

Want to improve customer service? Robots should enable humans, not replace them

Companies today have a customer service problem, and fixing it is more complicated than flashing an eager smile. Consumer-facing businesses, especially, are grappling with how best to meet the fickle expectations of real people in an increasingly automated, digital world.

At the center of the issue are automated customer service systems (also called “virtual agents”) – software programs designed to help customers answer questions, perform basic tasks, or solve problems without talking to an actual person. We’ve all used them, and in many cases they work great. By answering a few questions from a computer with a friendly voice, you can pay your bill, order a new service, reset your password, process a return, or complete dozens of other tasks, without having to “hold for the next available representative.”

But despite the fact that virtual agents become more lifelike and sophisticated every year, most customers still aren’t satisfied. In fact, in an NTT DATA survey of 1,240 consumers and 103 business executives, an overwhelming 94 percent of consumers said they’d prefer to speak to a live customer service agent over a machine, even if it means waiting a little longer. Only nine percent of consumers said they “trust” virtual agents, and only 42 percent said they had experienced “good” virtual agents in the past.

Suffice it to say, the average consumers’ relationship with customer service automation could be called dysfunctional, at best. And therein lies the rub: Companies are making big investments in automation to give customers the speedy service they expect in today’s on-demand world, yet customers still say they want the deeper problem-solving abilities and personal touch that only a live agent can provide.

For companies concerned with customer satisfaction, it seems like a no-win situation. But a closer look at the survey results reveals some reasons for optimism.

Quality is priority number one

One of the key takeaways from the NTT DATA survey is that a perception gap exists between businesses and consumers in the way they view the value of virtual agents. Generally, more business executives believe consumers prioritize speed over accuracy in customer service, whereas consumers say it’s more important that their questions are answered correctly the first time.

Perhaps the most telling statistic in support of that point: 76 percent of consumers would prefer a live agent with a higher chance of solving the problem, even if it takes 15 minutes; whereas only 26 percent would choose a virtual agent that *might* be able to solve their problem in just two minutes.

This tells us that while consumers certainly don't want to be on hold all day, they're willing to be patient to work with a knowledgeable agent who can get them squared away. After all, there's nothing more frustrating than getting stuck in a maze of telephone prompts when you've thrown the virtual agent for a loop.

Ultimately, it seems the winning customer service combination is equal parts speed and precision, and the means for companies to achieve that balance may be well within their reach.

A partnership in problem-solving

If you're thinking the solution is to do away with virtual agents altogether, think again. Customer service automation is here to stay. The efficiencies of automation (both in reducing costs and improving service) are just too great. Moreover, the segment of consumers who actually prefer working with virtual agents is growing. With the exploding popularity of Siri, Alexa and Google Home, people are only going to get more comfortable interacting with machines.

Nonetheless, for the foreseeable future the human element of customer service will remain unexpendable. But companies need to rethink the process of how their customers get from question to resolution, and thereby turn potentially frustrating situations into customer service victories. In the most likely scenario, it will involve the strategically orchestrated interplay between virtual agents and live ones – machines and people working in tandem to create a better customer experience than either could have accomplished alone. Not robots vs. humans; robots empowering humans.

That's where all of this is heading, and the companies that bring the vision to life the fastest will be the ones that win consumers' trust.

In more practical terms, winning the customer service war requires doing the hard work to better understand your customers, rewrite the automation technology roadmap, and manage change among employees. Most importantly, it takes a visible and vocal commitment from IT leadership to champion the cause.