

## Don't hang up on customers

### 1 Warmer

- When you have a problem with a product or a service, do you usually contact customer service? How do you get in touch with them (call, email, social media, etc.)?
- What do you think are the most important elements that make for good customer service?

### 2 Key words

- Write the words from the box next to the definitions below. Check your answers and your understanding of the words by using the same word to complete the example sentence below each definition. Then read the complete article to see how each of the key words is used in context (the words are sometimes in a slightly different form).

backlash    battered    clueless    demographic    fed up    flesh-and-blood    gripe  
outperform    query    rank    rival    spur    triumph    word-of-mouth

- a question that you ask because you want information or because you are not certain about something \_\_\_\_\_  
*You can view, post or reply to a \_\_\_\_\_ on our online discussion board.*
- a person, team, or business that competes with another \_\_\_\_\_  
*Their best-selling product is on sale in order to match a discount offered by their \_\_\_\_\_.*
- the proud or excited feeling that you get when you have won something or have been successful \_\_\_\_\_  
*"I got the job!" she exclaimed with \_\_\_\_\_.*
- cause something to happen \_\_\_\_\_  
*Their content marketing strategy was \_\_\_\_\_ mostly by their earlier failures.*
- a strong, negative, and often angry reaction to something that has happened, especially a political or social change \_\_\_\_\_  
*They didn't expect that such a small price increase would cause such \_\_\_\_\_.*

6. used to emphasise that someone is human, as opposed to a machine

*Artificial intelligence can help advance medicine, but patients still prefer that \_\_\_\_\_ nurses take care of them.*

7. stupid or knowing nothing \_\_\_\_\_

*Most of the new employees are \_\_\_\_\_ and need to complete our Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion training as part of their induction process.*

8. annoyed or bored with something you feel you have accepted for too long \_\_\_\_\_

*Customers are \_\_\_\_\_ with recurring shipping delays.*

9. having experienced a lot of difficulties \_\_\_\_\_

*Growth has stalled and the economy has been \_\_\_\_\_ by inflation.*

10. a complaint about something that is annoying but not very important \_\_\_\_\_

*I have a \_\_\_\_\_ about the service; we've been sitting here for ten minutes and no one has come to take our order.*

11. do something better than someone or something else \_\_\_\_\_

*A local secondary school has received more funding after student test scores \_\_\_\_\_ national averages.*

12. a group of people that a company wants to sell its products to \_\_\_\_\_

*We have been targeting our latest marketing campaigns at a younger \_\_\_\_\_*

13. communication that consists of comments that people make to each other in an informal way, not formal communication, such as news reports and advertisements \_\_\_\_\_

*Most of their customers find out about them by \_\_\_\_\_, so they don't invest much in other forms of advertising.*

14. a position or status, higher or lower, compared with other similar people or things

\_\_\_\_\_  
*They \_\_\_\_\_ poorly in the annual Best Employer survey.*

## The strange death of the company phone number

*AS ANGER RISES OVER CLUELESS CUSTOMER SERVICE THERE HAS NEVER BEEN A BETTER TIME TO OFFER A HUMAN, INSTEAD OF AN ONLINE FORM*

PILITA CLARK

- 1 “We have removed our telephone number,” said a note on the website of a photography business I needed to contact in a hurry last week.
- 2 “It’s because we’ve noticed customers prefer to chat online, via email or by filling in the form below,” it added.
- 3 Yeah, right, I thought, as I grumpily filled in the online form and hit “submit”, sending my query off to some digital netherworld where I doubted it would be seen by anything as costly as a human.
- 4 As it happened someone did respond, quite quickly, by email. But by then I had already spoken to a rival business that had a phone number on its site, and a person who quickly picked up – a fact I relayed to the first company with a degree of triumph I am not proud of.
- 5 The thing is, the numberless business was at least being open about its intentions. A growing number of organisations have quietly dispensed with website phone numbers, or made them so hard to find that they may as well not exist. This was happening long before the pandemic spurred a wave of digital commerce. Reaching a person at places like Facebook has been so famously difficult that even police officers have complained.
- 6 But it has reached the point that today the sight of a prominent company phone number is becoming notable and having a call answered quickly by a person feels like winning some sort of jackpot.
- 7 We all know why this happens. People are expensive. For Covid-battered businesses, cost efficiency is crucial. A lot of queries can be easily answered online. Nuisance calls are rife.
- 8 Still, a backlash is taking shape. Spain this year moved to require companies to answer customer calls within three minutes, with a flesh-and-blood employee, and similar efforts are afoot in the UK. The question is, why don’t more companies seize on the deepening fury about clueless customer service and make a competitive virtue of offering better support?
- 9 I wondered about this earlier this year on a visit to Australia, where the Telstra telecommunications group was boldly advertising its decision to bring all its call centres back home. The move follows years of complaints from fed-up customers, which can become especially acute during big floods and other weather disasters that have battered the country in recent years.
- 10 The UK telecoms group BT finished a similar call centre onshoring effort before the pandemic hit, and says it has seen big benefits. Customer gripes have plunged so much that BT, which once had some of the worst levels of complaints in the sector, now outperforms industry averages. Call centre efficiency is also higher. “We are about 30 per cent more efficient and effective,” a spokesperson told me last week, adding it was a mistake to think that only older people wanted to talk to a person on the phone.
- 11 While a lot of queries can be dealt with online, calling remains the first preference for customers for any complex or sensitive problem and “this does not really differ by demographic”.
- 12 The advantages of offering decent customer service has always been obvious to business leaders such as Tony Hsieh, the late US founder of the Zappos online shoe empire. He believed repeat customers and word of mouth were crucial to driving sales revenues up from less than \$2mn to more than \$1bn in just 10 years.

*Continued on next page*

- 13 “On many websites the contact information is buried at least five links deep, because the company doesn’t really want to hear from you. And when you find it, it’s a form or an email address,” he once wrote in Harvard Business Review. Zappos took the “exact opposite approach”, putting its phone number at the top of every page on its website and training staff to go out of their way to help people. “As unsexy and low-tech as it may sound, the telephone is one of the best branding devices out there,” he said.
- 14 Hsieh sold Zappos for \$1.2bn in 2009 to Amazon, a company that also lacks prominent phone numbers but ranks highly for customer satisfaction thanks to its online service.
- 15 Few companies match the might of Amazon but thousands could follow the ethos of Tony Hsieh – before governments force them into it.

**FT**

Pilita Clark, 17 September 2022

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## 3 Understanding the article

### a. Answer the questions using information from the article.

1. How did a company's decision to get rid of their phone number impact the writer as a potential customer?
2. What is famously difficult at places like Facebook?
3. What have been the main reasons driving the disappearance of the company phone number?
4. What is the result of consumer backlash received in Spain and the UK?
5. What was Telstra's recent big move?
6. What have been the benefits of BT's call centre onshoring effort?
7. According to a BT spokesperson, who prefers to call?
8. What is Zappos's approach to customer service?
9. Why does Amazon rank highly for customer satisfaction?

## 4 Business language

### a. Find phrasal verbs and expressions in the article that match the meanings below. The paragraph numbers are given to help you.

1. answer the phone (paragraph 4) \_\_\_\_\_
2. no longer use someone or something because you no longer want or need them (paragraph 5)  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. start using or doing things that were used or done in the past; bring something with you when you come back from a place (paragraph 9) \_\_\_\_\_
4. take the action to do something, especially to solve a problem (paragraph 11)  
\_\_\_\_\_
5. make a price or amount rise to a higher level (paragraph 12) \_\_\_\_\_
6. make an extra effort to do something even though it is not convenient or easy to do (paragraph 13) \_\_\_\_\_
7. make someone do something that they do not want to do (paragraph 15)  
\_\_\_\_\_

**b. Now discuss the questions below.**

1. What is the biggest factor that drives up revenue in the industry that you want to work in?
2. Do you know of any companies that have brought their call centres back home?
3. How much should employees go out of their way to please customers?
4. Should governments be able to force companies into picking up their phones within three minutes?
5. Do you think asking customers to fill in online forms is an efficient practice?
6. In what cases do you think should companies dispense with their website phone numbers?

## 5 Discussion questions

**a. Discuss these questions.**

- Can you think of examples of other companies that approach customer service like Zappos? What about ones that are more like Facebook or Amazon?
- What gripes do you have with companies after trying to get help with a service or product? Have you ever filed a complaint about customer service?
- How do you think companies can retain customers who have had such negative experiences?
- What case would you make for companies to keep their phone numbers?

## 6 Wider business theme – dealing with customer complaints

**a. Think of a person you know who tried to contact customer Service to get help and had a terrible experience. Complete the table with their information.**

Person	Company / Product / Service	Why customer contacted customer service	What happened / didn't happen

Advanced

**b. You are going to respond to the customer's complaint via email.**

- thank them for being a customer
- apologise for what happened
- ask for any details if necessary
- say what action is being taken as a result
- offer something in compensation
- apologise again and invite them to discuss it further

**c. Look for examples of emails and language used for writing emails to deal with customer complaints. Write some useful phrases below.**

**d. Use your notes and some of the phrases to write an email response to the customer complaint.**

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