

## Don't hang up on customers

**Level:** Advanced (C1–C2)

**Time:** Approximately 90 minutes (plus extra time for research and writing)

**Business topics:** customer service and support, customer satisfaction, communicating with customers, dealing with complaints

**Business language:** useful business vocabulary, phrasal verbs and expressions, language for dealing with complaints

**Activities:** discussing customer service and communication, key words, understanding the text, business language, discussion, writing an email to deal with a customer complaint

**Groups:** whole class, one-to-one, pair work or small groups

**Overview:** This article discusses the terrible consequences of companies dispensing with their phone numbers to cut costs, since calling is still most customers' first preference. It also describes a couple of success stories of companies that have brought back their call centres from offshore.

### 1. Warmer

- a. Put students into pairs or small groups and give them five minutes only to discuss their contact preferences before doing a class survey. You can ask students to raise their hand for their first preference and ask them if they think the article will state a similar preference for most customers.
- b. Ask students to brainstorm what makes for good quality customer service. Elicit some ideas from the whole class.

### 2. Key words

- a. Ask students to complete the task individually and then compare their answers in small groups before eliciting the answers from the whole class.

### Key:

- |                           |   |
|---------------------------|---|
| 1. <i>query</i>           | 9. <i>battered</i>                            |
| 2. <i>rival</i>           | 10. <i>gripe</i>                              |
| 3. <i>triumph</i>         | 11. <i>outperform;</i><br><i>outperformed</i> |
| 4. <i>spur; spurred</i>   | 12. <i>demographic</i>                        |
| 5. <i>backlash</i>        | 13. <i>word-of-mouth</i>                      |
| 6. <i>flesh-and-blood</i> | 14. <i>rank; rank(ed)</i>                     |
| 7. <i>clueless</i>        |   |
| 8. <i>fed up</i>          |   |

### 3. Understanding the article

- a. Students find key information in the article and write their answers. Ask them to compare these in small groups before checking answers with the whole class.

### Key:

1. *When the first photography company they found online offered an online form instead of a phone number, they decided to go with the second company, which they called.*
2. *reaching an actual person*
3. *Covid-battered businesses are trying to cut costs and many queries can easily be answered online.*
4. *A flesh-and-blood employee is now required to answer customer calls within three minutes.*
5. *They are bringing their call centres back home.*
6. *Customer complaints have plunged and they now outperform industry averages. Call-centre efficiency is 30 per cent higher.*
7. *Any customer with a complex or sensitive problem – it doesn't differ by demographic.*
8. *The company wants to hear from customers and puts its phone number at the top of every webpage. Staff are trained to go out of their way to help people.*
9. *Their online service is good, even though it's hard to find a number to call.*

### 4. Business language

- a. Ask students to quickly scan the article to find the phrasal verbs and expressions and match them to their meanings. The paragraph numbers are given to help them. The first letter of the first word can be provided if they need further support.

**Key:**

1. *pick up*
2. *dispense with*
3. *bring back*
4. *deal with*
5. *drive up*
6. *go out of (your) way*
7. *force (someone) into*

- b. Ask students to discuss the questions in small groups to use the phrases in context. Monitor and pay attention to the target language. Make note of errors and ask the class to help you correct these after the discussion.

## 5. Discussion questions

- a. Put the students in pairs or small groups and ask them to discuss the questions. When students have covered all the questions, bring the whole class back together so that they can share their answers and any interesting information that arose from their discussions.

## 6. Wider business theme – dealing with customer complaints

- a-c. Ask students to discuss task a. before completing task b. individually. Ask them to compare their notes in pairs or small groups before researching useful language together. Then allow them to write their emails individually. You can then get students to complete the writing for homework or to peer edit someone else's email.

Encourage students to come up with a relevant authentic situation, but if they are struggling, you can suggest the writer's experience with a photography company or a customer trying to reach a person at Facebook.