Accenture Song

Customer service on the brink
Course correct now for future growth

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Introduction

Customer service is at a breaking point. People have rarely been more displeased, and the implications for companies are grim. The vast majority (87%) of respondents in Accenture's recent global survey of more than 7,000 customers said that just a single bad customer service experience can completely deter them from a brand. Meanwhile, nearly two-thirds of people were left feeling frustrated or annoyed after at least one recent service interaction.

Our research reveals why service is failing to satisfy. Companies have prioritized investing in technologies to reduce costs and improve operational efficiency, with little focus on the customer experience.

The number of executives who say that their service departments primarily exist to create value for customers has dropped by 60%, since Accenture's last customer service report in 2022.[1]

Some solutions are falling short. **Fewer than one-fifth of the consumers we surveyed said that technology had significantly improved their customer service experiences.** Often, they told us, more technology is making their experiences worse. And as companies streamline, customers feel they have to do more to get things resolved.

"It is becoming more work to be a customer."

Gen Z, USA

More than half of the 2,400 customer-focused senior executives surveyed for this report say they are balancing cost reduction against customer satisfaction, treating it as an unavoidable trade-off. But that compromise is no longer necessary. Investing in technology, data and AI—particularly generative AI (gen AI)—can deliver efficiencies, lower costs and improve customer satisfaction. The opportunity is here to reinvent service in a way that benefits both businesses and customers.

In this report, we draw on our research and client work to identify three essential actions that all companies can take to turn customer service into a competitive advantage.

1. Personalize every interaction to build trust
2. Predict and proactively solve customer needs
3. Power collaboration by putting service at the center

For 64% of customers, service quality is the single most important factor that sets companies apart. Get it wrong, and drive customers away. Get it right, and you can build lifelong loyalty.

That's the power of customer service.

Research snapshot

The research conducted for this report combined quantitative and qualitative methods, spanning executive views and consumer insights, to provide a global perspective on the current state of customer service, as well as its future potential. All research was completed in October 2024.

- 7,143 consumers in six countries.

- 2,400 customer service-focused senior executives in 13 countries and spanning 10 industries.

- 150 individuals in the US and UK, in focus groups and short video interviews. Some of their quotes that appear in this report have been lightly edited for clarity.[2]

For full details, please see page 31.

Service is failing customers

Browse social media these days and it's virtually impossible not to stumble on a complaint about poor customer service. "Having serious issues locating the company's parcel on its way to me," states a customer in one review posted on social media in January 2025.

"It's impossible to speak to a human on the phone and the chat is completely automated. I will never use this company again... Just putting it out there. Avoid them and avoid the stress that comes with using them if things go wrong."

Customer service is delivered at every touchpoint, from browsing a webpage to visiting a store. It is also the "first responder" to people's calls for help. For these reasons, it's a vital differentiator for many businesses. When we recently surveyed thousands of consumers around the world, 64% said that service quality is the single most important factor separating one company from another.

The same survey, however, found that just 32% of customers think that the quality of service has, on average, improved over the past five years.

People have come to expect long wait times and convoluted processes, with no guarantee of a satisfactory solution.

Customers are also increasingly impatient with brands that get it wrong, with serious consequences for the companies that cause offense.[3] Our research, for instance, revealed that a solid majority of customers (61% of survey respondents) reported feeling frustrated and annoyed after at least one poor customer service experience in the past 12 months. Meanwhile, an overwhelming majority of customers (87% of respondents) who recently had a single negative service experience said they would likely avoid the offending company in the future.

Where customer service has gone wrong

During and just after the pandemic, many customer service functions were streamlined, deprioritized and forced to do more with less. Companies defaulted to an ad-hoc "survival mindset" approach to service provision that often solved for the enterprise ahead of the customer. And more recently, companies have been ramping up their investments in the function, for example adopting new technologies, such as AI assistants. However, this investment doesn't seem to be benefiting customers.

There appears to be two broad reasons why that's the case. First, companies are layering technologies into the customer experience in ways that inadvertently put more of a burden on the customer than ever before. For example, our focus groups consistently complained about their dealings with automated tools such as interactive voice response (IVR)

systems, self-service apps and chatbots, saying those interactions were frustrating and led to ineffective outcomes. "The chatbots are useless," said one of our interviewees, a gen Z-er from the UK. "The AI doesn't understand my requests, and loading websites is a nightmare."

Second, companies appear to be missing opportunities with their technology, data and AI. On the face of it, technology solutions are causing customer aggravation. But the real issue we uncovered is that it's more the integration of technology with data and AI that is falling short. Customers know companies have data about them and expect them to use it for their benefit—and they're wondering why this isn't happening.

Only

18%

of people said technology had significantly improved their service experiences.
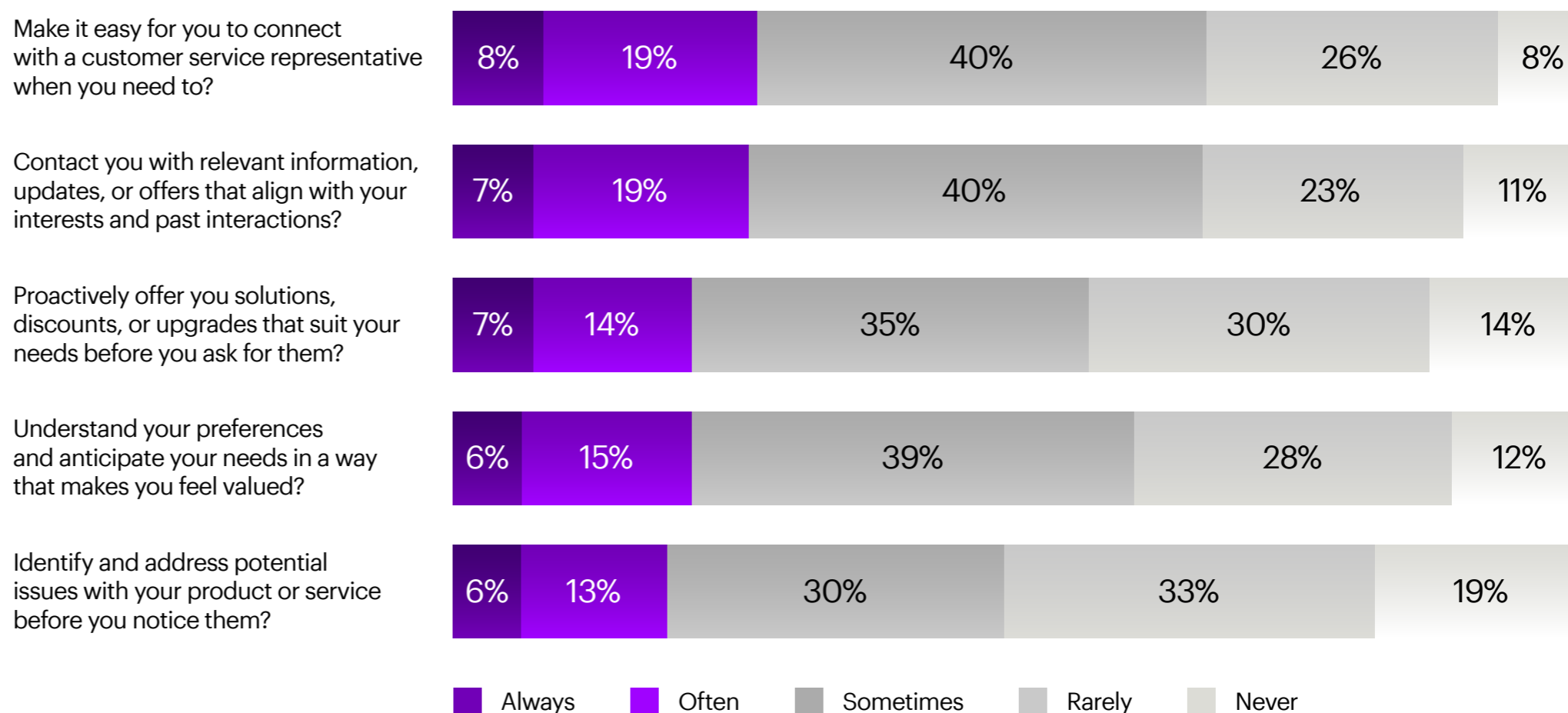
Many of our focus-group participants told us they could pinpoint exactly what companies should be doing, but aren't. "Every time my contract [with my telecoms provider] comes to an end, I have to ring and negotiate to bring the price back to a level I'm happy with," said one millennial in the UK. "I feel I should be rewarded for loyalty by staying with them – so they should [automatically] adjust the price of the contract to the same or close to the amount that I previously paid." And, then, she added, "I don't want to waste time with customer service. Why can't they send a calendar invite so I know when the price is likely to change, and then I can receive a push notification or something just stating, 'this is the new price, if you're happy click yes,' and then be done with it?"

Figure 1 highlights how only a small minority of companies consistently do things like predictively "identity and address potential issues" before customers notice them, "proactively offer solutions" and "contact customers with useful information."

Service or disservice? What customers told us about their interactions with companies

Think about your experience with various brands, how often, if at all, do you feel that companies;

	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Make it easy for you to connect with a customer service representative when you need to?	8%	19%	40%	26%	8%
Contact you with relevant information, updates, or offers that align with your interests and past interactions?	7%	19%	40%	23%	11%
Proactively offer you solutions, discounts, or upgrades that suit your needs before you ask for them?	7%	14%	35%	30%	14%
Understand your preferences and anticipate your needs in a way that makes you feel valued?	6%	15%	39%	28%	12%
Identify and address potential issues with your product or service before you notice them?	6%	13%	30%	33%	19%

■ Always ■ Often ■ Sometimes ■ Rarely ■ Never

Source: Accenture consumer survey, October 2024, for Customer service on the brink report

The underlying cause of all this dissatisfaction and missed opportunity? Misaligned business priorities. Companies tend to overemphasize operational efficiency and cost savings at the expense of high-quality service. In fact, since Accenture's last customer service report in 2022, the number of executives who say that their service departments primarily exist to create value for customers has plunged by 60%.[4] Also, a significant majority of executives (64%) told us they're actively making trade-offs between cost efficiency and customer satisfaction. And as a result, customers are investing more of themselves than they believe they should to get what they want and need. The next page explores this idea in more detail.
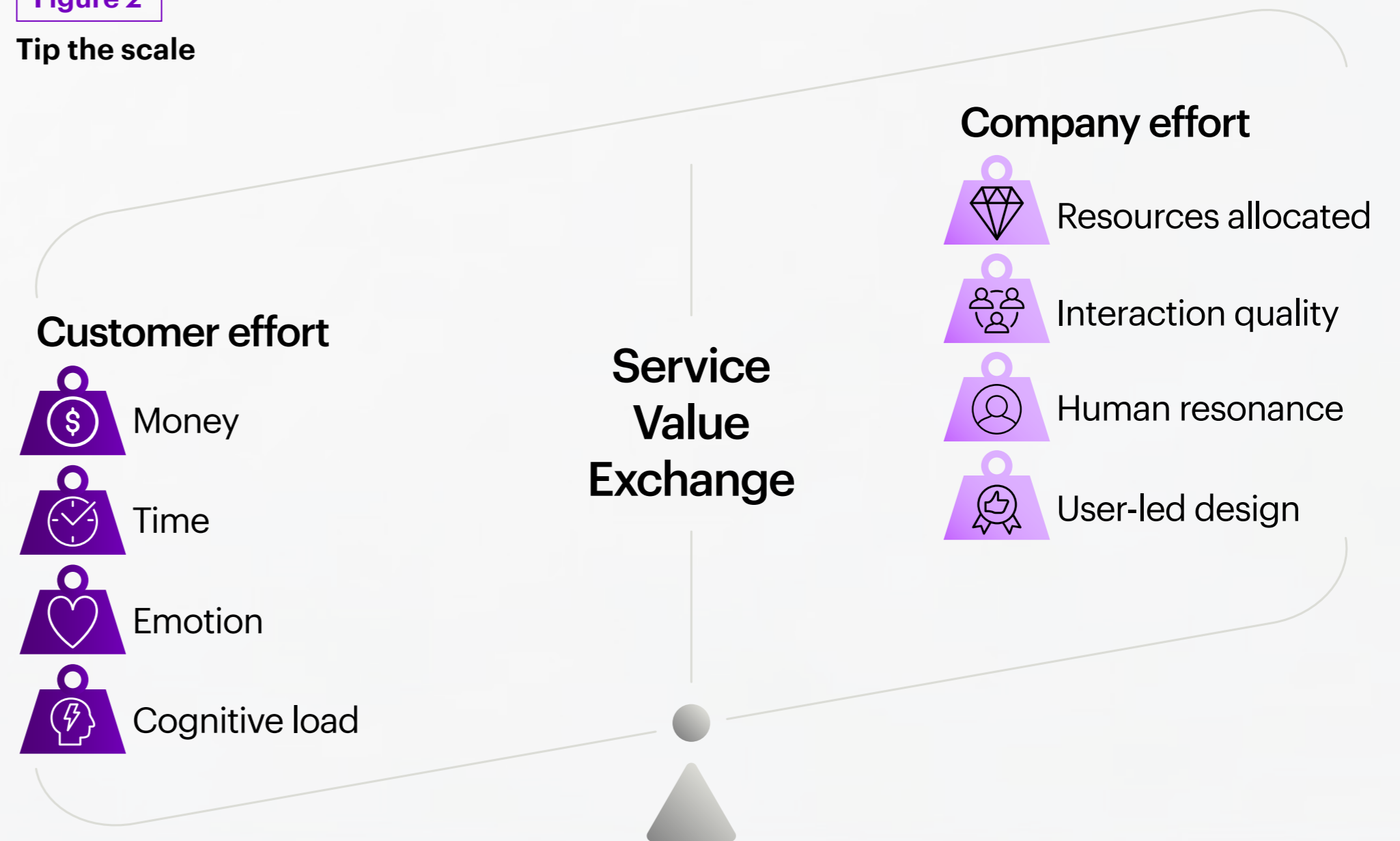
The customer ⇆ company investment exchange

Figure 2

Tip the scale

All service interactions require investment— of money, time and emotional energy—from customer and company alike. "Customer value" is the perceived benefits a customer receives from a company during an interaction. High customer value is achieved when the benefits (such as quality, convenience and emotional resonance) are greater than the total costs associated with the interaction. By reducing the effort they invest, the outcomes from customer purchases can be maximized. High customer value, in turn, boosts customers' satisfaction with, and loyalty to, a company.

Company effort

- Resources allocated
- Interaction quality
- Human resonance
- User-led design

Customer effort

- Money
- Time
- Emotion
- Cognitive load

Service Value Exchange

Of the thousands of customer service-focused senior executives we recently surveyed, 46% said their primary concern is controlling costs. On this front, many companies are succeeding: Nearly two-thirds of respondents (62%) reported having successfully trimmed their respective organizations' operating costs over the past three years. That said, only 45% of executives also say that customer retention improved over the same period. The harsh reality is you can't cost cut your way to sustainable growth. Cost reduction should be the consequence of better service, not the driver.

Executives' top five roadblocks to customer service quality:

1. Underperforming self-service/digital channels
2. Insufficient data and insights
3. Inability to fully measure the value of customer service
4. Inadequate technology
5. Highly complex products and/or services.

> Prioritizing business efficiency over customer satisfaction is no longer a necessary compromise.

How generative
AI can transform
customer service

The potential for gen AI to transform customer service is unlike anything we've seen before. Accenture's research on reinvention readiness ranks customer service among the top five priority functions when it comes to gen AI use cases—second only to IT security for high-value use cases.[5] When applied effectively, generative AI can transform the economics of service and yield game-changing value for customers.

The work of customer service agents is particularly primed for reinvention. Previous research by Accenture found that 65% of agents' working hours are, on average, spent on tasks that could be automated or augmented by gen AI (Figure 3).[6] This shift has the potential to free up significant time and resources, enabling agents to focus on more complex, high-value interactions.

The opportunity is significant. As functions are reinvented and manual effort is reduced, roles shift from task execution to advisory work. Agents gain access to richer context and hyper-personalized recommendations, enabling them to move beyond troubleshooting and instead help customers maximize the value of their products or services.

Moreover, employees themselves are primed to expect and even welcome the change. A large majority (87%) of service employees feel at least somewhat, if not very, prepared for technological disruption and change, according to another recent Accenture study.[7]

Figure 3

Service with an AI smile
Percentage of working hours spent on tasks open to automation or augmentation with generative AI

65%
Customer Service Agents

90%
Travel Agents

93%
Bank Tellers

Source: Lightcast; Accenture Research 2023, Generative AI Workforce Model

Likewise, the executives we surveyed anticipate that automation of employee tasks (those required to serve customers) will grow 48% over the next three years, while the number of "customer tasks" (those that involve the use of self-service tools) suitable for automation will grow by 39%.

These moves stand to improve efficiency and reduce costs, but they need to do more. They must create value and satisfaction for customers—saving them time and effort while delivering a superior experience.

These are still the early days of gen AI, and a large number of companies (more than half, according to our survey) have yet to integrate gen AI in customer service beyond experimental pilots. But there's not much time to get this right. The gap between market leaders and followers in terms of service quality and customer satisfaction will widen fast, and it will be difficult to close.

The majority of the executives in our survey (61%) agree that as companies introduce gen AI into customer service, those that do it well will pull away from the rest quickly.

What do customers want?

People, in droves, say they prefer dealing with people. They certainly did so in our surveys and interviews. More than three-quarters (78%) of customers told us they prefer direct interaction with a customer service agent; 33% of respondents even said that dealing with a human employee is essential to resolve any problem effectively.

And yet they also express great frustration with person-to-person interactions. Agents don't always receive adequate training. Sometimes, customer service reps lack the authority to solve out-of-the-box problems. As one millennial from the UK told us, "Even when you get a human, you can often tell they're just reading off a script... There's is no personality and nothing tailored to your query."

So is it possible that people say they prefer dealing with people because they see so few possibilities to get what they want and need through any other means? Our findings indicate that's the case.

A Gartner research study found that just 14% of customer interactions with chatbots, virtual assistants and other self-service tools result in a satisfactory resolution.[8]

"Getting a chatbot to work is like winning the lottery."

Millennial, UK

Yet, our findings revealed nearly half (49%) of customer interactions are now handled via self-service tools on the website or a mobile phone app or via a virtual assistant or chatbot. A solid number of customers (35%) also said they're concerned that AI will further reduce the quality of customer service in the coming years.

Generational differences in attitudes toward self-service tools do exist. Our research finds people aged 55 and over are most likely to prefer human interaction—and the younger people are, the more open they tend to be to different channels. But interestingly, even among the youngest demographic (18 to 24), just 29% said they actually prefer to use self-service tools. Interviewees of all ages also told us about their personal "hacks" for bypassing convoluted IVR systems, to speak to human agents faster.

What do customers want, at the core? Our findings lead us again and again to the same three words. People want **effective** service—they want the service experience to be easy and timely, and they want it to resolve their issue. They want **empathetic** service—one that is delivered in a way that shows the customer that the company cares, understands the impact the situation is having on their personal or professional life and is willing to hear their point of view. And they want **empowering** service—they want to feel well-educated by the company about how to get full value from their product and services, and that the company enables them to address their needs via their channel of choice and without human assistance.

Three actions to power up customer service for growth

Unhappiness with customer service may be rising, but it's hardly a recent phenomenon. "You didn't do what you promised me!" said Nanni, a copper buyer, to Ea-nāṣir, a Mesopotamian merchant, in 1750 BC. "What do you take me for? Why do you treat somebody like me with such contempt? I shall exercise against you my right of rejection!"[9]

Preserved for posterity on a clay tablet, the frustrations expressed in one of history's earliest recorded customer complaints will be all too familiar to modern consumers. Yet what is new today is that businesses have access to both the technological capabilities and proven strategies to finally fix customer service.

How can a company use technology, data and AI to make its service effective, empathetic and empowering as rapidly as possible? Our research and our client experience point to three essential actions.

Action 1

Personalize every interaction to build trust

Action 2

Predict and proactively solve customer needs

Action 3

Power collaboration by putting service at the center

Action 1

Personalize every interaction to build trust

Self-service tools should do more than complete tasks—they should feel intuitive, responsive and genuinely helpful, like a great customer conversation. AI makes this possible.

For example, a customer making a warranty claim could instantly access their purchase history and terms by effortlessly scanning a barcode or uploading a photo to a company's web portal, then be guided through the remaining steps by a friendly AI agent. But AI-powered service shouldn't stop at self-service.

To create truly tailored support conversations, human agents need real-time insights and intelligent recommendations so they can guide customers more effectively and suggest relevant products or services. With the right tools, agents shift from simply resolving issues to strengthening relationships and delivering real value.

This shift explains why companies with the strongest customer service outcomes are 82% more likely than their lagging competitors to use gen AI to help agents resolve issues faster and more effectively.[10] They're also 50% more inclined to use gen AI to resolve problems in real-time—and 87% more likely to deploy the technology to personalize digital channels.

What business leaders can do:

- Redesign customer journeys by mapping real interactions, not idealized flows. Analyze where customers get stuck, where data silos cause repetition and where self-service fails to meet real needs. Refine AI to recognize intent and personalize digital touchpoints based on past behavior. Assign a cross-functional team to own and continuously refine the end-to-end experience.

- Enhance self-service tools with AI so they can adapt to individual needs. This requires a unified data architecture capable of processing inquiries across all channels in real time, analyzing sentiment and tracking customer journey history. Make use of agentic AI architectures where multiple AI agents collaborate to deliver faster, more personalized support autonomously.

- Equip service agents with real-time insights by integrating generative AI tools that suggest next-best actions and personalized solutions during interactions—moving beyond generic service scripts to truly relevant, dynamic conversations. Upskill and reskill service teams to effectively work with AI-powered tools, embedding continuous learning initiatives into the AI strategy.

"A live system that's available 24/7 would be perfect. And if the system's funny and charming while helping, that's even better. Make the experience enjoyable, so you actually want to come back."

Gen X, UK

Case study

Using gen AI to deliver convenient, personalized customer support

Best Buy is using the latest technology innovations to go beyond customer issue resolution. The US retail giant is enhancing the experience for both customers and employees with personalized gen AI tools that solve real human needs.

A new gen AI-powered virtual assistant offers self-service support across Best Buy's customer support channels. Customers can quickly troubleshoot product issues, adjust delivery schedules and manage subscriptions.

If customers still want to chat with a real person to get the support they need, no problem! The virtual assistant connects them to one of Best Buy's thousands of care agents who will be equipped with gen AI tools to solve customer queries faster. These tools will analyze conversations in real time, detecting sentiment and providing relevant recommendations. They also use call data to help agents predict similar issues in the future. This streamlines the resolution process and enhances customer engagement.

Other tools automate routine tasks like navigating knowledge bases, allowing agents to focus on understanding and empathizing with customers—enhancing both productivity and job satisfaction.

With gen AI at scale, Best Buy is transforming its customer support—combining convenience, efficiency, flexibility and personalization for a service that's both technologically advanced and deeply human.

Action 2

Predict and proactively solve customer needs

Companies with the best customer outcomes use data to be proactive and predictive—turning service into a competitive advantage. They're 48% more likely than those with the poorest service outcomes to invest heavily in generative AI to improve predictions. Yet, despite this potential, just 14% of executives we surveyed said their companies regularly use data-generated insights to improve customer service.

Patterns in customer behavior build a more intelligent, real-time view of customer experiences. With this foundation, AI-powered solutions move service beyond issue resolution—predicting problems, enabling preemptive fixes and dynamically adjusting recommendations based on real-time usage patterns. Instead of reacting to customer pain points, businesses create proactive service experiences that feel effortless.

What business leaders can do:

- Identify high-volume, complex service issues that could be predicted and resolved before they escalate, using AI-driven analytics. Automate proactive interventions, such as notifying customers about potential issues before they occur or offering preemptive solutions.

- Expand data sources beyond traditional service records to include behavioral, operational and third-party data for a fuller picture of potential customer interactions. Through this, companies can better understand customers' preferences and behaviors, and use these insights to shape every decision and maximize the value of each interaction.

- Ensure AI-powered predictions are explainable and accountable, so customers trust proactive service interventions. A formal responsible AI program should be established to test AI for fairness, accuracy and transparency before deployment.

"[My comms provider] contacted me with an offer to upgrade to faster broadband for less money. At first, I thought it was a scam. But they'd actually analyzed my household usage and realized I needed a better package. It was proactive, thoughtful, and saved me money. I was very impressed!"

Gen X, UK

Action 3

Power collaboration by putting service at the center

Even in a hyper-connected world, customer service often remains siloed, leading to fragmented processes, inconsistent messaging and gaps in the customer journey. It's time to rethink service—not just as a support function, but as a **Customer Insights Hub**, where every interaction not only resolves an issue but generates valuable intelligence.

Until now, much of this insight has been overlooked or undocumented. Gen AI changes that. With its ability to rapidly process unstructured data, it uncovers patterns, deepens understanding of customer behaviors and needs and enables businesses to act with greater precision.

High-performing organizations are already leading the way—57% are more likely to use customer service insights to refine enterprise processes, from go-to-market strategies to product development. And those with the strongest customer service functions are 87% more likely to say that service plays a critical role in influencing their marketing strategy.

What business leaders can do:

· Set up a Customer Insights Hub that centralizes relevant customer information across all touchpoints, with a shared, real-time view across platforms and partners. This requires strengthening data-sharing agreements and ensuring the digital core is built to integrate diverse data sources securely. Use every interaction to generate valuable intelligence and build a deep, holistic understanding of the customer.

· Customer insights should continuously flow across the entire organization. Embed these insights into marketing, pricing and enterprise-wide strategies and use them to inform product innovation and highlight new revenue streams.

Evaluate the business impact, ensuring AI investments are aligned with long-term value creation rather than short-term pilots.

· Collaborate. Align all business leads, data and AI specialists and creatives towards a joint strategy and shared goals. Make it a priority to act on business intelligence—using insights to drive smarter and more aligned customer-centric decisions. Design service delivery around the customer, meeting their individual needs with tailored solutions.

With today's technologies, this is all finally within reach. Now is the time to make service a value engine for the enterprise.

Case study

Transforming service and satisfaction

In the telecom industry, consumer products and services often feel similar. So how can companies stand out? By delivering exceptional service and experiences. Virgin Media O2 (VMO2) is doing just that—supercharging customer service with digital technologies and putting customer needs at the center.

The company modernized its digital core with a focus on the customer experience. Using data and AI, VMO2 gained deeper insights into customer needs and revamped business processes to eliminate inefficiencies that once caused frustration. The result? VMO2's customer net promoter score (NPS) jumped by up to 35 points in some areas.

Going from legacy tech to tech leader, VMO2 implemented a cloud-based digital core that accesses customer data across multiple channels.

This powers insight-driven interactions, enabling agents to predict customer needs and resolve issues based on past conversations and similar cases. The digital core also supports an AI-powered contact center, so can handle customer interactions seamlessly across voice, chat, and mobile. A unified system simplifies the customer journey—speeding up service, improving satisfaction and boosting loyalty.

VMO2's technology-led transformation has unlocked new growth and reduced costs. By identifying upselling opportunities during customer interactions, sales-through-service revenue has surged. Meanwhile, customer service operating expenses have dropped as more issues are resolved on the first call. In just three months, same-day complaint closure rates increased from 65% to 89%.

If it's broke, fix it

One single customer service interaction can be make or break for customer relationships. Exceed a customer's expectations, giving them an increased sense of value, and earn their loyalty for life. But inconvenience them through poor service delivery, leaving them feeling short-changed and unappreciated, and risk losing their business permanently.

As one Gen Z interviewee from the UK told us about a recent interaction with her bank: "Even though I was on the phone for like two hours, they sorted it all. I now know that I can speak to someone till whatever time at night, and they will sort it ... I will never change banks because they've been good to me."

Customer service, after all, isn't just about resolving problems. It's about protecting and growing a company's most valuable asset: their customers. The choices companies make today—where they invest, how they design experiences and how they build trust—will determine their relevance and enterprise growth for years to come. That's the true power of service.

How Accenture can help

We're designed to solve fundamental business needs: relevance and customer-centric growth.

Accenture Song accelerates growth and value for clients by connecting what customers value with what is valuable to businesses, while simplifying complex technology for better customer experiences.

As the world's largest tech-powered creative group, we bring together storytellers, designers, technologists and strategists to create impactful experiences. Our global network allows us to scale across industries, functions, and markets, delivering personalized and proactive service that empowers clients' employees and customers.

With strong client relationships and deep industry expertise, we enable our clients to operate at the speed of life through the unlimited potential of imagination, technology and intelligence.

About the research

This report is based on comprehensive research designed to explore how companies are investing in customer service today and the evolving role of technology in shaping service experiences. Our approach combined quantitative and qualitative methods, spanning executive perspectives and consumer insights, to provide a global perspective on the current state of customer service, as well as its future potential. All research was completed in October 2024.

Consumer survey

We conducted a consumer survey with 7,143 respondents in six countries: United Kingdom (2,007), Japan (1,063), Brazil (1,034), Germany (1,029), United States (1,009) and Australia (1,001). This survey captured recent customer service experiences, focusing on their needs, frustrations, and perspectives on how technology shapes their interactions with brands.

Executive survey

We also surveyed 2,400 customer service-focused senior executives at companies headquartered in 13 countries and spanning 10 industries. The survey examined how organizations prioritize customer service investments to uncover the strategic aims of their technology initiatives. This survey provides a global snapshot of the challenges, opportunities, and emerging trends in the service function from the perspective of decision-makers.

By geography, executive survey respondents represented the following countries: United States (400), United Kingdom (200), Australia (200), Brazil (200), Canada (200), France (200), Germany (200), Italy (200), Japan (200), Saudi Arabia (100), Singapore (100), South Africa (100) and United Arab Emirates (100).

By industry, the executive survey respondents come from the following sectors: Banking/Financial Services, Communications and Media, Healthcare, High Tech, Insurance, Public Service, Retail, Software and Platforms, Travel and Utilities. All industries had 240 respondents each.

Qualitative research

Finally, to shed additional light on themes around customers' expectations and frustrations, we talked to 150 individuals in the US and UK, in focus groups and short video interviews. These qualitative methods uncovered overarching themes around customer needs, frustrations, and expectations. Some of their quotes that appear in this report have been lightly edited for clarity.

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About Accenture

Accenture is a leading global professional services company that helps the world's leading businesses, governments and other organizations build their digital core, optimize their operations, accelerate revenue growth and enhance citizen services—creating tangible value at speed and scale. We are a talent- and innovation-led company with approximately 799,000 people serving clients in more than 120 countries. Technology is at the core of change today, and we are one of the world's leaders in helping drive that change, with strong ecosystem relationships. We combine our strength in technology and leadership in cloud, data and AI with unmatched industry experience, functional expertise and global delivery capability. Our broad range of services, solutions and assets across Strategy & Consulting, Technology, Operations, Industry X and Song, together with our culture of shared success and commitment to creating 360° value, enable us to help our clients reinvent and build trusted, lasting relationships. We measure our success by the 360° value we create for our clients, each other, our shareholders, partners and communities.

Visit us at **accenture.com**

About Accenture Song

Accenture Song accelerates growth and value for our clients through sustained customer relevance. Our capabilities span ideation to execution: growth, product and experience design; technology and experience platforms; creative, media and marketing strategy; and campaign, commerce transformation content and channel orchestration. With strong client relationships and deep industry expertise, we help our clients operate at the speed of life through the unlimited potential of imagination, technology and intelligence.

About Accenture Research

Accenture Research creates thought leadership about the most pressing business issues organizations face. Combining innovative research techniques, such as data-science-led analysis, with a deep understanding of industry and technology, our team of 300+ researchers in 20 countries publish hundreds of reports, articles and blogs annually. Our thought-provoking research developed with world-leading organizations helps our clients embrace change, create value and deliver on the power of technology and human ingenuity.

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