codeblue

8x8 Essentials
eBook Series

Contact Center Game Changers in 2021

Contents

Introduction

One of the most hyped decades for business innovation is now well in flight. Whether you consider its start a setback or a boost, there's no doubt that recent events have accelerated technology trends and the need for digital transformation to the point where last year's existing gaps are this year's formidable divides.

But as we know in this age of digital disruption, new leaders can step up at any time with the correct pivot and focus. Around customer experience, leaders are now focusing on the right mix of technology and humanity, as customers have mastered engaging from a distance and businesses must too. In 2020, customers were empathetic toward brands that lacked or had a lackluster digital component, but 2021 won't bring the same regard.

"81.6% of organizations acknowledge customer experience offers a competitive edge and 58% consider it a primary differentiator."

NTT Global Customer Experience Benchmarking Report

2025

By 2025, 40% of customer service organizations will become profit centers by becoming de facto leaders in digital customer engagement.

**Gartner Predicts 2021:
CRM Customer Service and Support**

Self-service, video and SMS use is skyrocketing. Organizations that recently rushed to incorporate remote technology are now getting their long-term digital customer experience house in order in a way that breaks down silos between corporate employees, contact center agents. The result: a better experience for all.

Trends around virtual engagement, actionable analytics, AI, and platform use as a jump start in bringing people and technology together will accelerate. We hope you'll find this compilation of insights a valuable resource for taking action now, but also for looking and planning ahead.

Operate From Anywhere is the New Standard

Janice Rapp
VP, Product Marketing,
Contact Center, 8x8

Operate From Anywhere is the New Standard

In 2021, digital transformation will accelerate at even greater speed than in 2020 as organizations move from band-aid remote work solutions to a new operate-from-anywhere standard. In its top strategic technology trends report for 2021, Gartner confirms that this new standard is more than just working from home or interacting with customers virtually. A successful operate-from-anywhere model supports customers and enables employees everywhere: no matter how, when or where they interact and engage. Further, it provides organizations with a unified focus on cloud and edge innovation, security, collaboration, productivity, intelligence, and analytics to monitor, measure and optimize it all.

To that end, when it comes to customer experience (CX), IT leaders must broaden their focus and consider how best to support and optimize agent-to-agent, agent-to-customer and agent-to-employee communications. In this newly distributed operational environment, information and organizational silos must be eliminated in order to foster communication and collaboration in a way that helps agents quickly and successfully resolve customer issues. And all of this needs to be done in a secure, reliable, disciplined way that supports the new, stringent and unique requirements of an operate-from-anywhere workforce model.

At the same time, organizations need to meet increasing customer demands and expectations for improved, intelligent self-service. While self-service has been on the rise since the advent of the smartphone, recent events have caused an even greater spike. Today, the vast majority of customers attempt self-service first. When that fails, they want to be connected to the person best equipped to handle their issue.

The bottom line is that, in 2021, customers will expect organizations to have their customer experience house in order. As such, IT and contact center leaders must work together with a sense of urgency like never before. This is where a single-platform approach comes into play.

"Through 2024, businesses will be forced to bring forward digital business transformation plans by at least 5 years as a survival plan to adapt to a post-COVID-19 world that involves permanently higher adoption of remote work and digital touchpoints."

Gartner Forecast Analysis: Remote Work IT Spending Worldwide

For their investment, digital transformation leaders benefit from:

- **Improved customer experiences.** With more seamless experiences across channels, unified data and insights, and the collaborative knowledge of the entire organization working in both reactive and proactive support of the customer, leaders will be able to define and create a differentiated customer experience that also informs and improves product and service development, marketing strategy, and overall revenue growth.

- **Improved agent experiences.** Aberdeen research reveals that unified communication-enabled contact centers (those using a single platform with natively integrated chat and meeting room functionality to facilitate agent-to-agent and agent-to-back office/ SME collaboration) see a 50% increase in agent productivity. In addition, these UC-enabled contact centers benefit from CX, IVR and speech analytics that enable agents and managers to engage with and coach each other to improve in real time or over time.

Unified communication-enabled contact centers see a 50% increase in agent productivity, a 2.9x average handle time improvement year-over-year and an 80% decrease in customer complaints.

The ROI of Uniting Unified Communications and Contact Center, Aberdeen

$1.5M

A 200-agent contact center loses $1.5 million annually from agents working across silos to find information.

The ROI of Uniting Unified Communications and Contact Center, Aberdeen

- **Cost savings.** Aberdeen also notes that a 200-agent contact center loses $1.5 million annually from agents working across silos to find information. Imagine the savings of increased time and productivity from a single platform approach.

- **Higher-quality talent and reduced turnover.** 88% of workers say the technology their company uses is an important part of the employee experience, and 91% say they crave modern technology solutions. IT investments in a UC-enabled contact center will attract tech-savvy agents who can meet tech-savvy customers' expectations, as well as more experienced employees who want long-term operate-from-anywhere options.

- **Speed and agility.** The customer self-service of the past is not the same thing as the AI-assisted options we see today. Leaders have evolved from auto attendants to basic IVR to a full, intelligent conversational exchange. Those that take advantage of AI-based capabilities in a platform, operate-from-anywhere solution will leap ahead of their peers from better, more effective live agents and faster resolution.

Bringing business communication, collaboration, contact center, and AI-assisted capabilities together, digital leaders will win in the operate-from-anywhere environment of 2021.
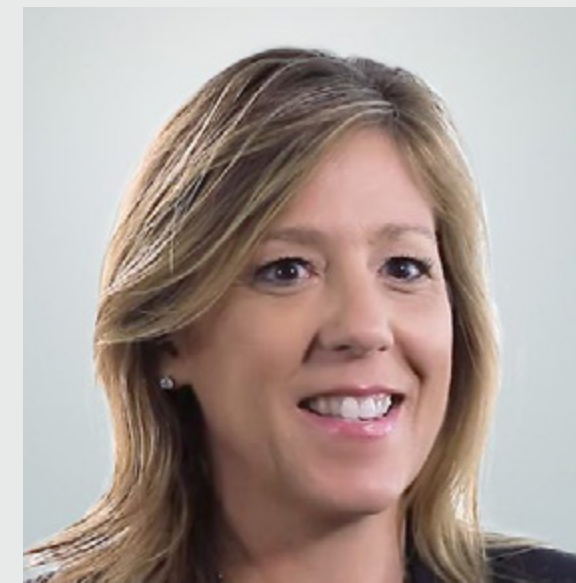
Janice Rapp
VP, Product Marketing, Contact Center, 8x8

As the VP of CCaaS Product Marketing at 8x8, Janice represents the interests of customer experience and contact center leaders, using insights to inform product development, develop go to market initiatives, and support buying decisions. Prior to joining 8x8, Janice led successful product marketing teams at Uptivity, NICE inContact, and Talkdesk.

2021 is all about Empathy, Digital, and Virtualizing Customer Care

Ian Jacobs
Principal Analyst, Forrester

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2021 is All About Empathy, Digital, and Virtualizing Customer Care

The following is an excerpt from the Forrester blog, *Predictions 2021: It's All About Empathy, Digital, And Virtualizing Customer Care*:

In our predictions for 2021, this need for a more empathetic service experience dominated our thinking. Some highlights from this year's predictions report include:

- **Customer service will become a lifeline for 33 million devastated consumers.** With US unemployment peaking in April, millions of individuals found themselves struggling to pay for food, bills, and other necessities. Organizations must react to provide high-quality, emotionally sensitive customer support in the flexible ways that consumers need.

- **Digital customer service interactions will increase by 40%.** The pandemic created a trend—an increased reliance on online shopping, digital financial services, and telehealth (virtual care) options—and that genie ain't going back in the bottle. The lack of in-person services forced many consumers to use digital channels to interact with brands, and consumers will continue using these channels.

- **Retailers and banks will create hybrid store/contact center roles.** With the closure of brick-and-mortar locations, many employees were unable to use their skills and knowledge to provide in-person support for customers. Retail associates and bank tellers, however, are well equipped to provide online support. Brands such as Apple and Northwest Community Credit Union recognized this and shifted some of their employee base to providing virtual assistance. Other brands will follow suit.

"Digital customer service interactions will increase by 40%. The pandemic created a trend—an increased reliance on online shopping, digital financial services, and telehealth (virtual care) options—and that genie ain't going back in the bottle.

Read our research for additional and further details on our 2021 customer service predictions. To understand the major dynamics that will impact firms across industries next year, download Forrester's Predictions 2021 guide.

Source: Ian Jacobs, Predictions 2021: It's All About Empathy, Digital, And Virtualizing Customer Care, Forrester, October 21, 2020.

Ian Jacobs
Principal Analyst, Forrester

Ian Jacobs serves customer service application professionals. With a focus on the ways AI is transforming customer service technology, processes, and labor models, he is an expert in contact centers. His research keeps a sharp focus on customer experience and agent experience issues. Ian is an award-winning columnist, is regularly quoted in major global publications, and is a frequent speaker at industry conferences. Ian comes to Forrester with nearly three decades of experience as a marketer, journalist, and analyst in the software market. He has held several senior-level analyst roles in both the CRM and customer experience fields, and he most recently crafted corporate vision and messaging as the customer experience evangelist at Genesys.

EX Investments Improve CX

Chris Hanna
Founder, Evolving Management

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EX Investments Improve CX

A critical part of the employee experience is hiring and training. Contact centers do a lot of hiring but doing so with a remote workforce has its challenges. While hiring slowed down in 2020 for many organizations, the hope of vaccines in 2021 will require a ramp-up in people in many contact centers. That will put pressure on leaders and training teams to get ready to train agents remotely. People have become accustomed to working remotely, and many don't want to go back to working onsite.

"Almost half (47.6%) of organizations can show evidence of a relationship between improved customer experience (CX) and enhanced employee experience (EX)."

NTT Global Customer Experience Benchmarking Report

Focus on video

Companies that can leverage video well will win the war for talent in 2021, but building a remote training program that focuses on both employee experience (EX) and customer experience (CX) needs to be worked on sooner than later. Creating and updating video content or course modules designed to help train and onboard agents remotely takes time. It's not practical to facilitate all training live, so pre-recorded content is essential.

No one wants to redo work, though. All organizations should have a plan to ensure that video training material is comprehensive yet flexible enough to update as needs require it. Involve other members of the contact center in the brainstorming and creation of new training materials, too. What processes no longer need to be covered? More importantly, where are the areas that could use a refresh or be highlighted more? Those doing the job itself will have a better understanding of what new agents need to know.

"By the end of 2021, only one-quarter of organizations will have the insights needed to understand the correlation between the customer experience and the employee experience."

Ventana Research

What lessons did the organization learn from what happened in 2020? More importantly, what feedback did they receive from employees, at all levels, that they can use to elevate the employee experience, and in turn, the customer experience? Armed with those insights, the right investments that make the lives of those in the contact center better should be made in 2021, especially concerning hiring and training.

Chris Hanna
Founder, Evolving Management

Chris Hanna is a speaker, virtual coach and consultant helping companies and leaders rethink and evolve their approach to managing the Employee Experience. He's also the host of a weekly podcast, The Chris Hanna Show, where he shares ways to help people achieve more. Chris has built, managed, and led contact center teams, including the winner of the 2020 'Best Small Contact Center' as recognized by ICMI. He has also been a Featured Contributor, sharing insights into the role leaders have on both the Employee and Customer Experience with the contact center community. Chris has been recognized as a "Mover & Shaker" and "Top 50 Thought Leader to Follow on Twitter" by ICMI.

Unified Analytics Capabilities Create and Define CX Leaders

Matt Taylor
Senior Director, Product Management
- Analytics, 8x8

Unified Analytics Capabilities Create and Define CX Leaders

2021 will be defined by a gradual recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. Companies that were forced to have a significant percentage of their staff working from home will continue to work differently and not bring everyone back to the office.

Companies will be supporting and selling to other companies and consumers who are feeling their way back to a new normal. Physical interaction almost non-existent during the pandemic will not come back fully.

Whether it's managers with employees, supervisors with contact center agents, or retailers with their customers, companies will depend on analytics even more to understand where to pay attention. What is going on in my company? With my customers? Unifying analytics—bringing together insights from all over the company—will be crucial to this process of focusing attention.

"2021 will require flexibility for contact centers, as what worked before may not work now. Instead of being physically on the floor and interacting with agents, managers will rely on productivity and evaluative data such as post call surveys like never before."

Impact on Contact Centers

What will this mean for contact centers? Understanding how work-from-home agents are doing will be even more important. Arrival patterns, when customers contact your company, won't match previous years. So workforce management will be challenging and will lead to SLAs being hard to meet, as well as potential burnout for agents and their supervisors.

2021 will require flexibility for contact centers, as what worked before may not work now. Instead of being physically on the floor and interacting with agents, managers will rely on productivity and evaluative data such as post call surveys like never before. Data analysts will be in even more demand as contact centers dig into their data and start to define a new normal for their organization, their agents, and their customers, as well as get more of the organization informed and involved in creating a better and competitive customer experience.

"For the fifth year in a row, organizations believe that data management, visualization and analytics is the top factor that will reshape the CX industry."

NTT Global Customer Experience Benchmarking Report

Emerging from shelter-at-home situations, customers will likely behave differently than what contact centers experienced before and during the pandemic. Analytics, including speech and channel usage for example, will be critical to identifying and responding to new trends. Bringing the large amount of varied data about our customers and agents together will provide the raw material which analysts can use to highlight threats and take advantage of opportunities.

Expect the differentiation between unified communications (UC) and contact center (CC) to blur even more in 2021 as customers use ring groups and simple UC-based queues to handle different kinds of customer support and sales. Inside sales reps, relationship managers, and other knowledge workers supporting external customers have been forced to do their jobs from home and many will continue working from home. This means sales and service managers, finance managers, and others will count on additional analytics capabilities to track productivity and highlight issues for teams that are even more widely distributed.
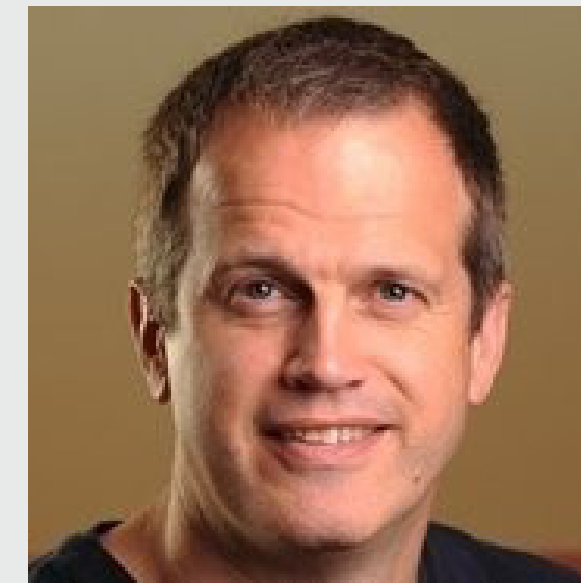
Matt Taylor
Senior Director, Product Management - Analytics, 8x8

Matt Taylor is the Senior Director of Product Management - Analytics at 8x8. Prior to joining 8x8, Matt's career included serving as the VP of Product at Formstack and a more than 15-year span at Interactive Intelligence which was acquired by Genesys. He holds a bachelor's degree in computer science, mathematics and applied physics from Butler University.

AI Becomes
Table Stakes

Chris Marron
Director, Market/Competitive Intelligence, 8x8

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AI Becomes Table Stakes

In 2021, some of the greatest investments in AI within the communications and collaboration space will be spent on the contact center. The global pandemic put considerable pressure on change needed in the contact center. Overnight contact volumes spiked significantly:

- Digital transformation across the enterprise caused a huge increase in interactions for contact centers as they became the first point of contact for all socially distanced interactions.

- Contact centers faced a significant increase in volumes from customers needing information on how the crisis impacted their specific relationships with companies.

To make matters even worse in many cases, contact centers were forced to face this massive increase in interactions with a decreased pool of labor. Under normal circumstances in the contact center, all employees could take calls as and when needed. But during the pandemic, not all agents were able to be on the phone from home at first. With the financial pressure faced by many companies, this left contact centers with few options.

86% of companies agree AI helps resolve customer issues, and 81% agree that they do so in a more timely manner and reduce contact center operations costs.

8x8 Adoption of AI in Business Communications Report

One-third of companies currently leverage AI in the form of chatbots, voice-based conversational virtual agents, and virtual assistants to optimize the customer experience.

8x8 AI Adoption of AI in Business Communications Report

No Small Change

All of this resulted in a number of fundamental changes to the traffic that contact centers faced. To address demand, many contact centers were forced to try to deflect customers to self help services and digital channels simply to deal with the sheer volume.

This has steadily increased acceptance and adoption of these channels, but voice remains king. Contact centers are now moving on from their pressured responses in 2020 and are looking at longer term planning on how to be successful in this new competitive environment. To achieve this contact centers must focus their AI investments on three areas:

1

Efficiency

Technology should never be a barrier between the customer and the business, and businesses should never avoid communicating with their customers. However, AI can still offer significant benefits.

As customers reach out to businesses, chatbots and voice bots can offer the ability to conveniently and rapidly authenticate customers, deal with routine inquiries and route the call to the appropriate agent or subject matter expert to deal with the interaction. The context of the interaction can then be passed to the employee or agent who can then be presented with the full detail of who the caller is, why they are calling, and what the best next steps to take are.

AI should enhance every step of the interaction to enable employees to most rapidly deal with inquiries regardless of their position within the contact center or outside it. Where an interaction needs more than one employee involved to resolve the inquiry, AI should be intelligently identifying the appropriate individuals to deal with the interaction.

2

Supervision

Direct supervision is no longer possible in a remote environment. A supervisor cannot physically see the agents they are supervising. In the contact center, at the best of times leaders face a constant battle to keep agents motivated, engaged and focused on solving customer inquiries. Social media scrolling, reading the news, playing games, switching themselves out the call queue and back in again to drop to the bottom of the queue—these are all well known challenges for contact center leaders when managing agents.

In a remote environment, desktop monitoring is a start but can only go so far. An agent has a plethora of new and exciting distractions. Some might be entirely innocent: a crying baby, a snuggly dog. Some might be less so, like watching a sports game muted in the

background, playing games on the phone or Xbox, and that's just for those without wireless headsets.

Contact centers clearly have to pivot from a focus on hours worked to output produced. AI technologies can record every word said, and understand the sentiment of both the caller and the agent. Coupled with post-call surveys and customer experience data, this provides not only a complete view of how each agent is performing, which calls they are struggling with, and where they have challenges, but also exactly how the agent and overall contact center are performing.

Any drop in performance can be immediately identified and investigated. Agents who know that their productivity is being monitored are much less likely to fall to tempting distractions in the first place.

3

Training

Supervisors aren't sitting next to agents; agents aren't sitting next to each other. This presents significant challenges for contact center leaders, who know that only a small fraction of what an agent learns is in the classroom. The rest comes from questions asked to colleagues, guidance from supervisors, reviews of their calls, and the methods they overhear from other agents who are handling tricky situations.

In a remote environment none of this takes place, and so technology must fill the gap. When a contact center has the full understanding of every call, they can not only tailor training to the exact agent, but also highlight

and share the successes that agents have, and the best methods of handling customers drawn from every single call the contact center has had. By removing the need for every call to be listened to by a person, contact centers can manage by exception and focus on the specifics that are most relevant.
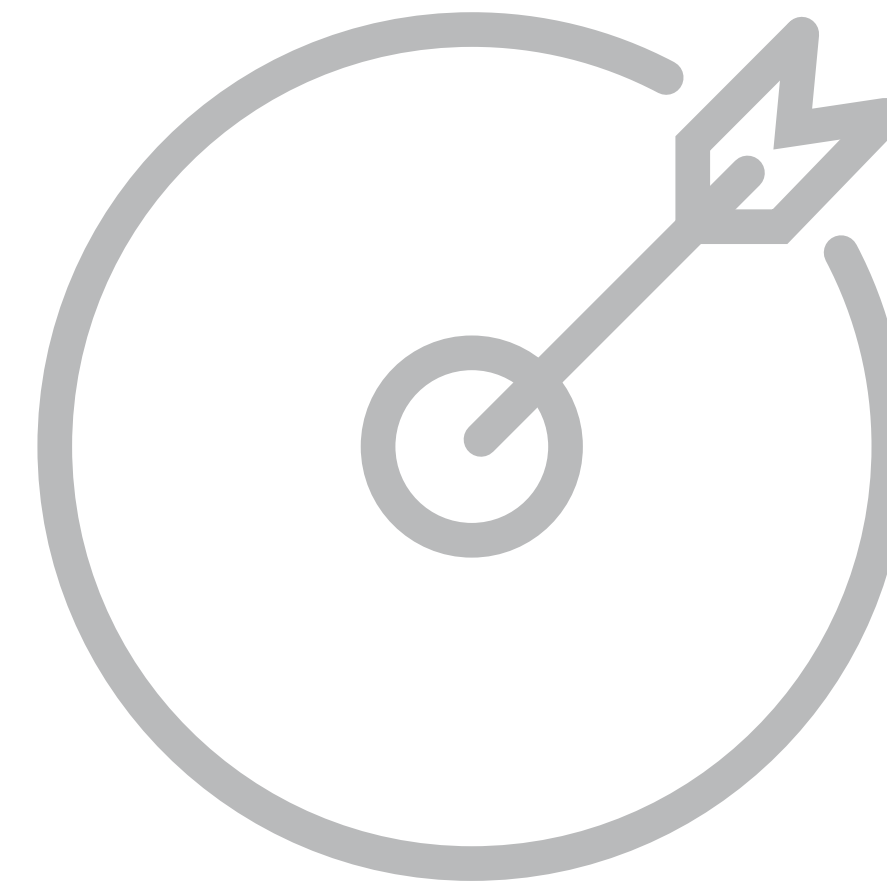
It should also be noted that all of the benefits of business communications mentioned above are particularly relevant to the contact center. The underlying voice quality is critical to the success of the contact center, particularly in times where global enterprises are having to overflow traffic between globally distributed contact centers to handle spikes in demand, and local outbreaks and lockdowns. The ability for agents to communicate with each other and the wider business is even more critical in such changing times.

Agents follow the path of least resistance. Give them an easier way to solve customer problems, and productivity, customer satisfaction, and business performance can improve dramatically.

Chris Marron
Director, Market/Competitive Intelligence, 8x8

Chris Marron is the Director of Market and Competitive Intelligence at 8x8. A leading customer experience expert and speaker, Chris has held a broad portfolio of roles in a variety of countries and cultures. His experience includes time spent both as an industry analyst as well as within the industry and he leverages this to deliver a fresh perspective on key trends and developments.

Customer Expectations Focus on Self-Service, Proactive Engagement

Russel Lolacher
International Customer Management Institute
Top 50 Thought Leader

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Customer Expectations Focus on Self-Service, Proactive Engagement

The thing about expectations is they never go down.

Your customers are getting exceedingly comfortable navigating digital engagement with brands. And the expectations they have around what service will look like in that landscape, continues to rise, whether your organization is ready or not. It's often said that customers aren't comparing you to your direct competition, they are comparing you to their last great customer experience.

The use of texting or SMS for customer interaction is no different, whether that's as a self-service tool or in how you use digital engagement proactively.

In a nutshell, self-service provides a resource for your customers to find the answers to their questions or problems, while proactive digital engagement includes your brand making the first step in communicating to your customer to better inform or assist them. For example, an upcoming appointment reminder, service updates, etc. (Spammy marketing doesn't count.)
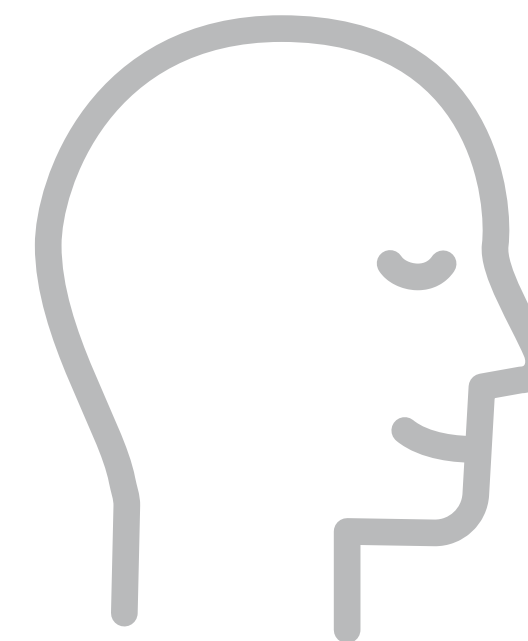
It's often said that customers aren't comparing you to your direct competition, they are comparing you to their last great customer experience.

If your organization is going to explore SMS in this way, you must understand the expectations your customers are going to have. And they will have them. They already do.

From SMS self-service, your customers expect:

- **Timely responses.** When connecting, they don't want to hear there is a 2–3 business day response time. When people text their friends and family, they expect a response quickly. That expectation has moved its way into these digital transactions. They want you to engage with them as quickly as their own friends would.

- **Solutions to their problems.** They have questions, so they want answers. Quickly. You should absolutely show some personality, either from your agents or a chatbot, but get to the point and answer them. This isn't an opportunity to put up sales-y roadblocks and scripted banter, it's an opportunity to help and be useful.
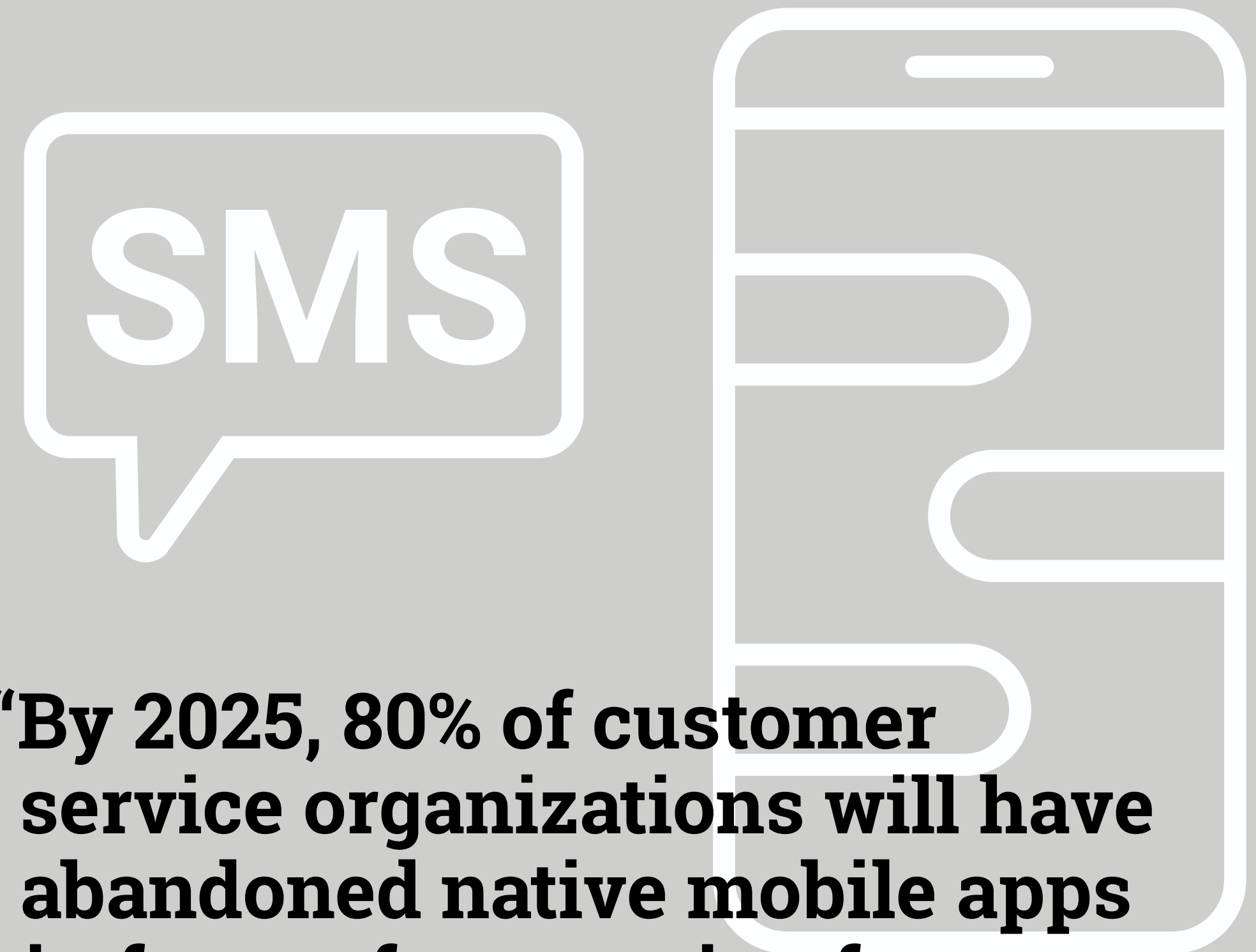
"By 2025, 80% of customer service organizations will have abandoned native mobile apps in favor of messaging for a better customer experience."

Gartner Predicts 2021: CRM Customer Service and Support

From SMS proactive digital engagement, your customers expect:

- **Personalization.** Of course people want alerts that impact all their customers and those in their regions, but also look to provide information impacting them specifically. Providing personally relatable information (an appointment reminder, a service they may need based on their last query or search to your website) will help build a connection and provide real value to your customer.

- **Ease.** Whether it's to opt into or out of the service, or the text language used to inform and engage the customer, interacting with your business should never be difficult.

To meet the expectations of your customers in 2021, consider:

- **Looking for opportunities to improve your customer self-service.** Are people being dropped? What is the percentage of resolved interactions? Don't just launch it and forget it. Make sure to monitor and improve the customer experience.

- **Using SMS/texting as a relationship tool.** Check in to strengthen the overall relationship, or send them a gift to improve loyalty.

- **Using SMS data to improve products and service.** Look at the feedback and trends acquired through this voice of customer channel. This is a valuable resource to learn about your customer, what they want and how they want to use your product or service. Improve accordingly.

Customers have strong expectations about the kind of service experience they want from organizations they engage with. And whether your organizations think they are high or not, is irrelevant. You're either meeting them or you're not. Make sure your SMS service is far more the latter than the former or someone else will.

Russel Lolacher
International Customer Management Institute
Top 50 Thought Leader

Russel Lolacher is a speaker, consultant and advocate for meaningful customer and employee relationships. From two-plus decades of service experience working on the front lines to leadership roles in call centers, public service and the retail and restaurant industries, Russel champions the importance of communication and trust building, online and in person. Writer of the Do More with L.E.S. blog, he has been named a top thought leader in customer service by Microsoft, Hootsuite and was named a Top 50 Thought Leader in 2020 by the International Customer Management Institute. Learn more at russellolacher.com.

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The Single Cloud Platform (CCaaS, UCaaS, CPaaS) is Rising

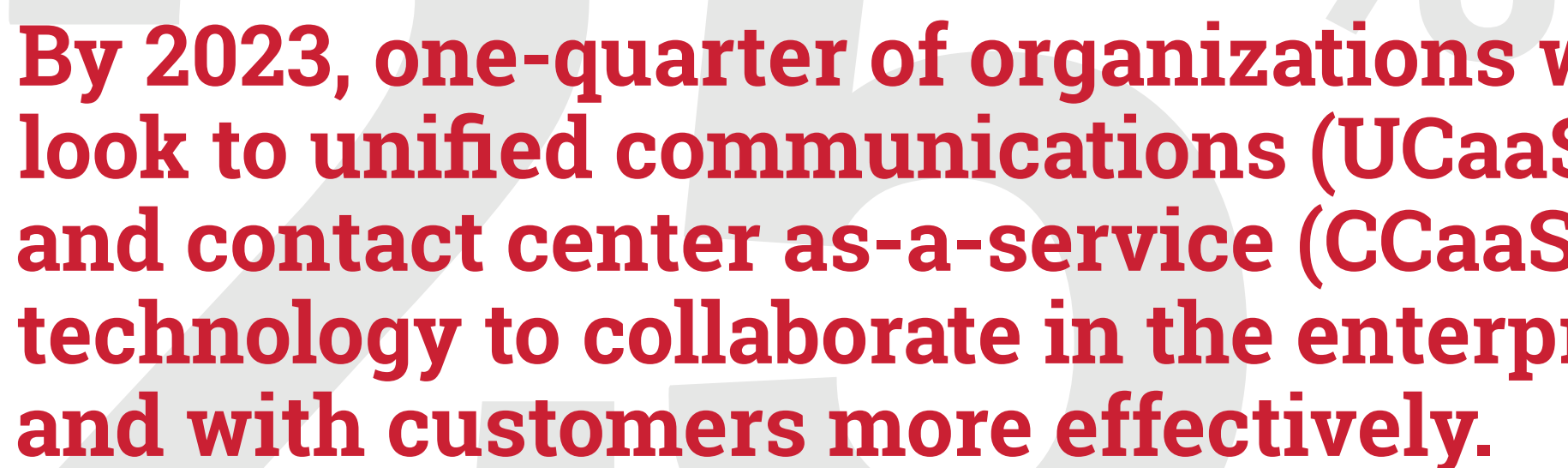**Keith Dawson**
VP and Research Director, Ventana Research

The Single Cloud Platform (CCaaS, UCaaS, CPaaS) is Rising

The following is an excerpt from the Ventana Research blog, *Trends in Contact Center Market for 2020 and Beyond*:

Cloud vendors have begun blending their offerings for contact centers and other business communications needs. The difference between these types of platforms often have more to do with the role they are serving in the organization than the underlying technology.

The next phase of market development is likely to see some consolidation of players and new ways of packaging offerings across these categories, which in turn expands the buying community. It is possible that the next two years will see a move towards broader emerging communications platforms and away from single-purpose applications. Enterprises will be able to turn communications services on and off with little regard for whether those services are being used in the contact center or in line-of-business departments.

25%

By 2023, one-quarter of organizations will look to unified communications (UCaaS) and contact center as-a-service (CCaaS) technology to collaborate in the enterprise and with customers more effectively.

We assert that by 2023, one-quarter of organizations will look to unified communications (UCaaS) and contact center-as-a-service (CCaaS) technology to collaborate within the enterprise and with customers more effectively. With a premium on openness, interoperability and integration to enterprise software tools, the next generation of contact center systems won't focus just on the contact center.

Segments like Voice of the Customer analytics are relevant to marketing and sales teams as well as service groups. When enterprises identify business problems in their CX, they are now just as likely to pull in broader groups of stakeholders to collaborate on solutions, using tools that also cross departmental boundaries.

Source: Keith Dawson, Trends in Contact Center Market for 2020 and Beyond, Ventana Research, October 22, 2020.

Keith Dawson
VP and Research Director, Ventana Research

Keith Dawson leads Ventana Research's expertise in Customer Experience (CX), covering applications and technology that facilitate engagement to optimize customer-facing processes. His focus areas include: agent management, contact center and voice of the customer and technology in marketing, sales, field service and applications such as digital commerce and subscription management. Keith's specialization is in natural language and speech tools with intelligent virtual assistants, multichannel routing and journey management, and the wide array of customer analytics. He is focused on how businesses can break down technology and operational silos to provide more efficient processes for two-way engagement with customers. Keith has been an industry analyst for more than a decade and prior was the editorial director of Call Center Magazine. There he pioneered coverage of cloud-based contact centers, speech recognition and processing, and the shift from voice to multichannel communications.

About 8x8

8x8, Inc. (NYSE: EGHT) is transforming the future of business communications as a leading Software-as-a-Service provider of voice, video, chat, contact center, and enterprise-class API solutions powered by one global cloud communications platform. 8x8 empowers workforces worldwide to connect individuals and teams so they can collaborate faster and work smarter. Real-time business analytics and intelligence provide businesses unique insights across all interactions and channels so they can delight end-customers and accelerate their business.

Ready to Unify?

Contact FUJIFILM CodeBlue for your free consult or for a personal 8x8 demo.
www.code-blue.com.au/8x8-unified-comms/
With 250+ tech and IT experts across ANZ, we'll make sure your solution sets you up for success.