



Customer service lessons from the pandemic

By Aileen Allkins, CEO & Founder of Aileen Allkins Consultancy

As we look towards a post-COVID world, there are many lessons enterprises can learn from the pandemic. For brands, this is an opportunity to reflect on the importance of customer sentiment.

The rapid change in how we conducted business demanded a new way of handling customer service. Some brands rose to the challenge and were creative in their response while others floundered and even continue to use the situation as an excuse for their failure to serve the customer well. Senior leadership have the opportunity to learn from what went well and what did not, especially when some of the biggest failures made headline news – a nightmare scenario for any C-Suite executive.

So when it comes to customer service, what stops a business getting it right? What can we learn from the failures (and successes) during the pandemic? And what three things should all enterprises be doing to make customer service a clear source of competitive advantage?

In this insight paper, **Aileen Allkins** – CEO & Founder of Aileen Allkins Consultancy and former Corporate Vice President – Customer Service & Support at Microsoft – explains what executives can do to adopt a customer-centric mindset at every level of the enterprise.

Why does customer service matter?

How you treat customers post-sale says a lot about how much you value them. Customers may need your products but they also want a great experience from the time they first interact through the purchasing cycle to the on-going service experience. The product may fulfil a function but the whole experience around it (pre-sale advertising, purchasing convenience and usability through to post-sale customer service) is what stimulates brand advocacy, loyalty and repeat business and there is a wealth of evidence that proves it.

The significance of customer experience (CX) – of which customer service is a key element – was on the rise before the pandemic. In 2010, just 36% of companies were competing on the basis of CX but, according to Gartner¹, by 2017 this had risen to more than 65%. The Economist Intelligence Unit report, *The value of experience*², shows that 64% of companies with a customer service-focused CEO had greater financial success than their competitors.

So why do some companies fail to deliver great customer service while others excel at it?

The shining lights

We start with examples of brands who prioritised the customer in the initial months of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Brands such as HEMA³ – a chain of grocery stores across China from online giant Alibaba – responded by introducing new layers of knowledge about their goods. They also provided customers with information about the individual person delivering the item to the customer so there was a layer of human connection to what could be a cold, online process.

In Germany, ALDI and McDonalds initiated a staff sharing plan⁴. McDonald's workers from temporarily-closed branches could redeploy at ALDI stores. This helped people maintain their salaries, ensured the supermarket had easy access to customer-facing staff and showed that McDonald's was making positive strides to support its staff.

Aldermore Bank in the UK focused on providing a more robust digital banking experience⁵. They improved knowledge availability to relieve the pressure on customer service centres. They also created a smooth process for mortgage repayment holidays and provided its business clients with access to support funds. As a result, customers left overwhelmingly positive reviews on well-known platforms like Trustpilot.

Customer service successes were not limited to external initiatives. Some companies recognised the close link between employee and customer satisfaction. They chose to prioritise staff needs so they could focus on their work without some of the anxiety surrounding COVID-19. For example, the UK telecom operator BT, offered all frontline staff a 1.5% pay rise in July 2020. It also guaranteed that no employee would be made redundant in the three months that followed.⁶

And customers also benefited with Admiral Car and Van Insurance (UK) automatically giving every customer a £25 refund in April 2020. This was in recognition of the fact that people were driving less at the time. Yet the company didn't need to do it. It was a simple act of showing it cared about its customers.

1 <https://www.gartner.com/en/marketing/insights/articles/key-findings-from-the-gartner-customer-experience-survey>

2 https://perspectives.eiu.com/sites/default/files/Genesys_Executive_Summary_-_GLOBAL_FINAL.pdf

3 <https://home.kpmg/xx/en/home/insights/2020/03/pleasing-customers-during-a-pandemic.html>

4 <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/marketing-and-sales/our-insights/connecting-with-customers-in-times-of-crisis>

5 <https://www.thedrums.com/news/2020/05/21/are-brands-getting-it-right-during-lockdown-here-are-10-examples-brands-upping-their>

6 <https://www.thinkbroadband.com/news/8714-bt-to-increase-staff-pay-1-5-in-july-2020>





Headlines for the wrong reasons

While some shining lights showed how good customer service was a positive endorsement of their brands, others did not do so well. Canadian airline WestJet's support line became overwhelmed at the start of the pandemic. Customers were left on hold for ten hours or more at a time when they needed clarity on bookings and refunds.⁷ Europe's largest airline group Ryanair went as far as to inform customers that the refund for their cancelled holidays would come "once the COVID-19 crisis was over", leaving customers in a state of limbo on exactly when that would be.

Away from the aviation industry, big name UK brands like Currys and Homebase were criticised for delays in orders and customer support. Currys received over two-thirds of bad or poor Trustpilot reviews⁸ and received more than 7,000 comments⁹ to a Facebook post in May 2020 from customers complaining about missing orders.

Even huge international organisations were poorly prepared or just made poor decisions. PayPal is just one company amongst many that was not prepared for such a spike in customer demand, that they temporarily turned off phone based support at the start of lockdown¹⁰. Others even used the situation to elicit extra money from customers.

Customers of the online holiday company Opodo were asked to pay £16.49 for 'perks' like confirmation emails, "fast" refunds, and "preferential, free customer service". For 'standard' customer care, Kiwi, another online holiday business, charged £15.74. Customers who objected would receive "low call priority", "no email assistance", and "poor support availability", among other things.¹¹

According to the Financial Times (FT)¹², the DVLA (a UK Government agency) opted out of customer communications and removed its contact email address from the website. This left many in Britain without driving licenses, as the DVLA decided to pause operations and "sat on" those that had been mailed in.

Meanwhile, the LA Times noted how American Airlines made customers overcome multiple obstacles to try and get a refund¹³. When customers could get through to an agent, they would be asked to email someone else or mail supporting documents. However, most of the time, no one would get back to the customers.

There are three reasons for customer service successes or failures like these. The first is **leadership** and whether customer experience has active sponsorship from the top down. The second is the **enterprise culture** that empowers employees to effectively assist customers. The third is the **technology** that is used to support CX agents in their customer service roles and to provide insights that the enterprise can act on.

7 Elite Business, The Good, The Bad and The Ugly

8 <https://uk.trustpilot.com/review/www.currys.co.uk>

9 <https://www.theguardian.com/money/2020/may/17/service-falls-victim-to-covid-as-retailers-keep-customers-hanging-on>

10 Elite Business – The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly

11 <https://www.theguardian.com/money/2020/dec/27/>

12 <https://www.ft.com/content/afd38f04-e022-46d9-bfbc-c19ea9ad2e0b>

13 <https://www.latimes.com/business/story/2020-08-11/column-coronavirus-customer-service>

A wake-up call for leaders

Arguably the biggest blocker or enabler of differentiated customer service is just one person: the CEO. No CEO will say that they do not care about their customers. Yet how many take an active role and invest appropriately in the customer end to end experience?

Understanding what customer service and experience looks like from the customer's perspective is an invaluable experience for any CEO. This is not just about 'walking the floor' in a call centre visit. It is about understanding the sales experience, customer onboarding and product experience, as well as the realities of how challenging it can be to serve customers effectively. Reviewing the customer experience as regularly as the sales forecast is rarely done yet knowing how customers experience all of these touchpoints creates a clearer picture in the CEO's mind of what opportunities exist for improving the customer experience.

The pandemic has been a wake-up call for many CEOs. There may well have been some leeway at the beginning with customers putting up with long hold times or several days to respond to an email because they knew everyone was adapting to something unprecedented. In the time that has elapsed, patience with poor quality customer service has worn thin but still many examples remain.

A report by the Call Centre Management Association¹⁴ found that more than 50% of customers had difficulties with customer service in 2020. A January 2021 comment piece in the Telegraph newspaper¹⁵ even made the point that some businesses were still using the pandemic as an easy excuse for delivering poor customer service.

There are mitigating factors. Businesses in sectors worst affected by lockdowns and restrictions, such as airlines and travel agents, faced huge financial challenges as sales plummeted. Yet customers still needed service. They wanted to know about cancellations, rescheduling and refunds. Some put all staff (not just trained customer service agents) on the phones to help customers at such a busy time or quickly shifted to online operations and others simply chose not to. While this may have been because of immediate financial considerations, the long-term impact on these brands could be even more severe.



¹⁴ <https://www.cmma.org.uk/leading-contact-centre-teams-through-change/>

¹⁵ <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2021/01/17/lockdown-has-legitimised-terrible-customer-service-not-even/>

CEOs have a lot on their plate – from compliance to data privacy and cybersecurity as well as the profitable functioning of the business. Some of these priorities are accepted as critical perhaps because of the legal and financial ramifications of any failure. Yet without good customer experience there is also the risk to the long term success of the business. Customer service is vital to a customer's lasting impression and therefore brand loyalty.

Delivering first-class customer service needs genuine CEO sponsorship. Jeff Bezos' relentless focus on the customer paid dividends for Amazon and there is no reason all CEO's can't have the same commitment to their customers.

CEOs also need to build a team around them that can deliver on their customer-centric vision. It's all well and good having a customer centric CEO, but if their direct reports are not genuinely behind them then any customer service strategy is doomed to fail. The CEO must select the customer experience champions for the C-Suite.

Organisation flexibility

CEO's need to lead a customer-centric enterprise but they also need to build an organisation that has operational flexibility to adjust rapidly to change. The pandemic has altered much of what would have been considered normal daily operations, but swift and significant market disruption from new entrants could do the same.

Flexibility is key to organisational resilience. Adopting a fluid management hierarchy within customer service operations is one way leaders can support those closest to the frontline in times of a crisis.

Traditional customer service operations management is a classic pyramid structure. The fewest people with the greatest control sit at the top. Each level below is more heavily populated but with less and less control. Towards the front lines, junior managers are often the ones with the highest span of control, and are closest to the customer, yet often they are the least equipped to deal with a crisis. They experience pressure from above, below and from the customer.

At times of significant disruption, senior management must be prepared to support junior managers actively and directly. This typically happens when case volumes spike, customers become more demanding and employees are stretched to their capacity, resulting in periods of stress. In effect, the pyramid needs to be flipped.

This can be as simple as leveraging active listening with the frontline teams to understand what they need to better serve customers and ensuring they get it. It could also mean adjusting the often strict and very controlled metrics and service levels that customer service teams usually have to adhere to. During times of crisis, all normal metrics have to be revisited and active crisis management may mean senior managers taking on additional tasks to allow the frontline team managers time to focus on the customers.





Happy employees = Happy customers

Focusing on leadership and management is one thing. Yet the key to great customer experience lies in enabling and empowering frontline customer service teams. From managers and team leaders to customer service reps, these people are the face of the business – certainly post-sale. They are on the receiving end of the full range of human emotions every day as they deal with customers needing assistance. If they are uninspired or they lack support, training and the tools to serve customers effectively, it is unlikely they will be motivated or able to do their jobs well and that directly impacts the customer experience.

During various pandemic-related restrictions, everyone was dealing with their own personal challenges, such as new financial worries, looking after young children or being unable to see family and friends. Many dropped into the lower levels of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Instead of needing 'love and belonging', 'esteem' or 'self-actualisation', they were struggling with 'safety needs' and even the basic 'physiological needs'. Not all businesses recognised this shift or did enough to really take care of their frontline employees. They failed to appreciate how much happy employees lead to happy customers.

Frontline customer service

Sometimes the only human interaction a customer will have with a brand is with the customer service department. If that interaction is negative then it will undermine everything positive about the customer experience that has come before. Recognising the critical role customer service plays in the overall customer experience, progressive businesses are changing their perspective. For some, customer service is no longer seen as a cost centre but a way to drive business value. And that means thinking differently about customer service frontline teams by seeing them as valuable as the sales teams.

Aerospace manufacturer Boeing has relayed the importance of customer service teams by showing them their impact on business performance and how this inspires competitive advantage. Telecoms provider T-Mobile has turned customer service into a differentiator through its 'Team of Experts' initiative.

Maintaining the company culture

Taking the time to look after employees pays dividends. Showing frontline workers that managers care can boost morale and productivity. The shift to remote working during the pandemic interrupted some of the positive advances in these areas. Maintaining a strong company culture is clearly harder when people are not together. Yet not enough companies trained their managers at all levels in the company to lead, manage, inspire and engage remote teams. It is a very different skill that somehow managers were just meant to figure out themselves.

Clear communication is essential. News of changes such as the introduction of new technologies should be easy to understand and highlight how it will affect people, especially when employees are working from home and cannot discuss things as easily with their colleagues. Being open and honest with employees and offering ways for people to provide feedback may seem like common sense but not every enterprise does this.

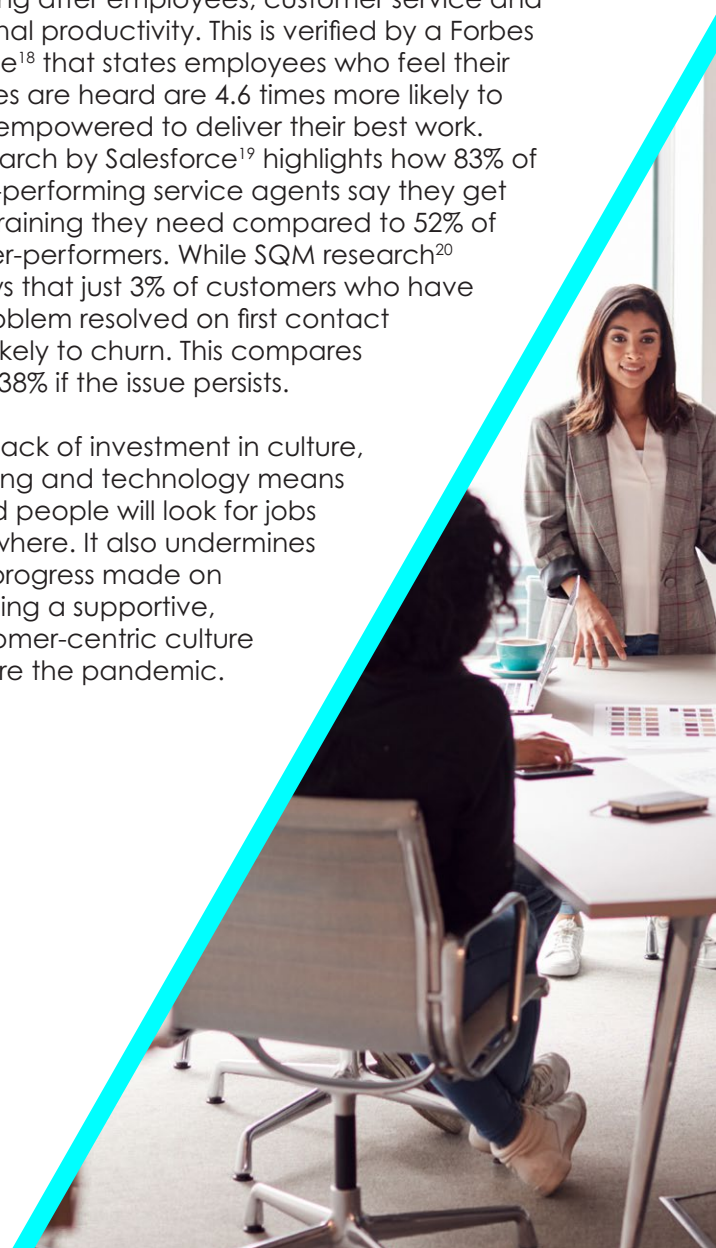
While some people have found more freedom to do their work, research by Clutch¹⁶ shows that as many as 4 in 10 employees (39%) feel less productive working from home. This could be the lack of togetherness and management oversight, personal motivation or how well the organisation has supported them away from the office. Recognising people are different and need different things to work at their best is crucial to maintaining a positive culture, this in turn influences how people treat customers.

The importance of tools and training

According to research by UK telecoms provider O2¹⁷, almost a third of people (31%) say their organisation has not supported them well during the COVID-19 pandemic. The same number say they have not been provided with a laptop or desktop computer. Two in five (42%) did not have access to all relevant work systems and few had access to an additional screen, ergonomic chair or laptop stand that could help them focus on work without neck and back pain. The same report also highlights how 33% feel they have missed out on training or skills development during the pandemic.

There is a clear connection between training, looking after employees, customer service and internal productivity. This is verified by a Forbes article¹⁸ that states employees who feel their voices are heard are 4.6 times more likely to feel empowered to deliver their best work. Research by Salesforce¹⁹ highlights how 83% of high-performing service agents say they get the training they need compared to 52% of under-performers. While SQM research²⁰ shows that just 3% of customers who have a problem resolved on first contact are likely to churn. This compares with 38% if the issue persists.

Any lack of investment in culture, training and technology means good people will look for jobs elsewhere. It also undermines the progress made on building a supportive, customer-centric culture before the pandemic.



16 <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/39-of-employees-feel-less-productive-during-the-covid-19-pandemic-employers-have-responded-with-mental-health-support-and-workday-changes-301089875.html>

17 O2 Dynamic working report, 2021

18 <https://www.forbes.com/sites/nazbeheshiti/2019/01/16/10-timely-statistics-about-the-connection-between-employee-engagement-and-wellness/#3ecceb622a03>

19 <https://www.salesforce.com/blog/customer-service-stats/>

20 <https://blog.hubspot.com/service/call-center-metrics>

Technology for technology's sake?

There is real concern within the field of customer service that technology – especially automation – means swapping people for robots. In organisations that place little emphasis on the value of the human element, this may well be true. In others, new technologies are seen as the latest toys but there is little commitment to finding ways they can add value. However, those organisations focused on true customer-centricity and who appreciate the value the frontline teams bring are using technology to boost customer service by making it easier for their service agents to serve customers.

Supporting the customer experience

Dedicated customer service technologies can help enterprises deal with customer queries faster than ever. Chatbots built on artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning (ML) can recognise the next best path and answer many typical questions. Digital workers can operate alongside human agents and take on some of the more mundane or repetitive tasks. This frees up staff to focus on more complex cases and even increase customer value.

Here, the role of technology should not be to replace human contact but to make it more meaningful. It can also help organisations understand what is going on in near real-time rather than looking back over broad measures of customer service or satisfaction – like First Response Time or Net Promoter Score (NPS). **Customer Thermometer** is one example of a simple and effective use of technology to measure the quality of individual service interactions and gain actionable insights from customers 'in the moment'.

"I see interesting opportunities in proactive customer service. One-to-one marketing, utilising the information from the back of the business to the front, can energize and engage your market. I expect future CX to be real time, where product development sits with customer support teams and uses that information to connect with markets, rather than relying on disjointed research."

*Lindsay Willott, Founder,
Customer Thermometer*

Diversifying the 'workplace'

With remote working firmly established as a workplace option, technology is also enabling people with different backgrounds or work styles to join the customer service profession. With video conferencing and cloud calling, people with disabilities or those who could not easily travel into an office now have more opportunities to work in this field. Enterprises can leverage the gig economy and still offer people the potential to build a rewarding career. Customer service also offers flexible employment to suit carers or people with young families that need to work outside the traditional hours of 9 to 5.

Limitless is an example of a Gig provider serving global brands through a growing network of gig workers.

"As Gartner says, by 2023, the gig agent employment model will account for 35% of the total customer services workforce, with PWC advising that 50% of workers will be freelancers by 2025. Limitless is continually encouraging companies to adopt GoodGig® practices to ensure fair rewards for working. We're empowering people to earn money for providing brilliant customer service for brands they love, while helping businesses access new talent pools to create 24/7 agility as well reduced cost to serve and an enhanced customer experience."

Megan Neale, Co-Founder & COO

For teams that continue to work from home post-pandemic, platforms like AmplifAI will enhance remote performance, coaching and team engagement. Its AI-powered recommendations help team leaders focus on the right kind of customer service and align what people do with the organisation's business goals. It also serves up actions that individuals can follow to become top performers and allows team leaders to work with underperformers and coach them to be more effective.

“Remote work requires transitioning from legacy managerial approaches to creating a more engaged and empowered workforce. Our core customer base is made up of people focused organisations that need to rethink their employee engagement, coaching, remote work performance management and talent retention within an intelligent contact centre. AI-driven actions that empower and enable front-line associates and front-line leaders help our clients create their workforce of the future.”

Sean Minter, CEO, AmplifAI

Using data to differentiate

Cloud-based data analytics platforms provide richer insights into customer needs. New systems can provide agents with details of past conversations and suggest next best paths to take the conversation. This avoids the common frustration customers have when being forced to repeat details. It can also provide a more Amazon-like experience (people that bought this also bought...) whereby recommendations are already prepared.

Migrating to cloud solutions also means enterprises can bring together a number of different customer service platforms in one place. Companies like Co-op have recognised that switching between multiple legacy systems undermines customer service. They have moved to a cloud-based customer relationship management (CRM) system and now agents have a single view of each customer.

Emerging technologies like Abbyy's Process Intelligence Platform allow customer service organisations to extract data from multiple sources, and once ingested, merged, and analysed, provide insights into how specific processes are working and highlight any issues so these processes can be optimised to improve customer service.

“With Process Intelligence, organisations can map, understand, analyse, and determine which processes can be optimised and benefit from automation to support a better outcome. Once automated, processes will be monitored and assessed. This allows humans to focus on improving customer service through exception handling or managing more complex cases.”

Ulf Persson, CEO, ABBYY

Encouraging adoption of digital technology will depend on communication and training. Self-learning or gamification can help upskill agents and test whether they are using the tools correctly. At the same time, managers need to explain to employees how these technologies will help them in their roles and deliver the higher levels of customer service that everyone is working towards.



Learning the lessons

The pandemic has highlighted why customer service should not be an afterthought. Those that have been consistent or adapted to the crisis have been rightly applauded for their efforts. Not just in the media but by their own customers.

Aldermore Bank responded swiftly to its customers' needs for reassurance and support. HEMA focused on bridging the divide between online and offline customer experiences. While ALDI and McDonald's teamed up to support the workforce, their own businesses and the customer.

Still, many enterprises lag behind the standards set by these progressive companies and they are falling further and further behind. The impact could not be more serious. The headline in one Forbes article captured it perfectly: "Ninety-six percent of customers will leave you for bad customer service."²¹

Yet there are several key lessons that senior leaders can learn to turn customer service into competitive advantage.

- **It all starts at the top with the CEO**
By setting the direction for the organisation and bringing together a team of customer experience champions, a relentless focus on the customer will become part of the culture.
- **Nurturing culture is imperative too**
Giving people who deal with customers every day the tools and training they need to be effective – whether in the office or at home – is a start. Demonstrating empathy, listening to their needs and learning from their first-hand experiences of dealing with customers will go further in keeping employees motivated and productive.
- **Technology can help but it is not a silver bullet**
It has a clear role to play in reducing monotonous customer service tasks and can support a diverse range of people in joining the workforce. It can also provide the insights to make substantial improvements in workflows, yet cannot replace the empathy and understanding of real people.



To some, the pandemic may seem like an anomaly. Yet many business leaders anticipate further disruptions or crises in the not-too-distant future. Instead of treating 2020-21 as a blip, C-Suite executives should learn from those that prospered from positive customer service then apply the lessons within their own organisations.

21 <https://www.forbes.com/sites/shephyken/2020/07/12/ninety-six-percent-of-customers-will-leave-you-for-bad-customer-service/?sh=10e1456c30f8>



About AAC

AAC was founded by Aileen Allkins in 2020 to provide executive-level services for improving customer experience unavailable to most enterprises. Over the course of her 30-year career, Aileen Allkins has been transforming the customer service and support experience of some of the world's best-known technology companies. Aileen's experience informs the enterprise services AAC provides and her unrivalled industry expertise is a key to our CX Advisor support.

To find out more, visit our [website](#)

