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Crisis in the Contact Center

How to Apply What COVID-19 Taught Us

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It's nearly once in a lifetime that virtually every industry, marketplace, and business throughout the world can be simultaneously affected by the same situation. The COVID-19 crisis has been one of these rare shared experiences. Even more common than the weather, the pandemic has become one of those topics we've all discussed with coworkers, colleagues, and clients no matter where we work or live.

We've seen it affect our clients and their customers in special and sometimes surprising ways. But there's always a silver lining, and we've learned much from these experiences that we'll be sharing with you here.

The insights you'll read here are the combination of conversations with clients and our insight gained with others in our industry. You'll see our direct commentary throughout, adding specific color to this unique time in history.

Sir Winston Churchill advised to never waste a crisis. So, here's what we've learned over the past year and how we believe it changed our marketplace forever. This past crisis gives all of us an opportunity to learn from it so we can be better prepared for the next unpredictable event sure to come our way.

Best,

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The Effects

The contact center and customer experience

The years 2020 and 2021 have not merely been tough—they've been challenging in complexly unique ways. This is because so many market forces converged on the customer experience (CX) industry all at once.

Increased customer volume

The sheer amount of customers contacting brands during the crisis was overwhelming for many of our clients and the marketplace in general. Contact and call volumes rose exponentially for many brands. In some cases the increase quite literally happened overnight.

Increased issue complexity

The issues customers brought were also more complex than average issues. They were asking questions brands did not yet have answers for. They had expectations that just couldn't be fulfilled within normal resolution models.

Increased number of issues to solve on a single call

Issues were not only more complex; they were compounded. Once customers were able to get through to an agent, they felt they must attempt to resolve as many issues at once, fearing they wouldn't easily get another chance.

Decreased agent capacity

In the midst of this rise in outreach from customers, brands found themselves with empty offices. Agents attempted to work from home while being hampered by contact center systems that simply were not designed for remote capabilities.

Decreased service capacity

Resolutions for customers were often just not possible. Interruptions in supply chains, overwhelmed departments, and general uncertainty often made serving customers a confounding challenge.

A hold time apocalypse

Hold time estimations increased exponentially in mere days for many of our clients. Services that routinely experienced average peak hold times of 15 minutes expanded to 60 minutes or more. We even witnessed fringe cases of four, 10, and even more than 24 hours of hold time for those in the travel industry. In some cases the telephony systems themselves weren't able to serve the volume.

Volumes also increased due to anxious customers contacting brands multiple times through several channels in an attempt to solve a single issue. The already painfully high volumes were exacerbated by the onslaught of attempts.

> **"The calls became more complex immediately. Callers were trying to solve every issue they had. They were looking for a conversation, not just a transaction."**
> **— Tom DeCarlo**

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Different industries, different experiences

Travel and tourism

In March of 2020 we saw contact volumes hockey stick upward to truly never-before-seen levels as customers attempted to cancel travel plans and request refunds. These surges then dropped almost as quickly as they rose once demand for travel became drastically de-prioritized.

This left the travel industry with the challenge of attempting to adapt from one extreme to the other, throwing standard operating procedures in disarray.

Finance

The finance and banking industry saw some gradual surges with peaks caused by the PPP loans and other financial assistance offered by the CARES Act. For many, contact volume plateaued and remained higher than average. But virtually all business previously conducted in person was now shifted to voice or video calls.

Retail

As retail outlets shifted their activities to online sales and services, contact volumes increased due to two main factors: First, previously in-store business now had to be conducted online or through voice channels. Second, all service agents effectively became sales support agents (while still needing to fulfill their original service roles).

Each of these industries had to navigate these surges and drops in contact volume while transitioning their workforce to remote environments. This became especially hard for those with activities that relied on face-to-face contact.

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What We've Learned

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The change is permanent.

Your brand may be one of the many that felt like they had to transition from the Flintstones to the Jetsons in a matter of days. One of the main transitions this CX crisis accelerated was the adoption of cloud-based platforms. PWC estimates that spending on cloud infrastructure rose 19% for 2020.[1]

Digital transformation was important—now it's essential.

Companies already in the process of a migration or handling a hybrid environment found they had to move to a nearly unrestricted adoption of cloud-based SaaS platforms to enable work-from-home activities. Brands without a plan to transition to cloud-based environments found themselves quickly left behind.

Those brands that are "in the cloud" now won't be going back. Any accelerations or completed transitions are here to stay. The risk of premise-based telephony and other support systems has been laid bare.

Departmental boundaries have also blurred. Especially in the retail sector, queues usually focused on service or help desk activities found themselves assisting with sales activities. And the customers needing sales help often blended into needing shipping, returns, and even item selection assistance. Customers became even more unconcerned with the intended role of the service agent helping them. Whether contacting through voice, chat, email, or even text, customers were wary of wasting their opportunity to solve their purchase problems.

This has pushed some brands to think less in a "not my job" mentality and adopt a more "it's all our job" approach. Even if an agent isn't equipped to help a customer's issue, the customer expects their conversation to continue as seamlessly as possible.

Blending one part in-office, one part remote

This transition to a work-from-home environment has had pronounced challenges—but its necessity can't be ignored. The accelerated transition positioned brands ready for a move to cloud in stark contrast to those who weren't. Even just the lack of a proper VPN connection crippled many contact centers during a period when contact volumes were unheard of.

While many brands implemented systems to fill the gap—sometimes literally overnight—they now realize the need to formalize this transition and make it permanent. More than just new technology, brands must update their training, security procedures, and workforce management tactics.

While having systems that promote flexibility used to be a nice-to-have, it has quickly become essential.

And, those that are still resisting the WFH and cloud-based transition put themselves at risk to be surpassed by competitors for CX ratings and even business growth.

"One thing COVID has done, if you really want to look at the positive side, was it pushed brands into the new technology.

When you take a step back you see they had to allow their agents to work from home; this actually produced a benefit. They've learned that people can be virtual, which means they've opened up their workforce to more than just the cities they have brick and mortar in. It's an evolution."

— Tom DeCarlo

Customer in control: The new SOP

The next trends are being determined by customers and their reset exceptions for CX. Here are some of the top trends that became core expectations during 2020:

Click-to-call

Smartphone use has only gone up during the recent quarantine period[2]. Because of this, customers may be even more likely to use a voice line in some cases due to click-to-call capabilities inherent with most smartphone operating systems. If they need service, and a smartphone is in hand, then calling is a no-brainer for many.

SMS text notifications

Customers have been ready to add texting with brands for several years now and are merely waiting for the brands to catch up with this CX expectation[3]. The WFH environment actually increases the expectation by customers that a brand will meet them where they are on their channel of choice. Many may have resisted contacting brands during business hours in an office setting. But a WFH environment opens them up to much more asynchronous communication over text with family, friends—and yes, even brands.

Callback as the ~~first~~ only choice

One CX approach we noticed evolving adoption for is offering callback at the front of the IVR. At VHT, one of our clients,

A Mindful experience

At VHT, we know that callers have a much longer threshold for waiting when getting a callback than when waiting on hold. But our CTDOL experience exposed that this patience can extend to days rather than just minutes once the customer feels like they're in control again.

This means using a full callback experience —complete with voice callback offerings, automated text notifications, and web-based scheduling—makes workforce management more efficient and your CX more effective.

> **Read the full Case Study**

Connecticut Department of Labor (CTDOL), call volume from citizens applying for unemployment increased exponentially in just a few weeks weeks. Reporting hours-long hold times only encouraged callers to hang up and call again later, sometimes dozens of (or even more) times a day.

Rather than even offering callers the hold time, **CTDOL refined call options only to those scheduled through Mindful, eliminating 40% of repeat calls and ensuring predictability for their employees and the public they were serving.** The number of citizens needing help may not have decreased, but the call volume dropped once the callers had a predictable time they knew their needs would be addressed—even if it was days in the future.

Conversational AI becomes a core need

The adoption of AI-powered chatbots and even IVR systems has been increasing steadily over recent years. But recent advancements and customer adoption make this capability essential for brands moving forward.

The more routine issues that can be solved through AI-powered conversations with customers, the more live agents get to address the complex issues.

A smarter text channel

Most of the current experiences in AI have routinely been offered in the chatbot or voice channels. For VHT, our own advancements in AI-powered conversations in the SMS text channel make this tactic more customer centered and accessible. This "agentless" form of conversation and issue resolution can solve common customer needs to allow live agents to connect with customers who need that personal attention.

A "warm" approach in the midst of distance

Retail wasn't the only industry affected by the lack of in-person connections. The financial services industry found itself needing to replicate an approach that was as personal as possible. Clients used to discussing complex financial and

investment plans in person needed a way to continue this experience.

Escalating to a more labor- and time-intensive contact experience isn't always necessary though. Merely giving the customer multiple options for contact puts control in their hands. They may not choose the more hands-on channel (e.g. a voice call or video call) as long as they know the option is there if they need it.

Just making sure they have a predictable method to have a voice conversation puts customers more at ease and willing to attempt other channels first.

> In these times of isolation, we found that many customers felt the need to have a true conversation about issues that may have merely been transactional before. Finding ways to give them more of a feeling of control makes for a better CX overall.
>
> -Tom DeCarlo

Can a bad crisis still produce good results?

The short answer: Yes. And we've seen this through real results with clients. Though to best understand why, let's dispel a common myth first.

Call deflection doesn't help brands.

While deflecting voice calls can seem to reduce call volumes and workloads in the short term, the damage to the predictability of contact volumes and customer sentiment makes the tactic not worth the trouble.

Deflection doesn't really reduce costs. Customers typically call back at a later time or attempt other contact methods, increasing the overall effort from the brand. Infrastructure costs go up and customer sentiment scores go down.

Times of stress actually increase loyalty.

It's not that we should look forward to the next crisis. But, we should recognize that when customers find themselves in times of uncertainty, **it's an opportunity for brands to gain even more loyalty from them than during regular times.**

Serving a customer well in normal times merely fulfills their expectations. Serving them well in the midst of anxious times feels like being rescued.

Whether a crisis is affecting the world, a region, or just an individual, allowing customers to feel more comforted and in control makes for smoother communication that requires less effort and cost. Plus, it produces even more positive customer reactions.

And this is why a platform like Mindful has such a positive effect on the CX and opinions of customers. Services like callback, automated text messages, and web-based call scheduling may seem like technology geared to helping the contact center. In reality, Mindful is a technology platform geared toward helping the customer, the end user. By keeping your customers feeling like their concerns are being met in the channels and timing that meets them where they are, we can both decrease costs and increase growth for brands.

Lockdown will leave, changes will stay.

As of publication, our world is heading toward a more open, safer time that resembles our experience before the COVID-19 pandemic. And even though we'll move past the worst times of 2020, the new normal won't be a return to the old normal. Customers' expectations have changed. Our marketplaces have changed. The world has changed. There's only going forward.

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by vht

Mindful is a CX platform built to adapt to 2020-type situations. Its fast implementation and multi-channel integration make it just as ready for the next crisis as it is for day-to-day customer needs. No one knows what the next event will be— but we do know that Mindful is ready for whatever the future brings.

Learn more

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Sources

[1] PWC: Can you meet customer demand for cloud-based computing?

[2] Forbes: Mobile Phone Use Surges During COVID-19 Lockdown

[3] eWeek: Consumers Like Using Text Messages to Solve Customer Service Issues

More than 25 years ago VHT invented callback technology—and has been perfecting it ever since.

Today VHT continues to improve the customer experience with Mindful: a cloud-based platform created to integrate callback technology with other voice, text, chatbot, and CX platforms to allow seamless transitions between talk and text with your customers.

> Get in touch with our team to learn more

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