

A woman with dark hair, wearing a light pink button-down shirt and a headset with a microphone, is sitting at a desk in a call center. She is smiling slightly and looking towards the camera. Her right hand is on a computer mouse, and her left hand is resting on the desk. In the background, another person is working at a desk, and there are large windows. The overall setting is a modern office environment.

**Jabra®**

# THE VALUE OF VOICE IN THE CONTACT CENTRE

A report from Jabra

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

**The call centre has evolved considerably in recent years. Today's customers want and expect a multi-channel experience – ideally in real-time – and the 21<sup>st</sup> century contact centre is emerging to match their needs.**

The technology environment for agents has also changed. Widespread adoption of VoIP telephony and Session Initiation Protocol (SIP) technologies means Unified Communications (UC) – which integrates real-time communications features such as presence, instant messaging, VoIP telephony and email via a single platform – is becoming a reality in many contact centres.

Yet, in this multi-channel environment, voice remains the preferred communications channel for many. According to a recent report<sup>1</sup>, 77% of UK inbound customer contacts are made by telephone, compared with around 10% by email and 8% through self-service.

We wanted to find out what is driving this ongoing preference for voice contact and to discover what consumers liked - and didn't like - about using this communication channel for customer service. We also wanted to explore consumer opinion on what constitutes exceptional service in this multi-channel age.

We commissioned YouGov<sup>2</sup> to question 2,000 adults about their experience of contacting customer service teams. We asked what drives them to pick up the telephone to contact a company, what annoys them most about using this channel, and what contributes most to a positive customer service experience.

The results are presented in this report, together with some practical tips and advice on how to achieve exceptional levels of customer service through voice communication in the contact centre.

1 According to ContactBabel's 2009 UK Contact Centre Decision-Makers' Guide, 77.2 per cent of UK inbound customer contacts are still by phone compared with 9.8 per cent by email, 8.0 per cent by self-service, 2.3 per cent by letter and 1.6 per cent by fax. And despite the massive media focus on new digital media, only 0.3 per cent of inbound customer contacts are by SMS and only 0.1 per cent by text chat.

2 The survey was conducted using an online interview, with members of the YouGov Plc GB panel of 185,000+ individuals who have agreed to take part in surveys. An email was sent to panellists selected at random from the base sample according to the sample definition, inviting them to take part in the survey and providing a link to the survey. The total sample size was 2130 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken in August 2010 and the survey was carried out online.

## 2. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**Today's customers have a vast array of options available when they want to communicate with a brand, from sending an email to visiting a website, or even using online chat or SMS. So why are more than 75% of inbound customer contacts still made by phone? We surveyed over 2,000 consumers to find out what is driving telephone contact in today's multi-channel communications environment.**

### The drivers for voice contact

We discovered that the top three reasons people pick up the telephone to contact customer services are: the need for an immediate response to a query; the desire to talk to someone about their issues in detail; and finally, to complain when their level of frustration has reached its limits.

### The key factors to a positive telephone call

What makes a positive call from a customer's perspective? We knew there were probably several components, but we wanted to find the single most important factor that made the biggest difference for consumers.

Perhaps surprisingly, 'hard' skills won out over 'softer' qualities; agents 'who know what they're talking about' was the overwhelming top choice, selected by 43% of respondents. The second and third reasons for choosing voice over other channels were 'having my query dealt with quickly' (16%) and 'friendly agents that treat me like a valued customer' (14%).

### The biggest turn-offs for voice contact

The biggest customer turn-offs for voice contact can be summed up in one word: waiting. All of the top five biggest frustrations around calling customer services involved delays in getting queries resolved effectively, by an agent with the knowledge to facilitate a speedy resolution.

We also looked at the biggest sources of annoyances once customers actually get through to an agent. The overwhelming winner in this contest was 'not being able to understand what the agent is saying', the top bugbear for 51% of survey respondents, ahead of being put on hold (19%) and time delays on the phone (10%)

### Observations

1. The full results are detailed in the pages that follow. But five clear conclusions emerged from our report:
  1. Speed is of the essence for today's time-starved, impatient consumer and voice remains the preferred channel for a real-time response in today's multi-channel world
  2. The biggest turn-off for voice contact is not being able to clearly understand the customer service representative; call centres need to address clarity of communication to achieve customer satisfaction
  3. There is a big opportunity to increase first time resolution for voice contacts, using collaborative tools such as Unified Communications
  4. Call centre agents are playing a vital role in customer service and satisfaction, being the first point of contact for handling complicated issues or talking through issues in detail
  5. Customers are much more likely to pick up the telephone to complain than they are to initiate a new service

## 3. THE VALUE OF VOICE: RESULTS BREAKDOWN

### 3.1 What is driving voice contact in the digital world?

Despite being in today's connected, 'always-on' digital world, our survey results show that the telephone still has a firm place as a channel of choice for consumers, with immediacy and complexity driving inbound voice contacts.

We asked consumers in what circumstances they would pick up the telephone to a contact centre rather than emailing or visiting the company's website for assistance.

We found that voice is still perceived as the most immediate means to deal with a query by the majority of customers (58%). Almost half also agreed it provides a direct route to a person who can talk about issues in detail (47%) and telephone is perceived as the most effective way to resolve problems and relieve frustration by 47%.

All of these contacts offer opportunities for contact centres to provide outstanding service and win the hearts and minds of their customers, placing agents at the heart of the customer experience. This is especially true when you consider that only around a third (34%) will pick up the telephone to cancel a service and only 19% when they're about to leave a company.

In which of the following occasions would you pick up the phone to a call centre rather than emailing or visiting the company's website?	Percentage of responses
1. When I need my query to be dealt with immediately	58%
2. When I want to talk to someone about my issues in detail	47%
3. When I'm frustrated and want to talk to someone about my problem with the company or its products/ services	47%
4. When I want to talk through something complicated	43%
5. If I've had no response from other channels	42%
6. When I need someone to talk me through a task step-by-step	34%
7. When I want to cancel a service	34%
8. When I'm about to leave a company	19%
9. When I have highly confidential information that I don't want to share via email/ the company's website	19%
10. When I want to sign up to a service or become a new customer	15%

### Key observations

- Customers still perceive voice to be the fastest real-time channel to resolve enquiries
- Voice contact is the preferred channel for more complex queries and provides an opportunity to deliver exceptional customer service
- A significant proportion of voice contact (42%) is driven by a lack of response from other channels; organisations could be missing out on an opportunity to provide web self-service and timely responses via digital channels
- When a customer decides to leave a company it may be too late to do anything about it; only 19% of consumers will call an organisation to tell them they're leaving
- Only 15% will make a phone call to sign up to a new service, suggesting that the majority are happy to do this using other channels

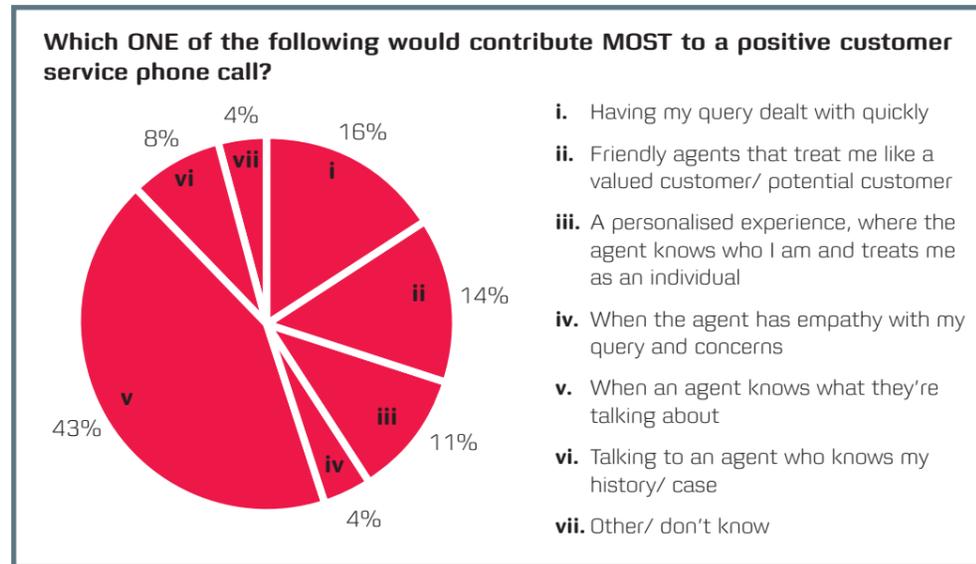
### 3.2 What makes a positive customer service call?

We wanted to find out what single quality defines a positive customer service call. We were somewhat surprised by the response.

When asked 'Which one of the following qualities would contribute most to a positive customer service phone call', 43% of consumers told us they wanted to speak to agents 'who know what they're talking about'.

The second and third choices – 'having my query dealt with quickly' and 'friendly agents that treat me like a valued customer', lagged quite a way behind, scoring just 16% and 14% of the overall votes, respectively.

All of these qualities were more important to consumers in our survey than an agent who knows the caller's history (8%) and an agent who has empathy with the caller's query and concerns (4%).



#### Observations

- The number one thing that contributes to a positive call is an agent 'who knows what they are talking about', reinforcing the importance of agents having instant access to the knowledge they need during a call
- Consumers also want their query dealt with quickly, suggesting that call centres are right to focus on first contact resolution as an important performance indicator
- Friendly agents are important and customers want to feel valued, but they rate empathy lower on their list of desirable qualities for a positive customer service call

### 3.3 What makes a negative customer service call?

We asked consumers to tell us the single biggest annoyance when contacting customer services on the telephone. And it was no surprise that for today's time-pressed consumers, waiting is the biggest bugbear.

Waiting in a phone queue topped the 'most annoying' list with 29% of the total vote, closely followed by being passed between agents on a call (24%) and not being able to speak to an agent at all (24%), then being put on hold (11%).

We also wanted to find out what annoys customers when they get through to an agent. The overwhelming finding, and perhaps the biggest surprise of our study, was that the biggest majority, 51%, said 'not being able to understand what the agent is saying', followed by 'being put on hold' (19%) and 'time delays on the line' (10%).



What annoys you when you are on a call with a customer services team/call centre agent	
Not being able to understand what the agent is saying	51%
Being put on hold	19%
Time delays on the line	10%
Having to repeat myself	7%
Echo on the line	4%
Not being able to hear the agent	3%
Background noise	2%
Other	2%
Not applicable - I have never called a customer services team	2%
Nothing	1%

#### Observations

- The biggest annoyance with telephone contact is not being able to understand what an agent is saying, so sound quality, reduced background noise and volume are key factors to address in order to improve the customer experience
- There is a significant opportunity to use real-time collaboration tools, such as Unified Communications, to remove two of the biggest bugbears for callers i.e. being kept waiting on hold and being passed between agents
- Organisations should continue to work on reducing call centre queues, possibly by improving self-service tools for simple enquiries

## 4. THE CHANGING COMMUNICATIONS LANDSCAPE

### 4.1 The rise of UC in the contact centre

In spite of the advances made by the multi-channel contact centre, our research highlighted that the need for instant access to relevant information to resolve customer queries is still a major driver for voice calls. And delays in fulfilling this need, due to being passed around between agents or waiting on hold, remains a major cause of frustration.

Many of today's agents have access to multiple desktop systems to provide them with the information they need to resolve customer queries. But does Unified Communications offer that missing piece in the jigsaw, enabling them to optimise first call resolution – and generate operational efficiencies in the process – by providing real-time access to expertise in the enterprise?

Until recently, the adoption of UC by UK contact centres has not kept pace with the inevitable marketing hype. However that is changing; in a recent survey by Interactive Intelligence, 87% of respondents said they were looking to invest in a UC solution in the near future. The increasing trend towards home shoring is also driving this adoption as the virtual contact centre becomes a reality, ensuring agents can be situated at home to provide out of hours or specialist support.

The cost savings created by bringing voice and data together within a single communications infrastructure are well understood. However, contact centres also have a significant opportunity to realise the 'soft' benefits afforded by UC, in the form of increased collaboration, improved customer service and optimised agent productivity.

Some of these 'soft' benefits are highlighted below, together with observations taken from a recent qualitative study conducted by Jabra within a specific contact centre, looking at how one organisation is utilising UC in a service environment.

### 4.2 Utilising UC in a service environment

#### The value of voice

UC tools such as 'presence' give people the ability to signal their availability to communicate. Together with 'click-to-call', these features make it much easier to ascertain the availability of colleagues and to initiate voice communications.

Users can be contactable when they are away from their desk and can work effectively, regardless of their location, making management of home-workers and remote agents much easier for contact centre supervisors. In this environment, agents can transfer calls to people with the specific skills to handle the caller's enquiry, without keeping them hanging on hold.

The Jabra qualitative study showed us that customer-facing staff provided with headsets become more aware of the benefits of voice communication in terms of delivering a higher-quality customer experience. They are more inclined to use the phone over email or instant messaging in scenarios where a voice contact would improve either the quality or the outcome of an interaction.

#### First time call resolution

Presence can also help to overcome a major customer bugbear – being passed around between agents to resolve their enquiry – and facilitate first time call resolution. By giving agents access to available and appropriately-skilled colleagues via instant messaging, there is no need to pass the customer around. And of course agents can also utilise presence to put the customer through to the right person to handle their enquiry.

#### Customer collaboration

As well as bringing the entire enterprise within reach of the contact centre, new UC tools empower agents to collaborate with customers, by sharing web pages, documents or applications. Colleagues can also be invited to join these sessions if required.

#### Improved call clarity

Wideband is one of the less-understood benefits of Unified Communications. It can be helpful to think of it as 'HDTV for audio'. It can overcome the sound quality issues of VoIP by guaranteeing that there is always more bandwidth available than is required to transmit the data. Ultimately, that means that the transmitted sound has significant depth and nuance.

#### Mobility

Unified Communications can also enable agents to work from almost anywhere, providing greater flexibility to manage available staff resources to cater for peaks and troughs in call volumes.

## 5. THE ROLE OF THE HEADSET

**Headsets are a staple part of a contact centre's communication infrastructure. This report has identified that the number one frustration of customers is not being able to understand what the agent is saying and more often than not this is down to poor headset microphone choice. This is no surprise as many contact centres today have standardised on a sound tube microphone which does not offer the level of noise reduction required in a busy calling environment.**

### Noise cancelling

Noise cancelling technology has been developed to minimise the interference of background noise and improve agent clarity. By selecting headsets that include this technology, organisations can address this important frustration. Solutions such as the Jabra BIZ™ 2400 and Jabra GN2000 corded headsets are built with the contact centre in mind, providing improved audio, build and comfort.

### Fully optimised for UC

To maximise investment in UC in both the contact centre and elsewhere in an organisation, a headset fully optimised for UC is an essential work tool. A headset with full wideband capabilities is recommended, to improve customer satisfaction by addressing customer frustration over the ability to understand and be understood.

Most traditional telephony, which is transmitted in the narrowband frequency range (300Hz-3,600 kHz), doesn't benefit from crystal clear voice definition. With wideband this is guaranteed and users will also benefit from the elimination of background noise via noise cancelling technology as well as protection from sudden loud noises.

Headsets such as the Jabra BIZ™ 2400 corded headset and the Jabra GN9350e wireless headset provide wideband capabilities of up to 6,800KHZ for superior sound.

For those who are considering rolling out UC in the future, but are currently using a PSTN telephone system, solutions like the Jabra PRO™ 9400 or Jabra GN9300e series of wireless headsets can work with both UC and traditional telephones, making your purchase future proof.

### Compatibility with other technologies

It is wise to choose a headset that is optimised for use with other applications and systems within the contact centre, such as Avaya or Microsoft® Office Communicator. In doing so, organisations will maximise their investment in the headsets and ensure they are used to optimum effect.

### Plug and play

Complicated implementations or complex training can induce skepticism among employees in the benefits of using a new headset. Contact centres can ensure agents are up and running with the latest headsets instantly, by choosing plug and play options, either corded or wireless, that are easy to use and deliver noticeable benefits immediately.

## 6. CONCLUSION

**While the call centre has evolved into the multi-channel contact centre, customers continue to prefer voice contact over email and visiting a company website when speed is of the essence, when they want to talk to a 'live' agent to handle a complex enquiry, or to voice frustration and make a complaint.**

Given customers' preference for a fast response to their enquiry, it is no wonder that waiting in call queues, being left on hold, or being passed around between agents is a major source of frustration.

Those organisations that move towards a Unified Communications environment can take advantage of a wealth of features in order to provide agents with real-time access to colleagues with the appropriate knowledge to speed up call handling and facilitate first time resolution for customer queries.

### About Jabra

Through its Jabra brand, GN Netcom is a world leader in innovative headset solutions. With around 1,200 employees and sales offices around the world, GN Netcom develops, manufactures and markets a broad range of wireless headsets for mobile users and both wireless and corded headsets for contact centre and office-based users. GN Netcom's business activities also include its original equipment manufacturing (OEM) business. GN Netcom is a subsidiary of GN Store Nord A/S.

For further information, please visit [www.jabra.co.uk](http://www.jabra.co.uk)

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