hiver

Survey Report

Customer Support Through The Eyes of Consumers in 2020

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Key Findings

Impact of COVID-19

34%

consumers feel that customer service should be more responsive and empathetic due to the pandemic

66%

think a company's customer service reputation is a critical factor while making a purchase decision

48%

of Gen Z consider email their preferred medium of customer support communication, making it the most-used channel for contacting support

80%

of consumers are generally happy with the quality of customer service they receive from companies

51%

of respondents feel that companies care about them and go the extra mile to keep them happy

12%

think that companies don't care about them at all

37%

of respondents describe a customer service experience as good when their issues are resolved on time

30%

appreciate the knowledge and resourcefulness of customer support professionals

23%

consider it a good customer experience when they don't have to explain their problems multiple times

1 in 2 people say that the most annoying part about customer support is explaining their problems multiple times

38% of respondents agree that the second-most annoying thing is receiving 'robotic auto-responder emails'

After a negative customer service experience, **70%** of respondents say they will advise their friends and colleagues against buying the product or service in question

18%

said they would take their issues to social media

30%

of consumers will not give brands more than one chance after a bad customer service experience

Introduction

In the late 1970s, before the age of iPhones and the internet, if your television broke, you'd have to write a letter and send it through snail mail to the company and hope someone reads it. If you felt particularly adventurous, you'd drop by the nearby RadioShack to see if you could fix it yourself.

Fast forward to 2020, and you can contact customer care by email, social media, text message, and live chat, all within a minute of when you accidentally spill coffee on your MacBook. Mobile and internet have enabled constant connectivity, giving customers real-time access to public forums to talk or complain about products and services.

Consumer expectations from customer support have grown by leaps and bounds. Organizations that proactively adapt to this shift in business-consumer dynamics have a much better chance of surviving and succeeding. But this is easier said than done.

We conducted a consumer survey and analyzed the data to give organizations insights into what customers expect from them when it comes to customer support in 2020. This report presents key findings about how consumers prefer contacting companies, their idea of good customer service, and how they'd react to a sub-par experience.

What qualifies as great customer service is changing, and changing fast. A few years back, you could make customers feel taken care of by sending automated replies and by convincingly stating that you are doing your best. That does not fly anymore, as customers are more educated and better connected with each other. Throw a pandemic in the mix, and you have very high customer service expectations.

This is why it's essential for companies to focus on building relationships, as opposed to simply making a sale. The key to that lies in looking at customer happiness as everyone's responsibility. It's about empowering teams across the company to take a customer-first approach to everyday tasks. This lays the foundation to delivering memorable experiences.
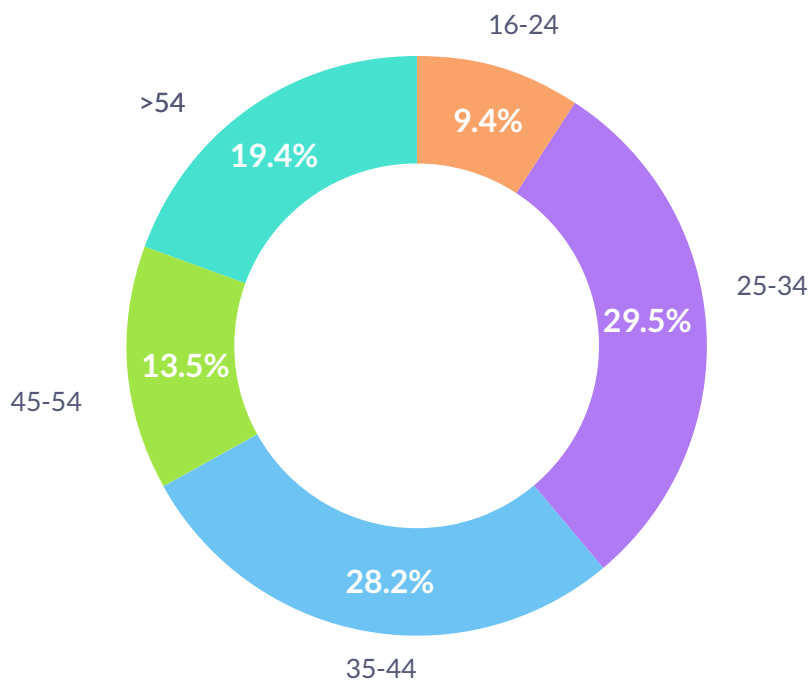
Niraj Ranjan

CEO and Co-founder of Hiver

Methodology

For the 'Customer Support Through The Eyes of Consumers in 2020' report, we surveyed 1000 respondents in the US. We asked them about their preferences, expectations, likes, and dislikes when interacting with customer support teams.

Demographics - Age Group

16-24	9.4%
25-34	29.5%
35-44	28.2%
45-54	13.5%
>54	19.4%

Respondents range from the age of 16 to the age of 54 and above, covering a broad demographic across different US states. The survey is broadly divided into three groups by age: Gen Z from the age of 18 to 24, Millennials ranging from 25-44, and Baby Boomers who are 45 years or older.
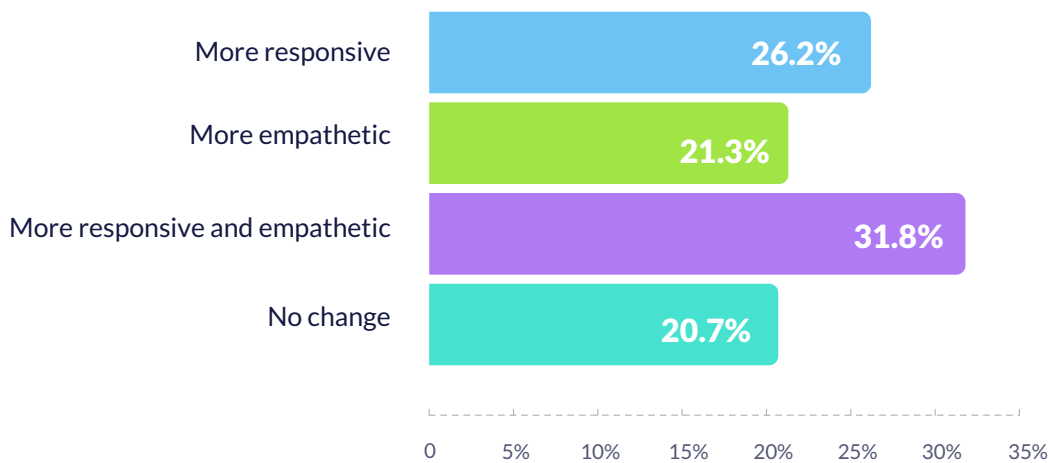
Expectations from customer service in the face of a pandemic

While customer support leaders are familiar with business continuity and disaster recovery planning, the COVID-19 pandemic has surprised everyone. The need to stay at home has changed customer behavior and customer support interactions at a staggering pace.

To understand how customer support expectations have shifted due to the pandemic, we posed this question to consumers. Here's how the respondents feel:

How consumers expect customer service to change post pandemic

Category	Percentage
More responsive	26.2%
More empathetic	21.3%
More responsive and empathetic	31.8%
No change	20.7%

Even as customer support professionals find themselves without infrastructure like reliable phone/internet connections or support (peers and managers available to lend a hand), customer expectations are at an all-time high.

According to the results, **80% of respondents expect customer support professionals to be more empathetic, or more responsive, or both.** One in 3 consumers want customer service to be both responsive and empathetic. In contrast, only 20% of respondents don't expect any change in customer interactions during the pandemic.

The research points towards dramatically increasing expectations from consumers, making a job that is hard for customer support executives on a typical day far more challenging.

Owing to the global pandemic, every business has had to empathize a lot more with customers - as we're all going through similar experiences. I can't stress how important it is for companies - and their support teams, in particular - to place themselves deep in their customers' shoes, understand how their expectations are currently evolving, and provide support that is more human and relatable.

Dan Gingiss,

Chief Experience Officer, The Experience Maker

# Customer support in the eyes of customers

To build a great company today, you have to put your customers and their needs at the center of your business. Why? Customers are smarter, more skeptical, and have more options than ever before. This combination makes it more challenging than ever to retain customers.

At the first sign of a bad experience, customers can and will jump ship to a different company. Keeping customers and increasing their lifetime value is something the most customer-centric companies have always been good at.

But how important is customer support to consumers as they are about to make a purchase decision? Turns out - very important.

According to the findings, **66%** of consumers consider customer service to be a deal-breaker when buying something, while **32%** believe it is moderately important.

Importance of customer support
in a purchase decision
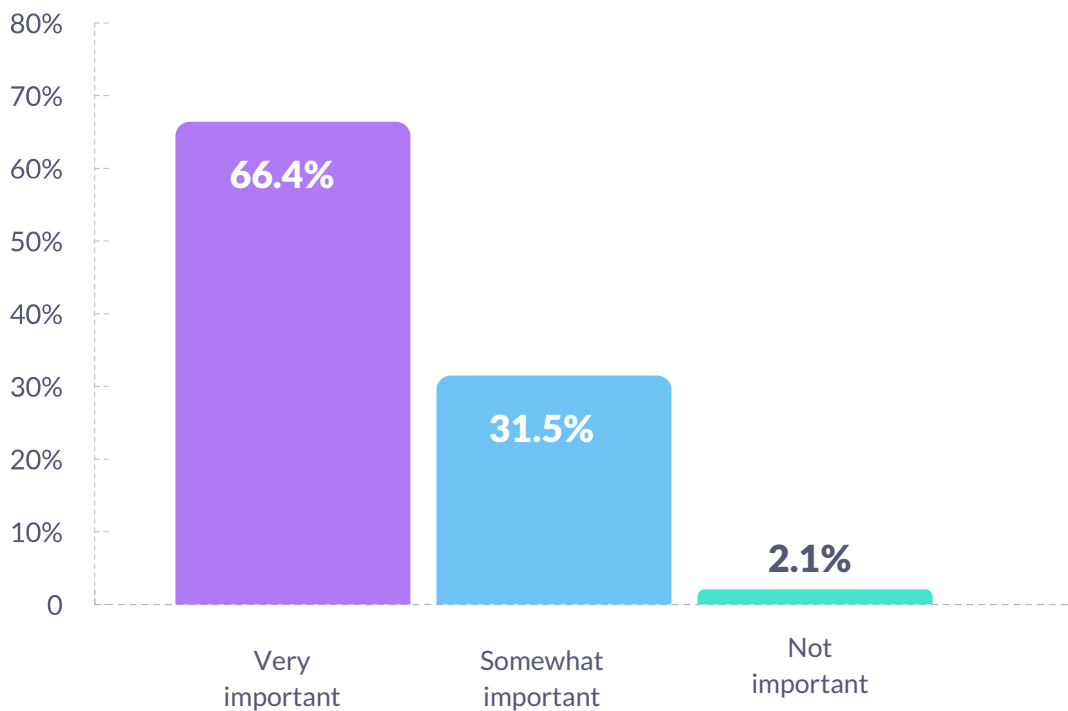
While the quality of customer service is key to certain purchase situations, there are also other factors at play. The importance of service as a driver of purchase decisions would also depend on whether the purchase is made online versus offline, the type of product customers purchase, the amount of money spent by customers, and so on.

Annette Franz

Founder and CEO, CX Journey Inc.

Communication is key; how you communicate matters more

Effective communication is key to nurturing any relationship, especially the ones you have with customers. But identifying the mediums that your customers are most comfortable with while maintaining high efficiency in resolving queries is a tricky affair. To help with this, we asked the respondents about the mediums they prefer to contact customer support.

Preferred customer support mediums by age range
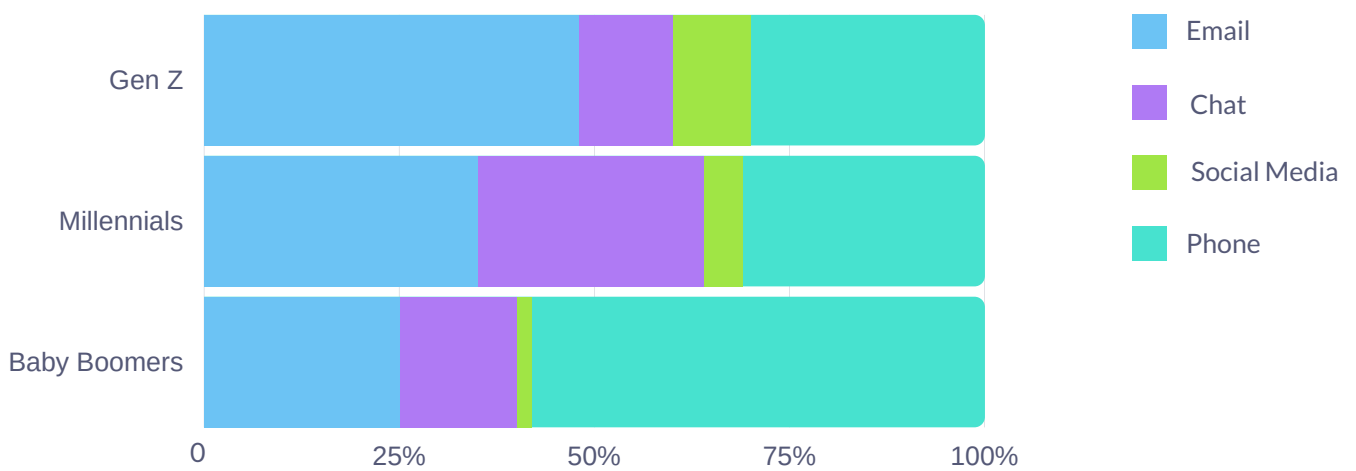
An exciting trend appears when the data is compared across age groups. **48% of Gen Z and 35% of Millennials prefer email,** making it the most-used channel for support communications.

This trend is followed by phone - **30%** of Gen Z and **31%** of millennials prefer using the phone after email as their preferred medium of communication. Not surprisingly, **58%** of people over the age of 54 prefer phone conversations while contacting customer support.

It's not surprising that the younger generations prefer email. Think about it — you get more thorough responses, and you don't have to sit tethered to a device for hours, as you would with a live channel. Not convinced? Try staffing your email channel to ensure customers receive a response within one to four hours and watch your customer satisfaction scores increase significantly.

"

Jeremy Watkin

Director of Customer Experience and Support, NumberBarn

This behavior can be attributed to how technology has permeated through generations and how younger consumers are much more used to mediums like email than older generations.

Owing to the popularity of email as a preferred medium of customer support, it becomes imperative for companies to set up a robust email help desk system to cater to different audiences.
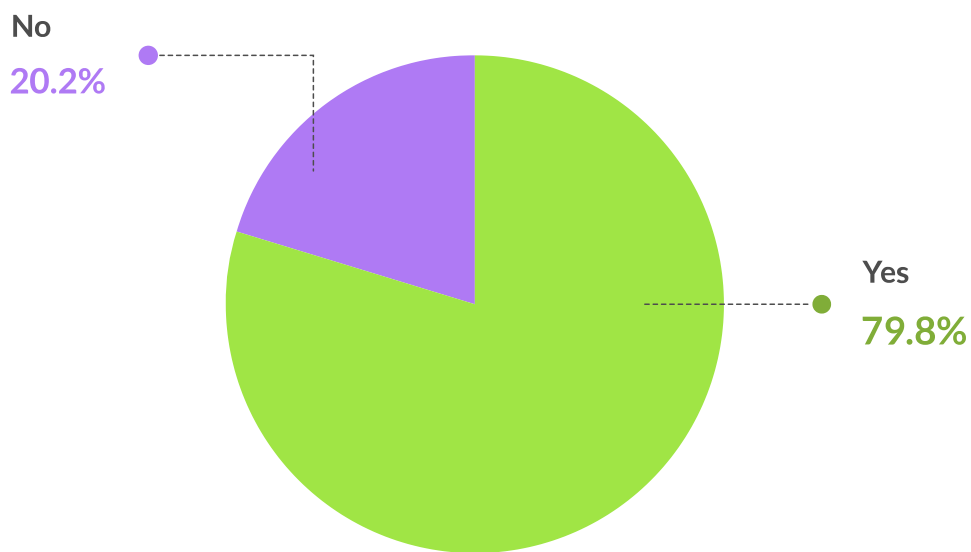
How excellent customer support leads to happy customers

Keeping your customers happy is non-negotiable. And one of the most important ways to do that is through excellent customer support. But, are customers happy with the kind of service they receive?
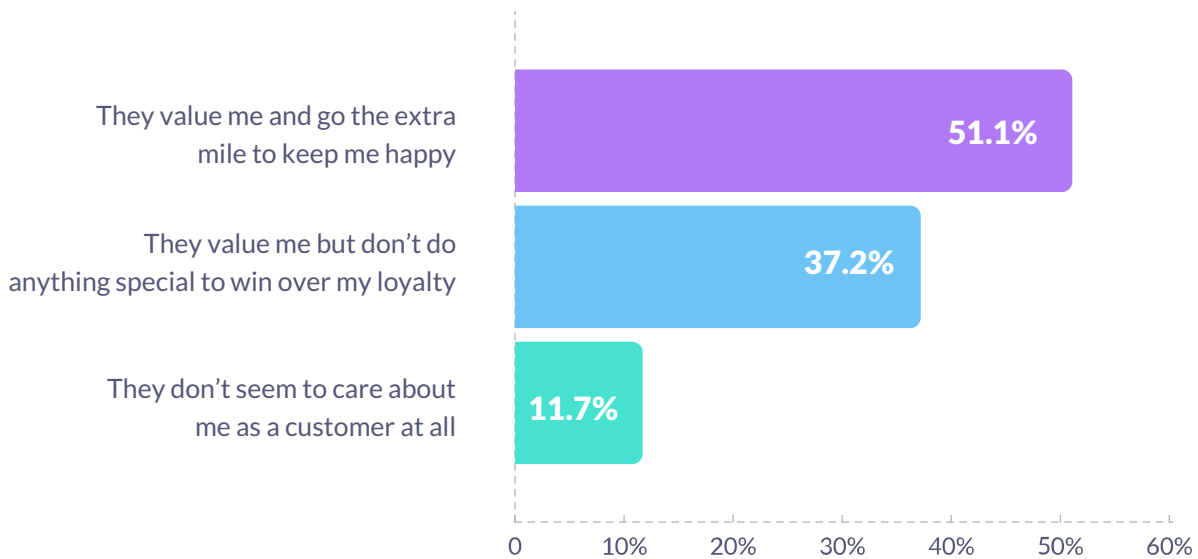
Are consumers generally happy with the quality of customer service

No
20.2%

Yes
79.8%

80% of survey respondents are happy with the customer service provided by the brands they interact with. But the **20%** saying they are not happy points to the fact that companies can still do better when it comes to support.

In today's age, where alternate options are just a Google search away, people can and do hop from brand to brand in favor of a company that would put in the effort to make the experience special for them. We asked the survey respondents about how they feel about the customer support of companies they interact with.

What do consumers feel about most companies that they interact with?

Response	Percentage
They value me and go the extra mile to keep me happy	51.1%
They value me but don't do anything special to win over my loyalty	37.2%
They don't seem to care about me as a customer at all	11.7%

A good **51%** of respondents think that the companies they interact with value them and go the extra mile to keep them happy. However, **37%** feel that even though the companies they interact with value them, they wouldn't do anything special to improve consumer loyalty. Lastly, 12% think that the companies they interact with don't care about them as customers at all.

Owing to the pandemic, this is THE moment in time to show customers your commitment. I fully understand that many businesses are suffering and might be tempted to optimize short-term revenue. But, companies that show that they are willing to invest in their customers even if it doesn't contribute to short-term results will be the winners of tomorrow.

Steven Van Belleghem

CX Expert and International Keynote Speaker

Going by the survey responses, even with an increased focus on customer support, companies are leaving cash on the table by not going the extra mile to keep their customers happy.

It is important for brands to go the extra mile now more than ever because flexibility and adaptability have become the hallmarks of great service during the pandemic. As companies waive change fees, remove the teeth from cancellation policies, and find ways to create customized service experiences, going the extra mile is now expected. The companies that give their teams the freedom to create such experiences, while protecting the basic customer demands, will be positioned for growth in the evolving economy.

Tony Johnson

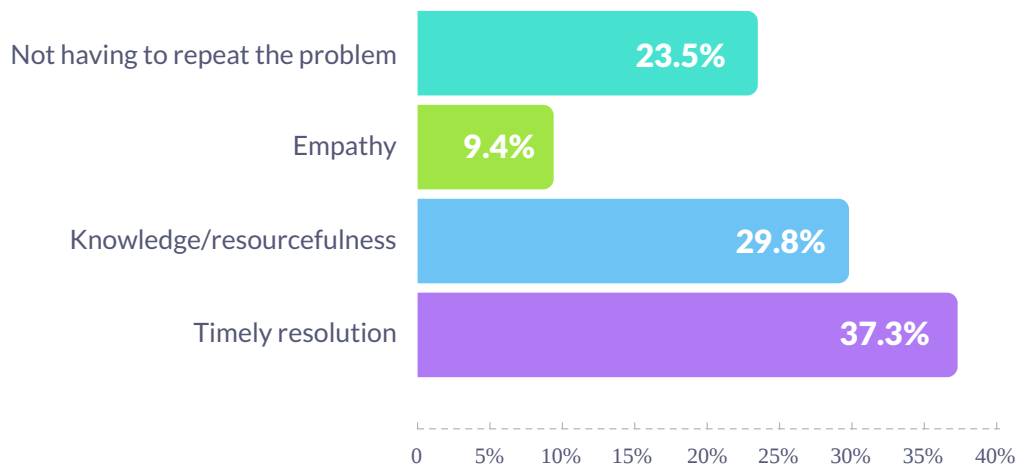Founder, Ignite Your Service

Deconstructing good customer support

Customer service at its heart is about making sure the customer is happy. Even with a great product, if a company's support is unhelpful, unreliable, or difficult to get in touch with, companies can lose customers over it. That's one big reason why investing in customer service is key to long-term business success.

But what does it mean to provide excellent customer support, and how can companies ensure that every customer has a great experience when they reach out for help?

What qualifies as good customer experience for consumers?

Category	Percentage
Not having to repeat the problem	23.5%
Empathy	9.4%
Knowledge/resourcefulness	29.8%
Timely resolution	37.3%

0   5%   10%   15%   20%   25%   30%   35%   40%

Roughly, 1 in 3 customers consider a customer service experience to be good when "their issues are resolved promptly."

About **30%** of respondents appreciate customer support professionals' knowledge and resourcefulness, and roughly **23%** consider it a good customer experience when they don't have to explain their problems multiple times. Only **10%** think empathy is an essential ingredient to great customer experience.

When customers reach out to you, they just want their questions or issues resolved. They don't want to repeat it 10 times to 10 different people in 10 different departments. They want one agent to be empowered to efficiently and correctly solve their problem or answer their question. The more consistently you can do this, the more customers will trust your brand as the one that has their backs when they need it.

"

Jenny Dempsey

Customer Experience Manager, Apeel

According to the research, consumers consider their problems' resolution time as one of the most critical factors to decide whether a customer support experience qualifies as good. This means that resolving customers' queries on time is one of the surest ways of gaining customer loyalty.

Interestingly, the importance of empathy in customer service differs with the age group of consumers.

Importance of empathy in CS by age group
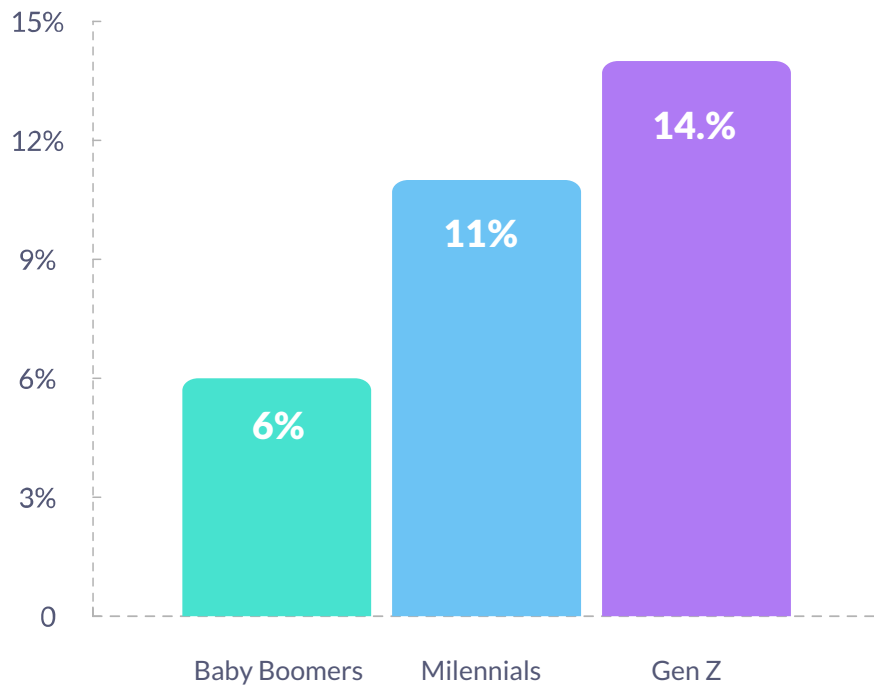
According to the survey responses, Gen Z values empathy more than older generations when it comes to customer support. This indicates an interesting trend that younger generations have higher expectations and want more personalized experiences when it comes to customer service today.

The most striking thing here is the correlation between age and how much empathy is valued. The younger you are, the more you want to not just get your issue fixed but be empathized with in the process. This means brands can improve retention and word of mouth amongst younger customers if they provide empathy training to their support staff and continually reinforce its value.

Ben Motteram

Founding Principal, CXpert
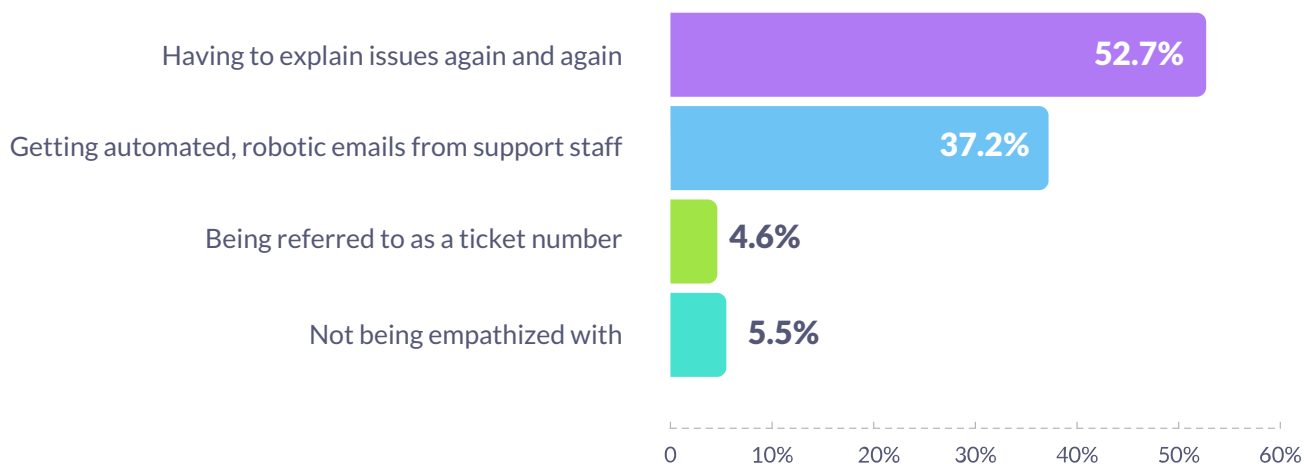
A consumer's insight into bad customer support experiences

In the world of technology we live in today, businesses cannot afford bad customer service. But what exactly entails a bad customer support experience?

What's the most annoying thing about interacting with customer support teams?

Category	Percentage
Having to explain issues again and again	52.7%
Getting automated, robotic emails from support staff	37.2%
Being referred to as a ticket number	4.6%
Not being empathized with	5.5%

According to the results, 1 in 2 people say the most annoying part of bad customer support is explaining their problem multiple times to different customer support agents.

This not only results in a significant delay in resolution, but it also portrays a poorly managed and inefficient customer support team - a reputation you'd want to steer clear of.

Robin Green said "Repetition is the death of art." After looking at Hiver's research, it might just be the death of your customer relationships too. We need to realize that the whole goal of Customer Experience is to understand and improve the relationships we have with our customers. The experience isn't the end, it's the means to the end. Experiences create emotions, emotions create relationships.

"

James Dodkins

Customer Experience Rockstar and Keynote Speaker

The second most annoying thing about customer service is the robotic auto-responder emails sent out to customers, according to **38%** of respondents. These are automated emails that remind customers at regular intervals that they are nothing more than just tickets waiting to be closed.

The research points to two chronic problems in customer support - context and personalization, or the lack of it. Often, when one customer service agent hands an issue over to her colleague, a lot of information is either lost in transit or simply not passed on. The auto-responder emails suffer the same lack of context and personalization.
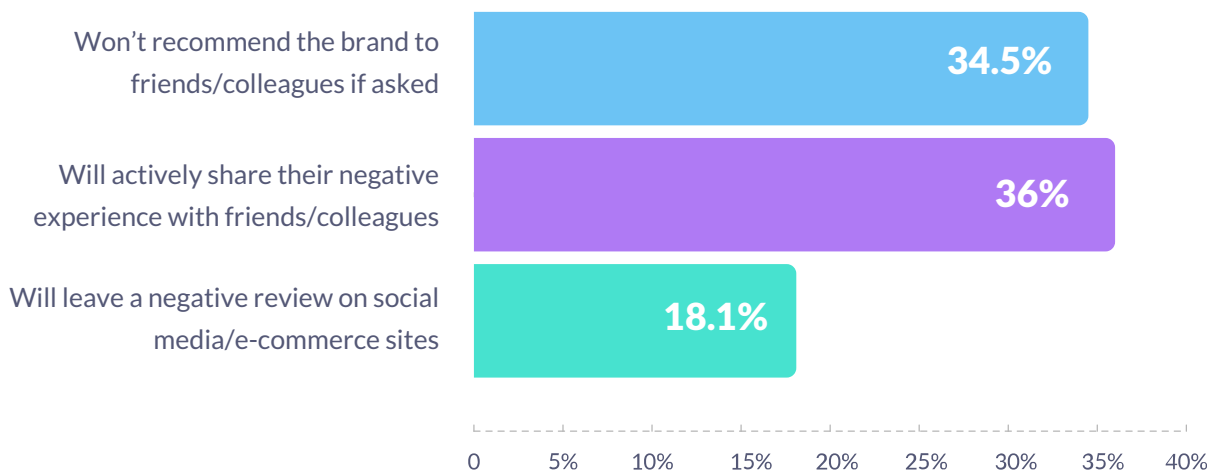
The true cost of bad customer support

Everyone has had a really bad customer experience at some time or another -- whether it was in a restaurant or when they were trying to pause a subscription. And poor customer service is one of the fastest ways for a business to lose customers.

Leaving a customer dissatisfied can have disastrous results, even when the bad experience happens online. Jeff Bezos, CEO of Amazon, believes that the reach of a bad customer service experience is far greater online than just by word of mouth. We asked the survey respondents about how they would react to bad customer service.

What are consumers most likely to do after a bad customer service experience?

Won't recommend the brand to friends/colleagues if asked	34.5%
Will actively share their negative experience with friends/colleagues	36%
Will leave a negative review on social media/e-commerce sites	18.1%

0   5%   10%   15%   20%   25%   30%   35%   40%

A whopping **89%** of participants will likely make their poor customer support experience known to friends, family, colleagues, and the general public. They can do this either by advising against buying the product or service, sharing the experience with people they know, or leaving negative social media reviews.

Not only does bad customer support drive existing customers away, but it also prevents potential prospects from considering doing business with companies in the first place. In other words, the ripple effects of one negative encounter can block countless new relationships from developing.

Compared to retaining customers, the cost of acquiring them makes poor customer support a Goliath-like problem for companies, especially as word of mouth travels faster than any other medium of communication.

But consumers are complex, and to be fair, a singular bad customer support experience can be an honest mistake, and companies should get a chance to redeem themselves. But how many opportunities do they get before the consumer decides to jump ship?

How many instances of bad customer service does it take for consumers to switch to another brand?
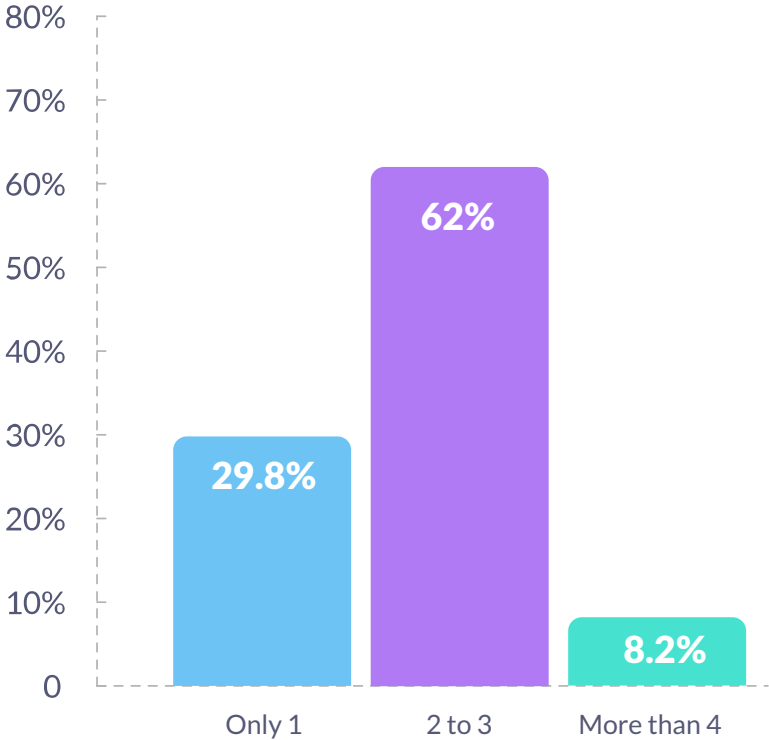
According to the research, **60%** of consumers would switch to an alternate brand after 2 or 3 bad experiences, and roughly **30%** would switch to an alternate brand right after a single bad customer support experience.

Researchers hypothesize that this kind of behavior is related to our innate survivalism. If we remember bad things more clearly, we'll strive to avoid them in the future. In terms of customer service, though, this means people who have a negative brush with your company may forever associate your brand with that unpleasant memory — and take their business elsewhere.

This makes listening to customer feedback an essential part of the process as it helps you identify unhappy customers early in the process.

> While many customers will abandon a brand after poor experiences, it's also true that they will forgive a brand with which they have an emotional connection. This is why companies should focus on strengthening the bond with customers. The best brands do this via data collection, analysis, and journey measurement. It enables them not only to monitor customer behavior but intervene and optimize CX in real-time.

Jim Tincher

Founder and Journey Mapper-In-Chief, Heart of the Customer

Conclusion

Today's customers are smarter, more vocal, and have higher expectations and more choices than ever. To make customer support a genuinely delightful experience, companies must develop a deeper understanding and empathy for customers and their problems.

This research attempts to help companies better understand what customers expect from them when it comes to customer service in 2020.

Creating a great customer support experience has never been more critical. When you keep the focus on your customers, prioritize their questions and concerns, and listen to their feedback, it's hard to go wrong.

However, if you're not utilizing the right tools, setting the right priorities, or building your team the right way, creating that ideal experience won't be easy. And in the process, you'll be losing customers who were once loyal and happy with you. Ultimately, if your company makes customer support an organization-wide mission, you win.

The stats and facts in this report support the idea I've been preaching for years. Customers' expectations are higher than ever. They no longer compare you to just your competition, but instead to the best service they have received from anyone. Then you add in the COVID-19 factor, where customers are expecting – and even demanding – higher "touch" in the form of human-to-human interaction. This is a great opportunity for brands to step up and create a higher level of confidence and an even better relationship with their customers.

Shep Hyken

Customer Service and Experience Expert,
Award-winning Keynote Speaker and New
York Times bestselling author

Hiver is the world's first Gmail-based customer service solution. It helps teams across the organization collaborate on shared inboxes like services@, orders@, support@. It's the most frictionless, natural way for teams to handle customer email communication as it works right inside Gmail.

Hiver helps over 1500 companies - ranging from new-age unicorns to traditional enterprises - deliver a better experience to their customers.
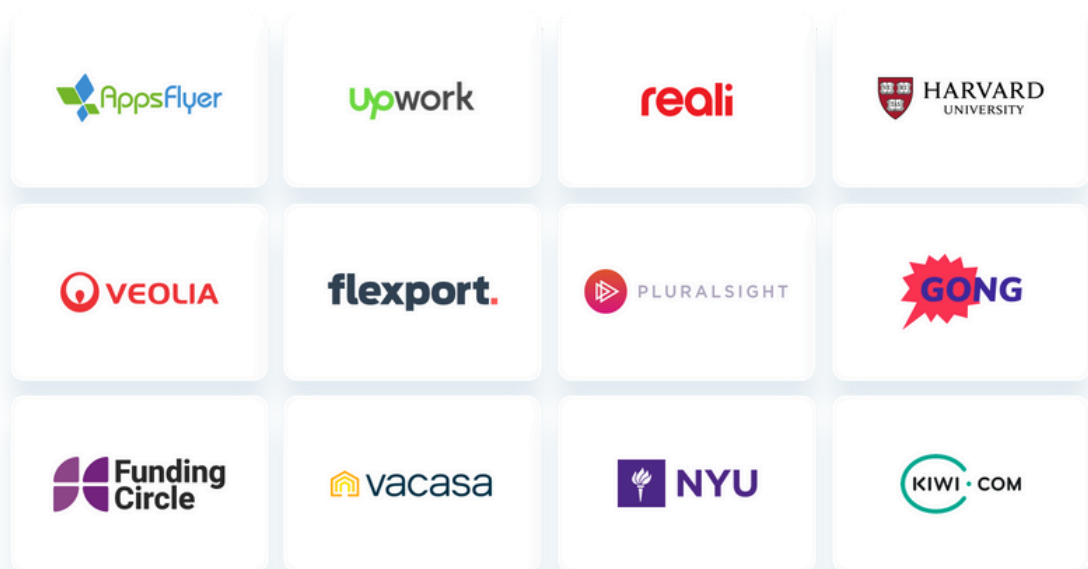
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