

## Don't hang up on customers

### 1 Warmer

a. When you have a problem with a product or a service, do you get in touch with customer service? How do you prefer to reach them?

- phone call
- online chat / form
- social media
- email
- in person

b. Why do you prefer this option? What are the advantages or disadvantages of these contact options?

### 2 Key words

a. 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.

call centre    complaint    efficiency    flesh-and-blood    query    reach

1. succeed in talking to someone by phone or email \_\_\_\_\_

*I haven't been able to \_\_\_\_\_ them all morning.*

2. the ability to work well and produce good results by using the available time, money, supplies, etc., in the most effective way \_\_\_\_\_

*Sales are down, so cost \_\_\_\_\_ is now more important than ever.*

3. a question that you ask because you want information or because you are not certain about something \_\_\_\_\_

*I wrote to the help desk with a \_\_\_\_\_ about the microphone on my new PC – I don't know how to turn it on.*

4. used to emphasise that someone is human, not a machine \_\_\_\_\_

*I don't know which option to press to talk to a \_\_\_\_\_ employee.*

5. a place where a large number of people are employed to deal with customers by phone, either in order to sell something or to answer questions \_\_\_\_\_

*They are hiring students to work in their new \_\_\_\_\_ and to deal with dissatisfied customers.*

6. a written or spoken statement in which someone says they are not satisfied with something \_\_\_\_\_

*They were so angry about the new parking fee that they filed a formal \_\_\_\_\_ with the building manager.*

demographic      fed up      gripe      outperform      satisfaction      word-of-mouth

7. annoyed by something you feel you have accepted for too long \_\_\_\_\_

*I'm \_\_\_\_\_ with being on hold; if they don't answer in the next minute, I'm going to end the call.*

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

*I don't want to listen to their \_\_\_\_\_ about having too much work.*

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

*Their service has improved so much this month that they \_\_\_\_\_ all their competitors.*

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

*When designing an ad, it is important to know what your \_\_\_\_\_ is.*

11. communication that consists of comments that people make to each other in an informal way \_\_\_\_\_

*We don't have a marketing budget, so we rely on \_\_\_\_\_ to get new customers.*

12. the feeling of pleasure that you get when you achieve or obtain something that you want \_\_\_\_\_

*Good relationships with colleagues contribute to job \_\_\_\_\_.*

## 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.

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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. Choose the best way to complete each sentence according to the information in the article.

1. In the writer's experience, ...
  - a. customers prefer to chat online rather than fill in a form.
  - b. a phone call is better, even though some companies do reply quickly to online queries.
  - c. it is better to leave a message when you call a company and they take forever to pick up the phone.
  
2. Even police officers have complained about how ...
  - a. difficult it is to talk to a real person at companies like Facebook.
  - b. long it takes to receive a reply to an email from companies like Facebook.
  - c. terrible digital commerce has become after the pandemic.
  
3. After the pandemic, many companies chose to ...
  - a. go all-digital so people would not have to interact with each other.
  - b. put their phone numbers at the top of their website.
  - c. cut costs, which meant fewer people answering phones.
  
4. In Spain, companies now must ...
  - a. reply to emails within three days.
  - b. have an automated reply menu.
  - c. answer phones within three minutes.
  
5. Telstra and BT are examples of companies that ...
  - a. have brought their call centres back home.
  - b. focused more on older customers.
  - c. got rid of their company phone numbers.
  
6. Zappos believes the key to success is ...
  - a. a high-tech approach.
  - b. always helping customers.
  - c. burying contact information.

## 4 Business language

a. Match the words to make business collocations from the article. One phrase is used more than once.

- |              |                                   |
|--------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1. fill in   | support / decent customer service |
| 2. pick up   | queries / complaints              |
| 3. reach     | a form                            |
| 4. offer     | a person / member of staff        |
| 5. deal with | the phone                         |
| 6. train     |                                   |

b. Find the collocations in the article to check your answers and read them again in context.

c. Match the collocations from Activity 4a with their meanings.

- give someone something that you think they need or deserve
- take the action to do something, especially to solve a problem
- answer the phone
- teach someone to do a particular job or activity
- add information such as your name or address in the empty spaces on an official document
- succeed in talking to someone by phone

d. Complete the statements with the verbs from Activity 4a.

- They want to \_\_\_\_\_ their staff to help solve customers' problems more efficiently.
- They promise their customers that a flesh-and-blood person will \_\_\_\_\_ the phone.
- Could you please \_\_\_\_\_ this form while we set up your new phone?
- It is best practice to \_\_\_\_\_ support both online and face-to-face.
- It is frustrating when you spend hours on hold and can't \_\_\_\_\_ anyone.
- They \_\_\_\_\_ complaints very efficiently.

## 5 Discussion questions

### a. Discuss these questions.

- Can you think of examples of other companies that offer good customer service? What about ones that do not?
- Have you had any negative experiences when trying to get help with a service or product?
- Have you ever made a complaint about customer service? Who did you complain to?
- Now that you've read the article, how important do you think it is for companies to keep their customer service phone numbers?

## 6 Wider business theme – dealing with customer complaints

### a. Imagine the writer's experience of trying to contact a photography company in more detail.

### b. You are going to write an email to the customer to respond to their complaint. Make notes to...

- 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. Use your notes and some of the phrases below to write an email reply to the customer complaint.

#### Useful language

*Thank you for your recent purchase / renewal / subscription / interest.*

*It has been brought to our attention that ... / I am sorry to learn that ...*

*On behalf of the company, I would like to apologise for ... / I am truly sorry for the inconvenience caused.*

*We value our customers / customers' time and ...*

*We would be grateful if you could provide us with details about ...*

*I assure you that we take all customer feedback seriously.*

*We are happy to offer ... / refund you ...*

*If you would like to discuss this further, please reply to this message or call us at ...*