



# NAVIGATING CUSTOMER SERVICE

# 2021



2021 is all about tying up different channels into one big channel, guiding users into that channel, and ensuring the whole process is as automated as possible.

# FOREWORD

As COO of ultimate.ai, I watched 2020 through the lens of our customers. I watched as a global pandemic and recession threw the world into survival mode and forced companies to make tough decisions. However, this year, while disruptive, was also one of accelerated change: change that will lay the foundation for immense innovation in customer service in 2021.



Three things set the groundwork for 2021's transformation:

### **Everyone (and I mean everyone) moved online**

The covid pandemic forced everyone into their houses and online, even those who previously preferred to do business in person. Key migrants included the elderly and others who may not have been as technically well-versed as the Millennials and Gen-Z populations. As a result, customer service inquiries jumped to meet the new demand.

This provides a new opportunity to serve a different population, a population that is accustomed to high touch human, usually in-person interaction.

### **Legacy players move onto the cloud**

Meanwhile, businesses were forced to become more digital, having to transition to a remote workforce and take all business online. This move online meant transferring legacy on-premise systems to cloud offerings, a move that unlocks access to tech innovation that the previous technical infrastructure couldn't accommodate.

### **Pandemic and recession force contact center closures**

As a result of the digital pilgrimage for both users and companies and the global recession, companies have become more cost conscious and customer retention focused. However as many contact centers downsize or close altogether, fewer customer service agents are employed. This leads to longer wait times for customers, increased strain on the remaining workforce, and lower customer satisfaction.

Now, the question is, how can companies provide high quality customer service to fulfill increased demand with a fraction of their pre-covid workforce?

If 2020 was a year of survival, 2021 will be a year of innovation.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sarah Al-Hussaini". The signature is fluid and cursive.

**Sarah Al-Hussaini, COO, ultimate.ai**

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# 2020 SNAPSHOT

## A LOOK AT WHAT WE PREDICTED

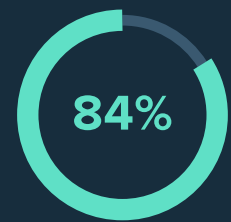
### 1. Hyper-Personalization

**PREDICTION:**

AI advancements will drive company focus from catering to general customer service experience to customizing for individuals.

**WHAT HAPPENED:**

**84% of survey respondents said they will spend more with brands that provide personalized customer service;** near 80% said personalized service is more important than personalized marketing.<sup>1</sup>



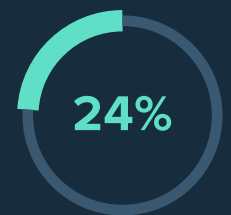
### 2. Increased Chatbot Adoption

**PREDICTION:**

Chatbot advancements enable handling of challenging customer issues, with AI-powered bots responding in human-like language—resulting in widespread adoption.

**WHAT HAPPENED:**

A study by SimilarWeb found an increase of more than 750,000 net new websites that have added “digital customer care technology”, representing a **24% increase in adoption.**<sup>2</sup>



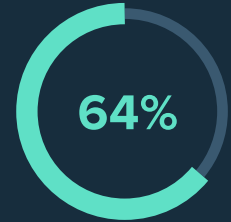
### 3. Automation

**PREDICTION:**

Customer service automation will become commonplace in the modern contact center.

**WHAT HAPPENED:**

Nearly 75 percent of IT decision-makers said that intelligent self-service automation ensured their organization was able to remain agile throughout covid; **64 percent of these decision-makers expect their company to increase investment in automation technology** as a result of the crisis.<sup>3</sup>



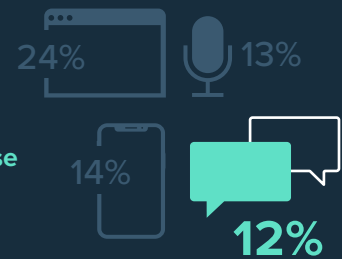
### 4. Self-Service

**PREDICTION:**

Self-service tools that allow users to get answers on their own with minimal human assistance become a go-to customer service method.

**WHAT HAPPENED:**

According to American Express, over 60% of Americans say that “their go-to channel for simple inquiries is a digital self-serve tool such as a **website (24%), mobile app (14%), voice response system (13%) or online chat (12%).**”<sup>4</sup>



### 5. Seamless Communication

**PREDICTION:**

Customer service communication will move from multi-channel to omnichannel, meaning frictionless customer communication across channels.

**WHAT HAPPENED:**

**20 percent of consumers prefer seamless omnichannel experiences** — preferring not to repeat information with each new customer service interaction.<sup>5</sup>



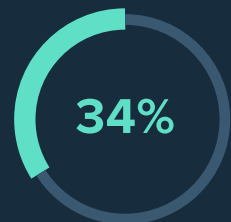
### 6. Time Agnostic Real-Time Responses

**PREDICTION:**

Customers will demand companies are responsive 24/7, in real time.

**WHAT HAPPENED:**

Unfortunately, few were prepared for the emotional events of 2020, and **hold times grew by as much as 34 percent.**<sup>6</sup>



## 7. Virtual “Live” Events

### PREDICTION:

Live streaming video will become a key part of the customer journey.

### WHAT HAPPENED:

Since the global pandemic forced live events online, virtual event technology took off in 2020. Virtual event software startup Hopin raised \$125 million in Series B funding, raising its status to a double unicorn.<sup>7</sup>

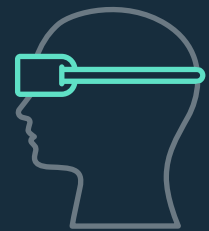
## 8. Virtual and Augmented Reality-Based Customer Service

### PREDICTION:

Virtual, Augmented, and mixed reality will provide a new channel for customer service experience.

### WHAT HAPPENED:

Companies used AR technologies to create agent training tools as well as smart manuals for customers.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, to support work-from-home measures, virtual, mixed, and augmented reality technologies enabled virtual meetings, cloud conferencing, and other enterprise applications.<sup>9</sup>



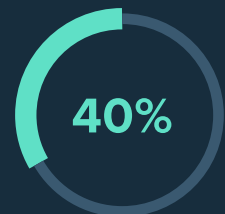
## 9. Return to Human Agents

### PREDICTION:

Automation frees up customer service agents to handle more complex queries that require human input and empathy.

### WHAT HAPPENED:

Nearly 40 percent of UK and US respondents said that they would rank the “**opportunity to speak with a human agent**” as a top-three requirement for ensuring customer service satisfaction.<sup>10</sup>



## What we didn't see coming...

Of course, we couldn't have gotten everything right. The Corona crisis brought with it truly heightened emotions that swept through contact centers across the globe. Indeed, the average company saw **the percentage of calls scored as “difficult,”** soar by more than 100 percent.



# STREAMLINING

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# THE NEXT FRONTIER

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# FOR CUSTOMER

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# SERVICE TECHNOLOGY

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According to HubSpot, 58% of customer service reps plan on leaving their current role in customer service<sup>12</sup>.

Add onto this the fact that customer service centers across the globe are shutting their physical contact centers down, and it becomes clear that customer service has reached a turning point. Yet, in a world shrouded in uncertainty, the industry has never been more in demand. It's important in this climate that brands reconsider their customer service teams structure and how to get the most out of a small transient workforce.

The pandemic pause provided time for brands to get organized: shrink bloated businesses, streamline their processes, and automate repetitive tasks. Now that we're seeing light at the end of the covid tunnel, we're starting to see the results of that hard work.

We sat down with customer service experts **Shep Hyken**, **Harald Henn**, **Flavio Martins**, and **Joonas Suoranta**, to talk **Intelligent Virtual Agents (IVAs)**, security, privacy, transparency, omnichannel, and CX, and identified six key customer service technology trends for 2021.

## OUR EXPERTS:

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**Shep Hyken**, customer service expert, author and keynote speaker, specializes in customer service and experience, and loyalty. He is a New York Times and Wall Street Journal bestselling author and has been inducted into the National Speakers Association Hall of Fame for lifetime achievement in the speaking profession.

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**Harald Henn**, CEO of Marketing Resultant GmbH located in Mainz, serves leading national and international corporations as acknowledged Customer Service, Customer Experience, and Call Center expert. He is a frequent speaker on conferences and author of various ebooks.

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**Flavio Martins**, VP of Operations and Customer Support at DigiCert, Inc., an organization famous for customer service in the encryption industry. He pens the popular blog WinTheCustomer!

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**Joonas Suoranta**, VP of Customer Success at ultimate.ai, uses his deep knowledge of AI, NLP, and machine learning to help customers achieve intelligent customer service automation.

- Trend 1: AI enabled Virtual Agents will power a shift away from bloated contact centers to agile service teams

## TREND 1

# AI ENABLED VIRTUAL AGENTS WILL POWER A SHIFT AWAY FROM BLOATED CONTACT CENTERS TO AGILE SERVICE TEAMS



BB

The AI technology is what allows the IVA to understand what the customer query is about, and resolve it in a way that's useful for the customer

Joonas Suoranta

99

Today's Intelligent Virtual Agents (IVAs) are AI-powered agents that can not only chat with customers in natural language, but also work from within most CRMs to conduct dynamic processes like intelligent ticket routing, custom order status updates, and account detail changes.

We can expect CRM automation will reduce the repetitive tasks an agent has to do, allowing them to focus on the issues that require sensitivity and nuance.

### IMPLICATION FOR CUSTOMER SERVICE

Contact centers are undergoing an intense transformation, as smart automation takes over the frontline of customer service across industries.

The designation "smart" is key here —for automation to be useful these days, it should

be AI-powered, and integrate seamlessly into the existing CRM that's part of the customer journey.

"The AI technology is what allows the IVA to understand what the customer query is about, and resolve it in a way that's useful for the customer. Smart automation is the biggest thing that will happen to contact centers in 2021," says Joonas Suoranta.

**\$1.1 trillion**

estimated revenue from AI-associated CRM activities by the end of 2021.<sup>13</sup>

**\$9.4 billion**

by 2024, IVA market size projected to triple from \$2.6 billion in 2019.<sup>14</sup>



## TREND 2

# CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE TO ECLIPSE PRICE AND PRODUCT



You should have the best people in the front office, and they should be paid fairly and well trained. This represents a totally different attitude and organization than in the past 99

Harald Henn

Customer experience has overtaken price and product as a key brand differentiator over the course of 2020.<sup>15</sup> Why?

**Customers have seen their preferred brands demonstrate outstanding levels of care and empathy during this difficult time, which has led them to place a higher value on customer experience.<sup>16</sup>**

Experts are recommending that brands concentrate on increasing their customer effort score, a loyalty metric used by companies to measure the level of effort a consumer must exert in a particular interaction.

### IMPLICATION FOR CUSTOMER SERVICE

According to Harald Henn, this trend means that customer service team leaders should be more selective when hiring human agents, and more diligent with their training.

**“You should have the best people in the front office,” he explains. “And they should be paid fairly and well trained. This represents a totally different attitude and organization than in the past, though, I think that needs to be readjusted in a lot of customer service teams.”**

17%

Customers are willing to spend 17% more for a good experience.<sup>17</sup>

60%

of consumers report caring more about CX post-covid.<sup>18</sup>

75%

of customers think that businesses that demonstrated a higher level of care and empathy during the pandemic will see an increase in loyalty.<sup>19</sup>

## TREND 3

# OMNICHANNEL BECOMES 'NO CHANNEL'



We move somebody from just doing business with me as a repeat customer to potentially doing business with me as a loyal customer

Shep Hyken

The concept of interacting with customers seamlessly across multiple channels isn't new, but in 2021, we can expect more companies to understand and adopt this approach. This means reaching customers where they already are — on native SMS and Messenger platforms.<sup>20</sup>

We can expect the omnichannel approach to deepen, with **leading brands shifting to a curated omnichannel strategy, which involves adapting their communications to align with particular channels.**<sup>21</sup>

Stronger APIs will also help these businesses convert their scattered applications into an organized data center that produces ROI-driving customer insights.<sup>22</sup>

### IMPLICATION FOR CUSTOMER SERVICE

So the new omnichannel means not really thinking about giving [the consumer] options," Shep Hyken posits, "But instead just saying, 'We're here for you, any way you want to get to us.' I think that's the way it's going to be in the future, and it's starting to be that way now.

## TREND 4

# AI-POWERED CUSTOMER INTENT PREDICTION

Customer intent prediction groups users into relatively small groups, categorizing by profile similarity, interests, and browsing habits. It does this by taking in the customer's historical data and applying a statistical algorithm to it, in combination with innovative machine learning techniques.<sup>23</sup>

The AI is then able to predict what the customer will want, do, or say next. Predictive analytics plays an increasingly critical role in helping customer service teams stay a step ahead of their customers.

### IMPLICATION FOR CUSTOMER SERVICE

If I'm good at doing my job, I will ethically help the customer get to where they need to be, to have the best experience they can with me. And that's because we have all this data about the customer."

Shep Hyken explains that, from the customer service perspective, "And we can match it up to all these other customers that have similar browsing habits. And I mean, the accuracy of the predictions the AI can make really is uncanny."

24.5%

Compound Annual Growth Rate (CAGR) for the global predictive analytics market size 2020 to 2025.

## TREND 5

# INCREASED FOCUS ON DATA SECURITY AND PRIVACY



What pre-answer does is leverage our knowledge of our customers and customer behavior to screen possible fraudulent actions 99

Flavio Martins

Data security and privacy are becoming increasingly more important, with the security field expected to grow by 12 to 15% year-over-year in 2021.<sup>24</sup>

Security experts say that bad actors are moving away from efforts to target individuals, and are instead **targeting organizations that own customer data. As the focus of the attacks change, so does the sophistication and complexity.**

Despite the increased threat, customers are becoming more liberal with their personal data, and have been shown to be willing to give up their privacy in exchange for a valuable service.

The covid pandemic has also made the general public more open to giving up a certain amount of privacy in the name of public safety and public health. And like we saw with airport security after 9/11, there is no guarantee that things will ever return to “normal.”<sup>25</sup>

### IMPLICATION FOR CUSTOMER SERVICE

Customer service teams need to stay a step ahead. They should start by brushing up on the

automated security tools available to them, like online vulnerability management solutions.

Many of these solutions are modular, scalable, and adapted to cloud technology, helping to achieve proof of concept in a few weeks or even days.

“For customer service teams in 2021, I’m most excited about pre-answer authentication,” says Flavio, Martins, “What pre-answer does is leverage our knowledge of our customers and customer behavior to screen possible fraudulent actions.”

**2.9 billion cyber traffic**

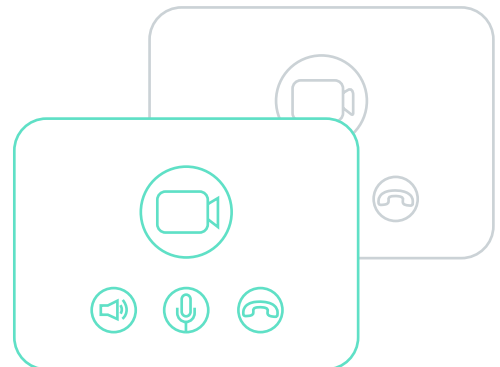
according to several research.

**61%**

of business leaders say they are concerned that their data is at risk because every company eventually gets hacked.<sup>26</sup>

## TREND 6

# VIDEO ADDED TO CUSTOMER SERVICE TOOLKIT



If I'm on the phone, I can see your eyes. And I can see your facial expression, I could see the empathetic expression that you're going to give me

Shep Hyken

Customer service video calls and video troubleshooting will become a practice in 2021. Some companies are already creating video tutorials for their most frequently asked questions, marrying the concepts of self-service and video troubleshooting.<sup>27</sup> Other teams are using video communication to send thank-you messages and showcase new products.<sup>28</sup>

Video customer service can, of course, work both ways. Many brands are now inviting their customers to send their service inquiries in video format. Rickard Månsson, IKEA Sweden's Customer Experience Business Developer, thinks this method lessens the work and mental load on the customer. "Customers need to send photos, emails, and so on," he explains. "With video, it takes us seconds to analyze the situation."<sup>29</sup>

### IMPLICATION FOR CUSTOMER SERVICE

According to Shep Hyken, this technology is already big in the customer service sphere, and is only set to increase in importance. The reason for the drive to video, he says, is that it increases emotional connection, improving the customer service experience. "When a company does that

they create a connection that's different than if I were just chatting," says the customer service experience expert.

"If I'm on the phone, I can see your eyes. And I can see your facial expression, I could see the empathetic expression that you're going to give me.

And what happens is we move somebody from just doing business with me as a repeat customer to potentially doing business with me as a loyal customer, because I feel more of a connection. You can't automate the relationship."

23%

of consumers said that they have used video calling on their mobile devices.<sup>30</sup>

79%

of customers choose live video chat because it offers the fastest response to their questions over other channels.<sup>31</sup>

“ The customer service professional role will change in its nature. At the moment it has something of a bad reputation, with lots of repetition leading to a lack of motivation. I think customer service roles will evolve beyond just a job you take for a year or two, into more meaningful career-type roles that require a very high level of professionalism. ”

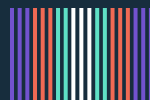


Joonas Suoranta

We've seen unprecedented changes throughout 2020. But, covid, for all its devastation, has given customer service a big nudge into the future.

Technologies like IVAs, security and privacy software, and AI-powered CRMs are fast advancing to keep up with the increasing demands from the customer, who is more informed and more skeptical than ever before —but also more forgiving and loyal to the brands with whom they truly connect.

2021 is looking bright.



# KEY TAKEAWAYS

1.

## Companies must provide human-level finesse without sacrificing efficiency

Empathy is crucial in post-covid customer service and a key driver for customer satisfaction. That said, they still expect convenient, efficient, and timely service. Automation ensures that live agents aren't wasting energy with easy repetitive questions, but instead handling high value customer issues.

2.

## Multi-channel Personalization is dead, No-channel has emerged

In the past, communicating with customers was about meeting them where they are and having a unique voice suitable for each channel. Now, it's about having porous communication channels that allow information flow seamlessly across channels. Channels will have no bounds. Instead, information from one channel can be used to communicate with the same person even if they talk to you in a different channel.

3.

## Providing good customer experience requires a concierge, not a firefighter

We've known customer experience was vital for years now. However, in the past, this meant crisis management and responding to customer needs. In 2021, companies must shift from providing responsive service to providing anticipatory service. Agents must become clairvoyant — predicting customer needs before they articulate them.

# FINAL THOUGHTS FROM OUR CEO



During covid, customer service agents were the first line of support for customers with pandemic questions. They handled the increased burden admirably and were the heroes for many companies. Without them battling on the frontlines, firms would not have been able to weather 2020.

Going forward, customer service agents will demand more from their employers: more respect, more support, more freedom. I believe the whole industry will need to rethink how they handle customer service because the burden put on agents during covid was unacceptable and unsustainable.

In 2021, the whole industry needs to step up in the same way the agents were able to. »



**Reetu Kainulainen**  
CEO, ultimate.ai

**You'll be hearing more from Reetu in our four video email micro-series—  
Customer Success: How CRMs and IVAs Improve Customer Experience.**

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