in to resolve the customer queries?

Source: Amdocs CRM of the Future Survey 2021 (Agent survey results)

Agents aren't just being called in to support customers at important, possibly transformational moments. They are, more often than not, having to answer simple queries about payment issues and shopping carts.

When agents can't give their best attention to solving key issues, quickly and effectively providing excellent experience, it ultimately reduces their impact on sales, brand perception and recommendations.

Next for tech

Decision makers know their current technological set-up is holding agents back.

Only 38% rate the automation in their customer service support systems highly for how they trigger processes, suggest the next best action, capture customer details, and send proactive notifications.

Just 41% rate well the ease of use of finding the latest pricing deals and discounts, placing orders, handling queries, suggesting offers by customers personal needs and quickly accessing product and service information.

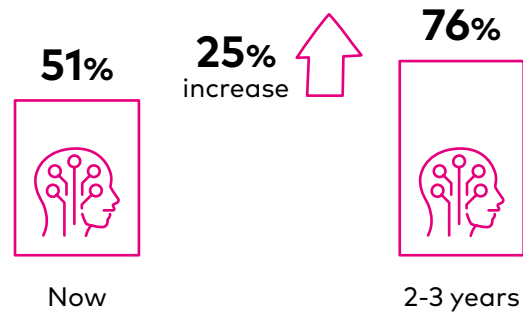
Change is needed. Systems aren't living up to their potential, clipping agents' wings. The possible impact is on the customer's perception, that the agent is not able to meet their needs and expectations and switching providers becomes appealing.

Empowering agents

Many brands want technology to do more to free up agents to create wow moments.

Currently just over half (51%) of customer interactions are automated / unassisted across multiple channels (e.g., virtual assistants, chatbots, telephone automation, mobile apps or online portals). But in just two to three years, decision makers aim for that to rise over half again (51%) to three-quarters (76%).

Expected growth in unassisted customer interactions



Q.21. What proportion of queries are a) currently being handled by automation software and b) what is the goal in the next 2-3 years?

Source: Amdocs CRM of the Future Survey 2021 (CRM decision makers survey results)

The big take out for CSPs

As we have seen, to enable agent excellence to meet customer experience needs, companies need to help them focus closely on the customer and let the systems do the heavy lifting. Further automation of systems, AI-driven personalized insights, recommended next steps and offers, guided flows and intuitive user interface (UI) are part of the answer.

But consolidation is also needed, reducing the number of systems in play and integrating them fully with each other, enabling agents to meet customer expectations for quick and effective resolution of their issue, whatever it may be.

The desire to move fast is understandable: business leaders are trying to keep pace with others, believing that digital tools will reshape the customer domain (85%). Key to meeting their target is to have the capabilities to allow scale and flexibility, automation and AI and ease of use. The risk is that brands are planning to do too much before they have those foundations in place resulting in additional load on agents.

While online customer service options are in growing demand, customers are not waving on agents' added value when it comes to understanding the service better, negotiating a price or consulting on the best fit products and services for their needs. Where technology comes into its own is in supercharging agents, freeing them up to go above and beyond customer expectations and providing opportunities to create a truly personalized, efficient and amazing experience.

About the research

The research was conducted in the summer of 2021 by Coleman Parkes Research, an independent b2b market research agency. The study used a mixed methodology (phone to web and online surveys) and successfully surveyed 3,000 consumers, 100 customer relationship management (CRM) decision makers in Tier 1 telecommunication companies and 150 of their customer agents, across North America, Europe and APAC. To gain deeper insights beyond the main survey, five agents and five CRM decision makers took part in a series of in-depth interviews.



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