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Customer contact centers 2022:

The state of the customer experience

Some companies get it right: When their customers call them, questions get answered, and problems get solved. It's fast, simple, and builds customer loyalty. Other businesses fail to make their customer experience seamless. Their teams struggle to manage call loads, can't access the right information, or don't have the authority to solve problems when they see them.

Businesses trust Tethr to measure their total customer experience. We use AI to analyze businesses' conversations with customers, so they can see how to improve customer service or optimize their sales process.

For this report, we focused on customer care. We evaluated more than 4.1 million calls to contact centers in the last six months. We looked across a myriad of industries, at both companies that delight customers and those that disappoint them. Here, we examine what the average company's calls look like, what creates poor customer experiences, and how industry leaders achieve success.

Technology heightens customer expectations

By the time a customer calls a business, they've run out of options to solve the problem on their own. Research indicates 84% of customers are already on screen when they place a call.¹

The customer service agents who pick up the line gambles with the future. Within a few minutes, a customer's relationship with a company may change forever.

A single bad interaction can prompt them to cancel orders, run to competitors, or rant on social media. Nearly half of consumers - 43%² will become disloyal after a single negative digital interaction. One great experience can mend a problem, earn some goodwill, and protect against future blips, but one bad experience can result in lost customers and revenue. Still, many customers calling support centers face an uphill battle to get their issues resolved. About one in four customers will have to overcome a hurdle when seeking the answers they need. In a time where research shows people expect more from customer service than just a year ago, and show less loyalty to brands, companies must pay attention.

¹ Source: [Glia/Forrester study](#) | ² Source: [Qualtrics study](#)

Most calls include positive language and many customer service agents advocating for customers. Yet, many of those same calls also included agent confusion, misdiagnosis of issues, and stereotypical reasons customers resist calling customer service: long hold times, transfers, and agents unable to resolve issues.

Tethr, an AI-powered platform, transforms raw conversational data into a comprehensive measure of the customer experience. Our automated scoring measures how difficult the experience was for the customer. Another score measures how well the agent handled what hurdles the customer threw at them.

What we found shows that yes, every business will encounter a small amount of irate customers who demand resolution or make threats. However, leading customer support teams have tactics to prevent making an unpleasant situation worse—and may even get a thank you at the end of the call.



Industry leaders that successfully coached their teams to act proactively also had lower risks for customer churn and fewer escalations.



About the data:

We analyzed a random sample of more than 4.1 million calls to customer contact centers during the six month period between November 2021 and April 2022. We anonymized these companies when benchmarking them against each other for purposes of this report. However, each company that uses Tethr can see how they rank when using our platform. The companies we analyzed include major retailers, financial institutions, and service providers. We limited our analysis to customer interactions at companies operating phone support and online chat support. Although customers also use Tethr for sales analysis, those conversations weren't part of this analysis.

Call metrics

The number of companies using chatbots will grow by more than 20% over the next five years¹. Despite this, most customers prefer to talk to a person instead of a bot when they need to sort out a problem with a company. They reach out to customer service centers, some operated by in-house staff, some outsourced.

These centers measure how long each call takes and how many issues get resolved. But while many may have anecdotal evidence of customer frustration peaking at certain times of the year or due to specific circumstances, not all call centers track information that can inform business decisions.

¹ Source: [Fortune Business insights](#)

² Source: [Tidio](#)



We didn't have to manually listen to 4.1 million customer conversations. We used artificial intelligence, Tethr's pre-built insight libraries, and the [Tethr Effort Score](#) to judge each conversation. Calls classified as a difficult experience for the customer - a unique score based on hundreds of different variables - also lasted, on average, twice as long.

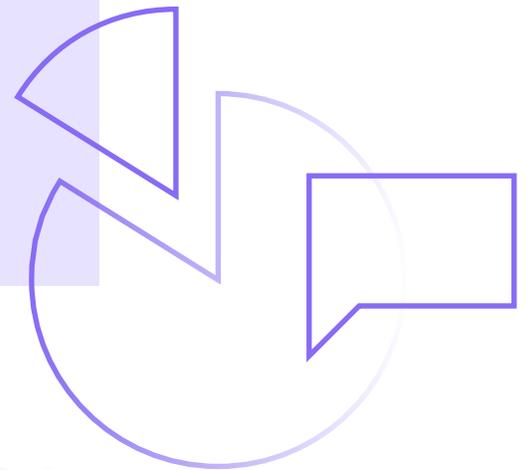
We also found that across various industries and seasons, some companies did a better job at keeping difficult interactions at a manageable level. Others had a much different story.

In the most troubling case, 22% of their calls receive a failing score - indicating a difficult, frustrating customer experience.

What's normal? The average company had 9% difficult interactions. Top performers had just 6% or fewer calls rated as difficult.

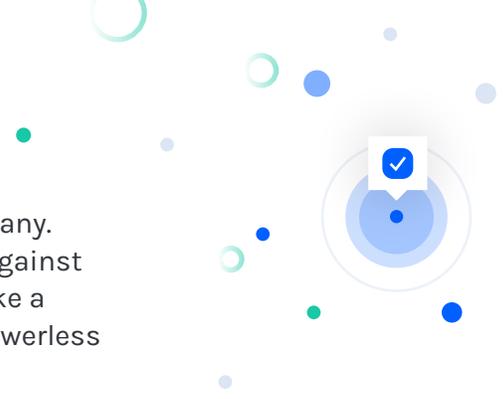
The bottom line:

No one can avoid having some difficult customer interactions, but high-performing companies keep it to a minimum.



| | 25th percentile | Median | 75th percentile |
|------------------------------------|-----------------|--------|-----------------|
| Difficult call length | 15:29 | 12:19 | 10:09 |
| Average call length | 9:24 | 5:45 | 4:32 |
| % of calls classified as difficult | 11% | 9% | 6% |
| % of calls classified as easy | 4% | 7% | 11% |

Agent behaviors



One critical moment can shape the way your customers view your company. Your agents have the power to diffuse customer frustration and guard against future problems with proactive questioning. Likewise, they can also make a critical situation worse if they seem disengaged, unwilling to help, or powerless to navigate against company policies.

Some agent behaviors matter more than others.

Advocacy can shape the fate of a customer support phone call. Research shows it has a larger impact than any other agent behavior. It's the difference between an agent saying "Let me see how I can resolve this," instead of just "I understand that happened."

The good news: Of all the positive agent behaviors analyzed, agents used advocacy the most.

Customers can lose confidence in an agent's ability to solve their problems if the agent seems confused or unknowledgeable. If company policies prevent agents from fixing an issue, customers may wonder why they called support to begin with.

Companies that have more of these "powerless to help" moments can signal to leadership that policies need updating and agents need coaching on how to resolve common problems.

These behaviors create more friction for the customer, which threatens long-term customer loyalty. More subtle agent behaviors can also prevent future problems. Agents who probe customers for more information can find undiscovered issues that can save customers from repeat calls or future frustration.

Key findings:

- + Of all positive agent behaviors, top-performing agents used advocacy language the most
- + The practice of expectation setting needs the most development across all call centers
- + Agent confusion was the most common negative behavior, detected when agents weren't sure how to solve customer problems or what steps to take next



Positive agent behaviors

Benchmarks indicate the percentage of a company's total calls where Tethr detected the agent behavior.

| | Worst | 25th% | Median | 75th% | Best |
|--|-------|-------|--------|-------|-------|
| Acknowledgement Percent of calls where agent expresses recognition and validation of customer's concerns or issues. | 1.3% | 12.5% | 20.3% | 22.2% | 50.4% |
| Advocacy Percent of calls where agent takes ownership of the customer's problem and uses proactive language to assure them that their problem will be solved. | 1.8% | 20.4% | 25.0% | 33.8% | 78.2% |
| Expectation setting Percent of calls where the agent sets expectations with the customer around the next steps in the process. | 8.6% | 14.2% | 18.0% | 21.4% | 66.9% |
| Proactive guidance Percent of calls where agents redirect the customer to an online self service channel or more information, enabling them to resolve their issue on their own in the future. Alternatively, agent offers a suggestion/recommendation for the customer on next steps. | 2.7% | 9.8% | 11.7% | 21.0% | 37.6% |
| Probing Percent of calls where agent probes the customer to uncover/diagnose the issue or concern the customer is experiencing. | 2.7% | 15.0% | 21.2% | 27.7% | 68.0% |

Negative agent behaviors

Benchmarks indicate the percentage of a company's total calls where Tethr detected the agent behavior.

| | Worst | 25th% | Median | 75th% | Best |
|--|-------|-------|--------|-------|------|
| Agent confusion Percent of calls where an agent expresses that they are unsure how to resolve an issue or next steps to take -- leads the customer to believe that the agent is not a knowledgeable source. | 23.7% | 15.3% | 11.9% | 9.7% | 1.0% |
| Powerless to help Percent of calls where an agent is unable (not unwilling) to assist customers due to external circumstances such as system issues or policies -- causes the customer to feel that the agent is not an authority. | 17.7% | 14.1% | 10.6% | 8.5% | 1.7% |
| Issue misdiagnosis Percent of calls where customer expresses their issue or concern is not being interpreted correctly by the agent. | 2.1% | 1.0% | 0.8% | 0.6% | 0.1% |

Journey friction

One critical moment can shape the way your customers view your company.

Ideally, the first person a customer talks to resolves their issue. Data shows this doesn't always happen. Transfers from one agent to another, holds, or redirection all contribute to what we call "journey friction." When several of these moments happen in one interaction, your customer struggles. The more they struggle - what we call chronic effort - the more likely they will move to a competitor.

These friction points frustrate your customers. But they also increase operational costs.

Call handling issues showed a wide gap between companies in the top 75th percentile and those in the bottom 25th percentile, especially marked for hold requests and transfers.



High-performing companies excelled at keeping a caller with one agent and solving the issue there.

Our analysis also uncovered the surprising most common friction point for customer journeys, but one that the use of conversation analytics can dramatically improve.



That problem source? Your company website. Website usage problems drove an average of 15% of calls to contact centers, with the most problematic sites prompting 25% of calls. This can mean customers had trouble logging in, needed navigational help, or experienced other usability issues.



While website issues may seem time-consuming, they can guide you to needed user experience improvements for your site. If you use those recommendations to make intuitive changes customers understand, it can reduce call volumes and operational costs.

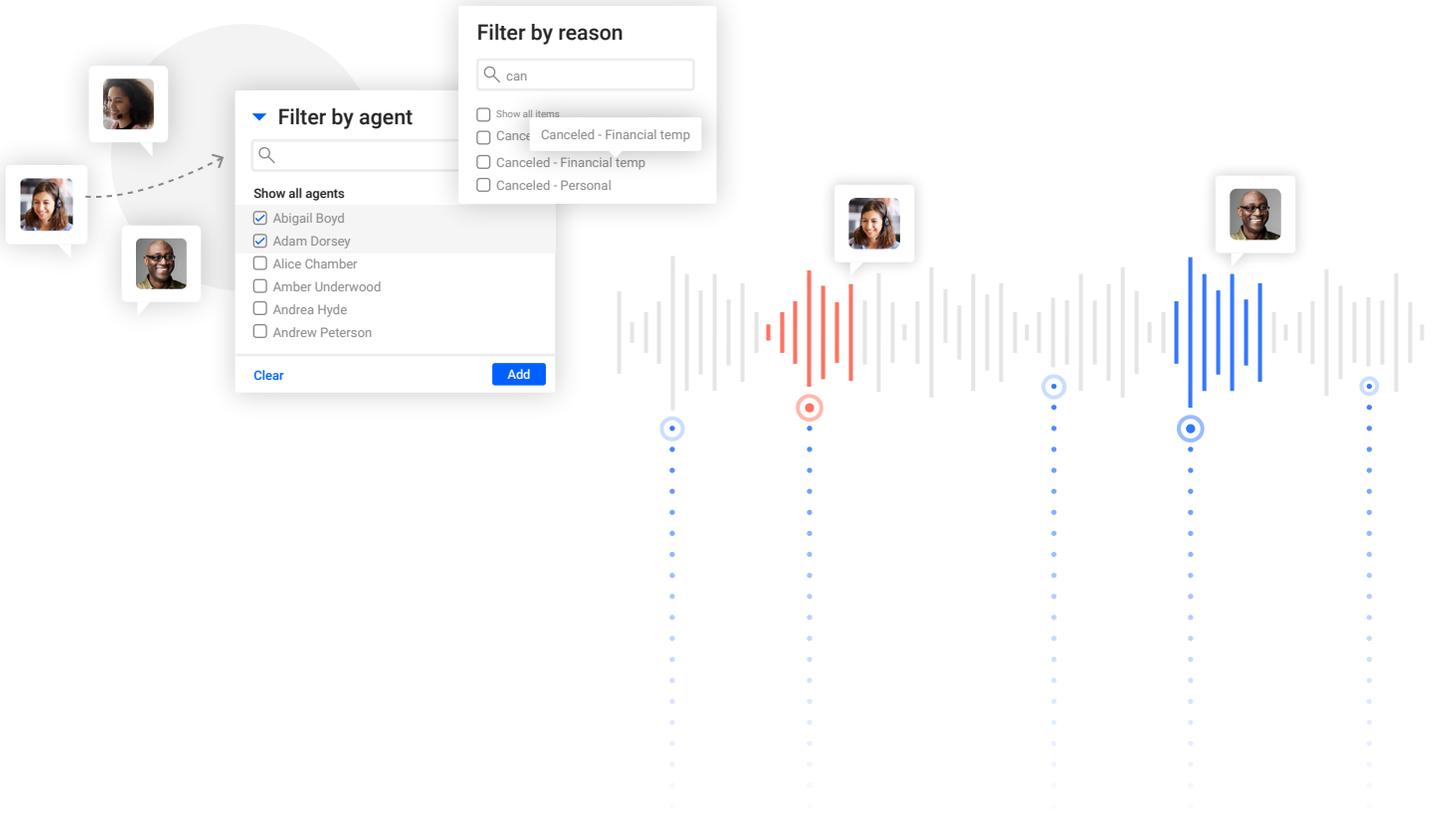
Key findings:

- + Hold requests were the most common call handling issue, occurring on average in about 14.3% of calls
- + At the lowest-performing business, about 1 in 4 calls were repeated contacts about the same issue
- + Issues with company websites drove an average of 15% of calls to customer support

Call handling issues

Benchmarks indicate the percentage of a company's total calls where Tethr detected the call handling issues occurring.

| | Worst | Lower 25% | Median | Top 75th% | Best |
|--|-------|-----------|--------|-----------|------|
| Customer can't understand the agent Customer says that they cannot hear/understand the agent or needs them to re-explain. | 6.1% | 1.8% | 1.2% | 0.9% | 0.0% |
| Hold requests Agent asks to place customer on a brief hold. | 35.6% | 19.2% | 14.3% | 9.7% | 0.3% |
| Repeat information Customer says they are repeating information they've already given in the call. | 3.1% | 1.9% | 1.5% | 1.1% | 0.0% |
| Redirects Agent re-directs the customer to get in touch with another company /vendor/third party/department that they are not able to transfer to. | 8.2% | 4% | 2.7% | 1.7% | 0.9% |
| Transfers Agent transfers the customer to a different agent or department. | 23.5% | 11.9% | 5.9% | 3.1% | 0.1% |



Customer journey

Benchmarks indicate the percentage of a company's total calls where Tethr detected the customer journey issues occurring.

| | Worst | Lower 25% | Median | Top 75th% | Best |
|---|-------|-----------|--------|-----------|------|
| Journey friction Percentage of conversations that reveal effort sources all across the customer journey. | 40.8% | 31.3% | 24.3% | 19.3% | 3.9% |
| Channel switching Customer attempted to resolve their issue using the website, app or chat but were unsuccessful or they were referencing a previous communication through email, text, social media, or chat. | 5.0% | 2.2% | 1.6% | 1.3% | 0.3% |
| Chronic effort Customer says that this is not the first time they have to put in some sort of effort to resolve their issue or concern. | 4.8% | 1.2% | 0.6% | 0.5% | 0.3% |
| Escalations Customer references either an internal or external escalation. | 4.0% | 1.7% | 1.1% | 0.6% | 0.3% |
| Repeat contacts Customer indicates that they have already been in or attempted contact with the organization by phone or other channels other than the call center, often referencing a previous or unresolved issue. | 24.9% | 13.9% | 11% | 7.9% | 0.5% |
| Website issues Customer mentions issues with either the Company App or website. | 25.2% | 17.4% | 15% | 8.2% | 2% |

Customer emotions

Ask any contact center agent: emotions during a support call can run high and agents have probably heard it all. Customers yell, curse, cry, and threaten.

Luckily, satisfied customers far outnumber the irate ones. But emotional exchanges shape a customer's perception of a company - and research shows that at least two-thirds of customer effort is about the customer's perceived effort in an interaction. That's why Tethr devotes much of its analytics on measuring the frequency, intensity, and potential damage of customer frustration.

Some industries might find themselves more susceptible to this. A call center dealing with high medical bills will undoubtedly hear more exasperation and emotional pleas compared to a support center that explains how to install household products.

We looked at not just how many of these customer conversations evolved into emotional war zones, but what nuanced situations led them there.

We also looked at common reasons that sparked the frustration, such as unmet expectations and broken promises.



Key findings:

- + Missed expectations were the most common reason customers expressed displeasure
- + Blanket statements of frustration were more related to exasperation of the process and the effort required to resolve their concerns. The bottom 25 percentile of companies had 10 percent or more of calls where customers expressed such sentiment.
- + **The good news:** Explicit satisfaction was the most common customer emotion detected, with top performing companies getting positive feedback from about 1 in 4 customers.

Customer emotions

Benchmarks indicate the percentage of a company's total calls where Tethr detected the customer expressing specific sentiments.

| | Worst | Lower 25% | Median | Top 75th% | Best |
|--|-------|-----------|--------|-----------|-------|
| Frustration Percent of calls where a customer is dissatisfied with the effort required to resolve an issue. Customer is upset, exasperated, angry with a process, situation, agent, etc. | 15.1% | 10.3% | 7.6% | 5.8% | 1.6% |
| Confusion Percent of calls where a customer expresses a lack of understanding regarding an issue or concern. | 15.1% | 7.3% | 5.8% | 3.9% | 0.5% |
| Missed expectations Percent of calls where customer expresses unfulfilled expectations due to agent misleading information or promises, never received a call back or follow-up, or information wasn't shared. | 19.6% | 10.3% | 8.6% | 5.4% | 0.4% |
| Missed promises Percent of calls where a customer reiterates were promised an action that did not occur. | 16.6% | 6.7% | 4.8% | 2.9% | 0.4% |
| Explicit churn potential Customer expresses desire to no longer use product/services through the organization. Or expresses extreme negative sentiment about the customer experience. | 13.6% | 3.6% | 1.8% | 1.2% | 0.4% |
| Explicit satisfaction Customer offers the original issue has been resolved or expresses strong satisfaction with the entire experience. | 0.9% | 12.2% | 18.8% | 23.8% | 36.7% |

Conclusions

The analytics here show the patterns that shape an overall customer experience. Knowing where you stand, and how you compare to the industry, can help you meet customers' expectations.

Tethr users get an accurate measure of 100 percent of their customer interactions. That also includes data from other types of customer interactions that weren't included in this study, such as chat conversations and other digital interactions.

Tethr analyzes conversations and distills the data on a set of dashboards, called TethrRx, which highlight the most important metrics. Leaders can take that analysis and immediately identify areas for improvement, understand the business problems that trigger customer complaints, and find cost-savings.



Consider this

 One company that implemented Tethr focused on call center performance improvements saw a 27% drop in “powerless to help” statements, 132% increase in advocacy and 300% increase in expectation setting for unresolved cases. [Read the case study](#)

 MetTel implemented Tethr as part of its CX strategy and within 60 days reduced repeat callers 28%, reduced churn risk 26% and reduced operational costs 11%. [Read the case study](#)

 A credit union that implemented Tethr increased self-service by 14% and reduced time spent on QA analysis by 80%. [Read the case study](#)

See your metrics for free

Want to compare where you stand? [Sign up for a free Tethr trial](#) and see how your customer calls compare.