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PEAK PERFORMANCE:

Mastering Customer Service Spikes with AI

How AI tools can improve customer service delivery during peak periods and beyond.

Contents

Harvard Business Review

"AI-enabled customer engagement holds the promise of a company learning more from each interaction and finding more ways to create value for customers."

Harvard Business Review, "Using AI to Build Stronger Connections with Customers." Aug 1, 2023

Executive Summary

Holidays, annual sales events, moments of crisis — every customer service leader has experienced a customer service peak.

These spikes in customer queries are a stress test for customer service teams. If peak periods are not handled efficiently, the results are dire: backlogs, long wait-times, high staffing costs, negative customer experiences and one-star reviews.

How well customer service teams handle these peaks is measured by the quality and consistency of their service.

Even if a customer loves a particular brand, 59% of consumers surveyed will abandon that brand after a few bad interactions, while 17% will walk away after just one bad interaction.[1] Up to 80% of consumers will go to a competitor after a bad customer service experience.[2] Quality and consistency in customer service matter.

To avoid the pitfalls, customer service leaders are often expected to scale-up their operations to handle these peaks, padding their staff with new agents hired in-house or outsourced through a call center.

The problem is that hiring, onboarding and managing new agents requires significant effort and can dramatically increase customer service costs. It can also hurt the quality of service, as new hires are often inexperienced. This leaves customer service leaders in a bind.

Fortunately, a marketplace of productivity-enhancing technology specifically designed for customer service has emerged. Customer service teams now have access to workflow management and collaboration tools, messaging platforms, email and SMS text automation, among the many new solutions.

The latest iteration of these tools are AI-enabled. Natural language AI — an umbrella term that includes Conversational AI and Generative AI — has made it possible for companies to engage with customers and resolve their issues without agent intervention. This makes artificial intelligence a powerful tool for funneling customer service queries during peak periods.

This white paper was developed to help customer service managers, digital transformation leaders and others responsible for improving customer experience better understand what AI tools are available to them. It will also cover how AI can help customer service teams lower costs, reduce handle time, maintain consistency and improve the quality of customer service during peak periods and beyond.

[1] PwC, "Experience Is Everything: Here's How to Get It Right," 2018. URL Reference: https://www.pwc.com/us/en/advisory-services/publications/consumer-intelligence-series/pwc-consumer-intelligence-series-customer-experience.pdf

[2] Zendesk, "Zendesk Customer Experience Trends Report 2020," 2020. URL Reference: https://d1eipm3vz40hy0.cloudfront.net/pdf/cxtrends/cx-trends-2020-full-report.pdf

Customer Service Peaks

Customer service peaks see a rise in inbound calls, emails, social media messages and overall demand. Some peaks are planned — such as holidays — while others result from a product or service issue or crisis. Sudden peaks require customer service teams to scramble, cobbling together staff and a unified response.

These peaks can mean stress for employees, a poor experience for customers and a drop in efficiency. When customer service departments can't handle an influx in queries, it can lead to longer wait times, poor handle ratios and, ultimately, customer abandonment and frustration.

Many industries — including airlines, utilities, retailers, e-commerce firms and others — are prone to seasonal and temporary peaks. To prepare, customer service leaders must forecast and develop staffing and response plans.

They can staff up by hiring in-house or outsourcing help. Both options have their pros and cons: Salaried employees are expensive and take time to onboard but can be retained and eventually become knowledgeable and effective. Outsourced call centers are cost efficient and flexible (billing by volume or hourly) and onboarding may be quicker, but they often lack an intimate understanding of your business.

Whether in-house or outsourced, new agents are human, and their skill and professionalism vary. Under pressure, they can make mistakes.

Automated customer service solutions can help. AI-enabled tools can foolproof the handling of customer queries and help agents be more effective and consistent. Customer service leaders can also advocate for AI tools that assist customers directly, such as chatbots or enhanced FAQs, allowing customers to get answers on their own and reducing the burden on live agents.

Email Fatigue

Customer service peaks often mean more phone calls. But nearly all customer service teams (90%) say they spend even more time managing email.[3] As the number of outstanding emails begins to pile up, response times start to lag. This can quickly become a problem, as most customers (88%) expect an email response from customer service within 60 minutes.[4]

90%

of organizations spend more time managing email than any other channel

88%

of customers expect a reply within an hour

[3] Statista, "Contact channels supported by customer services teams worldwide in 2023," December 2023. URL Reference: https://www.statista.com/statistics/1426565/customer-service-contact-channels-supported/
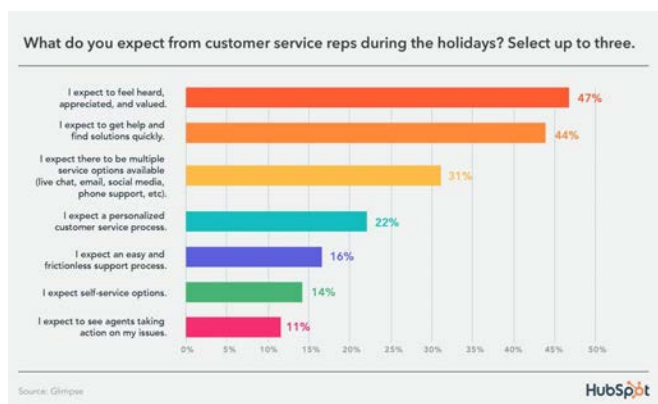[4] Gmelius, "How to Measure and Improve Your Email Response Times," August 2023. URL Reference: https://gmelius.com/blog/email-response-times

Meeting Customer Expectations

What makes a good customer experience? Speed, convenience and reliability rank high on the list. So, too, do experiences that feel personal.

According to a survey from PwC, nearly half (48%) of U.S. consumers define good customer service as friendly and welcoming. Meanwhile, an overwhelming majority (82%) of the top-performing companies report paying "close attention" to customer experience.[5]

What do you expect from customer service reps during the holidays?

What do you expect from customer service reps during the holidays? Select up to three.

- I expect to feel heard, appreciated, and valued. — 47%
- I expect to get help and find solutions quickly. — 44%
- I expect there to be multiple service options available (live chat, email, social media, phone support, etc). — 31%
- I expect a personalized customer service process. — 22%
- I expect an easy and frictionless support process. — 16%
- I expect self-service options. — 14%
- I expect to see agents taking action on my issues. — 11%
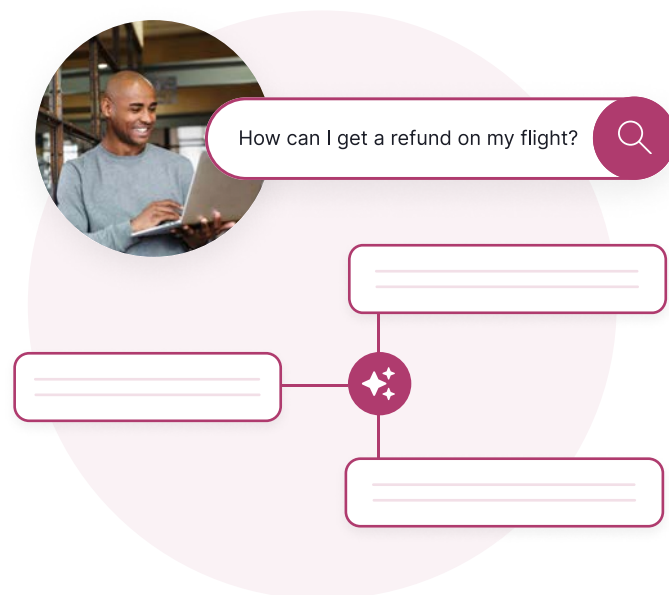
Source: Glimpse

HubSpot

Source: Glimpse

The benchmarks for customer service teams include customer satisfaction, NPS, churn, resolution rate, handle time and other metrics that measure customer service quality, effectiveness and efficiency.

Keeping KPIs high during peak periods can be difficult. Automating customer service interactions using AI is one way customer service leaders can provide a consistent experience and regular response times regardless of the number of inbound queries.

Generally, customer service questions fall into two categories: common and complex. While customers with complex questions or those that need additional support should have access to a live agent, the goal of AI-enabled customer service tools is to automate the most common questions and requests.

Common questions include how to reset a password, change account information, make a return or track a package.

By answering the most common questions with AI-powered self-service tools, leaders give their agents more time to deal with complex customer service issues. From a customer perspective, self-service options represent a major convenience, getting them answers whenever, wherever, faster.

How can I get a refund on my flight?

[5] "Experience Is Everything: Here's How to Get It Right," 2018. URL Reference: https://www.pwc.com/us/en/advisory-services/publications/consumer-intelligence-series/pwc-consumer-intelligence-series-customer-experience.pdf

Resolving Customer Questions, Requests with AI

Natural language AI-powered customer service tools such as chatbots, enhanced search features, FAQs and more give customers direct and convenient help. Natural language AI can also help live customer service agents generate responses, retrieve information and prioritize queues.

When used by both customers and agents, AI tools can not only reduce the number of inbound calls and emails that agents receive but improve the customer experience.

The key is leveraging natural language AI that is accurate, reliable and purpose-built for enterprise use cases. This is important: Introducing a tool that can autonomously engage customers and impact customer experience requires brands to pay close attention.

Chat
Answer Questions Automatically

For customers, chat tools are a gateway to customer service with zero wait time. Many customers, including 9 out of 10 Gen Z consumers, prefer this type of text-based conversation over picking up the phone.[6]

However, not all chat tools are created equal. Legacy bots act more like a waiting room, providing little help until a live agent can join the chat. Other chatbots give decision-tree-style responses, forcing customers to navigate a predetermined set of prompts — taking the "chat" out of chatbot. In both instances, customers are often left frustrated, with long wait times and wrong answers.

Especially during peak periods, the underlying technology that powers a chat tool is critical. Natural language AI bots (whether using Conversational AI, Generative AI or a composite of both) are more sophisticated and can understand the meaning and intent behind a user's query — not just a list of predetermined keywords and phrases. These natural language tools let companies engage customers in human-like, personalized conversations in multiple languages.

This is possible through the AI's ability to pull in, translate and process vast amounts of unstructured data from a company's materials. The result is a fast and accurate response, giving customers the answers they need without having to call or email customer service.

[6] CBS News, "Gen Z developing fear of phone calls, or "phone phobia"," August 2023. URL Reference: https://www.cbsnews.com/newyork/news/gen-z-developing-fear-of-phone-calls-or-phone-phobia/

Search
Help Customers Find Answers

Search is another area that can be radically improved with AI. While nearly all businesses have a search function on their website or app, the accuracy of search results can vary. A good search feature lets customers find what they're looking for, surface helpful content and look up a company's products and services with minimal effort.

During peak periods, search results can be modified based on the most common questions. For example, if there's an increase in customer queries around a particular product or situation, enhanced search can pre-populate search suggestions accordingly.

Important to any search engine is the ability to understand the context of queries, including the use of negatives, flexible words that can be either a noun or a verb, misspellings and other nuances of language. An enhanced search feature should also be able to interpret long-tail queries that read like a complete sentence rather than a short question or group of keywords. And it should be able to detect language preferences and provide content in the customer's native language.

Search features that rely on keywords can't accurately respond to these kinds of queries, resulting in a broken search experience. By contrast, search powered by natural language AI can understand the intent of queries and find the best response from the library of content a company has available. It means accurate search results, less reliance on agent support and a better customer experience.

Centralized Ticketing
Organize, Respond to Customer Queries Across Platforms

Different customers have different preferences for contacting customer service. According to survey data, Baby Boomers prefer phone conversations while Millennials prefer email.[7] Social media is also a popular channel for contacting customer service teams.

When customers don't get a response fast enough on one channel (such as email or phone) they are likely to move to another (social media).

Customer service teams need an intelligent way to review, prioritize and respond to customer tickets in a unified way, particularly during peak periods. A centralized case management and ticketing system that leverages AI to manage and draft responses can achieve this.

By converting email, social media, online form submissions and more into a single, manageable queue and using Generative AI and/or Conversational AI to draft responses and identify helpful content, customer service teams can improve the speed and quality of their work. Natural language AI can also detect sentiment and severity, helping customer service teams prioritize more sensitive or complex queries.

[7] Hubspot, "How to Create a Great Service Experience for Each Generation," 2023. URL Reference: https://blog.hubspot.com/service/generational-preferences-for-service

About Inbenta

Inbenta is a leading provider of Conversational AI solutions that let businesses seamlessly engage with their customers and their workforce. With advanced AI technologies, including Generative AI, Inbenta delivers real-time, interactive responses that enhance the user experience.

Inbenta is headquartered in Dallas, TX, with regional offices in the U.S., UK, Canada, Europe, Brazil and Japan. More than 1,000 global brands across industries, uses cases and markets use the Inbenta platform. Backed by decades of experience and expertise in artificial intelligence, Inbenta continues to redefine the way businesses connect and communicate with their customers.

Our Products

Chat
Automated conversations with human-like touch and superhuman accuracy.

Assist
Equips human agents with the power of multi-touch digital workflows, real-time escalation, voice, video and more.

Search
A predictive, intent-based search experience that drives self-service and customer satisfaction.

Knowledge
An AI-enabled knowledge base that saves you time and serves your customers the information they need.

Learn
Product videos and click-through tutorials that help your customers find answers autonomously.

Transform your customer experience with AI.

Schedule a demo