



THE CONTACT CENTER QUEUE: LESSONS FROM THE PANDEMIC

How the COVID pandemic has changed the modern contact center, and how the new Enterprise Music On Hold™ solution from Easy On Hold® is helping improve customer satisfaction as part of a complete contact center platform design.



THE MUSIC ON HOLD EXPERTS™



INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic forced businesses to innovate and adapt. Some of those changes have been for the better, including the shift to new, sophisticated unified communication platforms. Technology helped contact centers to adapt to staffing changes, but the demand for customer service and support became more demanding. As call volumes increased, so did “on-hold” times.

This article examines changes in the modern contact center in 2020, and how the new Enterprise Music On Hold™ solution from Easy On Hold® is helping improve customer satisfaction as part of a more effective contact center platform design.

SOPHISTICATION, YES. SATISFACTION?

The World Health Organization on March 11, 2020, declared the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak a global pandemic. For contact centers, like most businesses, problems piled up fast.

The compact design of the on-premise contact center would be outside of guidelines for protecting employees from the pandemic. The obvious choice was to leverage cloud computing to accommodate an offsite workforce—not a simple task, considering that only about 5% of contact centers were fully work-from-home enabled prior to the pandemic.

Many organizations upgraded contact center platforms ahead of schedule, reports Craig Robinson, Director of StableLogic, writing on the Genesys blog¹. “...organizations are moving to more powerful platforms that offer control and let them report on the satisfaction and retention of their customers.” But beyond reporting on customer satisfaction, the technology can only go so far when your operation is running on fewer agents and trying to catch up with an increase in inbound calls.

CONTACT CENTER CRUNCH

The crunch was well underway by mid-April when the Washington Post published an article called, Press 1 for Frustration: Customers Run Into Record Phone Waits as Companies Grapple with Worker Safety². “People hoping to defer mortgage or credit card payments, collect unemployment, cancel airline flights or locate missing shopping orders are all running into unprecedented waits for customer service by phone,” the article stated. Chase Bank posted a warning on their website and app: “Expect extremely long wait times if you call us.”

Financial institutions confronted a tsunami of calls. Enterprise voice security company Pindrop³ tracked call volume at a stock market brokerage, where overall call volume climbed 300% in just days. “By the later stages we are seeing enterprise contact center call volumes jump over 800% from normal levels,” the company reported.

In May 2020, Hillary George-Parkin, in an article for Vox called One Nation On Hold⁴, stated, “Call centers have never been more important — or more strapped.” Later that month a survey conducted by the conversational service automation distributor, Uniphore found that Americans had increased overall call center traffic by some 50%.

By July, more analytics appeared when a survey conducted by NICE inContact⁵ investigated the impact of COVID-19 on contact centers. 57 percent reported an increase in phone calls.

Pindrop noted that from May onwards, call centers experienced a decline in call center volumes, but overall the inbound call levels are still higher now than before the pandemic. It seems the tempo has slowed a bit, but in the meantime, consumers live in a cloud of uncertainty, and call centers should expect to continue to be busy, warns Daria Negriy in the Simply Contact Blog⁶.

Why so many inbound calls? Why can't the contact center catch a break?

“Expect extremely long wait times if you call us.”

—Chase Bank Contact Web Page

A DEMAND FOR INTERACTION



Protective measures made face-to-face interaction obsolete.



The contact center has become more of a “company hub”.



Customer anxiety increases demand for human interaction.

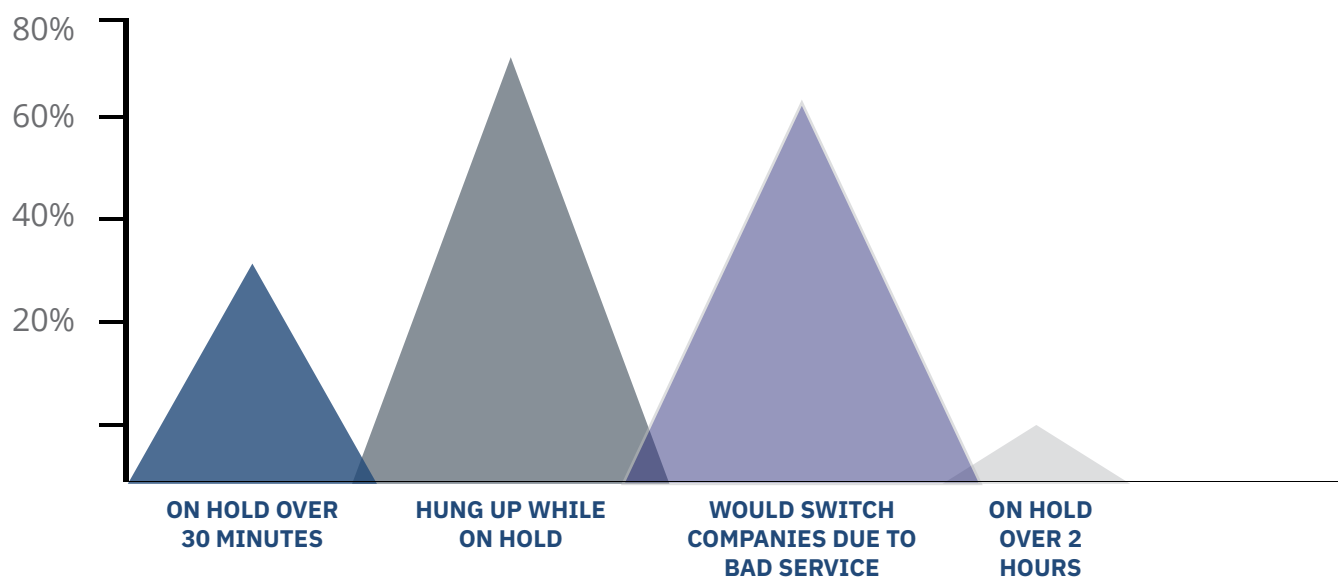
We all expected to see more consumers using chat, email, and other contact channels, but, “COVID has highlighted a new need for contact centers to be resilient. And nothing is more resilient — or faster to respond to changing problems — than an agent on the phone,” says StableLogic’s Craig Robinson.

Even a pre-pandemic CGS survey⁷ showed a strong preference for live agent support. 86% of consumers prefer to interact with a human agent; 71% said they would be less likely to use a brand if it didn’t have human customer service representatives available; only 30% believe that chatbots and virtual assistants make it easier to address customer service issues.

“American consumers prefer using voice over any other means of communication when contacting a contact center.” —Lidia Bertesteanu on the Uniphor study in the Nobelbiz Blog⁸

CUSTOMERS COULDN'T CONNECT

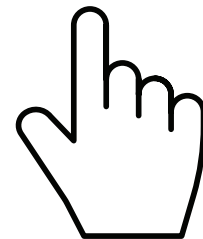
You can’t sugarcoat the story of caller frustration during COVID. At the May peak, callers reported the following:



All summer long news outlets ran stories of frustrating, epic on-hold experiences. Customers shared their anger on social media. A typical tweet says, “Yesterday I sat on hold for 3 hours and got nothing accomplished. I’ve been disconnected 7 times. I spend an insane amount of money on Citi cards annually. This is awful customer service.”

Ed Finegold, a contributing analyst at TMForum⁹, says it plainly: “Hold times must become shorter. Resolutions must be achieved more quickly. Customer interactions must deliver positive Net Promoter Score results. And it all must be done efficiently through the constraints of agents’ home internet connections.”

“*This is awful customer service.*”



MESSAGE ON HOLD TECHNOLOGY FOR IMPROVED SATISFACTION

Artificial Intelligence, bots, and more communications channels can help, but when your customer base wants to talk to an agent, there is almost always “hold time”. Timothy Brown, founder, and CTO of content and technology company Easy On Hold[®] seems to have landed on a formula—and a technology—that has been improving caller satisfaction for several contact centers. He calls it Enterprise Music On Hold[™] (EMOH[™]), which is not limited to just music. “The human voice is what the caller wants,” Brown says, “and the streaming on-hold audio platform we've built delivers the right messages at the right time.”

The EMOH[®] platform is powered by custom software developed by Easy On Hold[®] and can be delivered from the cloud or on-premise. The platform is designed to increase caller satisfaction through the use of relevant, targeted messages.



Timothy Brown

Through automated scheduling, contact centers can anticipate caller needs and set up timed messages to satisfy predictable queries.

“This is a huge shift for contact center messaging,” Brown reports. “Callers are expecting the traditional voiced announcements mixed over a 3-to-4-minute loop of music. This static audio file lacks the flexibility required by today’s call center.” Instead of the anticipated unpleasant experience, callers hear timely and relevant messages, played in random order. Most callers say this approach makes hold time feel shorter than it is.

THE RIGHT MESSAGING AT THE RIGHT TIME

A multinational call center worked with Easy On Hold® to align messaging with call traffic patterns. The result is that now, during times of shorter on hold durations, callers won't hear phrases like, "we are experiencing higher than normal call volumes." Instead, short, focused advice is provided to help callers learn about how the company is responding to COVID. And during hours when longer hold times are anticipated, the content shifts to longer stretches of music and instructions on how to self-serve. In this case, the Enterprise Music On Hold™ platform integrates live streams into an Avaya Aura Media Server from the cloud.

The targeted, timed, instant messaging and advanced scheduling offered by EMOH™ can be used to satisfy routine calls as well as handle unexpected emergencies.

INSTANT MESSAGE DEPLOYMENT

A national broadband service provider utilizes multiple streams of unique content, distributed to caller groups based on region. When a recent outage occurred for one of the regions, managers logged in to the Easy On Hold® customer portal to manage messaging for that particular region and turned on a pre-recorded announcement to tell callers they were aware of the issue. The call queue had 600 customers holding before the announcement was deployed. Afterward, the queue was reduced to less than 60 callers holding. Because the contact center was using skills-based queueing (a way of segmenting specific hold messages streams to particular audiences) unaffected customers had no idea there was a problem.

In this case, the EMOH™ is integrated with Genesys Engage contact center platform, streaming from the cloud.

High-value, targeted, timed messages:

- Updates on how the contact center is improving response times.
- How the company is responding to COVID.
- Changes in hours.
- Quickly-deployed 'emergency' announcements.
- Pause message content that may be changing, in real time.

CONCLUSION

We don't know what's coming next. We do know that our customers continue to come to us for answers.

In one more bit of research, an online study of more than 700 consumers by Influence Central¹⁰, concluded that companies and brands that focus on their consumers' needs during a difficult, unprecedented time will positively stand out and earn loyalty.

We must talk to our customers, even when an agent is unavailable. By deploying timed, relevant messages (EMOH™) you will use hold time to help your caller solve problems.

In 2020, we learned to expect the unexpected. We learned to work remotely, stay home, live in an online world, and depend on technology to support the remaining fragments of what we once called normal life. Fortunately, contact centers and companies like Easy On Hold® are innovating to make the customer experience valuable.

RESOURCES

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