8 EXPERT INSIGHTS ON OF YOUR BIGGEST CONTACT CENTER CHALLENGES

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THE TRUTH, THE WHOLE TRUTH...

by Chip Bell
Best-selling Author, *Kaleidoscope: Delivering Innovative Service That Sparkles*

I have to be honest: I enjoy debates when both debaters have some of the truth on each of their sides. This was the case in a recent spirited conversation I had with the Chief Customer Officer (CCO) of a large utility company. The discussion centered around three features of customer experience: time, access, and connection. These features aren't always completely appreciated (the whole truth) by many contact center managers, but contact center managers' "this is how we do it" positions are driven by having some truth on their sides.

Time Management Is Not Experience Management

Contact centers are enamored with time management. The metrics are up on the wall for all to see; the clock is embedded in many key performance indicators: there's average handle time, average time in queue, calls per hour, adherence to schedule, average speed of answer, etc. We love these metrics because they're irrefutable. It's like judging a speed skater instead of a figure skater. The truth is, customers do care about time, but there's a larger truth. If the clock is the sole performance driver, it can lead agents to focus on service expedience instead of customer experience.

My last call to Zappos took much longer than I expected. My last flight on Southwest Airlines was delayed thirty minutes due to weather. My last trip to the doctor included a forty-five minute wait because my doctor got tied up in surgery. What do I remember? Not the clock. I recall the charm of the Zappos agent; the humor of the Southwest flight attendant; and the fact that the receptionist at the doctor's office gave me a Starbucks gift card and one of those flashy buzzers you get at a restaurant. She told me she would buzz me at the coffee shop a block away when my doctor was ready. What can make your customers smile while the clock ticks?

Access Is a Bigger Deal Than We Thought

I was among a group of bank customers standing in the rain at 8:55 a.m. in front of a branch. All the bank personnel were in position inside waiting for the doors to be unlocked at 9:00. Once inside, I asked the receptionist why they didn't just open a few minutes early. I got the "bank hours" rule. So, I asked the branch manager if there was a legal or security reason for waiting. He said, "No, but we open at 9:00." His rules trumped our ease, and it underscored the fact that access has a new meaning in our "time's up" world.

Time is the gatekeeper to the important portals of our lives. It governs access to what we want or need, when we want or need it. And the cyber world has taught us to abhor the arbitrariness of that gatekeeper. "Why can't I reach someone when I need them?" "Who has time [there's that word again] to be shoehorned into a world of commerce with such inane rules?" Yet, as a metaphor for access, it opens the opportunity to reshape the customer's perception of time and access. After all, what time does your competitor (Amazon) close?

All Customer Connections Are Emotional

We love technology that solves customer needs. It lowers our costs and there's no worrying about morale or those pesky performance reviews. Computers do exactly what their programs tell them to do. Where were we before virtual hold, IVR, self-service, ACD, CRM, and omnichannel management? And now we have really cool tech toys like speech analytics, predictive dialers, and computer telephony integration that populates the screen from the ACD without agents having to look up customer information.

I watched a truck driver at a rest stop use his tire tool to destroy a vending machine over a simple offense: the machine kept his money without giving him his package of Fritos. It's vital to balance high tech with high touch. All customers value emotional connections. While technological convenience is clearly a boon to satisfaction, we must never forget that in the customer service business, we're still people serving people.

Conflict resolution experts teach us all to replace "yes, but" with "yes, and." Harmony and progress come from finding the truth in our opponent's position as a path to collaboration. "Seek first to understand," wrote Stephen Covey, "then to be understood." My CCO friend and I discovered absolutes stop exploration and myopic perspectives only fuel inflexibility rather than understanding. Whatever your position on what is "best" for your customers, consider two key questions: Is there a larger truth than the opinion you hold? And, what would your customers say?

__CHIP BELL__ has helped many Fortune 100 companies dramatically enhance their bottom lines and marketplace reputation through innovative customer-centric strategies that address the needs of today's picky, fickle, vocal, and "all about me" customers. Chip reveals the best practices from the organizations leading the customer loyalty charge, giving audiences powerful cutting-edge ideas and unique strategies they can put into practice the minute they return to the office. He's a world-renowned authority on customer loyalty and service innovation, having written more than 400 articles for many business journals, magazines, and blogs. In 2010, Leadership Excellence Magazine listed him among the top thirty thought leaders in America, and in 2016, he was included on ICMI's list of the Top 25 Thought Leaders on Twitter in the contact center industry. Follow him __@ChipRBell__.

Join Chip at Wednesday's afternoon keynote, **"Seriously Sparkly Service: Making Innovative Service Profoundly Remarkable,"** at CCExpo 2017

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HOW TO DEVELOP A CUSTOMER SERVICE VISION

by Nate Brown
Manager, Customer Support | UL

I know what you may be thinking: *"Yet another meaningless corporate rah-rah statement for me to forget about in a week!"* I'm with you. Two years ago, I'd have been in the same frame of mind—but before you do your best Judge Judy eye roll and surf on, I challenge you to give this concept a chance. There are few things this remarkably simple with such huge ROI potential for our teams.

It was an ICMI workshop by the one and only Jeff Toister that first turned me on to the concept of a customer service vision. Since that time, the truth of his statements has taken root and evolved into a new mindset for me. A customer service vision isn't a rewording of or a replacement for your company's vision statement…quite the opposite, in fact. In many ways, it's like a completion.

Our most powerful motivation lever as leaders is creating meaningful work directly tied into the company's purpose. Sadly, according to CX luminary Scott McKain, two-thirds of an organization's employees has no idea what makes the organization unique. Part of the reason is that company vision statements are often distant and irrelevant to what actually transpires in the life of an employee. A customer service vision statement is your opportunity to bridge this gap and channel purpose into everything from quality management to coaching conversations to rewards and recognition.

Hopefully, the why is now clear. Next up, we have the what and the how: what our service vision is, and how to create your very own.

The UL EHSS Customer Service Vision:

"Supporting our customers and each other in a manner that's effortless, accurate, and friendly."

That's it. You may be thinking, *"How silly to write a 700-word blog about a fourteen-word statement."* Well, I'm a silly guy. I also believe the best vision statements are short enough to actually remember. Let me unpack this statement briefly, as it will help your thought process as you go about creating your own.

- **"Supporting our customers and each other"**: The key phrase here is "each other." We sometimes push a customer focus to the point where we blind ourselves to the simple fact that customer service is a team sport. When a culture is established where agents go out of their way to help each other, your ability to assist customers increases exponentially. Make the privilege of serving one another a big deal.
- **"Effortless"**: For our demographic, great customer service is all about facilitating resolutions quickly and easily. When we can get our administrators back to work with minimal drama, we've done our jobs well. There's no "wow" moment required and "delight" rarely leads to increased customer loyalty.
- **"Accurate"**: The keyword is knowledge, which enables accuracy. A support organization is really only as good as its ability to create, curate, and distribute knowledge. We're working hard to become a KCS (Knowledge-Centered Support) team. We also create a culture of life-long learners. Everyone should be continually growing in his or her knowledge and abilities.
- **"Friendly"**: In a world overrun by IVRs, chat bots, and automated messages, our support team places a huge emphasis on the human element. We're just people supporting other people, after all. While we strive to be knowledge experts, we strike a more personable tone in our phone interactions and beyond. Agents are highly encouraged to be themselves and engage in real-life dialogue with interested customers.

So, that's us! Now it's your turn. Here are a few helpful guidelines and questions you should ask yourself when creating your own customer service vision statement:

- **Create It Together:** What makes your company unique? What makes your contact center unique? I encourage you to ask these questions to your whole team. Get them involved in the very beginning as you create this statement. This will build ownership across the team versus another "top-down" communication they'll just delete.
- **Brand Voice:** You'll want your customer service vision to coincide not just your company's vision, but also your brand voice. As Sarah Stealey Reed taught me, there's great power in having a consistent brand voice across marketing, sales, and support. This will reduce the number of mixed messages being given to agents and, ultimately, to your customers. It may be a good idea to get marketing involved in this exercise! Just remember to keep it short and memorable.
- **Pound It Home:** Once you've worked with the team to establish your magic statement, find a way to celebrate it! Having a "vision lunch" or something similar will help to kick things off right. Repetition is essential. Have it printed on something like a mug or sign that reps will see on a daily basis. As leaders, use the statement often in coaching conversations, team meetings, and as part of quality assurance. If you're not intentional about giving your customer service vision statement meaning, it'll die off faster than your favorite character in "Game of Thrones".

One of my favorite things about having a customer service vision statement is the consistency. Goals and objectives come and go, but the vision statement is always there providing inspiration for important decisions. Best of luck, and may 2017 be a year of renewed vision for your contact center!

__NATE BROWN__ has had an outstanding day when he's been able to help customers. As the manager of customer support for UL, Nate's ambition is to create outstanding service interactions through creativity, knowledge, and professionalism. He is a certified HDI Support Center Manager, VP of communications for the Music City local chapter, and speaker in the Southeast region. Nate is also the founder and author at __CustomerCentricSupport.com__. Follow Nate on Twitter __@CustomerIsFirst__ and connect with him on __LinkedIn__.

BOLD PREDICTIONS ON WHERE THE CONTACT CENTER IS HEADING

THE EXPECTATION ECONOMY

by Sarah Stealey Reed
Editor, Relate | Zendesk | @stealeyreed

Companies are going to look beyond—way beyond—their competitors for best practices in customer service. Thanks in great part to the Experience Economy, consumers are getting accustomed to personalized, proactive, and empathetic customer experiences. And because they get and like them in one industry, or from one company, it means they expect them from all. If brands simply look at their peer group, they'll miss out on the customer experience being driven by other, perhaps more disruptive segments. This is known as expectation transfer, wherein a customer's expectations in one industry or service transfer to most, if not all.

Firms like TrendWatching feel that the Experience Economy, bolstered by promoters, is evolving into the Expectation Economy. Expectation sits on three pillars: rising quality, positive impact, and personal expression.

Not surprisingly, customers are expecting higher quality—from products, from service, and from customer support. Continuous innovations have led us all to believe that what we buy, use, or need tomorrow is better than yesterday. And because of promoter tools like review sites and social, there is clear transparency among users. We expect everything to be great (including customer service), or we'll tell everyone about it.

Brands will also need to be paying attention to CSR initiatives, as many consumers want to work with companies that make a positive impact. And this extends into customer service. If you claim to be a "green company" and "environmentally supportive," then don't force customers to print or fax when they need to send back-up materials into customer support. It's not enough to say you make a "positive impact," you best be authentic about it.

Finally, personal expression comes into play. Today, status is less about what you have and more about who you are and what you prefer. How does this apply to customer service? Think channels. A great way for contact centers to facilitate customer self-expression is to offer unique (and appropriate) channels—Facebook Messenger, IM, and AI-assists.

What's big in 2017? Brands will stop looking at their closest competitor for what's next, what's important, and what's relevant. Instead, they'll look to the companies driving innovation and customer experience. Customers have expectations, and they will transfer to you.

DEFINING QUALITY IN CUSTOMER SERVICE

by Brad Cleveland
Founding Partner | ICMI

With customer expectations evolving so quickly, we're often asked a basic (and important!) question: What is quality in customer service? Related questions often follow: Who determines what quality is? How should we define it? What guidelines or specifications should we establish to manage and measure it?

Given how fast services are evolving, these questions have never been as important as now. Let's look at what quality means and where quality standards should come from.

We've probably all heard or used the term quality in a general sense: "I need some quality sports headphones." Or, "Their service team does a quality job every time." What we really mean is, high quality, or exceptional quality. Quality is, simply, the attributes of a product or service. So, to define what great quality means, we need a point of reference.

That's where standards come in. Standards refer to the requirements, specifications, guidelines or characteristics established for customer service. Standards should reflect and provide guidance on what needs to happen — what we want to apply or replicate — across all customer interactions. They should provide a template that leads to consistent service.

There are three major sources of input for establishing quality standards: customer expectations; mission, vision, and values; and stakeholders.

Quality:
The attributes of a product or service.

Customer Expectations

With service, unlike manufacturing, there is no tangible product. So there are many ways to approach quality in this context. But researchers and practitioners alike agree that customer expectations must form the basis for defining quality standards in customer service. Accordingly, we can define service quality as, "The customer's perception of how well our service meets his or her expectations." Both the services we deliver and the expectations we help to create are important aspects of quality.

Mission, Vision, and Values

A second source of input for establishing quality standards is the organization's mission, vision, and values. Every organization, in any industry, whether small or large, public or private, has a unique personality. It should be reflected in quality standards.

- The century-old financial services company Northwestern Mutual has built a brand of safety and stability. Formal, effective professionalism matching this image is integral to their services.
- Moo.com, a London-based print-on-demand company, encourages their team to (in their words) be passionate, lovely, and ambitious. Their mantra is, "We're not happy until you're happy," and their quality standards lead to services that, like the company name, are more playful than those of many other firms.

In both examples, quality standards create effective services that are right for these organizations' brands.

Both have high standards. But can you imagine the customer confusion they'd were they to swap quality standards for a day?

A company's mission, vision and values are not standards, per se. They are generally not specific enough. But when direction and values are inculcated into a culture — when they are reinforced at every level — they powerfully guide decisions and behavior. They inform the development of quality standards and make them far easier to implement.

Stakeholders

A third source of input into quality standards are stakeholders. "Stakeholder" refers broadly to

Standard:
The requirements, specifications, guidelines, or characteristics established for customer service.

anyone or any group that has an interest or concern in an organization. Employees, shareholders, suppliers, government, industry associations, and the community: all are stakeholders. This source of input shapes many the quality standards related to compliance—those that we *have* to get right.

For example, various government agencies administer privacy and security regulations in financial, healthcare, and other sectors. These requirements must be built into internal quality standards, given the risks of noncompliance.

In another example, evaluation sources in the travel sector, such as Michelin and Forbes, rate hotels, typically up to five stars. The Forbes Travel Guide uses more than 800 standards as part of their assessment. Many are very specific—for example, for a five-star rating arriving guests must be greeted and provided assistance within sixty seconds, phone calls are not to be left on hold for longer than thirty seconds without offering a callback, and many others. Since ratings significantly influence a hotel's marketing and revenue, quality standards should reflect requirements aligned with the appropriate level of service.

It's important to remember, your agents are also stakeholders. They have incredible insight into what customers need and want, because they spend time with them every day. And the more involved they are in establishing your quality standards, the greater the likelihood they'll buy into and support them.

Effective quality standards bring together and reflect input from all three of these sources: customer expectations, the organization's mission and vision, and stakeholders. Your quality standards should be unique to your organization, because they reflect *your* brand and customers.

***BRAD CLEVELAND** is often cited as one of the world's foremost leaders and thinkers in customer service and contact centers. He has worked in over 60 countries, has advised numerous governments, and counts many of today's service leaders Apple, HP, American Express, and others among his clients. Brad is author/editor of eight books, including Call Center Management on Fast Forward, which won an Amazon.com best-selling award and is used in universities and corporate training programs around the world. One of the initial partners in and former president and CEO of ICMI, Brad grew the firm into a global industry leader. He now serves as a senior advisor to ICMI, and as an in-demand author, speaker and consultant. His current research is focused on the future of customer service. Follow Brad **@bradcleveland**.*

THE TOP 5 REASONS EMPLOYEES STAY PUT

by Jenny Dempsey
Director, Customer Care | DMV.org

Understanding why employees stay with your company begins with a very simple task. No, it doesn't mean looking at their pay stubs to see who you pay the most. It begins by simply your employees *why* they stay. It is a choice, after all.

Most of your employees are seated at their desks, click-clacking away on their keyboards for more than just a paycheck. Or, as my dear friend Amber says, *"It isn't just about the money. It's about [a company] showing employees they're more than just another bottom to fill a chair."*

I took to the streets of Facebook and asked my dear, hardworking friends *why they stay* at their jobs. And while I have a rainbow of friends, covering a wide variety of ages, industries, and positions, the results were surprisingly similar.

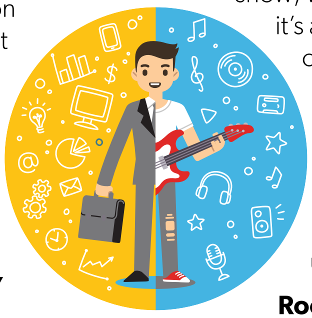
As a customer care manager, keeping the team together matters. Perhaps these reasons matter to you, too.

1. Flexibility

"If a company isn't willing to be flexible with 'life', then I wouldn't stay long." *– Leah M.*

Being flexible with employees doesn't just keep them happy; it's a decision that could ultimately save a business thousands of dollars in turnover costs. Being flexible with your employees may not break the bank either, with inexpensive VoIP telecommuting technologies on the rise. And by implementing a custom or flex schedule that works for your employees, you're able to maintain control over productivity while giving your team members the freedom they need. Flexibility goes hand in hand with work/life balance and is seen as a perk to attract future talent.

Rockstar Tip: Start small with telecommuting and build up. Begin your program with one or two days per month to gauge your team's progress. Encourage open communication via an online system, such as Slack or Google Chat, to be available during work hours. Keep track of stats and completed projects, and then analyze after a set time period (3-6 months) to understand the impact on the bottom line. You'll know at that point what you need to work on and whether you can expand the program to more days per month.



2. Acknowledgement

"Although I wouldn't turn down money, gifts, or promotions, it really comes down to acknowledgement. Even private acknowledgement is often enough." *– Jeff D.*

People want to know that they matter. They want recognition for their hard work, and not always in the form of money. While money can temporarily satiate, a manager or peers recognizing an employee for going above and beyond will last longer in their mind than the dollars put in their pocket. Remember when we were kids and we built a sandcastle then yelled out to our parents for attention, "Look! Look! Look! Isn't it the best ever!"? We're still like that on the inside sometimes, it's just that our desire to obtain that recognition has shifted. (Well…for most of us.)

Rockstar Tip: Revisit your informal and formal acknowledgement processes. How often do you follow up with an employee for successfully completing a project? Do you have a system in place for formally recognizing employees through an award system? Does your culture need a formal process for this, or is informal encouraging on its own, such as Thankful Thursday?

3. Health and Safety

"The fastest way to have me packing a box when an organization does not demonstrate integrity or places me in a situation where my own personal integrity is compromised." *– Nate B.*

Egos, hostility, unethical decisions, and law-breaking situations: no, we're not talking about a new reality show; we're talking about a workplace near you. While it's a sad truth that employers can stoop to a level of unimaginable, you may not be aware that it's happening in your office.

The US Department of the Interior publishes a brochure on what qualifies as a "hostile work environment." TheBalance.com offers insight on unsuspected behaviors that show up when you least expect them.

Rockstar Tip: Ultimately, if you're working for a company and something doesn't feel right in your gut, lean in and listen, then try to communicate this to your HR department or a manager as quickly as you can.

4. Growth

"For a company to keep me, I had to have a manager that was encouraging of my continued desire to grow and learn, as well as one that communicated clearly and openly." *– Ali O.*

Being a manager also means being a landscaper, creating paths for the individuals on your team to walk down as time ticks on. Building opportunity into a role gives your employees motivation that their hours worked are not wasted, but rather are bricks that build their future. Shift your perspective: you're investing in your company's future by investing time (and money) in your employees.

Rockstar Tip: Develop a program for each person on your team to discuss and set goals. Then, allow a budget (if necessary) for them to work toward these goals. Does this mean an online class 1 hour per week? A side project where they shadow someone in another department every month? An educational conference for them to fine tune their skills?

5. Culture

"I don't enjoy negative cultures. I don't mind a competitive culture or big expectations, but I can't work at a place where people are always stabbing each other in the back and leaders allow it to happen because we're all fighting for our own cause and not the bigger picture." *– Jeff T.*

In a Forbes article, Josh Bersin states, "Culture is a big and somewhat vague term. Some define it as 'what happens when nobody is looking'. In reality, it's much more complex. Culture is the set of behaviors, values, artifacts, reward systems, and rituals that make up your organization. You can 'feel' culture when you visit a company, because it is often evident in people's behavior, enthusiasm, and the space itself."

Culture is a reason why people go to a company, and it's why people stay with a company. The better you treat your employees, the better they'll treat your customers. And, if all goes well, the happier the customers, the more money your company will make. Sure, this is a high-level picture, but in the long run, hiring for a culture fit is going to benefit your employees and your company.

Rockstar Tip: While we can't all incorporate nap pods in our culture, think outside the box about what you can do, on top of your generous pay and benefits. Offering snacks and coffee? Lunch and yoga? Mindfulness and mobile car washes? Monthly massages and foosball breaks?

My friend Lilia, an HR manager and someone I've known since elementary school, sums up company longevity thusly:

"In 2017, we have a total of 77 anniversaries; of those, 33 have five years of service, 26 have ten years of service, and 18 have fifteen to forty years of service. I would say benefits are a big reason why employees stay with us, as we subsidize a large percentage of their health benefits. I find that any reward system encourages employees and they feel like their work is making a difference. Pay is important, but a lot of people will choose stability if the morale is good."

Couldn't have said it better myself.

*With almost a decade of customer service experience under her belt, **JENNY DEMPSEY** strives to bring creativity, compassion, and optimism to everything that she does. Jenny is the cofounder and a regular contributor to **CustomerServiceLife.com**. As the director of customer care for DMV.org, an internet publishing company for DMV content (not your state DMV), she works to change the game for customer service in the motor vehicle realm. Previously, Jenny was the customer service manager for Phone.com, a growing VoIP company in which she wore many hats, including onboarding and training, documentation, webinars, number transferring, and much more. You can often find Jenny singing songs to customers as well as declining customer marriage proposals. Jenny lives in San Diego with her boyfriend and cat, Taquito. Follow her **@jennysuedempsey**.*

Join Jenny for session #707, **"Keeping the Customer Service Rockstars on Your Team,"** at CCExpo 2017

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BOLD PREDICTIONS ON WHERE THE CONTACT CENTER IS HEADING

EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

by Jim Rembach
Host | FastLeader Podcast | @beyondmorale

As I sit and ponder about what's to come, I'm reminded of what has always been.

When I started in the industry twenty years ago, it was a problem. When I was a frontline supervisor, it was a problem. When I became a contact center manager, it was a problem. Since my days in operations, it's been a problem. It's been a chronic, yet repairable problem. But most companies have not elected to fix it.

Employee engagement, agent turnover, contact center morale, and various other tags have been applied to the agent experience issue for the past thirty years. But companies are approaching a crossroads, and they can't avoid it anymore. With the increased need for omnichannel support and with customers becoming more savvy and knowledgeable, companies need more highly skilled agents. What this means for companies is that they have to do a better job at engaging and retaining their top agents.

A larger paradigm shift has also begun, with companies and executive leadership realizing that the employee experience is the precursor to the customer experience, which is itself the key battleground in retaining and growing customers.

So I believe 2017 will be the year when we see more action on employee engagement. More companies will go beyond the typical employee survey/feedback (that's rarely acted on) and start engaging employees better and faster by using tools like An Even Better Place to Work (and others) to engage employees emotionally and build stronger workplace cultures.

THE 5 MOST COMMON MISTAKES MADE BY SMALL CONTACT CENTER LEADERS

by Justin Robbins
Group Community Director | ICMI

Make no mistake, life in the contact center is rough. It's a volatile business that relies on a perfectly blended combination of people, processes, and technologies to ensure success every single day. And while this is true of every contact center, it is the smallest of the bunch (think 75 seats or less) that can experience the reality of this volatility at exponentially heightened levels.

As a former small contact center leader and someone who spends a lot of time around contact centers of all shapes and sizes, I've gained exposure to these centers at their best and at their worst. Here's a collection of the five most common small contact center mistakes that I've witnessed and some advice on how to ensure that they don't make an appearance in your own contact center.

1. Cancelling training to cover high contact volume.

We've all been there. A training session was planned weeks or months in advance, and when the day finally came, we were so underwater that we couldn't let our agents attend. This is a mistake for two reasons. One, by cancelling the training, our actions send a clear message that professional development isn't a priority. Our agents will give us their best work only if we invest in enabling them to work their best. Two, the chances are that the training session was important. Let's be honest: nobody wants to train for no reason. By cancelling the training, you could be preventing your agents from improving the efficiency, quality, or effectiveness of their work. Even if you reschedule the session, who's to say that high volume won't strike again? If you've determined that your agents need training and you scheduled for it to happen, it needs to happen. Don't try to sacrifice a long-term benefit for a short-term fix.

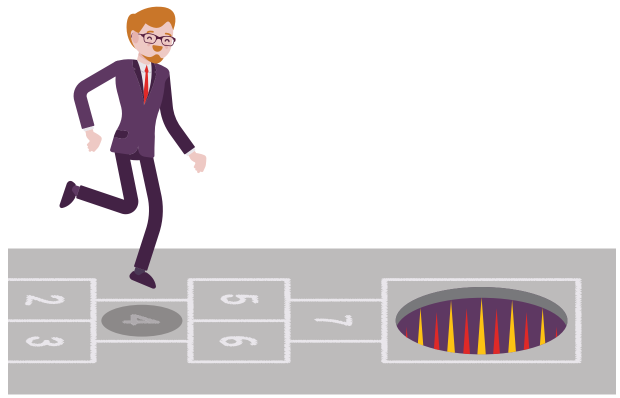
This brings me to the second mistake…

2. Misunderstanding the dynamics of small queue groups.

The smaller the queue group, the more volatile the arrival pattern and predictability of incoming contacts, and the more significant the impact if we get the forecast or staffing levels wrong. We may all know what this feels like, but many small contact center leaders don't understand the science behind it. To be completely candid for a moment, not educating myself and the other leaders in my contact center sooner is one of my own biggest career mistakes. (Explaining planning theory and the dynamics of size requires a bit more than I can provide in this article but, if you recognize that this is a struggle for you, ICMI has a lot of great resources to help get you on your way.)

3. Coaching only to the bad behaviors (if they coach at all!).

Most contact center leaders are rich in coaching opportunities but poor in time to do so. The reality is that in addition to coaching, they could be assisting in times of high volume, resolving escalated customer issues, running reports, monitoring queues, answering agent questions, researching solutions, and a litany of other things. It's easy for coaching to fall to the bottom of the bucket and gain perception as a nice-to-have, not a need-to-have.



In addition, the little time that is made available for coaching is used to address major concerns or problems. The end product is that the "good" agents receive little to no coaching or feedback, while the "problem" agents get all of the coaching time and attention. This affects all agents in a negative way, as the good agents could feel neglected and question their importance or value, while the problem agents feel as if they only ever hear about the things they do wrong.

Coaching is incredibly valuable. When done right, it can resolve many of the other issues we experience in our contact centers. To get on track, however, we need to spend our coaching time with all agents and use those conversations to not only address the opportunities for improvement but also reinforce the positive and desired behaviors.

4. Spending most of their time "firefighting."

Many small contact center leaders feel as if they're running toward a finish line that never gets any closer. It's not uncommon for them to start the day with a "to-do" list that was left over from the previous day—and that will only increase in size by the next. Their time is spent trying to get additional shift coverage, shuffling breaks and queue assignments, answering questions from the endless line of agents at their desk, or throwing on a headset and helping to lower the queues themselves. The primary reason that many small contact center leaders make this mistake is that they know they're understaffed but they don't understand the real reason why.

The two most common contributors are incorrect internal reporting and inaccurate shrinkage calculations. To address the first of these, small contact centers should be measuring and planning to half-hour intervals. Essentially, this means that the forecasts for volume and schedules for staffing should be broken down to the half-hour level. This provides an increased degree of accuracy and empowers contact center leaders with actionable opportunities for improvement. As for the second, your shrinkage factor takes into consideration the time your agent spends off the phone (breaks, training, coaching, etc.) and also accounts for vacation time, average call-offs, and other events that will impact when and how many agents are available to work. When properly calculated and applied, contact center leaders will gain an accurate understanding of how many agents are actually needed to handle their projected forecast.

5. Losing sight of their advantages.

For as tough as it can be to lead a small contact center, there are also some incredible advantages that, in the midst of the day-to-day hustle, can be easy to forget. Small contact center leaders are often able to build closer and stronger relationships with their team; they're able to communicate information more quickly and personally; and they're able to implement ideas and respond to a changing customer landscape more rapidly and nimbly than their larger contact center peers. Take time to recognize and celebrate the uniqueness of your contact center and the incredible advantages you have as a small team.

The reality is that running a contact center isn't necessarily a glamorous job, but it is a tremendously important and noble undertaking. Without us, organizations would be unable to effectively serve their customers and deliver on their needs and expectations. Never make the mistake of believing that what you and your team do doesn't matter. You provide value beyond what you may ever realize and make a difference to people every single day. Own your position as a valuable asset to your organization and strive to deliver excellence one interaction at a time.

__JUSTIN ROBBINS__ is a customer service expert focused on contact center operations and helping organizations appropriately define and achieve success. Over the past two decades, he's coached thousands of individuals around the globe on customer experience best practices. Justin leads the content strategies and community engagement initiatives for HDI and ICMI and is a speaker, trainer, and writer on topics such as customer service best practices, KPIs, and motivational business leadership. He's a professional member of the National Speakers Association and has been featured by the New York Times, NBC Nightly News with Lester Holt, Fox News, and numerous other media outlets. Follow him __@justinmrobbins__.

HOW TO WRITE AUTOMATED TEXTS THAT SOUND HUMAN

by Leslie O'Flahavan and Rich Weborg
Owner | E-WRITE // CEO | OneReach

If your customers have opted-in to receive texts from your company, they probably realize that some of your texts are going to be automated. They understand that sometimes texts from your company were sent by an automated system and that you don't actually have a human employee, chained to a desk, hand-typing each appointment confirmation or loyalty program welcome message!

However, even if your texts to customers are automated, they shouldn't sound mechanical. Here are ten tips to help you write automated texts that sound human and build rapport with your customers.

1. Use familiar, conversational words.

Text is closer to speech than any other written form of customer service, so choose words that you'd use if you were talking to a customer. This text from ZocDoc uses "info" and "Just remind," which makes this text sound like it's coming from a friendly company. (It also fits nicely within the 160-character limit).

> *Your info has been sent to your healthcare provider. Just remind the office that you completed your forms online thru ZocDoc! Problems? Reply "s" for support.*

2. Be concise.

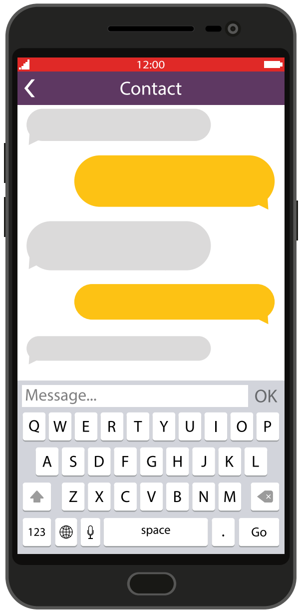
Wordy texts read like form letters, and no customer thinks, "Oh, you wrote this form letter just for me?" Cut the word count and you'll come across as more personal.

> **Original, not concise:**
>
> *AT&T Free Msg: Welcome abroad! Our AT&T Passport app is required to use in Wi-Fi in participating hotspots. If you have not already done so, please visit www.att.com/getpassportapp for iPhone, iPad or Android devices. Data charges may apply for download.*
>
> **Revised, concise:**
>
> *AT&T Free Msg: Welcome abroad! You'll need our AT&T Passport app to use Wi-Fi in participating hotspots. Please visit www.att.com/getpassportapp to download it on your iPhone, iPad or Android device. Data charges may apply.*

3. Give consistent instructions about how to text back.

You're going to reuse those automated texts repeatedly, so write them right. Don't explain the same task two different ways in the same text—you don't want to confuse your customer.

> **Original, with confusing instructions about how to text back:**
>
> *Salon H20: Reply "C" to confirm Brenda's appt on Fri, Dec 18 at 12:30 PM. If you have questions, call 301-774-7999. HELP = Help STOP = End msgs*
>
> **Revised, with consistent instructions:**
>
> *Salon H20: Reply C to confirm Brenda's appt on Fri, Dec 18 at 12:30 PM. If you have questions, call 301-774-7999. Reply "help" for help or "stop" to end msgs*



4. Use feeling words.

One way to offset the automated quality of automated texts is to use words that indicate feelings. (Everyone knows robots don't have feelings!) Words like "sorry," "love," and "happy" all evoke an emotional response in the reader.

> *A&F: Sorry to see you go! You've been unsubscribed from texts. You will no longer receive messages. Contact 866-712-1032 or http://bit.ly/WW3WWw for more info.*

While this automated text—from a former presidential candidate whose name begins with an H—doesn't use a word that names a feeling, such as "sorry"; it uses intense, connected words to build a feeling of connection, including "at the heart" and "you're with me."

> *To South Carolina, the volunteers at the heart of our campaign and the supporters who power it: thank you. If you're with me, chip in now: http://hrc.ms/bb — H*

5. Use personal pronouns.

If you want your automated texts to connect to your customer, use pronouns such as "we," "you," and "us." Personal words make your texts sound, well, personal.

Original, with personal pronouns that build the relationship:

We noticed it's your first time participating! FYI: Your phone number is completely private and we'll never spam you.

—Powered by PollEverywhere.com

Revised, without personal pronouns, which makes the text sound cold:

Thanks for participating for the first time! FYI: Phone numbers are kept completely private and PollEverywhere.com doesn't send spam.

—Powered by PollEverywhere.com

6. Consider using humor if it's consistent with your brand.

If your brand voice is light, hip, or irreverent, try humor in your automated texts. Don't try humor if it gets in the way of your message, however. (Local governments texting citizens about severe weather, I'm talking to you.)

Breaking News! Your GrubHub order is being prepared. Our crystal ball estimates your delivery time between 1:25 PM and 1:35 PM.

7. Use the conventions for writing text, not email.

Your automated texts to customers don't need to resemble the other ways you write. In fact, they shouldn't. Texts rarely use "From" to identify the sender, and they don't need subject lines. The wording in this text makes the sender sound both automated and unaware of how texts are commonly written.

FROM: Headlines Hair Designers

SUBJ: Appt Reminder

MSG: Fri, Feb 12 3:00 pm – Female Hair Cut @ Headlines Hair Designers

The writing in this text has two other problems:

- "Female Hair Cut": That's just not what the customer would call it. She'd call it a haircut. She knows she's female. If Headlines books a longer time for "female" haircuts than it does for "male" haircuts, that's not information the customer needs to deal with. And the phrase "female hair cut" is just all kinds of wrong.
- "@ Headlines Hair Designers": Avoid using the @ sign when you need to write "at." It makes your text look like it includes a Twitter handle, which could be confusing.

8. Avoid bureaucratic words.

Text is a casual customer service channel, even when automated. Don't use words that make you sound like a lawyer ("ensure," "advise," etc.)

Original bureaucratic wording:

SAFETY MESSAGE: Please ensure your phone is now switched off. Your cabin crew will advise when phones may be switched on again. Thank you for flying Emirates.

Revised plain language:

SAFETY MESSAGE: Please check to be sure your phone is now switched off. Your cabin crew will let you know when you may switch your phone on again. Thanks for flying Emirates!

9. Avoid weird abbreviations and capitalizations.

Automated texts need to be short, given the fact that space is at a premium. However, don't abbreviate things in a manner no one would recognize. What will most customers think the "S:" means in the flood warning text? Be as clear as possible.

Weird abbreviation:

S: Alert Montgomery Flood Warning – The National Weather Service has issued a FLOOD WARNING for Montgomery County as of 6pm (2/24/16). Flash flooding of streams, creeks, and low-lying areas is occurring or imminent. Do not drive through flooded areas. Do not drive through flood barriers.

Most texts use sentence case ("You qualify for more minutes"), not title case ("You Qualify for More Minutes,") because most texts are written in short sentences. There's no reason to write "Msg & Data Rates May Apply" in title case. It makes this text seem more robot-written than human-written.

Weird capitalization:

AMC: Conf #123456789. 7 tickets to see Interstellar on 11/29/2016 at 3:25 PM http://bit.ly/ABC1dEf Msg & Data Rates May Apply

In the text below, the customer is probably wondering, "Why are you screaming at me?" and "Isn't an LPN a Licensed Practical Nurse?" I'd write out "license plate" this time, or at least do "Plate #."

Weird capitalization and abbreviation:

PARKING SESSION DEACTIVATION REMINDER. Will deactivate: 9:59 PM. Activated: 3/20/2015 7:29 PM. Zone:12345 Space: n/a LPN: 2AB1234

10. Paraphrase the customer's question or need in the automated response.

The best way to show someone you're listening (or reading) closely is to restate what he or she asked for or wanted to know. In live customer service, we paraphrase to confirm that we understood the customer's request. In automated customer service, paraphrasing is only possible when you're sending specific, not generic, responses.

Though automated, this text comes across as genuine because the second sentence paraphrases the customer's question or need.

> *Thanks for contacting Evanston 311. Please reply with the name of a restaurant that you are interested in seeing a health score for.*

Conclusion

So, to wrap up, even if you're sending automated texts you should write them in a personal, friendly, connected style. Every text to a customer represents a chance to build a relationship.

***LESLIE O'FLAHAVAN** has helped thousands of people learn to write well for online readers. She has delivered customized writing courses for customer service agents, social media managers, and support desk staff. She is a problem-solver for all the writing-related challenges faced by contact centers: e-mail, chat, and social media. She helps contact centers train agents to write excellent e-mail, measure the quality of their e-mails to customers, and rewrite and maintain their entire library of canned answers. Recently, she completed a complete overhaul of customer service writing for a global airline's domestic and international contact centers. Leslie is the co-author of Clear, Correct, Concise E-Mail: A Writing Workbook for Customer Service Agents. Follow her **@LeslieO**.*

***RICH WEBORG** is the CEO at OneReach. He is passionate about technology and communication and believes that technology can help drive better and more meaningful interactions between people and businesses. Rich has helped to create several technology startup companies over the last 15 years and has created compelling solutions for various industries including DSL, Networked VPNs, Text Messaging and Data Analytics. Rich brings with him over 25 years of experience in software development, process engineering and product management. Rich started his career working for fortune 500 companies including IBM, Aetna, Sprint and Level 3 and is now concentrating on creating companies focused on emerging technology. Rich holds a master's in Technology Management at the University of Denver and a bachelor's in Information Systems.*

BOLD PREDICTIONS ON WHERE THE CONTACT CENTER IS HEADING

CHATBOTS

by Al Hopper
Cofounder | SocialPath Solutions | @AlHopper

Too many companies see the contact center as a loss center and are trying to automate their way to higher profits. One such automation is the chatbot, which has come to social media.

Chatbots first came on the scene around 2011, but they made a big splash in 2016. Both Facebook and Twitter announced new features that allow company accounts to enable text recognition to automate private message responses. These features go far beyond the automated response tools some brands use to try to quickly engage tweets and messages.

The new chatbots can respond to customer inquiries using key words to give the appearance of personal interaction. For the customer on the go, who wants a very transactional interaction, this is a big win. However, like their older cousins, telephone IVR systems, there are some limitations to the types of input/output options, as well as regulatory concerns.

One example of this is in financial services. Customers are unable to get financial account balances via social media, so chatbots will only serve as a traffic director to a different channel, instead of personally connecting.

For the contact center that relies on building relationships and increasing wallet-share through cross-selling, this is a big problem. It is much more difficult to upsell an angry customer that has been through any automated system for something they thought was simple, only to find out they still need to speak with a real person.

HOW TO GET VOC DATA WITHOUT A SURVEY

by Jeff Toister
President | Toister Performance Solutions, Inc.

Surveys are a popular way to get customer feedback, and it's not hard to understand why. Surveys are easy to implement. They yield lots of data. Best of all, they produce a metric that can be managed.

Surveys also have their limitations. They rely on our customers' memories, which can sometimes be faulty. They focus primarily on perception, not facts. Surveys can also annoy customers who feel bombarded with these requests. There's even a term for that last one: survey fatigue.

The good news is, there are alternatives. You can gather useful voice of customer (VOC) data without bothering your customers with a survey. Here are five techniques:

Contact Type Reports

Contact centers often keep a record of the reasons customers contact them. This can be captured through your CRM system, your phone software, or even an old-fashioned tick sheet.

Monitoring contact type trends helps you quickly spot problems. For example, let's say you notice a spike in calls related to a specific product. You can investigate the problem and quickly diagnose the root cause.

Social Media Monitoring

There's a good chance that people are talking about your company, product, or service on social media. Why not listen to the conversation? You can easily categorize what people are saying to determine if there are opportunities to improve.

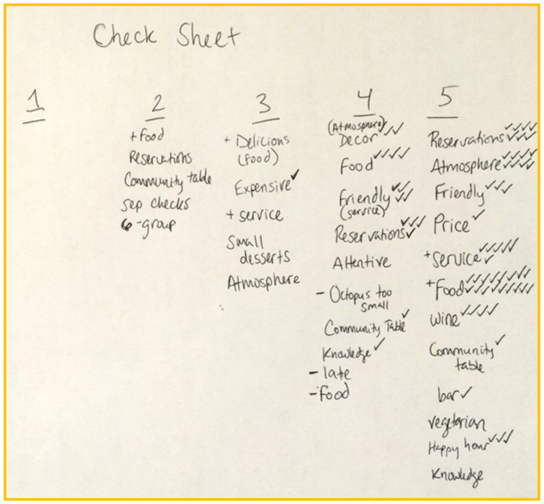
There are lots of tools available to help you do this. Your contact center might have these resources already if you are serving customers via social media. You can also check out this list of ten free social media monitoring tools.

Text Analysis

Many customer service channels rely on the written word. These include live chat, social media, text, and email. Big companies often employ sophisticated software to analyze the sentiment in customer writing. You can do this on a smaller scale with little budget.

One option is to use a check sheet. You use a check sheet by reading through text and writing down keywords as you go. Place a check mark next to a word each time that keyword or a similar one is repeated. It goes pretty quickly once you get started; I can typically analyze 250 records in fifteen minutes.

Here's an example of a check sheet I prepared using a restaurant's Yelp reviews:



Agent Polling

Your agents talk to customers every day. This means they have a good sense of the typical problems and challenges your customers encounter. They may also know a lot of details that wouldn't be collected in a survey.

Here's an exercise to help you capture and act on this data. Call a team meeting and ask agents to brainstorm a list of the top customer service challenges. Prioritize the issues by which ones happen most often and have the biggest impact. Select a couple and work together as a team to find a solution.

Hunt Icebergs

You can learn a lot from unusual cases. Sometimes, a strange problem is a sign of a bigger issue that affects more customers.

One contact center received a single complaint about a product shipped in a box that was too large. On a hunch, the contact center leader decided to follow-up with other customers who had purchased this product. It turned out they had similar feedback too, but didn't feel it was worth complaining about. The contact center leader brought the feedback to the company's shipping and merchandising departments. They worked together to find a way to ship the product in a smaller box. The company ended up saving money on shipping and prevented customers from experiencing a minor irritation.

Capturing VOC

Improving service is the reason we collect VOC data. Surveys can help you do this, but they have some limitations. Be careful of relying on just one approach. The best VOC programs use a variety of tools to capture data from multiple perspectives.

__JEFF TOISTER__ is the author of two books. The first is Service Failure: The Real Reasons Employees Struggle with Customer Service and What You Can Do About It. The second is The Service Culture Handbook: A Step-by-Step Guide to Getting Your Employees Obsessed with Customer Service (Spring, 2017). He has also authored several training videos on lynda.com including Customer Service Over the Phone, Customer Service Fundamentals, and Leading a Customer-Centric Culture. His company, Toister Performance Solutions, helps customer service teams unlock their hidden potential. Jeff is a member of ICMI's Top 50 Contact Center Thought Leaders on Twitter and was named one of the Top 30 Customer Service Professionals in the world by Global Gurus in 2015. Jeff is a nationally recognized employee performance expert. He holds a Certified Professional in Learning & Performance credential from the Association for Talent Development (ATD) and has been featured in two ad campaigns to promote the certification. In 2015, he earned the CPLP Contributor Award for his contributions to the CPLP certification. Jeff is a Past President of ATD's San Diego Chapter where he is a recipient of the WillaMae M. Heitman award for distinguished service.

BOLD PREDICTIONS ON WHERE THE CONTACT CENTER IS HEADING

SOCIAL MEDIA CUSTOMER SERVICE

by Scott Ontiveroz
Cohost | #Luv4Social Twitter Chat | @scottontiveroz

The contact center has evolved tremendously in the last fifteen years, as a result of both increasing technological capabilities and shifting consumer demands. Back when I started working in the contact center space, the term "social media" hadn't even been coined to describe what has become the most prominent form of human-to-human communication. As the platforms have matured, many companies have wisely opened social media up as a customer service channel. Unfortunately, many more companies have not.

As demographics continue shifting towards a majority of people that've never experienced life without the internet, the expectations for social media customer service will continue to grow. Companies that have long resisted, with notions of social media not being a business tool, will see the light in growing numbers as their competitors use it to improve customer experience. Whether they're successful in implementation remains to be seen, but there is a growing number of software companies, consultants, and BPOs with the expertise to ease the transition in 2017 and beyond.

KPIS: AS EASY AS (NOT) FOLDING LAUNDRY

by Jeremy Watkin
Head of Quality | FCR

Here's an analogy for you: The act of tracking stats and KPIs is like doing laundry. I've been trying for a really, really long time to find a way to make this laundry analogy work, and I think I've finally got it. Bear with me.

Airing Out the Dirty Laundry

I do most of the laundry in our house. My wife and I both possess a variety of homemaking strengths and weaknesses—one of mine just happens to be the laundry. She cleans the bathrooms, so I think I'm getting the better end of the deal.

Where was I? Oh, right, laundry. So, early on in my career as The Laundry Guy, I made sure all of the clothes got separated into different loads: darks, whites, jeans, gentles, and towels. On the other side, I would fold all of the laundry, including the underwear, and put it neatly in the drawers. Even before kids came a long, this process took a long time to complete each week.

Enter three kids and I found myself having to do laundry at least twice a week and barely keeping up. We finally got a high-efficiency washer and dryer, capable of handling mass amounts of clothing, and that helped a little. Maybe it's the hour it takes to fold and put clothes away, or perhaps it's the time(s) where the baby "undid" all of the folding, but at some point I began to question why in the world I was spending all of this time doing the laundry perfectly and what I was really getting out of it.

Laundry and KPIs?

For those of you leading customer service teams, how many different stats do you track on a regular basis? How many stats do you track for your individual agents on a regular basis? 10? 50? 100? More?

I'm no stranger to a behemoth Excel spreadsheet that must be maintained monthly. How many hours, days, or weeks would you say you devote to calculating and inputting your stats? It can be mind-numbing work. Is it worth it?

Think about your finished spreadsheet. Does anyone besides you look at it? Do you have clear actions that you regularly take on the different metrics where you've actually seen them go up or down? Is the fact that you track those metrics making you more efficient? Is it improving your customer experience?

Take a Step Back

Before you start thinking I'm going to tell you to delete your Excel spreadsheet and manage your team "by faith," let's get out of the weeds, take a step back, and think about this for a minute. Whether you are like me and already have this massive bank of stats or you're looking to establish KPIs for your team, let's talk about a few of the usual suspects and think about the value they provide.

Customer Satisfaction

Perhaps you track customer satisfaction or a similar metric. Are you simply tracking a number and hoping it will go up? Stop! Instead do this:

- Read verbatim feedback from customers and reach out to those customers to recover from service failures and restore their trust in your company.
- Categorize the dissatisfied surveys into key drivers. Find out which of them are costing significant amounts of money in both support time and lost revenue from canceled accounts. Share these insights with the rest of the business and work to fix the top issues.
- Identify issues where your agents could be trained, coached, or empowered to handle them better. This includes evaluating your quality process to ensure you are looking at these key behaviors.

Now customer satisfaction is an indicator of how well your efforts to transform your customer experience are working.

Average Handle Time (AHT)

AHT is a popular metric regardless of the support channel. Perhaps you share this one with your agents regularly and say, "You gotta get faster!" Cut that out! Instead do this:

- As part of your quality process, review some of the longer interactions and identify reasons why they're long. You may find that agents are placing callers on hold because they don't know answers or they have difficulty handling upset customers. This will reveal areas where you can empower and train your agents to be more efficient.
- Also look at the short interactions and make sure the quality of the customer service being provided is where you expect it to be.
- Don't forget to evaluate your customer service tools. How many different programs are you requiring your

agents to use during the typical support interaction? You may find that there's additional technology or equipment that can help improve this.

Now AHT has become a metric that drives quality and efficiency and improves your customer and agent experience.

First Contact Resolution (FCR)

FCR is a fun one to look at as well. Let's first start with the fact that this one can be difficult to both define and track. You may log a lot of time tracking FCR and, if you're anything like me, you frequently forget how you arrived at that calculation each month. If that's you, take a break! Instead do this:

- Regularly review cases that weren't resolved on first contact. On phone calls, you may find that agents could have provided more information or, as I say, "answered the questions customers didn't know to ask."
- When you review email, you realize that you actually don't want the case resolved in a single email response to the customer. While you value really complete responses to customers, you also value a bit of rapport building dialogue with them. This may drive you to adjust your FCR calculation for a particular channel.

Now FCR is a metric where you're driving your agents to offer the best, most complete solution to customers on every interaction, saving customers the need to contact you multiple times.

Back to Laundry

After evaluating my laundry practice a bit, I realized I could change my process and save a whole lot of time and aggravation. I now wash my whites and darks together and only separate out towels and gentles. Folding laundry has turned into more of a sorting into piles—one for each person. We then loosely place clothing in drawers, much of it without folding. In general, wrinkles aren't a problem and there's a whole lot more time for more important KPIs, like quality time spent with family.

As you think about the myriad of stats you're tracking and calling KPIs, I encourage you to take a moment to step back and think critically about each one. Ask yourself the following questions:

- Are there clear actions I can take to improve this metric?
- Does my team understand its role in driving this metric?
- Does this metric align with and drive us toward our customer service vision?

If the answer to any of those is no, you might want to hit the pause button on that KPI and evaluate whether or not it's a KPI worth tracking. You may find that some of your stats are like my pile of laundry—no amount of perfect folding is going to make your customer or agent experience any better.

__JEREMY WATKIN__ is the head of quality at FCR, the most respected outsource provider. He has more than fifteen years of experience as a customer service professional. He is also the cofounder and regular contributor on __Communicate Better Blog__. Jeremy has been recognized many times for his thought leadership. Follow him __@jwatkin__ for more awesome customer service and experience insights.