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Humans and Technology Intersect at the Future of Customer Service

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Every few years, a new customer service channel arrives on the scene with claims that this technology will be the main service channel and the future of customer service. We've heard the same arguments for decades, yet agents remain at the heart of the vast majority of customer service interactions.

As far back as January of 2000, we heard the call center was dying. In March of 2012 the headline still read the same: The Death of the Call Center. That same year in December we were told that social media would replace the call center. Fast forward to 2018, when it was again predicted that chatbots and self-service would bring about the end of the call center. And as recently as May of 2020, headlines argued that coronavirus would usher in the death of the call center. Two decades have passed, and predictions from 2000 and even 2020 are as wrong today as they were when they first appeared.

Even today non-voice channels like email, chatbots, social media, and self-service still only account for a small portion of customer service interactions. Why? Because when customers cannot resolve their issues through non-voice channels, they ultimately turn to agents, because ultimately it takes people to solve problems for other people.

Humans are invaluable in the call center. People want to talk through their issues with other people. Certain issues require a level of explanation that cannot be addressed by bots. Chatbots certainly play a valuable role in self-service, like checking your bank balance. For companies that believed the hype and placed their bets on chatbots to reduce cost and volume, deciding to lay off a large percentage of their staff wasn't the best idea. When chatbots and self-service did not reduce volume, these companies didn't have the manpower to handle calls, leaving customers frustrated and angry.

Customers need to feel confident and have trust in their brand experiences, which is impossible to achieve with the impersonal nature of a chatbot or other self-service platform. This rings especially true when dealing with sensitive topics like determining insurance costs for COVID-19 tests, wiring money,

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or dealing with personal finances. Only humans can understand the complexity and emotional components of these experiences, solve problems that bots cannot, and exude trust that instills brand confidence and loyalty among customers.

Humans Will Be Augmented, Not Replaced

To deliver optimal customer experiences, agents need reliable support—proper coaching, training, communication, etc. Call centers generate enormous amounts of data that humans are unable to gather, analyze, and translate into real-time insights. By leveraging an intelligent assistant, call centers can turn these millions of data points into instantaneous actions. This better prepares and supports agents, helping managers create smarter staffing decisions while improving customer experiences, all leading to significant cost savings without sacrificing service.

Think about how technology assists people who need a ride via Uber vs. hailing a taxi. Uber is still very much human-driven and, augmented with technology, creates better experiences for customers and employees. Adding intelligence to the call center is similar. Technology optimizes the process of matching demand (incoming calls) to supply (agents), which is revolutionizing customer service.

For those who still believe people are best left behind in the next wave of customer service, ask yourself this: Was your last experience with a chatbot wildly successful? Even more, how happy are your customers based on the service your brand provides? The capability for chatbots to fully replace humans does not exist, and it's unlikely to happen. Instead, customer service leaders should leverage innovation and technology to enable agents to excel in their roles of providing exceptional customer experiences. People will remain at the heart of customer service interactions because a heart is often what is needed, in combination with intelligence, to solve problems and deliver the best brand experiences possible.

Matt McConnell is founder and CEO of Intradium.

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