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# CUSTOMER SERVICE
# best practices

Barphone
Reinventing Customer Experience

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## Ensure your customer service works for your customer experience

Understanding the difference between customer experience and customer service, and how they work together, is crucial for improving your brand loyalty, customer service metrics and revenue. Short-term customer service interactions are just one of the building blocks of a long-term customer experience. And customer service will continue to be an integral part of a much broader and strategic practice of customer satisfaction. According to Bain & Company, companies that excel at customer experience grow revenues 4–8% above the market.

In its simplest terms, customer experience is strategic — a holistic view that connects all customer events. It dives deeply into solving the root cause of an issue, bridges organizational silos and drives clearer business strategies. Looking across the customer experience from the customer's perspective — and across all touchpoints — is a smarter way to do business.

Customer service solves immediate issues, questions and queries at a particular moment in time. These are mostly one-time, transaction-driven events, and they're often triggered by experiences that should run smoothly — but don't. A customer's current emotional state could greatly affect how they respond to your customer service. And these emotional responses, and memories of them, often play out in survey results. Customer service is the front line for your brand and customer experience.

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# View the customer journey holistically

True customer experience is the result of connections made across all functions and touchpoints. Every interaction in the customer journey matters, including the emotions and relationships that have been built with your brand.

Maintaining a positive experience requires deliberate connections of business silos behind the scenes, as well as delivering on the customer's critical moments of truth. Mastering this means connecting purpose and emotions, hard work and an entrepreneurial mindset for thinking outside the box.

However, most businesses will deliver only mediocre experiences to customers. And the cost in brand loyalty is enormous. Walker, a leading customer experience consultancy, predicted that, by 2020, customer experience would overtake price and product as the key brand differentiator for business-to-business (B2B) companies.

This ebook explores customer service best practices you can integrate with your customer experience to push you past your competition. You'll learn success strategies, skills that every customer service agent should have for a contact center or call center, tips for training call center agents, and ways to benchmark and measure customer service and customer experiences.

# Move up the customer engagement hierarchy

Agents are under a lot of pressure to perform; they're on the front lines — interacting with customers. So, they're primarily responsible for how your brand is perceived. But it's hard to perform at your best under such pressures. Because of today's competitive business landscape, making only tactical improvements is too short-sighted, unsustainable and unprofitable. Instead, address systematic issues based on consistent refinement and re-engineering of your customers' entire experience. To do this, focus on making improvements in these three areas.

## 1. DEFINE your customer engagement hierarchy

You might satisfy your customers by delivering a "good enough" experience, but to really succeed, you need to build a differentiated and long-lasting relationship. Satisfied customers are happy with the purchase of a product and service; however, they'll still evaluate their level of satisfaction with your brand — even though you met their expectations. Loyal customers have experienced consistent and positive interactions; they're even willing to tolerate minor hiccups in product quality or service. And advocate customers reign at the top of the hierarchy; their experiences with your brand have far surpassed their expectations. They have made the leap from simply being loyal to voluntarily offering their time, resources and voice to promote your brand and influence your next potential customer. Advocate customers are crucial business assets.

## 2. PLAN your business model from the outside-in

Look at engagement from your customers' perspective. All too often, businesses create processes and practices that serve internal needs without considering how those processes will affect the customer's ability to do business with them. Create a business plan with a common organizational purpose that everyone understands. This includes making the connection between company employees and the customer as well as understanding how their work affects the customer experience. Enabling this type of understanding and harmonious interdepartmental work also strengthens employee engagement.

## 3. DESIGN EXPERIENCES that connect with your customers and build empathy

Understanding your customers' pains and needs is one way to connect with them, but you need to take this further and align with their business values and propositions. Put yourself in their shoes; be flexible enough to design all your services, support and add-on products to connect with them. This means meeting customers where they are and showing them how far they can go by using your product or staying with your brand.

# SUCCESS STRATEGY ONE

Cultivate the skills every
customer service agent needs

# Cultivate the skills every customer service agent needs

The first impression your customer service agents deliver often is "make or break" for your company. And as customer expectations continue to rise, your agents are tasked with more than just answering phones. Customer experience is today's top brand differentiator — the most successful organizations focus on who they hire in critical, customer-facing positions, as well as how they train them.

The stakes have become too high to gamble on customer service agents who lack the appropriate skills. Not only do poorly trained individuals jeopardize customer relationships, they also contribute to high attrition rates. Because there's a cost to every customer or employee lost, there's a bottom-line reason to fine-tune hiring and training practices. With customer experience moving toward greater personalization and automation, it's important to look for and nurture the following agent skills.

## Listening

Successful customer conversations begin with effective listening. Agents won't succeed if their communication skills are limited to being skillful talkers. Without the ability to listen to what a customer is saying, details can be misunderstood or misinterpreted. This is one of the most common sources of communication breakdowns and customer frustration. Listening is about much more than hearing; it's about paying attention to what's being said as well as what's left unsaid. Ongoing communication training, including role playing, improves and retains agent listening skills.

## Attentiveness

Customers know when agents are distracted or running through a series of canned responses. Agents require a level of attentiveness to make experiences personalized and meaningful. Even when they must stick to certain responses, attentiveness ensures the dialog remains on target and is specific to each customer.

## Problem solving

With popularity of self-service channels, customers often only talk to an agent when they escalate an unresolved issue. That means customer service agents deal with more problems and require the skills to effectively manage them. This includes listening carefully to the customer, filling in the gaps when there's limited information and identifying the best approach for a fast resolution — all while remaining calm.

## Resourcefulness

Many customer service situations require improvisation and adaptability. Quick-thinking agents thrive in contact centers because they have the skills to quickly find a temporary fix that satisfies a customer until a long-term solution is found.

## Product knowledge

Customers view agents as their source for product information. Agents must be current and knowledgeable about your company's products, services and promotions so they don't frustrate customers. When agents are deeply familiar with your knowledge base, they know exactly where to find answers and provide real value to customers.

## Multitasking

Customer service agents on digital channels frequently manage more than one customer conversation at a time. This requires a combination of skills and expertise to ensure customers aren't waiting extended periods of time between responses.

## Technical skills

Agents should be fully competent with the tools they use for every interaction. Moving away from disparate systems and legacy infrastructure ensures their success. When you deply a unified, all-in-one customer experience platform, agents don't have to toggle between screens and systems. They can focus on helping customers, instead of engaging in repetitive processes, to deliver a seamless, personalized experience.

## Self-control

Although self-control is considered a character trait, it's also a skill that agents must hone within the call center. Working with customers is challenging under the best of circumstances; it takes practiced skill in self-control to remain calm with unsatisfied customers. Agents must treat every customer interaction separately, regardless of how bad a previous one was. Agents who learn how to consistently keep their cool derive the greatest satisfaction from their work and deliver the highest quality of service.

## Study skills

With technology and customer expectations advancing rapidly, ongoing training and self-improvement are necessary for agent success. While this may seem like a general skill, it's one of the most important for ensuring agents don't get left behind.

## Teamwork skills

Teamwork is critical to customer service. Teams that have the skills to share and learn from each other gain the advantage of their collective knowledge and experience, especially as technology continues to advance. This greatly affects the agents' quality of life and organizational success.

> "Empathy, cordiality, sympathy, kindness, professionalism and competence are some of the required abilities for great customer service where the client is satisfied."

**Caique Augusto da Mata**
Customer Service Agent, Bradesco Next

# Five ways to deal with customer challenges

Customer service agents meet a variety of people who want assistance from your brand. But not every customer is satisfied with their experiences — and they'll let people know.

Ninety-five percent of customers tell others about a bad experience while just 87% share good experiences. Turning a negative customer experience into a positive one can affect whether the customer continues to do business with your company and becomes a brand advocate — or moves on to a competitor. Here are some tips on how to handle difficult customers in the contact center.
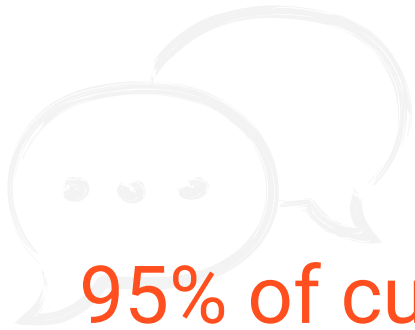
## 95% of customers TELL OTHERS about a bad experience

## Listen

Customers often become angry when something goes wrong; they want you to rectify an issue, perceived injustice or imbalance. And those feelings can escalate when they feel powerless or think that their issues aren't being heard. Often, these customers just want you to listen carefully and show empathy for their concerns. Empathetic listening can calm customers and make agents' lives easier.

## Identify the interaction for future consideration

If your contact center system supports it, record interaction details. When your customer communicates again — through chat, email or any other channel — your agent can recognize the customer's original journey. Your winning strategy is to let the customer know that you recognize the previous interactions and you're committed to completing that journey.

## Understand your customers

Difficult customers appreciate when you acknowledge their situation. Ensure them that there's a path to resolution — and that you're going to get there together. If you have scripting built into your contact center solutions, use parenthetical reminders to support these strategies. With occasional training and email reminders, scripting creates frontline consistency across all agents for greater Net Promoter Score (NPS) results.

## Follow up

When the interaction is complete, send an email noting that you recognize the customer's frustration and thank them for future feedback — negative and positive. But it's important not to ask anything further of your customer. If your contact center allows it, integrate this type of follow-up into your customer journey via email or the customer's preferred digital channel. Doing so could differentiate you from your competitors.

## Stay positive and communicate with your team

Encourage your organization to become customer-centric and put customer experience at the top of your business strategy. Build up team morale with examples of successful customer engagements that agents have been involved in or created. And share tips on how to perpetuate these experiences. Changing to meet the shifting consumer landscape will pay dividends for the entire team.

Difficult customers are a fact of life, and some companies will have more than others. Loyal customers are seven times as likely to test an offering, five times as likely to buy again and four times as likely to refer someone to your company. Encourage your contact center team to talk about difficult customers, processes and ways to improve service and the customer experience.

# Five causes of contact center attrition and burnout

Psychologist Herbert Freudenberger first coined the term "occupational burnout" in a 1974 medical journal; however, the complex psychological syndrome likely has existed since the Stone Age. Defined by physical, emotional or mental exhaustion, and combined with feelings of insecurity about work competence and value, burnout can happen in any occupation or industry. And it's a particularly common workplace hazard for call center agents and contact center employees.

When agents are tasked with creating rapport, trust and empathy with callers while continuously striving to meet quotas on call volumes and sales, it creates chronic stress, fatigue and anxiety. Burnout is a leading cause of call center agent turnover — and can have a devastating effect on sales, brand reputation, customer satisfaction and profits. The first step to prevent contact center employee burnout is knowing the reasons behind it.

## Poor hiring decisions

Call center work isn't for everyone. Individuals who aren't cut out for the role are far more likely to have difficulty on the job and suffer burnout. It takes effort and skill to effectively hire, based on an application and an interview. Assessments and competency tests can identify candidates with the specific skills and abilities to succeed in this role.

## Insufficient training

With a lack of training, agents likely will be overwhelmed by the workload and make errors that affect customers. Whether you're hiring entry-level employees or highly skilled specialists within your call center, proper training on products, processes and technology is essential to their success. And make training an ongoing process — with the goal of continuously improving performance outcomes and reducing turnover.

## Repetition overload

Albert Einstein once said, "The monotony and solitude of a quiet life stimulates the creative mind." However, in a call center, monotonous tasks only stimulate agent burnout and turnover. Performing the same task day after day — with few challenges or opportunities for autonomy or creativity — exhausts agents mentally and physically. Enable agents to work in different capacities or within a variety of communication channels so they learn new skills while getting a variety of tasks to stay engaged.

## Outdated technology

Working with complicated, poorly integrated software and tools negatively affects agent productivity on every interaction. Frustration builds quickly when agents have to spend time on tedious tasks like toggling between different systems and screens to obtain a customer's profile and history. These activities also pull the focus away from the customer — and this all raises agent stress levels and reduces service quality. Tools must support the processes that agents have in place. If outdated technology hinders agents, consider moving to a customer experience platform that enables you to orchestrate engagement across all touchpoints, channels and resources.

## Lack of recognition

Contact center work is challenging under the best circumstances. Without verbal and written praise, perks, rewards and celebrations, it can feel like a thankless job. Take the time to recognize and reward agents; it's a simple, yet highly effective way to minimize employee burnout and attrition.

# SUCCESS STRATEGY TWO

Use best practices for training contact center agents

# Use best practices for training contact center agents

"Customers will never love a company until its employees love it first." This quote from bestselling author and TED speaker Simon Sinek speaks to the importance of employee engagement. While having enthusiastic, fulfilled employees is important for every company, it's particularly critical during a customer experience transformation and the daily customer service your agents provide.

Frontline employees have the power to make or break the customer experience. When you give them the tools, support and motivation needed to deliver exceptional experiences, they'll not only see the benefits of the customer experience transformation — they'll enthusiastically drive change.

Businesses engage with customers through multiple channels. And even though it's more common for customers to get basic questions answered through self-service channels, contact center agents must resolve the most challenging issues. Engaged, well-trained agents create better customer experiences.

To provide excellent customer experience, you must have the right tools and technology in place — and you need to give agents the necessary skills to succeed. Investing in your contact center staff by giving them key soft skills and training on your technology and tools can ensure their success.

**The customer service rep who SAVED Christmas**

Learn how agent Nicole Martin went above and beyond to help her customer. Read more.

## Elements of a training program

A training program is meant to, first and foremost, improve the quality and efficiency of your employees' work. But it also enables you to assess their current knowledge and skills — and determine where they need additional coaching.

Integrated skills assessment software lets you pinpoint coaching opportunities so you can better allocate your learning and development budget. Accurate skills assessment also improves routing and resource planning.

Personalized, streamlined training reduces costs and enables effective service. The right software gives you visibility into training schedules and lets you track and reschedule training, as needed. As team members receive training, their skill sets update automatically in a database, enabling you to continually improve the distribution and handling of customer interactions and work activities.

It's important to deliver the right training at the right time. Ensuring that employees are well trained about what to do and say translates into better experiences — for employees and customers. Equipping your team with current knowledge and information improves average handle time, FCR, sales conversions and, ultimately, NPS. In addition, agent training boosts employee morale and reduces attrition. Creating personalized development plans that are focused on an individual's abilities and needs improves employee satisfaction and retention.

## Don't forget the soft skills

Every contact your agents have with customers involves two dimensions: the technical components and the softer communication skills. And soft skills have a strong influence on customer experience. Customers who encounter agents who are compassionate and concerned, and who show a sincere desire to help, remain loyal to your company.

Key soft skills include communication, professionalism, extensive product knowledge, problem-solving capabilities, enthusiasm and an ability to gain the trust and respect of customers.

## Stop whispering — start coaching

Old-school contact center tools enabled supervisors to listen in on employee interactions and "whisper" guidance to them. This method is outdated and unviable; it's a distraction to employees and it makes them feel monitored — not nurtured.

Modern contact center technology offers quality management tools and provides real-time metrics on queues and employee performance. Adding transcription and speech analytics gives you an unparalleled view into customer and employee interactions, including filters for emotion or sentiment and specific words or phrases. These are the type of insights that contact center supervisors need to spot issues and opportunities to effectively coach and motivate employees.

If you notice a spike in your average handle time on a high-level dashboard, for example, you might click into a seasonal holiday queue to see what's happening. There, you notice one of your employees has consistently long interaction times. You'll want to learn more about those interactions.

Perhaps a knowledge gap is causing longer resolution times for technical issues. Or maybe this employee is up-selling customers on special holiday promotions — leaving them excited about their purchases and thrilled with their service experience. When you can listen in on current and past interactions, you can form more complete pictures of your employees' performance, strengths and weaknesses. Then you can tailor your feedback to provide superior training and coaching.

## Don't just manage agents — empower them

This shift from optimization to engagement is gaining ground, but it isn't mainstream yet. Companies now have a rare opportunity to gain a competitive edge by focusing on employee engagement and empowerment.

Empowerment becomes increasingly important as emerging technologies change the type of interactions that agents handle. Soon, simple requests will be addressed more consistently through self-service or non-human methods like chatbots. Interactions that will be routed to your agents will become more complex — requiring them to be extremely knowledgeable, nimble and confident.

Your workforce is potentially your most strategic asset in the contact center. And the difference between a great customer experience and a bad one is a direct result of either a successful — or unsuccessful — conversation between your employees and your customers.

Consider training as an ongoing process that's guided by the goal of improving performance outcomes and reducing turnover.

# SUCCESS

# STRATEGY THREE

Use contact center benchmarking and metrics to improve customer experience

# Use contact center benchmarking and metrics to improve customer experience

Customer experience and customer service are connected — and metrics show that contact center interactions directly affect the customer experience. In the "Global Customer Experience Benchmarking Study" from Dimension Data, more than 84% of respondents said that improved customer experience increased revenue; 79% reported cost savings as a result. In a rapidly evolving industry, it's critical to keep up with the latest contact center technologies and base your customer experience strategy on solid, quantifiable data. Contact center benchmarking does that.

## 84% of respondents said that improved CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE increased revenue

## Why contact center metrics matter

Benchmarking essentially means comparing products, services and processes with other organizations' products, services and processes to identify new ideas and areas for improvement. It's an analytical method of studying your contact center's capabilities and business processes — and comparing them to your competitors — through certain KPIs.

The trick is leveraging that information to make improvements. When done consistently and correctly, contact center benchmarking offers a range of benefits.

- Gain access to quantitative data on your operations. You see if — and how — you keep pace with industry trends. You'll also learn how you compare with others in the industry in readiness and maturity.
- Get an understanding of the customer journey — the full customer experience — including all journey steps and touchpoints along the way to achieve goals.
- Access data you can use to invest in improvements and inform your managers about where to focus their efforts.
- Gain guidance on agent training.
- Receive information for financial analysis and business modeling to help you understand — and improve — ROI.

## Which KPIs to benchmark

Various elements affect the overall quality of your customer experience. KPIs help you understand how you're doing and how you compare to others in your field. The areas of focus for contact center benchmarking vary widely, but could include quality, agent performance, productivity or cost.

You can't measure everything; focus on what's most relevant to your contact center operations and what aligns with your goals.

Using artificial intelligence (AI) to analyze and leverage your metrics enables you to improve customer experience. AI lets contact centers move beyond operational metrics (e.g., service-level agreements, average speed of answer, average handle times and abandon rates). Predictive AI lets managers optimize business outcomes, such as NPS, FCR or sales closure rates, to transform your contact center into a revenue or brand ambassador center.

Most contact centers generate plenty of benchmarking data. But not everyone knows which metrics are most useful. In the ContactBabel report, "The US Customer Experience Decision-Makers' Guide 2018," the leading analyst firm for the contact center market shared its insights on a variety of topics, including customer experience benchmarking.
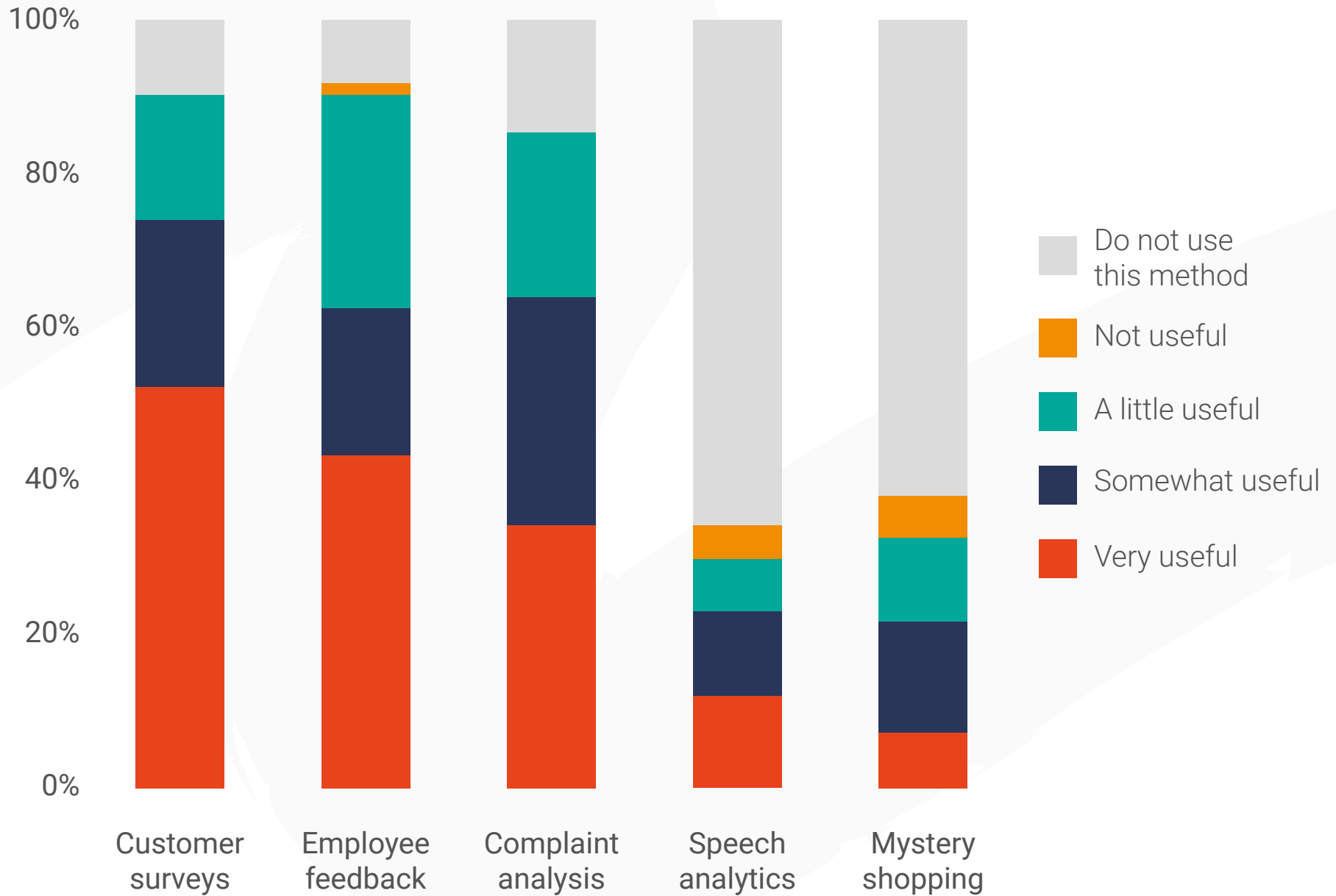
## Gathering customer experience benchmark metrics

As a contact center manager, you likely track customer experience through customer surveys, programs to gather employee feedback, complaint analysis and more. You might even take advantage of newer methods like speech analytics. The chart below shows which methods ContactBabel survey respondents use and how they rated each for its usefulness.

A large majority of respondents, 75%, found customer surveys to be a "useful" learning method, with 53% finding them "very useful." No other option was rated as "very useful" with more than 50% of respondents. No respondents rated the method as "not useful," while 10% reported they don't use this method.

More than 80% of respondents report that they use customer surveys, employee feedback and complaint analysis. And just 37% of respondents reported they use speech analytics, which was the most technologically advanced option. Of those that relied on speed analytics, most found it "somewhat useful" or "very useful," making it more highly regarded among users than mystery shopping.

# Usefulness of customer experience learning methods



Legend:
- Do not use this method (gray)
- Not useful (orange)
- A little useful (teal)
- Somewhat useful (dark blue)
- Very useful (red)

Categories: Customer surveys, Employee feedback, Complaint analysis, Speech analytics, Mystery shopping

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## Rating common benchmarks

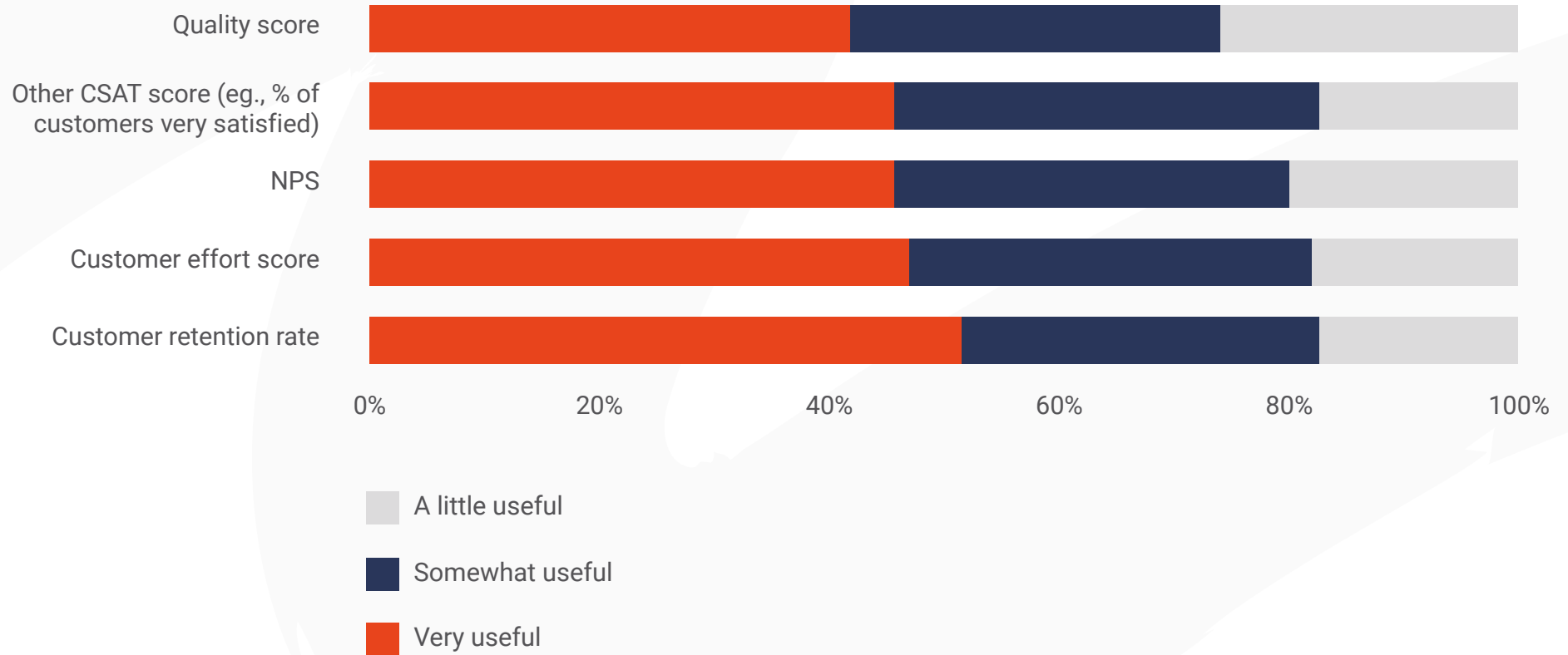Respondents use methods like customer surveys and employee feedback to generate customer experience benchmarks.

- **Quality scores:** Employees are scored based on multiple factors during various customer interactions; companies determine which factors contribute to the overall score.

- **Customers satisfaction (CSAT) scores:** This generally involves tracking customer satisfaction rates in surveys using a scoring system, such as numeric scoring or satisfaction levels, determined by the business.

- **Net Promoter Score (NPS):** This index measures customer loyalty based on factors such as how likely a customer is to recommend a company.

- **Customer effort scores:** These scores rate the ease or difficulty of interactions for customers.

- **Customer retention rates:** These rates are typically based on contract renewals, especially in contract-based industries like insurance.

ContactBabel asked respondents to rate the usefulness of each benchmarking method used. Interestingly, the highest-ranking customer experience benchmark — customer retention — is one that the contact center has little control over.

Nearly 60% of those surveyed found customer retention rate to be a "useful" customer experience benchmark; another 24% found it "somewhat useful." Quality, CSAT and NPS earned virtually identical ratings as "very useful," but the customer effort score ranked slightly higher.

Looking at combined numbers for "very useful" and "somewhat useful" responses, each customer experience benchmark used performed well. But this isn't very surprising; companies likely eliminate benchmarks that are "not useful."

# Usefulness of customer experience benchmarks



Quality score
Other CSAT score (eg., % of customers very satisfied)
NPS
Customer effort score
Customer retention rate

0%    20%    40%    60%    80%    100%

A little useful
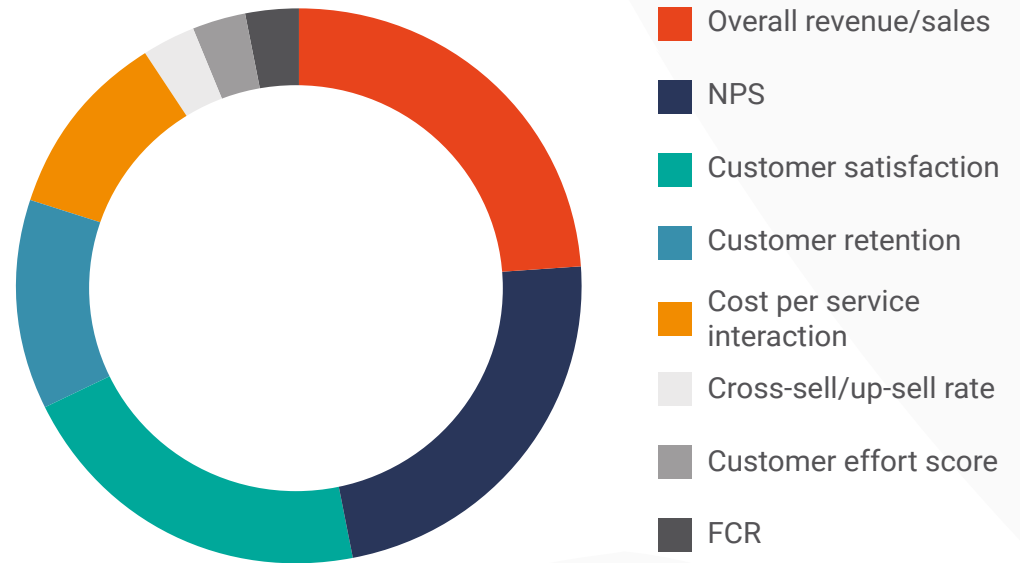
Somewhat useful

Very useful

# What the C-suite watches

Based on the ContactBabel report, we know that customer experience professionals are armed with a wealth of benchmarking data. And they can share that data with lines of business, including C-suite executives. ContactBabel examined which customer experience benchmarks those executives look at first. They asked which single metric these leaders rely on when judging the success of their customer experience program.

While customer experience pros chose customer retention rate as the most useful benchmark — by a landslide — only 12% of respondents report that leaders in their organization give that metric top priority. Instead, top execs are more likely to look to overall revenue, NPS and customer satisfaction to judge customer experience success. Few executive teams make FCR a top consideration, though that metric is directly related to customer experience — and lacks the subjective component of some other metrics like NPS.

**Metric upon which the board/senior management most judge the success of the customer experience program**



- Overall revenue/sales
- NPS
- Customer satisfaction
- Customer retention
- Cost per service interaction
- Cross-sell/up-sell rate
- Customer effort score
- FCR

# Make every customer interaction count

Satisfied customers stay; unsatisfied ones take their business to your competitors. The contact center is often a customer's first contact with your company. Your success often depends on whether that first experience establishes a long-term, loyal relationship — or sends them running to your competitors.

Starting with the customer, their needs and their journeys create a better human experience. Empower your agents and customer service representatives with the best training and skills to provide personalized service to your customers.

Call center work isn't for everyone. The stakes have become too high to gamble on customer service agents who lack the appropriate skill sets. Not only do these individuals jeopardize customer relationships, they also contribute to high rates of attrition. Because there is a cost to every customer or employee lost, there is a bottom-line reason for fine-tuning agent hiring and training. With customer experience moving toward greater personalization and automation, it's important to look for and nurture these skills in your agents.

With a lack of training, agents likely will be overwhelmed by the workload and make errors that affect customers. Whether you're hiring entry-level employees or highly skilled specialists within your call center, proper training on products, processes and technology is essential to their success.

You can't measure everything; focus on what's most relevant to your contact center operations and what will achieve your goals. Leverage that information to make improvements and explain how customer service supports customer experience and impacts brand loyalty.

The initial moment a customer interacts with your contact center is a chance to build a long-term relationship. And companies that get it right know the importance of building long-lasting customer loyalty through positive customer experiences.

**For more information, contact:**

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