

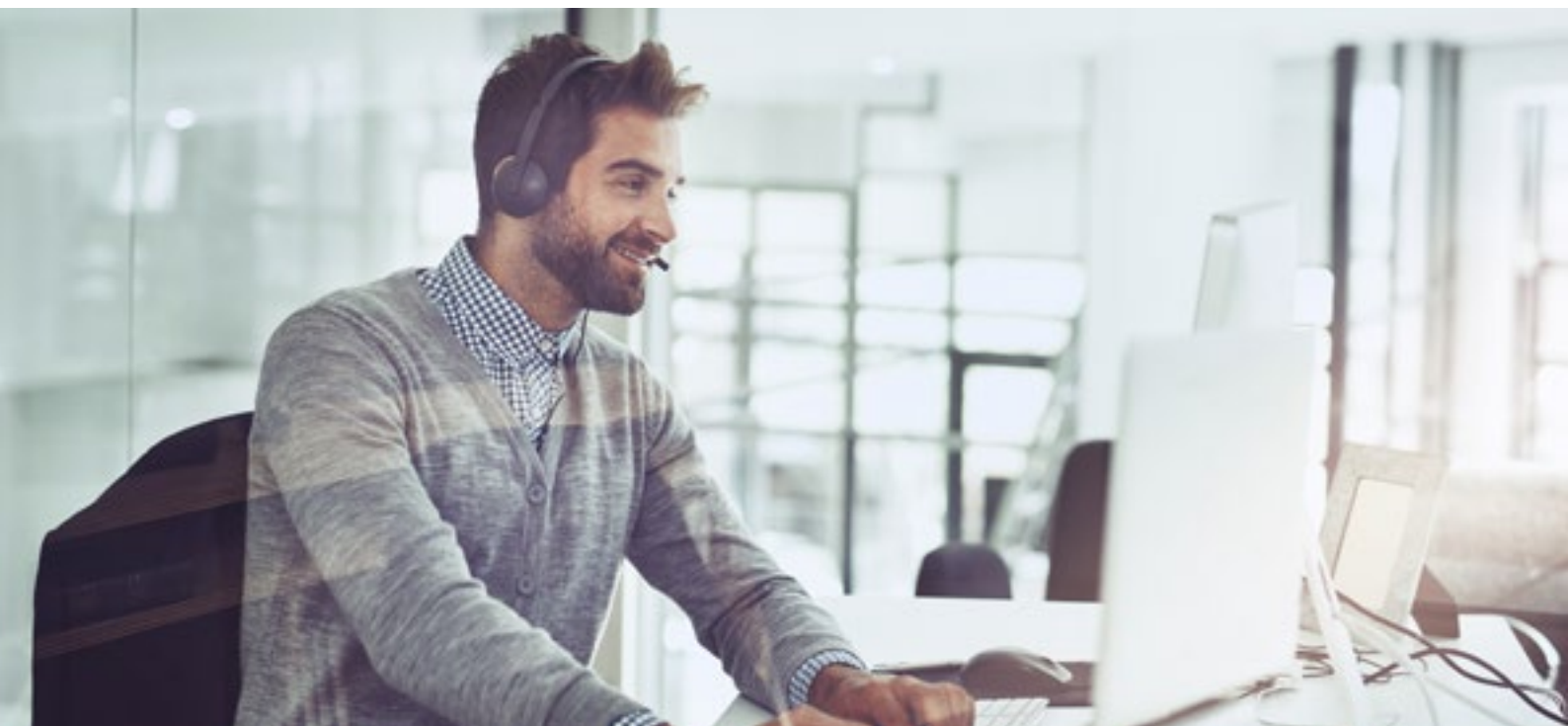
CloudCall Insight

Perfecting the Art of Conversation:
how businesses are managing
increased call volumes

CloudCall 

CONTENTS

<u>Introduction</u>	2
<u>The phones are still ringing</u>	3
<u>Delivering seamless interactions across channels is a challenge</u>	6
<u>Inbound teams under pressure - How are businesses coping?</u>	8
<u>Outbound - The end of phone alone</u>	12
<u>Conclusions - Transforming the customer conversation</u>	14



The COVID-19 crisis has stress tested the Customer Support function to its limits. Travellers desperate for refunds, workers seeking payment holidays and vulnerable people looking for food deliveries have placed massive pressure on airlines, banks and retailers.

Call centres were first to reach crisis point, as traffic peaked and staff were sent home or fell ill. Many restricted the type of calls they would handle while some simply shut down. But there was also a knock-on effect on other channels, including websites, apps and social media. Twitter remained one of the few channels open, and these Tweets reflect the frustration customers felt:

“Are you answering any of your phone calls from customers other than with recorded messages?”

“They have ignored my tweets, phone calls were unsuccessful, and email address no longer monitored! Not good enough!”

“I need to speak to someone but every option on the phone line says, “We can’t take your call right now” and hangs up on me. How do I get someone to help me?”

“What happens if I get no email confirmation of my order for tomorrow? No one answers the phone at my branch”

As businesses start to move out of crisis mode, many will be wondering how they could have been better prepared. So now is an ideal time to think about how voice fits in with other channels within the world of customer service.

The Art of Conversation is a series of research papers, commissioned by CloudCall, exploring how businesses are using the phone to have a more effective dialogue with customers in a multi-channel environment. In this report we look specifically at why voice telephony is increasing, and how businesses are managing that increase with limited resources.

THE PHONES ARE STILL RINGING

In the world of omni-channel customer experience, where customers have email, text and social media at their fingertips, it's easy to think that there's no place left for voice telephony. But that couldn't be further from the truth, as the reaction post lockdown showed.

Customers prefer to call for problem resolution and to arrange appointments.

Research among customers (fig. 1) showed that nearly half (45%) prefer to use the phone to arrange or change an appointment or service call. That's double the number who prefer self-serve on a website (20%) or email (24%). Similarly, picking up the phone is the preferred channel for getting support and sorting out a problem with a delivery. Only when it comes to accessing system-based information, such as delivery status, do self-serve channels really come into their own.

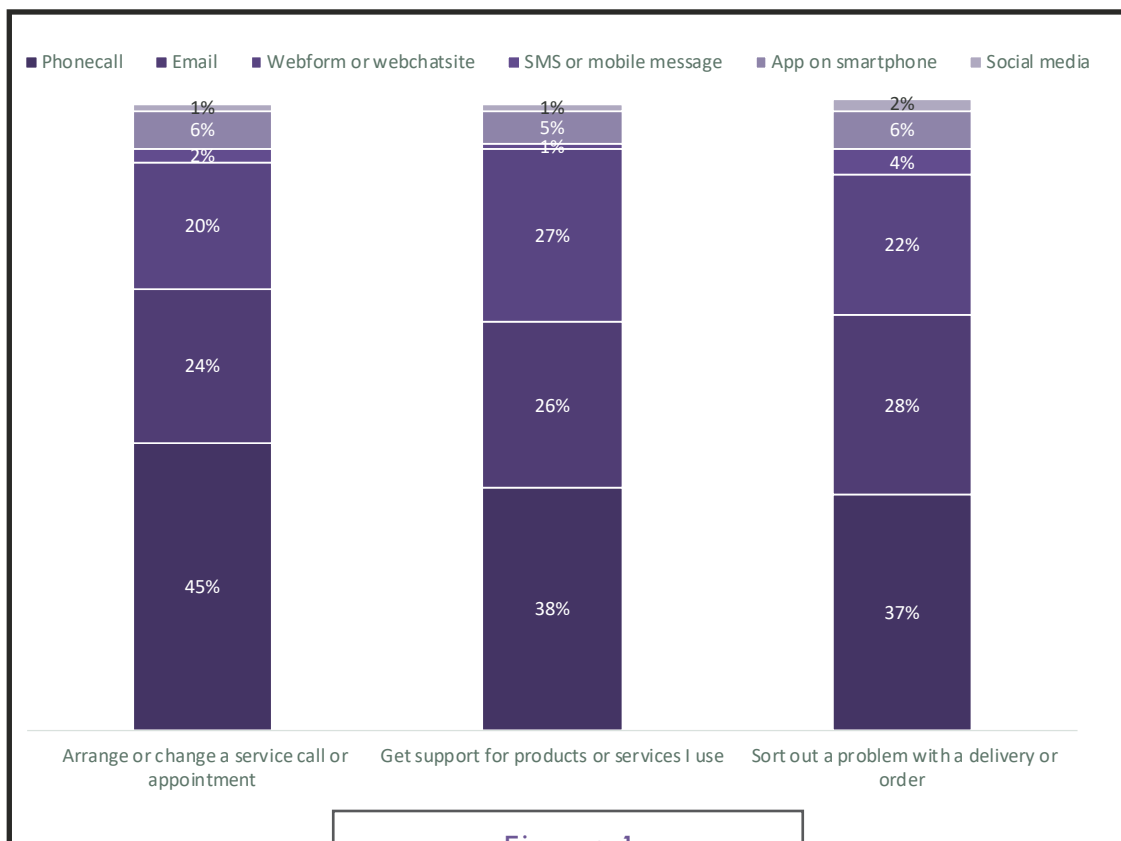


Figure 1
Preferred inbound channel when customer needs help

Call volumes are increasing

It's no surprise then, that even before COVID, more than two thirds (69%) of businesses reported that call volumes in their contact centres had actually increased in the last 2 years. Overall, customer facing businesses in the UK reported a 12.6% rise in inbound calls over that period.

12.6% average rise in inbound call traffic in the 2 years pre-COVID

So what caused this increase? While some businesses cite organic growth, others attribute it to customer choice. 52% of the businesses who have seen a surge in inbound traffic say it's because **customers prefer to talk to someone**, and 49% say it's because customers want a faster response (fig. 2).

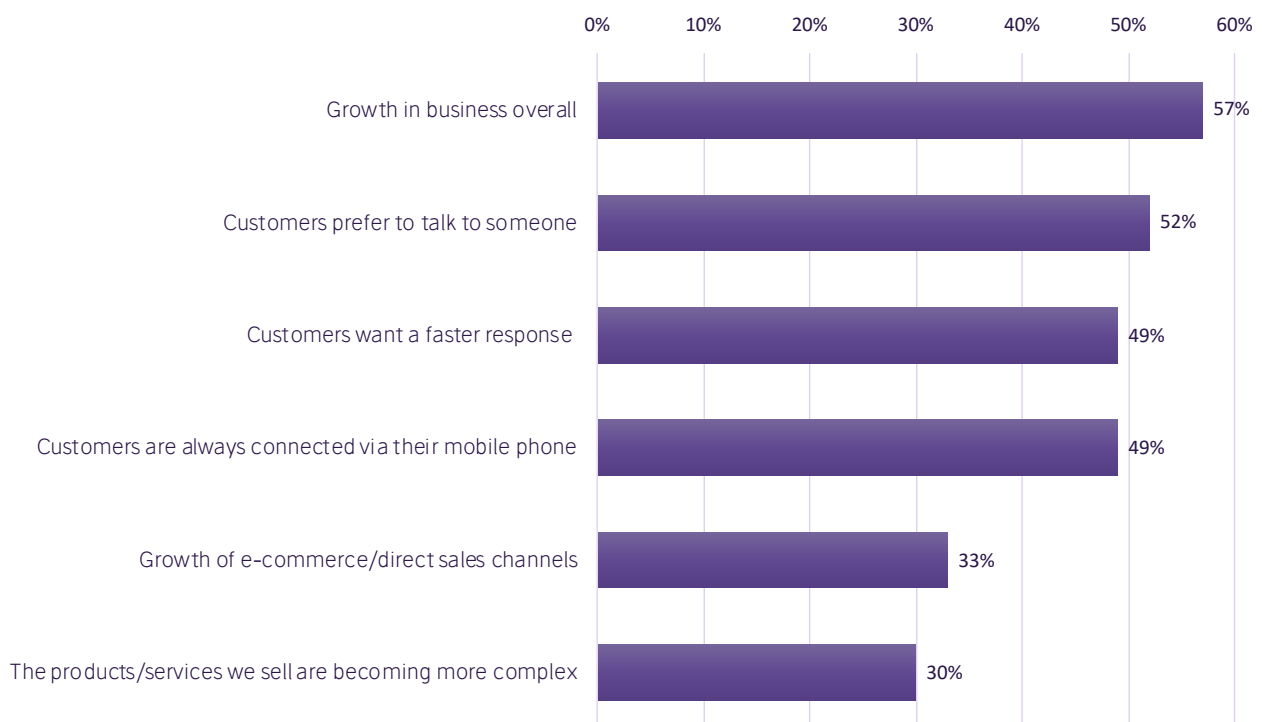
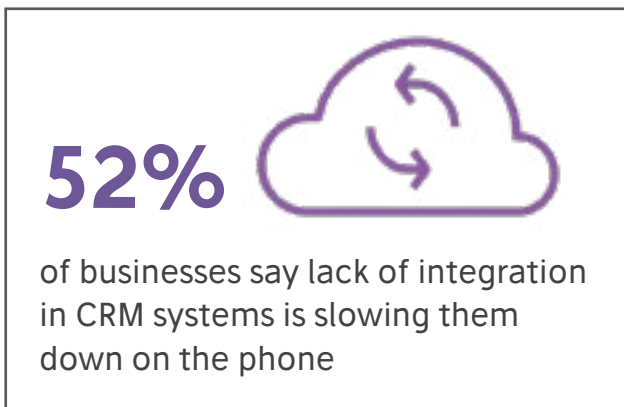


Figure 2
Drivers in growth of call volumes

DELIVERING SEAMLESS INTERACTIONS ACROSS CHANNEL IS A CHALLENGE



Customers want seamless interactions. 68% say they get really frustrated if they contact a firm and they don't have their account history to hand. But 80% have experienced just that – times when they have to explain things over again if they need to get back in touch.

Businesses are still on a journey towards omni-channel.

Businesses recognise that customers want omni-channel, but many are still on a journey to delivering it. Giving customers access to the right channel at the right time is seen as a priority by 78% of businesses, with 45% saying that this will be critical to their success in 2020.

But omni-channel is much more than offering a wide range of channels. As customer journeys become more complex, there is a

need for better integration between channels. 83% of the businesses we spoke to highlighted improving integration between channels to allow better hand off as a significant priority for the coming year. And that's something that would clearly be welcomed by their customers.

A lack of a single CRM across channels is holding call centres back.

As the COVID crisis deepened and customers became more desperate, they bombarded businesses across numerous channels. But to add to their frustration, many found that once they did make contact, there seemed to be little or no knowledge of their customer history.



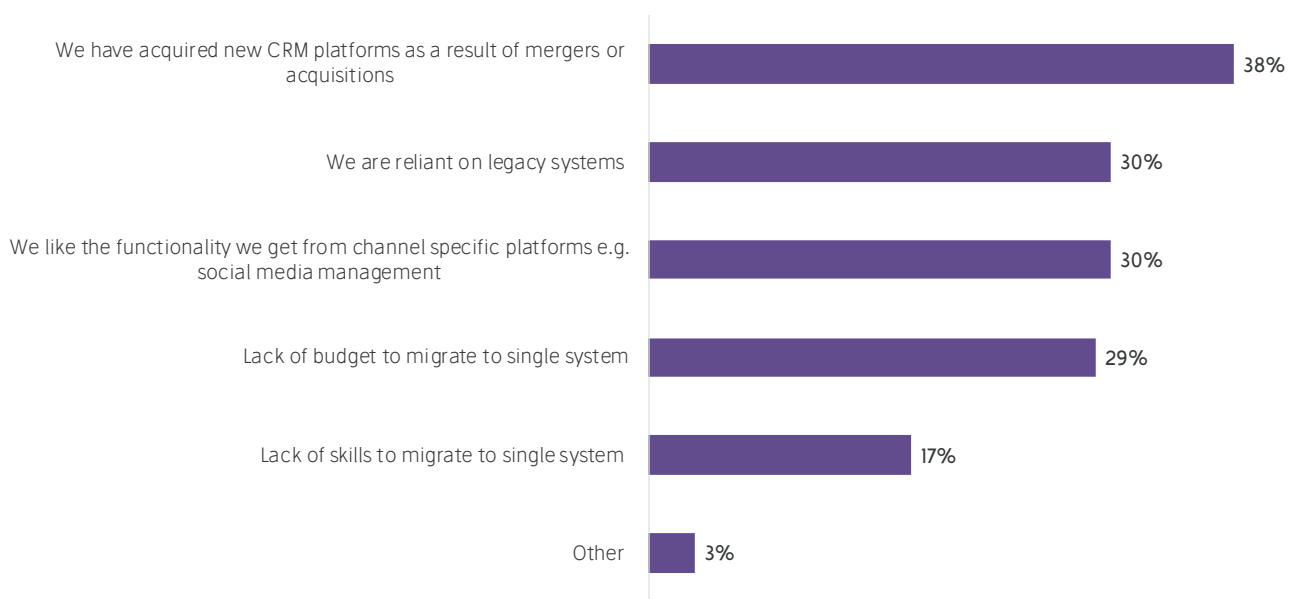


Figure 3
Reasons for not using a single CRM

In fact, as our research shows, just 38% of businesses hold all of their data in a single CRM, regardless of the channel it originated in. This is rarely a situation of choice. Of those who have data distributed across multiple systems, just 30% made an active decision to do this based on the way they wanted to manage those channels (fig. 3). For others, they are simply dealing with an infrastructure acquired at different points in time or inherited through acquisition.

It's worth remembering that **voice telephony is often the point of last resort, or the channel chosen when things go wrong.** Many customers are happy to self-serve for straight forward interactions, but when things get complicated, they pick up the phone. This means that, in call centres more than anywhere else, access to CRM data is essential; it's not surprising then, that three quarters of businesses (77%) see giving customer service agents access to account details and customer history as a priority.

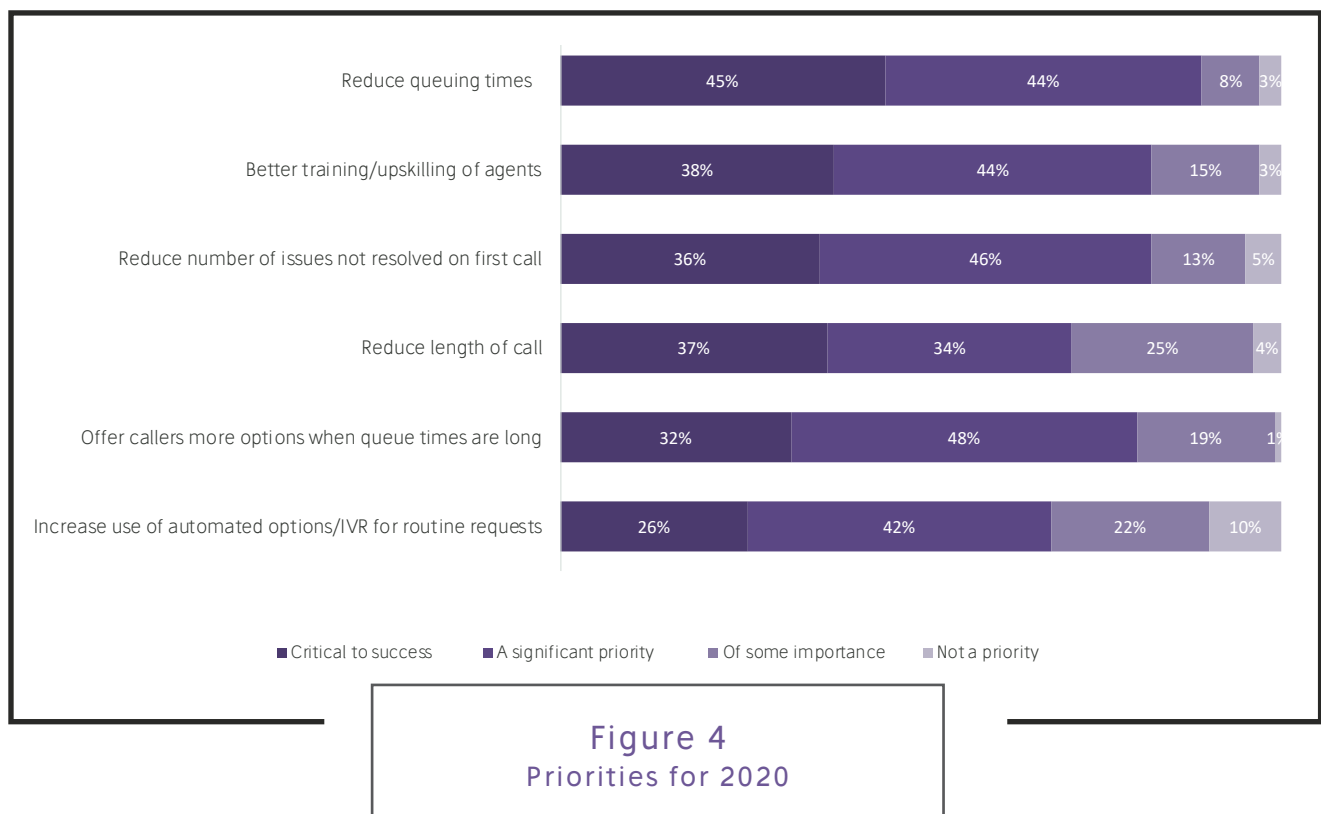
INBOUND TEAMS UNDER PRESSURE

HOW ARE BUSINESSES COPING?

Even before COVID, call volumes were rising, and businesses were struggling to meet customer demand. What we now know is that while they are indispensable, they can't cope alone in a crisis. Building call centre operations fit for the 2020s is going to take a transformation in how services are delivered across multiple channels. It will also mean looking at how voice telephony fits in the wider channel picture. How can other channels shoulder some of the burden? And what needs to happen to deliver the seamless experience customers expect?

The drive to manage queue times.

Reducing queue times was seen as the number one priority for call centres, even before the crisis. Our research showed that 9 out of 10 saw this as a significant priority. Indeed, almost half of all businesses go so far as to say it will be critical to their success.



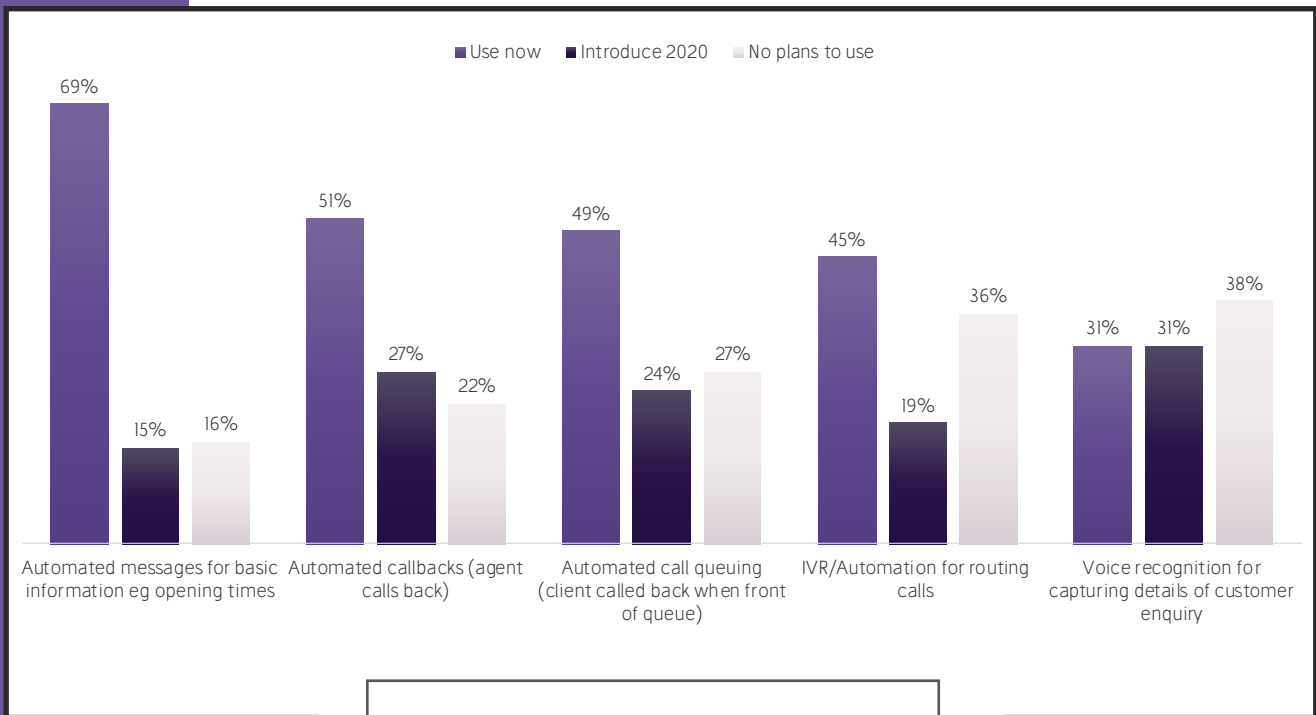


Figure 5
The future of automated inbound

Queue times hurt businesses in two critical ways. Firstly, they increase pressure on call centre resources, and secondly, they cause dissatisfaction for customers. This discontent leads to significant customer churn with nearly half (46%) of customers stating they had bought elsewhere or cancelled a contract because they struggled to get in contact with a supplier (fig.4). As figure 5 shows, managers are looking at a variety of strategies to bring down queue times, but the overall approach is three-pronged:

1. Increase self-service/reduce agent intervention
2. Offer virtual queuing
3. Better handling of calls, so they are shorter and resolved first time

How technology is helping to reduce the burden on inbound call centres.

To deliver on the first two strategies, businesses are turning to technology and looking to parallel channels to ease some of the burden.

At the most basic level, automated messages for simple questions like opening hours can be a quick win. 69% of customer-facing businesses employ the technology to do this in some form today (fig. 5).



Automated messages and routing deliver efficiencies for businesses, and mean that routine calls can be dealt with without the input of a live agent. That's a win for everyone if implemented well and in the right scenarios.

- Callers get access to the information they need fast
- Agents are put under less intense pressure as low value calls are filtered out
- Call centres see increased efficiency, with reduced resources or better allocation of resources

Queues are unfortunately still inevitable, but businesses are also using technology to create a smoother process through virtual queues. 51% have technology which allows callers to opt for an agent to call them back, and a further 27% plan to introduce this in 2020.

Again, this is an all-round winner. Minimising the frustration for the customer means that agents have more productive and less stressful conversations when they do connect. But perhaps most persuasively, businesses are gaining and retaining customers they might otherwise have lost.

“Now agents phone back we get more business. It used to be customers wouldn't hold the line, then would use a different company, but now we phone back we can make the deal”

“The customer feels more in control by having a say as to when and how we call back”

“Automated messages allow many customers to know our opening and closing times because we often change it”

“A lot of time is lost answering regular simple questions when the information is easily available on our website. Automated messages help maximise resource”

Giving agents the skills and tools they need

The last of the three strategies is all about the quality and the efficiency of conversations. As we have seen, Interactive Voice Response (IVR) and automation is being used to manage out the many routine enquiries which don't need an agent to answer. Indeed, 87% of businesses are looking for ways to automate routine enquiries so they can focus agents on more complex enquiries.

But what that means is that agents will increasingly find themselves dealing with the more challenging calls which can't be machine managed. To do that, they are going to need more sophisticated skills and knowledge – about both the customers and the products. This is no doubt why more than four fifths (82%) of businesses highlight better training and development as a priority.

In parallel, agents need rapid access to customer data to deal with these more complex enquiries. **78% of businesses say that giving agents access to account details and customer history across channels is a priority for them.**

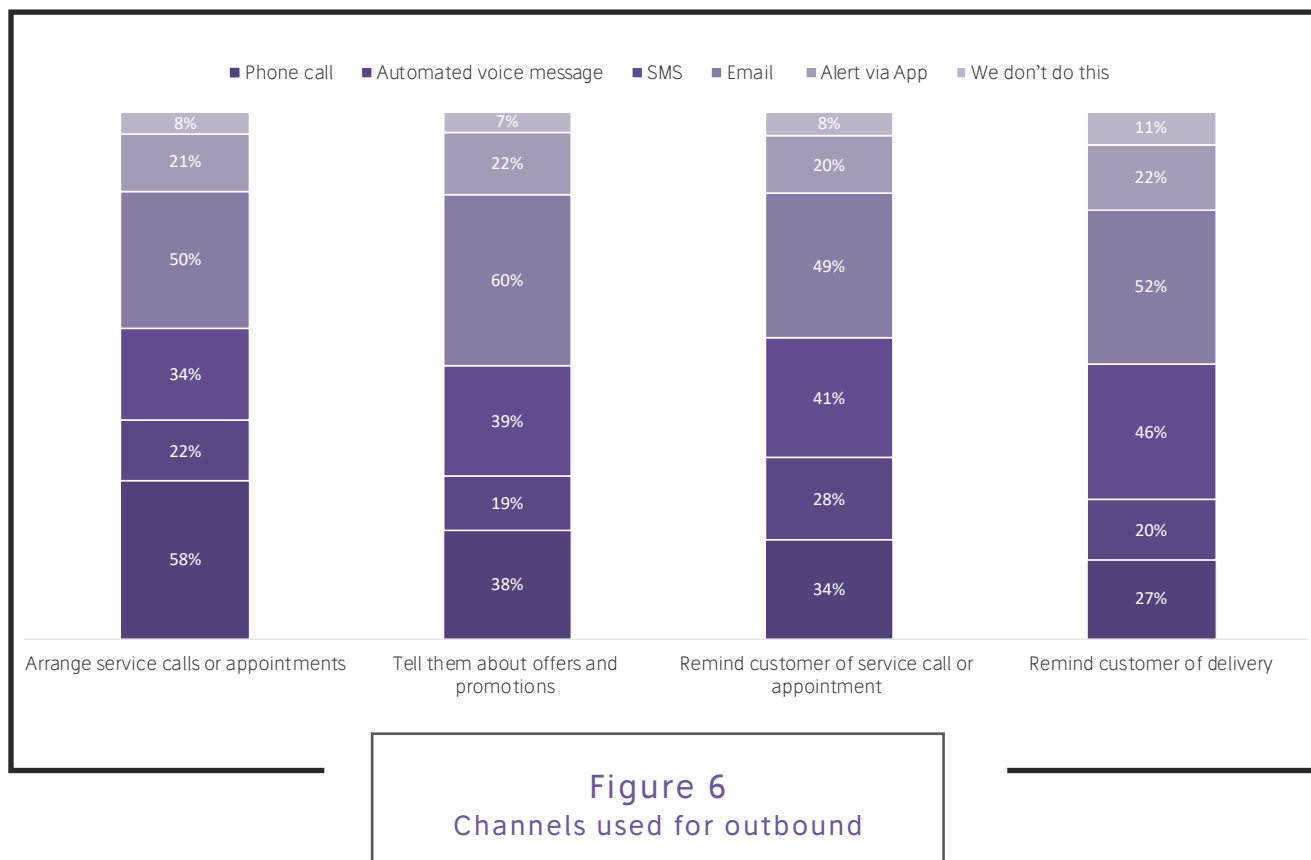
Remember: half of customers have gone elsewhere because they have given up on trying to get in touch.

OUTBOUND - THE END OF PHONE ALONE

As businesses emerge from the crisis and try to rebuild customer relationships and sales pipelines, outbound calling is sure to re-emerge as a hot topic. As figure 6 shows, phone is the most widely used channel for arranging service calls and appointments, but for sales calls and reminders, email and SMS are more widely used.

Email dominates the landscape for large scale marketing campaigns because it is less costly. 43% rate email as the lowest cost channel as figure 7 shows.

But voice telephony makes an impression and gets results. 51% say it is the channel most likely to get attention and 47% report that it gets the best response rate. This might explain why businesses prioritise voice for arranging service calls and appointments.



SMS can power up outbound and cut missed appointments.

Voice telephony on its own has its limitations. 67% of customers say they won't answer their mobile phone if they don't know who is calling. That can be costly, especially if that call is to remind the customer of a pre-arranged callout or appointment – or even an interview.

“ It shows we are dealing with the problem and they have not been forgotten ”

Service-led businesses (e.g. travel, logistics and utilities) are more likely to leave a personal message than their counterparts in retail and e-commerce (73% vs 48%). They report that it makes the customer feel valued and is more effective.

They are also more likely to follow up using an SMS with contact details or a link to a self-service area, and this too gets tangible results. Those who use SMS for reminders state that it has resulted in 19% fewer missed appointments or unsuccessful callouts. Businesses have only to think of the cost of each appointment – be it a service call or a job interview – to appreciate the impact of this.

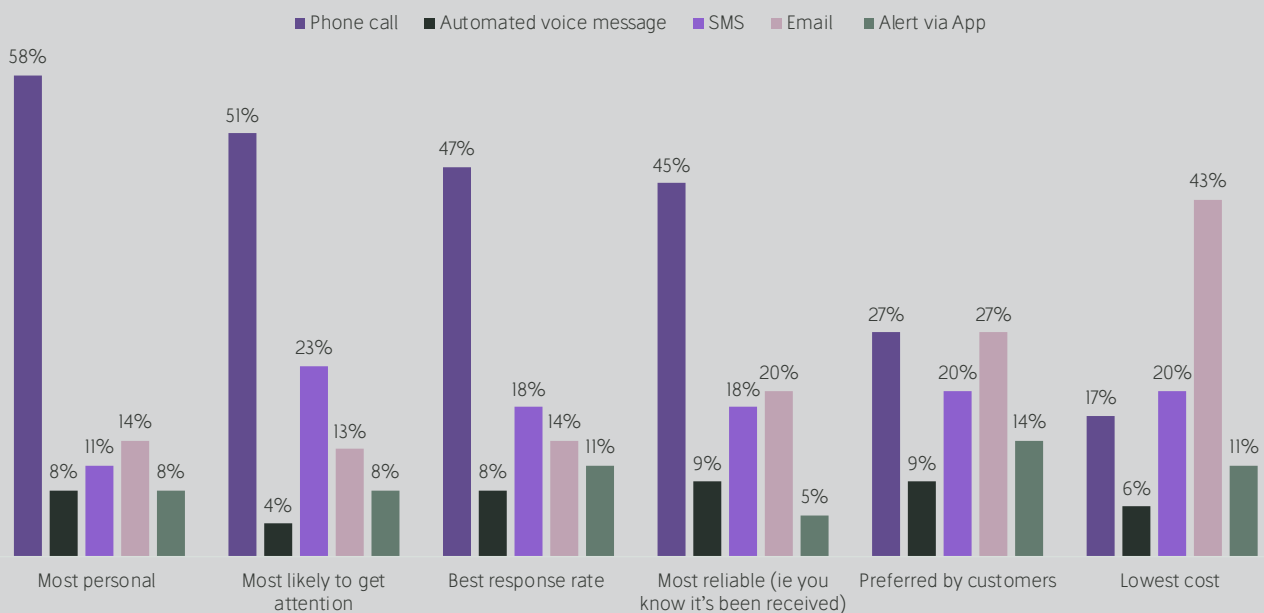


Figure 7
Channel strengths



SMS reminders can reduce the number of missed appointments by 19%.

CONCLUSIONS: TRANSFORMING THE CUSTOMER CONVERSATION

The COVID-19 crisis has shown us that in times of stress, customers want to talk. It has also highlighted the need to use other channels to manage more routine traffic. Through our research, we have identified five strategies for having better conversations.

01

REDUCE AGENT INTERVENTION

Identify the routine enquiries which can be machine managed; that way agents can be utilised where they are most needed.

02

UPSKILL AGENTS

Agents will need training to deal with the more complex and demanding enquires they are being asked to focus on. Invest in training or seek agents with a more sophisticated skill set.

03

POWER UP VOICE CONVERSATIONS WITH OTHER CHANNELS

SMS messages build on calls and reduce missed appointments and home calls.

04

CREATE VIRTUAL QUEUES

Technology for virtual queuing lowers tempers and results in more productive conversations; it also reduces lost business.

05

OMNI-CHANNEL MEANS ACCESS TO DATA

Make sure agents have access to the CRM systems they need to serve customers with multi-channel journeys.



CloudCall create innovative technology that makes business communications easier, quicker and more powerful. Through providing advanced software that integrates with CRMs, our users can manage their communications in the same space as their data, providing insight that has the power to transform the way they work.

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