When disaster strikes:

a business continuity plan for customer service

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Executive summary

Customer service should lie at the heart of brands' efforts to drive loyalty and trust among their customer base. It's more important than ever when disaster strikes. This is when customer concerns are heightened, nerves are often frayed and your organization's resources may come under severe strain. A business continuity plan for customer service will help you prepare for these scenarios, ensuring that the business doesn't suffer when unplanned events occur.

This paper will describe the essential elements of an effective business continuity plan, including how to:

Build trust through good customer service

Serve-up current business information via search and social channels

Enhance the contact center with virtual contact center (VCC) tech and managed services

Help customers self-serve with interactive voice response (IVR) and voice call back

Instability demands preparedness

That realization has pushed business continuity and disaster recovery planning to the top of the boardroom agenda. But not every organization has established a comprehensive plan to ensure customer trust when disaster strikes. A business continuity plan for customer service could be key to ensuring customer loyalty, trust and engagement — and, ultimately, business success — over the long term.

What constitutes a disaster is ever-evolving. Natural disasters and extreme weather events were among the five biggest threats on the global risk landscape in terms of likelihood and severity, according to a World Economic Forum report from January 2020, but so were ecosystem collapse, human-made environmental damage and the failure to mitigate climate change.[1] Cyber attacks and geopolitical turmoil, too, were cited as looming threats. By October 2020, the spread of infectious diseases had jumped into the World Economic Forum's top 10 threats.[2] Whether in the face of fire, flood, famine or flu, customer service continuity is key. Disasters stress IT systems and front-line staff to their breaking points, disrupting the customer journey exactly when a high-quality experience is most important. But an effective response plan that covers every customer touchpoint during a crisis can help you weather the storm — whether it's figurative or literal — and secure your customers' faith in your business.

**It's time to start planning strategically for the next new normal.**

Measuring and maintaining customer trust
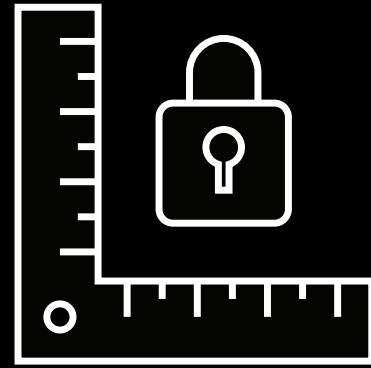
Customer trust has always been a critical component of success. According to a 2019 KPMG study, 56% of consumers said that customer service — more than price, product assortment or the ease of the shopping experience — is why they remained loyal to their brands.[3]

Against a backdrop of unprecedented business headwinds, the COVID-19 pandemic has made the importance of good customer service clearer than ever. According to McKinsey, times of crisis can make customer interactions with a company's service staff trigger an immediate and lingering effect on a customer's sense of trust and loyalty.[4]

"As millions are furloughed and retreat into isolation, a primary barometer of their customer experience will be how the businesses they frequent and depend upon deliver experiences and service that meets their new needs with empathy, care and concern," the consulting giant argues.[5]
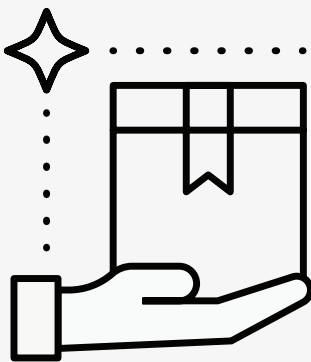
"As millions are furloughed and retreat into isolation, a primary barometer of their customer experience will be how the businesses they frequent and depend upon deliver experiences and service that meets their new needs with empathy, care and concern"

Measuring and maintaining customer trust

Driving trust and loyalty

In a digital age marked by heavy competition, customer trust is hard to win but extremely easy to lose. How well and how quickly you resolve customers' issues is a key factor in driving loyalty. According to a 2019 Edelman survey, 36% of global consumers cited speedy resolution of customer service problems as the chief reason they trusted brands.[6] ContactBabel and Verizon polled 1,000 US consumers and found that first-contact resolution is far more important than any metric in influencing customer satisfaction. And there's a ripple effect in play, too – speedy resolution boosts customer satisfaction, and it also reduces the need for repeat calls, which in turn trims wait times. (And shorter wait times yield happier customers.)

Call resolution might be the most important metric, but it's far from the only one that engenders customer loyalty. The ContactBabel/Verizon report also highlights:

Short call and web chat times

Long operating hours

Multiple lines of communication

US-based representatives

Short queues

Single-representative issue handling
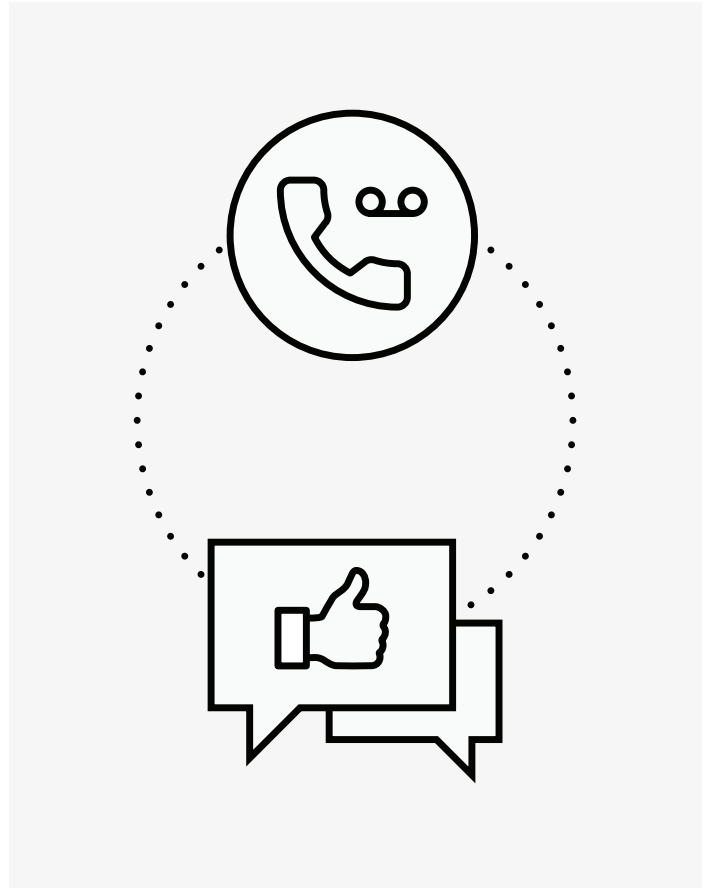
Polite, friendly customer service representatives are also essential, the report notes. Providing compassionate customer service, according to Accenture, "will likely generate an outsized increase in positive brand perception and customer loyalty post-crisis."[7] Recording customer service calls can help encourage and optimize the delivery of compassionate customer service. When paired with data and analytics on the call outcome and type of call, recorded calls can be used to train customer service staff, improve outcomes and boost loyalty.

Measuring and maintaining customer trust

How customer service interruptions disrupt trust

The challenge of building a business continuity plan for customer service is that you don't often know what you're planning for. In the case of COVID-19, airlines and travel companies were flooded with calls and emails from customers trying to cancel their bookings or reacting to forced cancellations. Technology providers and retailers experienced a surge of new business as enterprises and consumers rushed to outfit remote work environments.

Even if a disaster interrupts your supply chain, service or operating hours, it's absolutely vital that it doesn't disrupt your customer service operation. During a disaster, consumers are often dealing with uncertainty, frustration and fear — and they'll be looking to your customer service teams for guidance and reassurance.

Inbound call center disruption is the digital equivalent of a back-in-10-minutes sign in a shop window — it's "a memorable moment of disappointment that instantly breeds distrust," according to Skybridge America.[8] If customers can't get in touch with a service agent or don't have enough information to manage their expectations, they'll be left angry and confused.

Social media and review aggregators have opened up myriad avenues for customers to share their negative experiences online, and customers are actively listening to what dissatisfied customers have to say. Zendesk polled more than 1,000 US consumers and found that, following a bad customer service experience:[9]
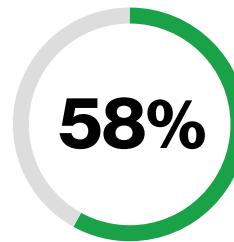
58% of respondents stopped buying from the company
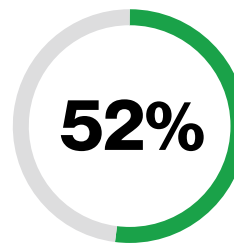
52% of respondents switched to a different company for that product or service
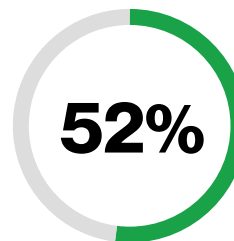
**52%** of respondents told others not to buy that product or service

All told, 97% of respondents said that a bad customer service experience changed their buying behavior. Even more concerning, from a long-term perspective, was that 46% of respondents said that they continued to change their buying behavior two years after a bad customer service experience.

Planning your technology response
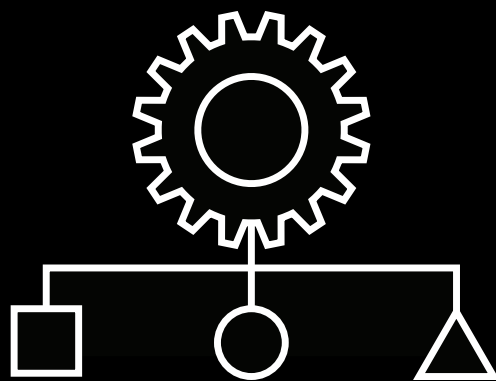
Fortunately, there are things your organization can do today to mitigate these risks. A business continuity plan for customer service, drawn up by key stakeholders, should be designed around your most valuable asset — your service agents. But technology has a crucial part to play here, in supporting those employees to help them nurture long-term customer relationships.

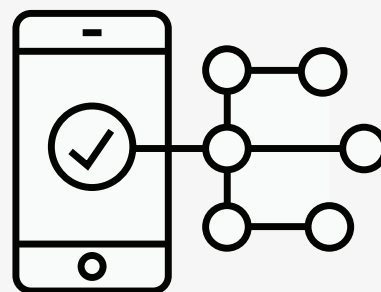Strengthen call center services through virtual contact centers and managed services

This could include a strategy to:
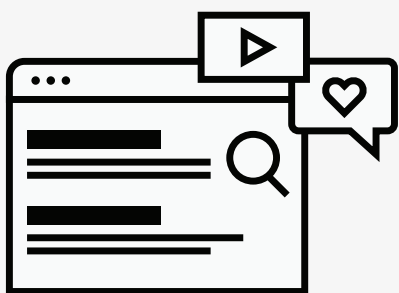
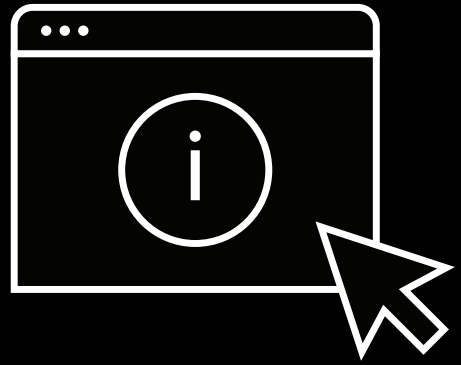Ensure that customers can find what they're looking for online via search and social media

Improve customer self-service through interactive voice response (IVR) and voice call back

Serving customers online

These days, customers don't always pick the phone when disaster strikes. A July 2020 study by Sitel Group found that 35% of the consumers it surveyed would rather find a solution online than reach out to customer service, up more than 7 percentage points since the early days of the pandemic in March.[10]

What does this mean for your business? It means sitting down with the right stakeholders — webmasters, social media teams, IT teams, business continuity teams, customer service leads — to ensure that customers can find what they're looking for through search and on social media. At the very least, consumers should be able to find information on updated business hours and preferred contact details. Because consumers seek it out on their own and will not necessarily verify it against another source, it's critical that this information is reliable and consistent.

If you don't get the online experience right, your customer loyalty and trust scores won't be the only metrics that take a hit. Between 50% and 60% of calls to contact centers in 2019 resulted from bad website service or the failure of another channel, according to the ContactBabel/Verizon report, and we've seen what happens when unhappy customers aren't placated by customer service representatives.

"Between 50% and 60% of calls to contact centers in 2019 resulted from bad website service"

Serving customers online
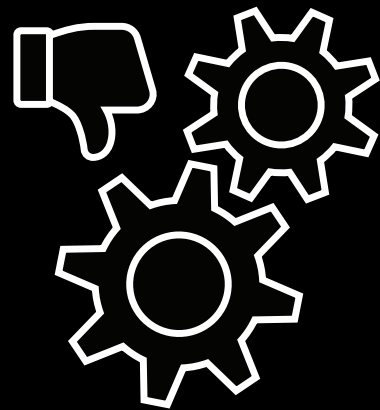
Making search work for you

For many, the search box is the first port of call following a disaster. Google offers several features that help businesses maintain contact with their customers and get them relevant updated information over multiple channels.

Google Posts lets organizations listed on the Google My Business directory share messages and information through the local panel on its search tools and maps.

FAQ markup can help organizations surface their website FAQs via Google search, which could be a useful way to help customers quickly find what they need.

Google My Business also lets businesses provide the most accurate information to their customers, such as temporary business hours, disaster-related service delays and preferred customer service contact information.

Staying on top of social media

Social media offers a relatively cheap, if limited, way to communicate critical updates to customers following a disaster.

If a disruption has caused an outage that will affect a large number of customers (or already has), it's best to step in and address your followers before rumors start to swirl:

- Acknowledge what's happened and confirm that you're working on a solution.

- Provide regular updates, even if there is nothing new to report.

- Provide as much insight as possible into what you're doing to rectify the situation.

- Respond to each customers' specific concerns.

- Apologize for any inconvenience.

Chatbots could reduce the workload on customer service staff by serving up answers to frequently asked questions and by directing requests to appropriate team members. A solution such as Localworks — a centralized dashboard designed to help small and medium-sized businesses streamline updates to business information that's published across more than 70 directories and search engines, including Google, Yahoo, Bing, Yelp and Whitepages — could help your organization manage feedback and reviews and analyze customer sentiment to improve customer service.

Enhancing the contact center
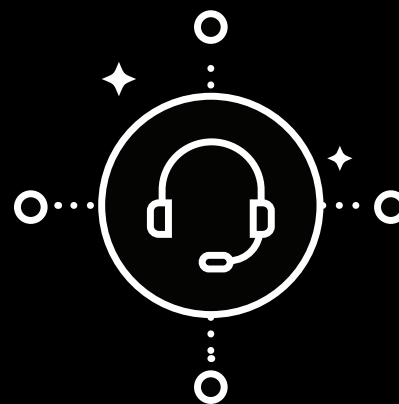
Even though online options are propagating, the contact center is still a crucial resource during severe business disruptions. According to Accenture, 58% of customers prefer to solve urgent issues by calling for support, even when online options are available.[11]

Enhancing the contact center by deploying virtual and intelligent technologies will strengthen your business continuity plan for customer service.

Virtual contact centers

A virtual contact center is a collection of linked remote terminals and satellite offices managed as a single site to drive economies of scale, employee productivity and round-the-clock availability. COVID-19 made remote work business as usual, and many organizations turned their contact centers virtual when they transitioned their workforce from the office to the homestead.

Virtual contact centers typically leverage such technologies as:

Automated call distributors, which answer and distribute incoming calls to the right call center agent

IVR, which lets customers select from a list of automated options then puts them through to the right agent

Agent desktop, a web-based portal that lets agents view all of their customer conversations and select the preferred communications channel

Workforce management software that's designed to optimize a virtual contact center by ensuring it's able to scale to handle call volumes at any given time

Advanced analytics which uses AI algorithms to analyze call center data and improve customer satisfaction and agent performance

Professional services

For some organizations, the best course of action for ensuring uninterrupted high-quality customer service in the wake of a disaster might be to outsource to an expert managed services provider. Managed services providers can take over the monitoring and maintenance of business-critical contact center applications, freeing staff to focus on helping the business in higher-value ways.

Look for providers that can offer:

• Continuous monitoring of your platforms to detect and rapidly respond to critical incidents

• Year-round, round-the-clock managed service operations

• ITIL-certified best practice service delivery

• Predictable monthly charges

Verizon's Contact Center Hub solution is a fully outsourced operational support model that monitors and manages critical contact center applications to maintain the high level of availability contact centers require – even during a crisis.

Customer self-service
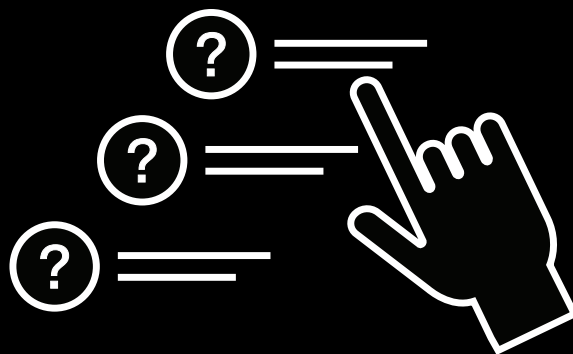
The key to an effective customer service business continuity plan is choice. Many customers might want to talk to a trained member of your support team to resolve their issues, but some might prefer to troubleshoot more straightforward problems on their own. A versatile self-service platform powered by intelligent routing and virtual queueing will not only help meet customer needs and improve satisfaction and loyalty, but it can also reduce contact center costs and workload — which are especially important when dealing with a disaster. Digital customer experience solutions are designed to provide fast answers to the most common questions that can be answered without requiring a live agent. Strategically placing a chatbot solution on websites makes it easy for customers to get quick access to the information they need.

Secure interactive voice response

Eighty percent of customers who abandon self-service sessions do so because they're not getting what they want or need, according to the ContactBabel/Verizon report. IVR uses intelligent routing to solve that issue. Inbound customer calls are routed based on the caller's menu choices, originating automatic number identification, time of day, database lookups, caller-entered digits and the destination labels provided by customer systems. The result? Callers reach the right resource the first time, every time.

For the customer, IVR is all about simplicity; the customer gets what they want — no muss, no fuss. For your business, IVR improves call center staff productivity by ensuring that the right agents are reached every time, even if they're working across multiple departments or call centers.

But not all IVR solutions are created equal. Finding a provider that can offer the functionality you need to support your business requirements is critical. Look for one that offers:

- A cloud-based service to minimize upfront capital expenditure and ongoing maintenance costs

- Usage-based pricing

- Simple deployment

- Integration with in-house databases to enhance call routing

- Call routing from one number through to many call centers and departments

- Voice callback options

But great customer service cannot compromise the enterprise. You'll need to prioritize anti-fraud and authentication capabilities to detect automated attacks, safeguard customer accounts, reduce average handling times and mitigate losses from fraud. Verizon's multi-factor anti-fraud and authentication solution combines IP header metadata analysis with voice and behavioral analytics to accurately calculate the risk of each inbound call.

Customer self-service

Voice callback

Voice callback functionality can enhance customer loyalty by minimizing one of the biggest frustrations that inbound callers experience: long wait times. Instead of holding indefinitely, the customer can join a virtual queue, and a customer service agent will call the customer back as soon as possible or at the customer's convenience.

It's an increasingly popular option: More than 2.7 million callers chose to receive a callback in 2019. Data compiled from Verizon Voice Call Back found that the service eliminated 224 million minutes of hold time in 2017 and 2018.

Voice callback functionality can also:

Improve call center agent productivity, as agents spend less time mollifying angry callers

Eliminate costly retraining, as callbacks arrive in exactly the same way as normal inbound calls would

Reduce costs by optimizing call center resources and reducing agent talk time and customer hold time

Disasters, whether natural disasters that disrupt facilities and equipment or pandemics that wreak havoc worldwide, are unpredictable, and their impacts and fallout can be complex. During times of crisis, your customers turn to you for support — and if you're not there for them, you'll lose them.

To be ready for everything is to be ready for anything. **Proper disaster preparation is incumbent upon solid business continuity planning, especially when it comes to customer service:**

- Think about a virtual contact center to maximize your remote customer service staff's productivity.

- Consider managed services to reallocate internal resources to higher-value tasks.

- Invest in intelligent tech solutions, such as IVR and voice call back, that can support customer self-service.

- Ensure that the information you provide on your website, on social media and through search is consistent and current.

- Look after your biggest asset — your people — by training them to provide compassionate, empathetic service.
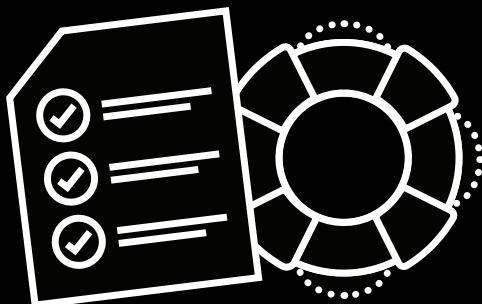
It's not a matter of if the next disaster strikes — it's when. But with a solid continuity plan, you won't need to worry about it — or your customers.

Learn how

Verizon's digital customer experience solutions can support
your business continuity plan for customer service.

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3. "The truth about customer loyalty," kpmg.com (accessed Oct. 22, 2020).
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5. Op. cit., McKinsey (April 2, 2020).
6. "In Brands We Trust?" Edelman (accessed Oct. 22, 2020).
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8. "The Real Cost of Downtime in your Customer Contact Center," Skybridge Americas (April 3, 2019; accessed Oct. 22, 2020).
9. "The business impact of customer service on customer lifetime value," Zendesk (updated Oct. 6, 2020).
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11. Op. cit., Accenture (March 23, 2020).