

RETAIL

Customer calls crucial to brands this holiday season

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Holiday call volume is up since 2015. Image credit: Bloomingdales

By SARAH RAMIREZ

As the holiday shopping season kicks into high gear, retailers need to be prepared to handle high call volume and provide quality customer service.

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Despite a growing number of brands automating customer interactions, many shoppers still prefer to speak with human service agents rather than chatbots or robo-calls. New research argues that both human and automated interactions have a place in customer service, calling for companies to find a balance between the two.

"Customers crave human interaction, but that doesn't mean they are opposed to technology," said Kathleen Hickey, marketing manager at **Usabilla**, New York. "Companies must strike the right balance between offering technology solutions and human representatives.

"Elevating the human touch is important when it come to complex situations, but companies should still use technology to simplify and streamline customer interactions," she said.

Call me maybe

According to research from call tracking and analytics provider CallRail, holiday call volume has increased 379 percent over the past two years. CallRail analyzed the number of calls made to the more than 100,000 businesses from 2015 to 2017.

Green Monday, the second Monday in December, saw the highest growth in call volume with an increase of 1,621 percent since 2015. Call volume on Black Friday and Cyber Monday jumped 229 and 235 percent over the same period.



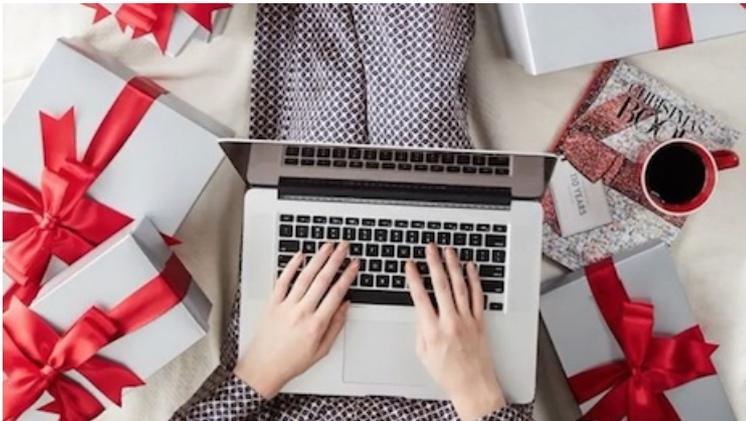
Cyber Monday and Black Friday are integral in the holiday shopping season. Image credit: Nordstrom

Many of those calls involve customer service requests, such as changing or canceling orders or booking or rescheduling travel.

Technology provider Usabilla found that 55 percent of customers prefer to speak with human customer service agents over the phone. Only 36 percent would prefer to use a chatbot when dealing with a simple and straightforward issue.

Usabilla's 2018 report is based on a survey of 1,000 U.S. consumers between 18 and 72 years old who have used any customer service options that allowed them to completely avoid human interaction for a given customer service issue.

Nearly three-quarters of respondents, 73 percent, attempt to skip the automated phone tree system by hitting zero to reach a human agent. Speed is still appreciated among shoppers, as 54 percent said they would always choose a chatbot over a human representative if it saved them 10 minutes.



Consumers have mixed feelings on chatbots. Image credit: Neiman Marcus

There is a lot at stake for brands when it comes to customer service. According to Usabilla, 82 percent of consumers will be less likely to recommend a brand to others after one poor customer experience.

"Companies looking to offer quality services and improve the phone tree need to make sure that they are providing the best, most efficient customer experience through better training and more efficient management systems and processes," Ms. Hickey said. "When asked where brands could improve, 40 percent of customers suggested better training for customer service reps, while 31 percent want faster customer service."

Digital help

Customers are increasingly wary that growing adoption of digital tools will make shopping less personal and more frustrating.

While the weeks leading up to Christmas are brands and retailers' busiest times in terms of sales, the days immediately following the Dec. 25 holiday are some of most active for returns.

On Dec. 26th, brands and retailers typically see some of the highest numbers of returns and exchanges as consumers return gifts of wrong sizes and colors or make other corrections. For brands and retailers, chatbots can be one way of easily handling the increased load of Web traffic as customers float questions and concerns about

how to return their gifts ([see story](#)).

In a report from Adobe and Invoca, 80 percent of respondents believe face-to-face interactions with a brand representative result in the most empathetic service experiences.

Adobe's Experience Index also found that 53 percent of respondents would rather interact with a person than a computer. Less than a quarter of consumers found voice assistants or chatbots effective at providing emotional intelligence ([see story](#)).

"Customers want the quickest and easiest experience possible when dealing with brands, and they expect to accomplish the most simple tasks independently," Usabilla's Ms. Hickey said. "Companies can dedicate more time towards handling high call volume by automating the tasks that customers are happy to do on their own."

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