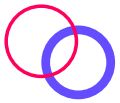# ONECOM

Retail technology:

The AI influence on customer experience & the rise of the remote contact centre

High street retailers are facing increasingly challenging times as traditional shopping habits continue to change. The rise of successful online-only retailers with lower operating costs and more agile business models is having a direct impact on conventional brick-and-mortar stores.

In this report, Onecom looks at how digital workplace technology in the retail sector can help improve customer experience, and reduce costs in order to stay competitive.

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The growing importance of omnichannel strategies

According to Gartner, more than two thirds of companies say they compete mostly on the basis of customer experience, and this figure is set to grow'.

Loyalty is no longer based on price or product – it's fostered by having great experiences, time and time again. With this in mind, having a thorough and effective omni-channel strategy is crucial to a retailer's success.

"Customer Experience is gaining importance in UK Boardrooms. Organisations understand the importance and have identified the need to align processes that match the customer journey, but recognise they must overcome structural constraints to respond and to deliver to customers' needs and expectations."

Tim Denison, Director of Retail Intelligence at Ipsos Retail Performance

Every buyer's path is different. Since this can vary daily, it's more important than ever for retailers to take both a digital and seamless omni-channel approach to customer experience.

For physical stores to compete more effectively against the e-commerce giants, this should include marketing, serving, and selling to customers; to the point of purchase and beyond. Hence why consistency is key in providing a more convenient service, and helps build customer confidence in your brand.

Supporting increasing customer enquiries

Along with rising customer expectations comes an increase in digitisation. Consumers want a frictionless experience and expect to easily connect with retailers across all touch points; whether by phone, SMS, social media, or web chat.

High on the priority list is the option to be able to switch seamlessly between all mediums, whilst being greeted with a personal, consistent brand voice. For example, a shopping basket in an app and on a website is expected to mirror the same quick and easy-to-use functionality, regardless of what device a customer is using.

In order to handle large volumes of online engagement, consider the entire range of your customers' journey. This includes all the different departments and technologies they may interact with to make an enquiry, resolve an issue, or complete a purchase. Across all channels, retailers should look to:

Be Holistic
Take a 360-degree view of the whole customer experience, and determine how you can better resonate through your service.

Respond immediately
Consider a unified communications system to allow for collaboration on customer issues - to avoid customer frustration.

Think beyond voice
Factor in communication and workflows that come via alternative channels, for example social media.

Ensure high availability
Avoid jeopardising your customer experience, by keeping a physical or virtual replication of your main contact centre server.

Utilise IoT
Automated responses to certain triggers can prevent problems before they become a reality.

Get your communications strategy right and you'll be well on your way to enhancing the customer experience.

Artificial Intelligence (AI): cutting costs and enhancing customer service

While harnessing the power of AI may seem daunting to some, in reality it can help cut costs, improve operational efficiency, and enhance the overall customer experience. Virtual agents, chatbots and other AI are challenging the traditional perception of a contact centre and already demonstrating value in customer service industries.

For example, chatbots can help reduce both the time it takes to resolve a customer query, and the need for agents to handle it. By allowing chatbots to quickly resolve the more frequent queries and FAQs, agents can then prioritise other queries and partake in more fulfilling customer interactions – resulting in happier, more empowered workers:

23% of agents feel more motivated and challenged since AI was installed in the call centre

85% of agents say AI frees up valuable time to focus on more challenging tasks

42% feel much more productive since AI was installed

A more convenient customer experience

It's not just call centre agents who are benefiting from AI. 82% of customers prefer the speed, with 38% preferring the convenience of virtual call centre agents[2].

"Customers get frustrated if they need to repeat their issues to multiple representatives. The latest advanced AI powered contact centre technology removes this frustration, empowers the agent and the retailer while delivering a seamless customer experience."

Martin Flick, CEO of Onecom

Chatbots can now handle over 85% of common customer queries[2]. The savvier retailers are already realising the benefits, moving towards a more efficient way of managing queries.

59% of retailers have invested in Virtual Call Centre Agents[2]

71% have invested in contact centre AI this Christmas[2]

42% have invested in Virtual Agent led Live Chat

22% in Agent Assist technology

A quarter of Heads of Customer Service in retail and e-commerce say that AI will add another layer of intelligence, data and insight[6]. Contact centre staff can use this information for smarter, more personalised interactions, with 56% agreeing[7] that customer queries are resolved at greater speeds.

Giving the consumer choice

If 2020 has shown us anything, it has been that an omni-channel strategy is more relevant and necessary than ever before. Consumers thrive on choice and brands embracing multiple platforms of communication, for example the use of e-commerce, m-commerce, click to shop on social media and email promotions, should find engagement is on the up.

The contact centre agent ties the omni-channel approach together, and AI enhances it further; adding another layer of intelligence and allowing the brand to further understand and connect with their audience.

Continuous improvement of the customer experience

Consumers expect more in 2022 – quicker, more detailed answers and faster resolution. Delivering excellent customer retail experiences is a continuous process of defining, measuring and adjusting. The release of new technology combined with growing consumer demands means retailers need to adopt an agile, responsive way of working. Those who listen to their customers and quickly adapt to meet their needs can expect to secure loyalty; shoppers who continue to use their services and purchase their products over their competitors.

"Customer experience is now overtaking price and product, retailers must be prepared to evolve to offer a more personalised experience, which our research has proved must be quick and convenient for the customer across all channels."

Martin Flick, CEO of Onecom

The benefits of a remote workforce

Having customer service agents enjoying flexible working from a more comfortable environment can positively impact the customer experience. Customer queries get resolved quicker, agents feel more empowered, and cost savings can be made in office space and staff overheads. All by having agents working from their preferred location. But why do staff favour remote working?

After the pandemic, attitudes towards working from home and hybrid models changed. **85% of employees advised that they would prefer a hybrid model, working both from home and the office[4].** This comes as no great surprise, since agents say feeling more empowered, motivated, and engaged are the top three benefits of remote working. In addition, nearly a quarter say they experience greater job satisfaction. For parents, **43% say being able to spend more time with their children is a key benefit[2].**

Location, location, location

While 19% of agents work from home 100% of the time either in their bedroom, kitchen or study, around a quarter work from locations such as coffee shops, hotel lobbies, or at a friend's house[2].

AI is transforming the 'traditional' contact centre as we know it. With agents being more productive working remotely, consumers are receiving a higher standard of service as a result - regardless of where the customer service agent may be located.

"Everyone benefits, the customer, the operator and the retailer. It's a great example of how bots and humans are working side by side to improve the role of the live agent, to transform the customer experience and ultimately boost the retailers' bottom line."

Martin Flick, CEO of Onecom

Many retailers have already taken advantage of the increase in agent output, taking the customer experience to a whole new level and in addition recognising the cost saving potential.

With 60% of call centre agents now work remotely[2], over one third of retailers saying this saves them more than £100,000 per year.

Embracing technology to boost the bottom line

Customer experience has become today's competitive battleground. In order to survive, retailers must evolve with the times and leverage the best technologies.

Intelligent customer experience capabilities such as AI will enable businesses to better tailor an experience to their customer base, and build lifelong loyalty. Now is the time to implement this new wave of retail innovation and embrace the opportunities that await.

For more information, register to join our webinar 'How AI can enhance your customer experience and boost your bottom line'.

Whether you are responsible for customer service improvement, operations, or finance, the webinar hosted by Onecom and Mitel will demo some of the new Google AI intelligent contact centre capability. See first-hand how you can enhance your contact centre operations, empower your agents, and delight your customers.

Sources: [1]Gartner, [2]Onecom Flexible working report
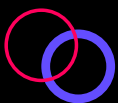
About Onecom

Onecom is the UK's leading managed cloud communications provider dedicated to advising other leading SME and enterprise businesses on their transformative growth strategies. With pedigree across retail, legal, financial, professional services, construction and private healthcare, Onecom has experience and success in migrating clients to the cloud with an emphasis on transforming business capability and agility by leveraging the power of convergence and technology.

Onecom reported a £32 million turnover in 2017 and in 2016 received investment of £10 million from Business Growth Fund (BGF), plus £5 million shareholder investment. Customers include Berry Bros & Rudd, Lastminute.com, Mace, Laithwaite's Wine, and Kennedys Law LLP. 2018 awards include being named Top Healthcare Solution Provider at Mitel's European Partner Awards, as well as leading customer 1st CENTRAL to Gold at the Insurance Times Awards for Excellence in Technology. Onecom is accredited under ISO 9001, 14001, 27001 and 18001.

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