CX Insight

Beyond the Tech Stack

Smarter systems. Stronger trust. Better CX.

Are Legacy Systems CX's Biggest Roadblock?

The Experience Cliff:
How to Reach the Peak Without Falling Off

Privacy-First CX: Building Trust Through Design

Brand Spotlight: Walmart

in this issue

CX Insight

AN EXECS IN THE KNOW PUBLICATION

Welcome

to the April 2025 issue of *CX Insight* magazine, an Execs In The Know Publication.

Balancing Tech, Trust, and Transformation

The customer experience is evolving but not always in the ways we expect.

In this issue, we're diving into the paradoxes shaping CX today; where technology promises to elevate service but can just as easily erode it. We're exploring the real stories behind the metrics. The moments when automation helps, and when it hurts.

We'll unpack the risks of racing toward efficiency, explore why so many brands are still held back by outdated infrastructure, and spotlight how privacy-first strategies are quickly becoming a competitive advantage.

You'll also hear from leaders like Rafi Barragan at Walmart on driving large-scale CX transformation. And from Thomas Harden at The Black Tux, who reminds us that empowered people, not just efficient platforms, are what elevate an experience.

Across every article, one truth is clear: brands that lead with empathy, strategy, and intentional innovation aren't just keeping up, they're charting a stronger, more connected future.

As you flip through these pages, pause and think about how far we can rise when we put people, trust, and purposeful technology at the center of the customer experience.

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ARE LEGACY SYSTEMS

CX's Biggest Roadblock?

Innovating beyond legacy systems creates new opportunities for customer experience excellence.
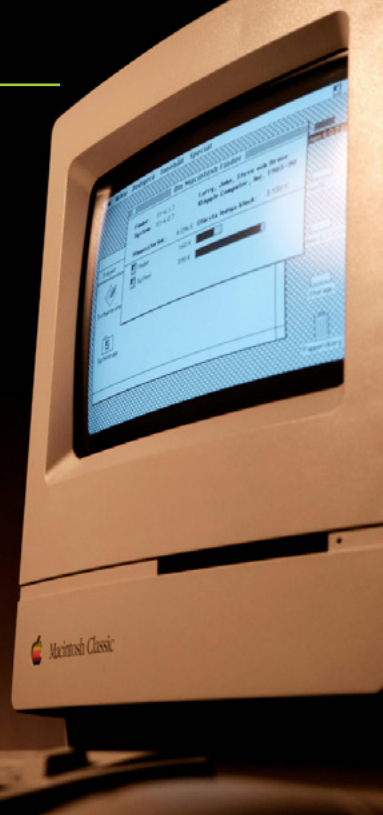
by Execs In The Know

In today's hyper-connected world, customers expect seamless interaction with brands, whether they're reaching out through social media, live chat, or a phone call. But behind the scenes, many brands are struggling with the very systems designed to support these interactions. Instead of agility and efficiency, outdated technology forces agents to wrestle with slow-loading screens, fragmented customer data, and rigid workflows that can't keep up with evolving expectations.

Picture this: A customer dials into a support line, frustrated after multiple failed attempts to resolve an issue online. They're transferred three times, forced to repeat their information at every stop. The agent on the other end, well-intentioned but handcuffed by an outdated interface, struggles to piece together the customer's history. By the time the issue is resolved (if it even is), frustration has soured what could have been a seamless interaction.

Sound familiar? For 42 percent of customer experience (CX) leaders, legacy systems are the single biggest operational hurdle in delivering exceptional service. According to our latest _2025 CX Leaders Trends & Insights: Corporate Edition_[1] report, not a single CX leader reported satisfaction with their current tech stack.

The customer experience landscape is changing faster than most systems can keep up with. The demand for seamless cross-channel engagement, automation, and artificial intelligence (AI)-powered insights is higher than ever. Yet, many brands remain trapped in outdated, fragmented infrastructures, unable to keep pace with evolving customer expectations. The question isn't if modernization is necessary; it's how much longer can companies afford to wait?

A System in Crisis: Why Legacy Tech Is Holding CX Back

Legacy systems aren't just an inconvenience, they're a financial and strategic liability. According to the research, 74 percent of CX leaders plan to invest in new technology to improve cross-channel consistency, yet outdated infrastructure continues to undermine these efforts.

The Numbers from Our Report Speak for Themselves:

- **0 percent** of CX leaders are satisfied with their current tech stack. (p. 59).

- **74 percent** recognize the need for better cross-channel integration (p. 52).

- **54 percent** say that 21-60 percent of customer interactions are too complex for automation due to system limitations (p. 71).

- **90 percent** of brands have deployed AI, but legacy technology is slowing implementation (p. 66).

Every inefficient system, every clunky interface, every manual workaround adds up, not just in wasted dollars, but in eroded customer trust. Worse, it handicaps frontline employees who are forced to navigate inefficiencies while delivering service in real-time.

For decades, companies have relied on legacy software – including IVRs, outdated CRMs, and antiquated ticketing systems – to manage customer interactions. While these tools once revolutionized service efficiency, they now serve as a primary roadblock to meeting modern customer expectations.

The biggest pain point in customer experience today isn't a lack of innovation, it's the weight of outdated systems that hinder seamless interactions, prolong wait times, and complicate employee workflows. Technology like AI is magnifying inefficiencies due to outdated tech. For companies still tethered to outdated infrastructure, the choice is clear: modernize or risk irrelevance in a world where customers demand instant, frictionless, and hyper-personalized service. If your customers experience more friction than fluidity when engaging with your brand, what's stopping them from leaving in search of a competitor that gets it right?

The financial sector provides a stark example: More than 53 percent of bank executives acknowledge their dependence on outdated systems,[2] and legacy technology is slowing AI adoption, increasing operational costs, and limiting omnichannel integration. According to an IDC survey, 83 percent of customers now expect seamless interactions across mobile, online, and in-person channels. Yet banks (and many customer-facing businesses) are struggling to meet this standard due to fragmented, outdated infrastructure.

Are you satisfied with your organization's current CX technology stack?

2022 — Very Satisfied 4%, Satisfied 27%, Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied 31%, Dissatisfied 32%, Very Dissatisfied 6%

2023 — Very Satisfied 8%, Satisfied 37%, Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied 25%, Dissatisfied 20%, Very Dissatisfied 10%

2024 — Very Satisfied 0%, Satisfied 29%, Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied 34%, Dissatisfied 30%, Very Dissatisfied 7%
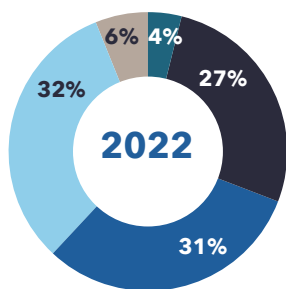
Very Satisfied | Satisfied | Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied | Dissatisfied | Very Dissatisfied
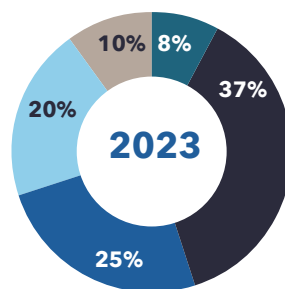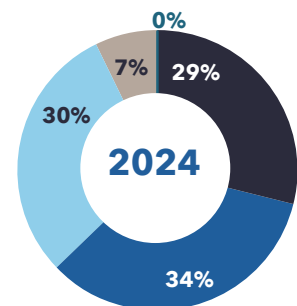
2. Fragmentation and Integration Nightmares

A major theme from this year's research is the struggle with integration. Legacy systems don't talk to each other, creating data silos that prevent seamless interactions. Customers move between channels expecting continuity, but instead find themselves starting over at every touch point.

The path to modernization varies, from incremental updates to full system overhauls, but the lesson is clear: companies that delay modernization risk falling behind in an era where customers demand speed, efficiency, and hyper-personalization. Whether in banking, retail, or customer service, the firms that proactively invest in modern infrastructure will be the ones that define the future of customer experience.

Why CX Leaders Are Struggling to Move Forward

If everyone agrees legacy systems are a problem, why aren't more companies fixing them?

1. The Weight of Technical Debt

Replacing decades-old infrastructure isn't cheap. Organizations face massive budget constraints, with 59 percent of leaders citing cost as a primary barrier. IT teams are often stuck in a cycle of maintaining outdated systems rather than innovating, patching leaks instead of building a new foundation.

3. The Complexity of Customer Interactions

AI has been heralded as the future of CX, yet 54 percent of CX leaders say their customer interactions are too complex for full automation. They're saying legacy systems can't support AI's potential. Instead of augmenting human agents with real-time data and intelligent recommendations, AI deployments are stunted by outdated databases and disconnected workflows.

4. The Misalignment Between Investment and Impact

While 74 percent of leaders say they're prioritizing new tech investments, many aren't seeing the return they expected. Why? Because pouring new technology into old systems is like upgrading the engine of a broken-down car while ignoring the transmission and brakes. A true transformation requires a full reallocation of resources toward scalable, cloud-based solutions that enhance (not hinder) the customer experience.

What CX Leaders Actually Want: The Path Forward

Companies are eager to integrate AI, to undergo digital transformation, and to deploy greater personalization, yet outdated infrastructure remains a stubborn obstacle. The shift from passive systems of record to systems of action is a defining moment in CX evolution.

Modern platforms must move beyond simply storing data; they need to orchestrate real-time, AI-driven insights that enhance interactions across every touch point. However, businesses can't afford to "rip and replace" legacy systems overnight.[3] Instead, the key is interoperability, investing in platforms that integrate seamlessly with existing infrastructure while enabling the agility today's customers demand. In 2025, brands that prioritize CX innovation will be the ones that bridge the gap between old and new, ensuring technology enhances, rather than hinders, the customer journey.

CX leaders need modern, scalable, customer-centric solutions that work. According to our research, here's what they're prioritizing:

1. Cloud-Based, Scalable Systems

The ability to scale and integrate across platforms is no longer a luxury; it's a necessity. Brands that fail to modernize will not only lag in customer expectations but lose the competitive advantage.

2. AI and Automation That Actually Reduce Friction

When done right, AI can streamline operations, predict customer needs, and empower agents with real-time insights. But AI is only as strong as the systems it's built on. Investing in AI without first addressing underlying infrastructure issues is a wasted opportunity.

3. True Cross-Channel Integration

Customers don't think in silos, so why do brands still operate in them? A customer who starts a conversation on live chat should be able to seamlessly continue it over the phone without repeating information. This is what customers already expect.

What are the main barriers to enabling a more dynamic digital strategy within your organization? (Select all that apply.)

	2023	2024
Inadequate Budget	45%	43%
More Pressing Priorities	38%	42%
Incompatible Legacy Systems	39%	41%
Lack of Human Resources/Know-How	19%	12%
Legal/Ethical Concerns	18%	12%
No Leadership Buy-In	14%	10%
Incompatible Cultural Fit	10%	3%
Digital is Not on Our Roadmap	6%	0%

4. Budget Reallocation Toward Innovation

The excuse of limited budgets is running thin. Organizations should think about reallocating spending from maintaining outdated systems to implementing solutions that drive long-term ROI. The most forward-thinking brands aren't waiting for permission to innovate, they're making transformation a top priority.

The Call for Change: Why Brands Can't Afford to Wait

There's no sugarcoating it. Legacy systems are the roadblock preventing companies from delivering next-level customer experiences. And the risk of waiting too long? Losing customers to brands that got ahead of the problem.

Brands that hesitate on modernization will soon find themselves at a disadvantage, not just in CX, but in overall business growth. Customers will continue demanding frictionless, personalized, and responsive experiences. The brands that deliver will win. The ones that don't? They'll become case studies in what happens when businesses fail to adapt.

If your tech stack is frustrating your customers more than serving them, it's time to change. So, the real question is: how long will brands continue to let outdated technology stand in the way of exceptional customer experience?

Download the report now.

Get the Full Report

For a deeper dive into the numbers and insights driving CX transformation, download the full *2025 CX Leaders Trends & Insights: Corporate Edition* report. Inside, you'll find detailed data, expert commentary, and strategies for overcoming legacy system challenges.

Links

1. https://execsintheknow.com/2025-cx-leaders-trends-insights-corporate-edition/
2. https://insights.samsung.com/2025/03/17/legacy-or-limitation-transforming-technology-for-banking-in-the-future/
3. https://www.fastcompany.com/91279604/why-cx-is-every-brands-biggest-opportunity

Are you inundated by what's outdated?

What is the single biggest challenge currently facing your CX operations?

	Legacy Systems/ Processes/Tools	Labor Force/ Staffing/Agent Performance	Balancing Automation With Live Assist	Budget/ Resourcing	Effective Utilization of Program Data	Internal Alignment/ Leadership Support	Other
2022	34%	27%	11%	9%	6%	6%	7%
2023	35%	23%	14%	13%	2%	6%	3%
2024	42%	16%	14%	9%	7%	6%	6%

Legend: ■ 2022 ■ 2023 ■ 2024
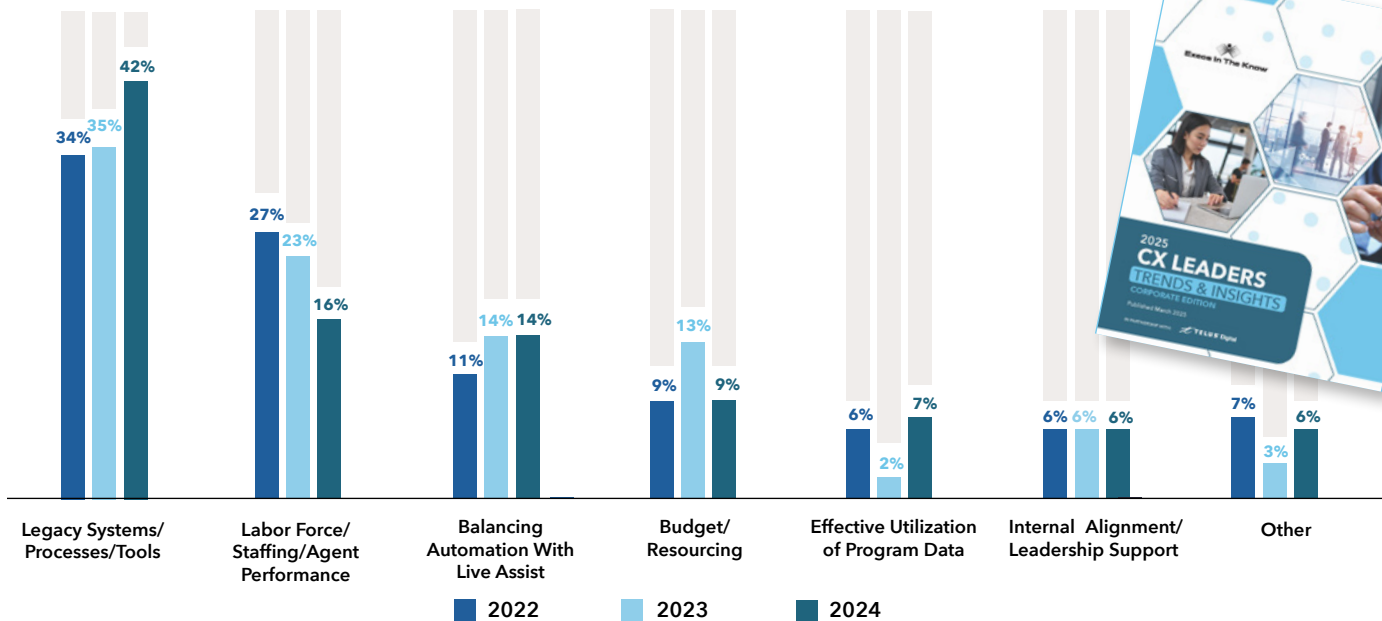
"Legacy Systems/Processes/Tools" was named as the biggest challenge facing customer experience (CX) operations in our latest industry research. Benchmark your operations in this and other critical areas when you check out our latest research release — The *2025 CX Leaders Trends & Insights: Corporate Edition* report

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execsintheknow.com/research

The Customer Experience Cliff: How to Reach the Peak Without Falling Off

Why the relentless pursuit of efficiency is pushing brands to the edge and how to strike the right balance before it's too late.

by Execs In The Know

Imagine you're climbing a mountain. Every step is calculated, optimized, and backed by the latest technology. You've streamlined your route, leveraged automation to reduce friction, and implemented efficiency at every turn.

And then, just as you reach the summit, you realize something is wrong. The ground beneath your feet is crumbling. Customers, once loyal, are slipping away. Satisfaction scores are plummeting. Your systems are running at peak performance, yet your brand is teetering on the edge of irrelevance.

This is the experience cliff, the moment when companies, in their relentless pursuit of automation and efficiency, erode the very relationships that built their success. It's not just a theoretical risk. Some of the biggest brands in the world have fallen victim to it, and the fallout has been brutal. But those who recognize the warning signs, strike the right balance, and put people before processes? They're the ones who stay on top.

So, the question is: Are you climbing toward success, or walking toward the edge of the experience cliff?

The Rise: Allure of Automation

For years, business leaders have been told that efficiency equals success. Faster service. Lower costs. Scalable solutions. Who could argue with that?

And it's true – to a point.

Automation, artificial intelligence (AI), chatbots, self-service portals, and workforce management tools have revolutionized customer experience (CX). They've reduced costs, streamlined operations, and allowed companies to handle customer needs at unprecedented speed.

Consider the rapid rise of AI-powered customer interactions:

- AI chatbots resolve a large percent of customer queries without human intervention, reducing call center costs by millions.

- Predictive analytics anticipate customer needs, optimizing marketing and service delivery.

- Self-service portals empower customers to troubleshoot issues instantly, cutting down on human agent workload.

"We partner with our customers to track many metrics to ensure that they are protecting the customer experience while implementing automation. Our technology focuses on supporting what I believe to be one of the hardest jobs in the world, frontline, customer-facing agents," says Jennifer Lee, President & Co-CEO at Intradiem. "We have a robust change management program that guides our customers to ensure their agents and supervisors understand the "why" behind implementing our solution and how it will benefit them. This encourages adoption of the platform and its solutions and ensures that communication, support, and reinforcement remain central to the implementation."

This is the golden promise of automation: better experiences, greater scalability, and a more cost-effective operation. For a while, everything runs like clockwork. Customers appreciate the efficiency. Net Promoter Scores (NPS) hold steady. The bottom line looks great. Until suddenly it doesn't.

The Warning Signs of the Experience Cliff

According to Forrester,[1] brand loyalty is expected to decline by 25 percent in 2025 due to rising prices, a staggering forecast that reflects deeper cracks in the customer experience foundation. This drop isn't happening in a vacuum. It's unfolding alongside a now three-year decline in overall CX quality across U.S. brands. Why? Because many companies, in their rush to cut costs and move faster, are leaning too heavily on automation, pushing customers to navigate bots and rigid systems when what they crave is connection.

As Forbes reports,[2] corporate America's fixation on extreme efficiency and the overuse of technology in place of human interaction is eroding trust. And customers aren't leaving quietly, they're taking to social media, reviews, and word of mouth, amplifying every failed interaction in ways that hurt retention, reputation, and revenue.

"There are several KPIs that serve as strong lead and lag indicators of drops in consumer sentiment: CSAT, NPS, and LTV. All of these metrics should be closely monitored as brands implement automation and AI to ensure any negative impacts are identified immediately," explains Lee. "There are also other engagement metrics that can vary depending on the business – measures of how often customers interact with your brand in meaningful ways. If you observe reductions in engagement metrics, which can differ by industry but may include aspects like logins and click-through rates, it should be a glaring red flag that something is going wrong."

At first, the cracks are barely noticeable. A small dip in NPS. A few more customer complaints than usual. An uptick in social media frustrations about impersonal customer experience.

Then it snowballs.

- Customers start feeling like transactions, not relationships. Chatbots can't grasp nuance. Automated phone menus lead to endless loops. Customers feel unseen, unheard, and unvalued.

- Support escalations rise. Frustrated customers demand human interaction, but your automation-first model has made it difficult to reach a real person.

- Brand sentiment shifts. Customers, once advocates, start voicing dissatisfaction. The trust you spent years building unravels, and fast.

This isn't speculation. It's already happening to some of the world's biggest brands.

McDonald's AI Drive-Thru Meltdown

McDonald's placed a bold bet on AI-powered drive-thru automation,[3] aiming to revolutionize the customer experience and boost efficiency. Through a 2021 partnership with IBM, the fast-food chain rolled out automated voice bots in over 100 U.S. restaurants. But by 2024, the company made a sudden pivot, announcing plans to end the pilot and remove the technology from all locations.

The decision followed a wave of viral videos that drew widespread attention to the system's shortcomings, glitches that left customers with chaotic orders, like dozens of unintended items or an infamous $250 McNugget mistake. Despite claiming an 85 percent accuracy rate for the automated order-taking (AOT) system, the brand faced mounting scrutiny, reinforcing the risks of deploying AI without adequate human oversight.

McDonald's hasn't officially cited these public misfires as the reason for shutting down the program, but the timing suggests the backlash may have played a role. IBM, meanwhile, continues to stand behind the performance of its technology.

Zillow's AI Disaster

Zillow's ambitious AI-powered home-buying platform, Zillow Offers,[4] was meant to automate real estate transactions. Zillow was so confident in its pricing algorithm that it said its Zestimates would serve as the initial offer price on eligible homes. That didn't last. Instead, its flawed pricing algorithm led to massive overpayment for homes, resulting in a write-down of over $500 million and the eventual shutdown of the program. The company announced in 2021 that it was exiting the iBuying business. Zillow may not have been explicitly manipulating the market, but it was certainly trying to use technology to outsmart it. Zillow's flipping flop should serve as a reassuring reminder that not everything can be automated.

"All industries are vulnerable to this, because everyone serves a customer of some kind, and customers have been clear that they expect to be treated as more than just a number or a line item. That said, I would highlight industries that deal with particularly sensitive or emotionally charged issues, such as healthcare and financial services. When you are touching people's health or finances, extra sensitivity is required," adds Lee.
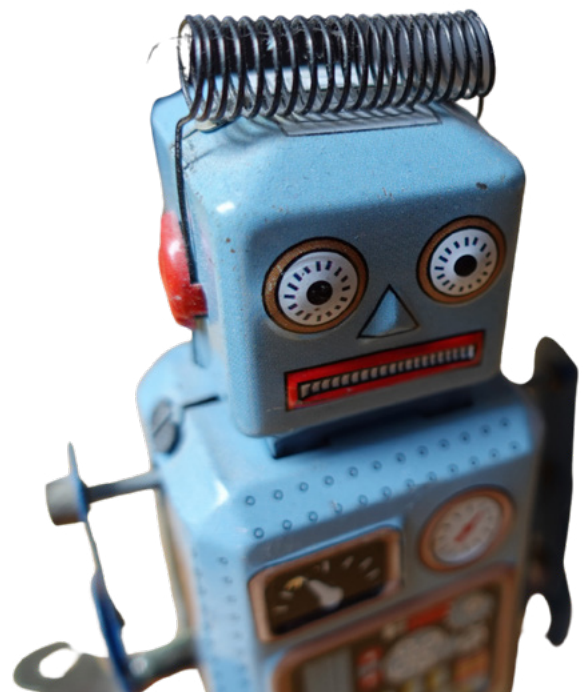
How to Stay on Top: Avoiding the Experience Cliff

To stay off the cliff, brands must stop thinking of CX as a series of isolated fixes and start treating it as an ongoing relationship.

CX doesn't begin or end with a support ticket. It spans the entire life cycle, from discovery to renewal. Yet many organizations continue to focus narrowly on isolated moments of efficiency instead of viewing CX as an ongoing relationship. Without meaningful feedback loops and a full-picture view of the journey, brands risk optimizing for the wrong things and accelerating toward the experience cliff.

Even a brilliant product can fall flat if you fail to listen. Whether it's deploying chatbots without testing usability or introducing automation that burdens customers rather than freeing them, the intent may be innovation, but the result is often alienation. And in a landscape where customer patience is thin and switching costs are low, the consequences of getting CX wrong show up fast.

So, how do brands avoid this fate? The key isn't avoiding automation; it's humanizing it.

"This may sound overly simplistic, but it's crucial: it all starts with a leadership team committed to human-centric innovation," says Lee. "There is a lot of noise out there right now, making it easy to get caught up in the hype. Leaders who care about preserving human connections need to be thoughtful and block out that noise, allowing them to focus on finding solutions that support a human-centric tech strategy, which inherently drives human connection. Keep the customer at the center of everything you do; map their journey, understand the pain points, identify where technology can address these issues, and determine where a human touch is needed. It is an absolute fact that if you care for the experience of your agents, they will care for the experience of your customers. Some specific ways our customers do this include creating

space for proper training and coaching, monitoring their agents' days to identify when they may need a mental health break, and using our Burnout Dashboard to flag and proactively address agents who are on the cusp of burnout while assisting customers."

> *Keep the customer at the center of everything you do; map their journey, understand the pain points, identify where technology can address these issues, and determine where a human touch is needed.*

Staying off the edge of the customer experience cliff isn't about rejecting automation. It's about applying it with intention, balance, and a relentless focus on the customer. The most future-ready brands are building CX strategies that don't just scale but sustain. Here are five ways they're doing it:

1. Human-in-the-Loop Automation

Smart brands don't replace humans, they elevate them.

- AI handles routine tasks and frees humans to handle complex issues.

- Instead of forcing customers into automation-only models, brands benefit from offering seamless escalation paths to human support.

Are you using AI to replace human interaction or to enhance it?

2. Customer-First, Not Cost-First

Too often, automation decisions are made from an operational standpoint, not a customer experience perspective.

- Instead of asking, "How do we cut costs?" consider: "How do we make this effortless for the customer?"

- The best brands optimize for loyalty, not just efficiency.

When was the last time you measured success beyond cost savings?

3. Intelligent Workforce Management

Automation should support employees, not replace them.

- AI-driven workforce management can help agents work smarter, not harder.

- By removing mundane, repetitive tasks, automation can free up human agents to handle high-value interactions.

"Effective workforce management involves deploying resources efficiently and effectively,

ensuring that agents are well-prepared and supported as they assist customers. These tools can automate tasks that the human brain may overlook, resulting in a smoother agent experience and ultimately an enhanced customer experience," explains Lee. "Effectively implementing these capabilities requires emphasizing change management, communication, and reinforcement. Involve operations and IT teams early in the project, showcase the value it will bring to their areas, and consistently collect (and genuinely consider) their feedback on their experiences. These tools are valuable only if the business adopts and integrates them as a standard part of their operations, making buy-in crucial."

Are your employees empowered by or are they fighting against automation?

4. Continuous Feedback Loops

Your customers will tell you when automation is failing … if you listen.

- Implement real-time feedback mechanisms to monitor frustration points.

- Track CSAT trends, chatbot accuracy, and self-service effectiveness.

How often do you reassess your automation strategy?

5. Long-Term Thinking: The CX Journey

The most successful brands don't see CX as a one-time optimization project. They see it as an ongoing commitment.

- They iterate, test, and refine.
- They balance tech-driven efficiency with human connection.
- They resist short-term gains at the expense of long-term relationships.

"The key is not just to reach the top, but to build a CX strategy that keeps you there," says Lee. "I believe AI is here to stay, and it will eventually revolutionize how we interact with brands. Agentic AI is coming, and there may very well be a day when my personal AI agent interacts with the AI agent at a brand, working through a solution on my behalf. However, that day is far in the future. It requires acceptance of this technology by customers, and there is a significant barrier of skepticism that must be overcome first. In the interim, in the mid-term future, my best advice to brands is simple: When considering CX strategies, remember that for now, CX is about human connections; find solutions and strategies that enhance those connections, and you'll thrive while others fall off the cliff."

Final Thoughts: The Future of CX

The brands that win the future aren't the ones that automate the fastest. They're the ones that automate with intention.

So, take a hard look at your CX strategy.

- Are you truly making things better for customers or just more efficient for your business?
- Are you climbing toward a better experience or heading straight for the cliff?

The choice is yours.

Links

1. https://www.forrester.com/predictions/b2c-cx-digital-2025/

2. https://www.forbes.com/councils/forbestechcouncil/2025/01/15/the-cost-of-poor-cx-why-businesses-must-rethink-customer-journeys-to-survive-2025/

3. https://www.cxtoday.com/conversational-ai/mcdonalds-stops-using-ai-for-drive-thru-orders-whats-next-for-fast-food-cx/

4. https://www.wsj.com/articles/zillow-offers-real-estate-algorithm-homes-ibuyer-11637159261

Origin of the Customer Experience Cliff

The concept arose from conversations I've had with customers and prospects. I started to notice a theme: the fast-movers in adopting customer-facing AI were sharing their experiences, and almost universally, they rolled things back just as quickly as they rolled them out. The bottom line is they realized that their customers were not ready for this leap, and it was actually hurting their businesses. We also had two customers who ended our partnership in the last three years, stating that they were eliminating their contact centers altogether and going fully digital. Recently, both have returned to the table with us because they are rebuilding their contact centers for the same reason – their customers didn't respond well to, and adopt, the digital-only service they were offering.

In my experience leading CX organizations in the past, I always knew that I had to balance two things: efficiency, as contact centers are largely viewed as cost centers, and experience, since contact centers are on the front line serving customers every single day. That balance has always been challenging, but it struck me while hearing these stories that now, with AI in the mix, it is harder than ever. The specific metaphor of the cliff came to me on the airplane on my way to CRS as I was contemplating how to discuss this challenge in my opener. I visualized businesses rapidly scaling a mountain, stacking innovations to drive efficiency, without noticing that their customer experience was suffering as a result.

Jennifer Lee
President & Co-CEO
Intradiem

Walmart

Inside Walmart's Ecosystem-First Approach to Driver Experience

Discover how Walmart transforms gig driver support through proactive automation, real-time data, and a platform-wide empathy mindset.

Rafi Barragan is a strategic technology executive passionate about solving complex challenges through AI, automation, and real-time data intelligence. As Director of Driver Experience & Strategy at Walmart, he leads the development of the Driver experience roadmap and proactive interventional capabilities designed to proactively detect and resolve platform instability before it impacts operations—enhancing resilience, reducing MTTD, and minimizing disruptions. Outside of Walmart, Rafi is the CEO of Second Chance Hero, where he applies his leadership to improving the lives of congenital patients navigating heart transplants. His dual expertise in engineering robust digital platforms and building supportive human networks underscores his commitment to making both technology and life experiences more seamless.

Walmart

Rafi Barragan
Director of Driver
Experience & Strategy

Execs In The Know (EITK): Your role at Walmart focuses on enhancing the driver experience within the Spark Driver platform. Can you share how your team approaches creating intuitive and defect-free driver experiences, and what impact that has on Walmart's broader logistics strategy?

Rafi Barragan: Our Team's core mission is to deliver a defect-free and intuitive experience across our last-mile delivery ecosystem for our users. We do this by thinking beyond isolated features or defects and their fixes. We've embraced what we call an ecosystem empathy mindset: a design and operating principle that centers the full lifecycle of the user journey, accounting for the invisible forces behind every click, delay, and support need of our users.

We first bring this to life by shifting the culture – influencing our innovation partners to think like platform stewards, not just product builders. In a platform-based organization, what matters most isn't just how well one product or system performs but how each system change impacts the broader ecosystem. This mindset helps us design for interconnected health, not just individual feature/ enhancement success.

Second, we invest in upstream detection. When we think like an ecosystem, we move from reactive issue detection to more proactive capabilities, enabling us to identify and triage defects earlier in the lifecycle – compressing the time from issue detection to resolution. By embedding ourselves in real-time feedback loops and pairing data with human insights, we can uncover root causes faster, mitigate risk before scale, and reduce the volume of production defects that impact our users.

Ultimately, our approach enables more than stability—it creates a more scalable and resilient logistics network, where human experience isn't an afterthought but the system's most valuable input.

EITK: One of your core strategic pillars is "One-Call Resolution & Driver-Led Support Optimization." In an industry where efficiency is key, how are you leveraging automation and proactive interventions to improve driver support and reduce contact rates?

Rafi: I believe that the best support is one a user never needs—and when they do, it should resolve their issue the first time, without friction. Our approach to "One-Call Resolution" is grounded in ecosystem awareness and empathy—we don't just reduce contact volume; we reduce the need for contact by eliminating root causes upstream.

We've built proactive systems that do two things exceptionally well. First, we use machine learning agents to detect and confirm platform defects in real-time. These agents review logs across our back-end systems to flag when a contact may have been driven by a true production defect— not just a misunderstanding.

While we haven't yet embraced agentic AI, multi-turn autonomous support agents that resolve low-complexity issues without human escalation, we have built generative AI experiences paired with contextually relevant in-app help that surfaces personalized guidance based on where the user is in their journey. Studies show that drivers who engage with content when experiencing user friction are over 80 percent less likely to contact a call center at all.

What's powerful is that these solutions aren't just efficient but deeply human when done right. By understanding the journey, anticipating needs (not just reacting to them), and responding with empathy at scale, CX leaders can create a support experience that feels less like a transaction and more of a partnership with users while accelerating efficiency. A one-call or one-content view solves it all support design.

EITK: Walmart's Spark Driver Platform aims to be the largest and most trusted gig-economy delivery provider. In your experience, what are the key ingredients to building trust and transparency into a platform at this scale?

Rafi: Our team views trust at scale, and trust at scale isn't built through one-off interactions that go well. It's more about how your platform behaves over time. That's why I encourage teams to view trust as an outcome of operational integrity, where every experience is designed to reduce surprises, expose relevant context, and keep users in control of their journey.

In platform environments like last-mile delivery (LMD), it's tempting to focus on metrics alone, but metrics without meaning don't inspire loyalty from users. You must design for ecosystem health, ensuring that every change enhances the entire journey, not just a single touchpoint. That includes leveraging real-time monitoring and upstream defect detection to identify friction early, intervene proactively, and maintain the stability our users rely on.

To me, transparency means surfacing just enough context at the right moment to empower action—not overwhelm or user decision paralysis. Whether that's in-app feedback, clear escalation paths, or journey-aware guidance, teams should work to reduce the ambiguity that erodes trust. When a user knows why something happened and what to do next, it builds confidence, and confidence is what scales trust.

Ultimately, a trusted platform is one where users feel seen, informed, and in control. That's the bar CX leaders and their teams across product and operations should hold themselves to every day.

EITK: Gig workers have unique challenges compared to traditional employees. What are some of the biggest pain points you've identified for Spark drivers, and how has Walmart worked to address them?

Rafi: Supporting gig-earners starts with understanding that their motivations are diverse and that a one-size-fits-all experience won't build trust or loyalty. Through research and real-time behavioral insights, most CX leaders in this space have, in my experience, identified three core gig-earner mindsets: goal-driven earners, income bridgers, and flexibility seekers. Each requires a distinct design and operational response.
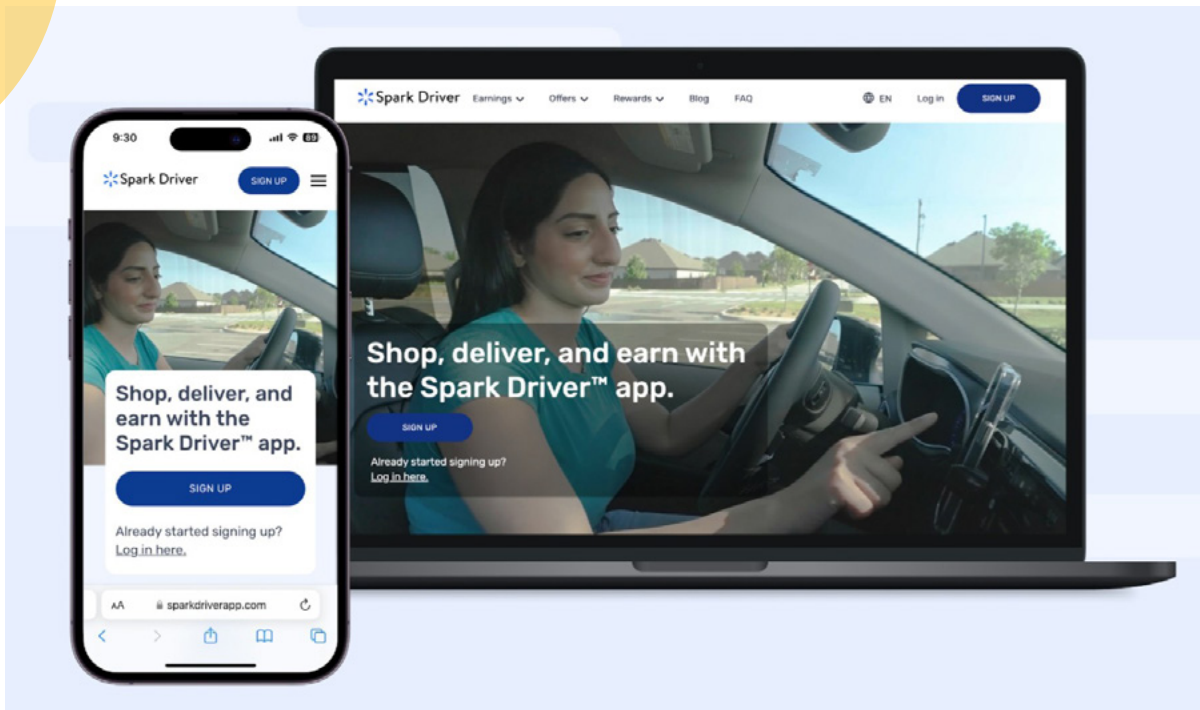
For short-term earners, quickly and with minimal friction, surfacing high-value opportunities works best. For those seeking earnings stability, we focus on platform reliability – reducing defects that could impact their ability to earn consistently, ensuring a dependable earnings experience. And, for gig users prioritizing their personal autonomy, we explore demand strategies that align with their preferred working hours, allowing them to earn on their terms. These are the strategies I'd recommend to anyone in this space.

But even great personalization won't succeed without a stable foundation. Find the issues that impede your experience before they affect users at scale and combine that with operational rigor and human-centered design to reduce discovered pain points—you create a platform gig-earners trust, return to, and recommend.

EITK: With your global experience launching call centers and leading operational scaling across multiple markets, how do you see the evolution of CX in the gig economy? What trends should brands be paying attention to?

Rafi: Having scaled support operations globally, I've seen firsthand how different the gig economy is from traditional CX models. Gig Platforms aren't selling products; they manage real-time

ecosystems with high variability and ultra-dynamic supply. Because of this, the evolution of CX in the gig space will hinge on how well you hold on to your users – at least in my view.

Most gig platforms underinvest in retention, treating churn as a background constant – but the truth is, gig churn is often 10-20 times worse than traditional jobs, and that's just not sustainable. The leaders in the gig space of tomorrow will focus on retention by design. I'm seeing a slow but necessary shift from short-term thinking to long-game design, where platforms embrace a human-centered approach where trust is built through transparency, predictability and intuitive experience. CX in this space involves evolution from reactionary cost center management to a predictive layer of the business, one that understands driver motivations, designs with empathy, and measures success not just by revenue or resolution metrics but by how long users stay. In this space, retention is just an outcome, a signal that you've earned the right to keep serving your users.

EITK: The intersection of technology and human experience is critical in customer and driver engagement. How do you balance automation and personalization to create meaningful interactions at scale?

Rafi: The question isn't how to balance automation and personalization. It's how to blend them to amplify the human touch, not replace it. The evolution of Agentic AI shows that when automation is designed with intention, it can enhance empathy by extending the reach of human agents and enabling real-time, emotionally intelligent support responses.

While Agentic AI is in the early stages for us, my approach to it would be not operating in isolation—it co-pilots with a human facilitator. That synergy allows us to create conversational experiences that feel personal and responsive while scaling efficiently across millions of interactions. It's not just about faster resolution—it's about making every interaction feel like it was designed just for that user at that moment.

When automation is orchestrated by humans and guided by ecosystem-level insights, we move beyond scripted flows into meaningful engagement. That's where trust is built. And in the gig economy, where trust drives loyalty, that blend becomes a strategic differentiator.

When automation is orchestrated by humans and guided by ecosystem-level insights, we move beyond scripted flows into meaningful engagement. That's where trust is built. And in the gig economy, where trust drives loyalty, that blend becomes a strategic differentiator.

EITK: The gig economy is evolving rapidly, and competition among delivery platforms is fierce. What do you think differentiates Walmart's Spark Driver Platform from other gig-delivery services, and how do you ensure drivers continue choosing Spark?

Rafi: What differentiates Spark? I can't really speak for the platform. What I can say is that what differentiates my team is our belief that personalization at scale isn't a feature—it's a platform philosophy. We've continued to encourage building a gig experience flexible enough to support the full spectrum of gig-earner motivations, from goal-driven earners looking to maximize high-yield trips to income-bridgers needing reliable, consistent work to flexibility seekers prioritizing working-hour autonomy.

Gig platforms should go beyond single-order-type fulfillment. At Spark, drivers can shop, deliver, and serve high-verticals like pharmacy and time-sensitive essentials. That diversification isn't just operational—it's strategic. It broadens earning possibilities for gig-earners, supports more sustainable engagement, and allows us to better serve our customers through dynamic fulfillment options.

Behind all of this is my passion for blending human empathy with intelligent systems and design concepts. Our teams ensure that the platform adapts to users and customers, not the other way around.

EITK: You've successfully led teams through major launches and operational scaling across global markets. What advice would you give to leaders trying to drive large-scale CX transformation while maintaining a customer- and employee-first mindset?

Rafi: My biggest piece of advice? Don't get so focused on the outcome that you forget who you're building for. In large-scale CX transformation, narrowing in on top-line metrics—revenue, adoption, and contact deflection is easy. But those are lagging indicators, outputs, not inputs. Real transformation happens when you center the experience itself.

Remember—your "customer" isn't just your user. It's your revenue-driving customer, your gig-delivery driver, your support agent, and your dispatch planner. Build for everyone in the system. When you create intuitive, defect-free experiences that just work—ones that deliver the right information at the right time—you unlock the full potential of users on your platform. When that happens, growth and retention follow as a natural consequence.

Lead with empathy. Design for clarity. Measure by trust and churn. The rest will take care of itself.

EITK: You've had a dynamic career across multiple industries and global markets. What's one leadership lesson that has stuck with you throughout your journey, and how does it shape the way you approach CX today?

Rafi: You can build the most brilliant strategy in the world, but if it doesn't resonate with users – especially in the gig space – it won't matter. Empathy isn't a leadership buzzword or some fluffy concept in this context; it's survival. A platform's greatest risk in a world where drivers have endless choices is irrelevance.

That's why I immerse myself directly in the experience. I deliver on multiple platforms, intentionally stepping into the shoes of our users to feel the friction, the trade-offs, and the moments of delight. I ask myself: Does this help me earn more? Does it respect my time? Does it give me what I need when I need it?

Mentors have shaped me, teaching me that enthusiasm and empathy are choices—and if you lead with both, you'll never lose your connection to the people you serve. Staying relevant requires constant curiosity, humility, and the willingness to evolve as far as your users do.

Execs In The Know

Execs In The Know partners with brands that provide outstanding customer service (CX) experiences. The Brand Spotlight Series showcases innovations and solutions to CX challenges today's leading brands face.

Thank you to Rafi Barragan and the Walmart team for contributing to the Execs In The Know Brand Spotlight.

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Privacy-First CX:
Building Trust Through Design

Discover how a privacy-driven design approach empowers brands to build trust, enhance CX, and stay ahead of evolving data regulations while delivering personalized experiences.

by Execs In The Know

Great brands that deliver amazing experiences invest in resources to orchestrate customer and employee journeys. A typical journey orchestration practice allows customer experience (CX) teams to design and coordinate cohesive, personalized interactions across multiple channels and touch points. These teams need access to customer data to power predictive analytics, design and deliver tailored interactions, and improve products and service offerings. Since customers crave these personalized experiences, this practice can raise privacy concerns.

A modern and effective way to balance the benefits of delivering customized journeys with customer concern about the collection and protection of their data is the privacy-driven design approach. Privacy-driven design weaves respect for customer data, transparency, and consent into every step of the customer journey.

This design mindset puts customer trust and autonomy at the forefront rather than treating privacy as a compliance requirement or an afterthought; it is a great way to demonstrate how a company puts its customers first yet allows essential and valuable data collection and application.

An Important Approach to Consider

The data privacy landscape is changing rapidly in the U.S. — both for businesses and consumers. Research reveals that 70 percent of companies recently increased personal consumer data collection, while 86 percent of customers cite privacy as a concern. Further, more than half (68 percent) of consumers report being concerned about the level of data businesses collect.[1] These practices increasingly lead customers to look for companies prioritizing ethical data practices and providing clear control over their personal information.

Leading with a privacy-driven design approach presents a remarkable opportunity to balance business needs with customer sentiment. Brands that invest in this approach recognize that trust is a differentiator. In a world where customers share increasing amounts of personal details online, privacy is a significant factor in brand loyalty and reputation. In fact, nine out of 10 customers say they would buy from a company that gained their trust.[2] Further, companies that build digital trust with customers are more likely to see their revenue grow by at least 10 percent annually.[3] The return on investment is there for the taking!

Regulatory Momentum

In 2019, the US data privacy framework changed significantly with the emergence of the California consumer privacy act, which created a significant compliance burden for most businesses that collect personal information about California residence. Since then, activity at the state level has increased as more space to establish privacy laws without a comprehensive data privacy law at the federal level. Currently, 20 states have passed comprehensive data of privacy laws. This state-level momentum does not appear to be slowing.[4]

A Seven-Step Implementation Methodology

Implementing privacy-driven experiences requires a structured, customer-first approach that balances data protection, compliance, and value delivery. It also requires an operational model that puts privacy at the core of product design, service delivery, and customer interactions. This methodology is designed to build trust and long-term engagement and includes the following seven key steps:

	STEP	ACTIVITIES
1	**Establish guiding principles**	• Define the privacy principles (e.g., transparency, control, data minimization, security). • Align with frameworks like Privacy by Design, General Data Protection Regulation, California Consumer Privacy Act (and/or relevant state laws), and industry standards. • Ensure leadership buy-in and communication of the commitment – privacy must be a strategic priority, not a check box.
2	**Map the customer journey**	• Create a journey map focusing on data collection, storage, and decision points. • Identify moments of data entry, consent, personalization, and support. • Flag high-risk or high-value data moments for more profound attention.
3	**Conduct a privacy assessment**	• Identify types of data collected and how it is stored and processed. • Evaluate risks and determine mitigation strategies. • Design privacy-conscious alternatives where needed.
4	**Design for transparency and control**	• Use plain language to explain data usage. • Offer one-click options to make it easy to opt in or out of optional data collection or communications. • Build preference centers that provide a user-friendly portal where customers can see, understand, and/or modify their data-sharing preferences at any time and their convenience.
5	**Integrate security and compliance by default**	• Implement encryption, access controls, and secure application program interfaces. • Implement encryption, access controls, and secure application program interfaces. • Adopt data minimization and collect only what is needed. • Stay aligned with current and emerging privacy laws.
6	**Implement continuous improvement**	• Create loops to gather ongoing feedback through surveys or trust indicators. • Track key performance indicators (KPIs) like opt-in rates, data requests, and consent withdrawals. • Iterate on privacy messaging, flows, and settings. • Audit privacy policies periodically and iterate as regulations, technologies, and customer expectations evolve.
7	**Build a privacy culture**	• Train cross-functional teams on privacy-centered practices, including Legal, Compliance, Product, Design, Marketing, and CX team representatives. • Promote a culture of ethical data use and respect for users. • Offer customer onboarding guides with short explainers or tips about data usage during sign-up. • Keep customers informed about the changes, highlighting how the voice of the customer influenced actions and sharing information about new or updated laws and policies.

Core Principles of the Approach

Privacy-driven design has several foundational components that drive how it is best applied to address business and customer needs. The first is privacy by design: building privacy into the architecture and operations of systems, practices, and infrastructure by default – not as an afterthought. To take a privacy-driven approach, companies must anticipate, prevent, and minimize privacy risks rather than just react to them.

This can be accomplished by embedding privacy considerations early in product development and CX strategy rather than retrofitting them later. A proactive approach will be more efficient to implement and have a higher success rate. Data minimization efforts can also contribute to this work; by collecting and storing only what is strictly necessary, companies reduce risk, and customers feel less of a burden to share more personal data.

Transparency and control are the second core principles that empower and build customer trust. The first and most crucial step is to teams that design and implement precise consent mechanisms along the customer journey. These mechanisms ensure that customers know exactly what data is collected, how it is being/will be used, and how long it's kept. Leading firms rely on

several best practices to be transparent with customers; these companies:

- Use plain language in privacy policies to obtain consent.

- Notify customers when relevant policies or processes change.

- Share audit practices for data to show accountability within the organization.

- Design and offer dashboards so data preferences (e.g., opt-ins, opt-outs, settings) can be viewed and managed.

Security and compliance are the third principle of designing privacy-centered experiences. While transparency and control empower users, security and compliance form the backbone that ensures data is truly protected and handled according to legal and ethical standards. A secure infrastructure is the first and critical component of this principle. Organizations must use encryption, secure authentication, and implement rigorous data governance practices to protect user data and put security practices first. From there, ongoing monitoring is key to maintaining safe and compliant practices. Companies can ensure compliance with evolving regulations and standards by regularly and consistently auditing internal processes.

Finally, establishing and following ethical data use is the fourth core principle. Brands should develop purpose limitations that clearly define and communicate to customers why specific data is collected. This also includes confirming that customers understand that the company will not use or share personal data for unrelated purposes without their consent. Establishing a value exchange helps customers feel part of the process. This ensures that any data customers share directly benefits them, such as personalized recommendations, faster support, or customized offers. When customers see clear value to them, they are more willing to share personal information.

The Benefits of Privacy-Driven Experiences

Following a structured methodology to design, deliver, and optimize privacy-focused experiences offers a range of strategic, operational, and customer-facing benefits. This approach doesn't merely check legal boxes; it creates strategic value for customers and the business. The most compelling benefit is the enhanced trust and increased loyalty between brands and customers. Trust is the currency of digital experiences. Customers who feel confident that their data is safe and have more control of their experiences are likely to engage deeply, share additional information, and remain loyal.

Customer-focused key performance indicators (KPIs) will reflect the positive results of these experiences. Increases in customer satisfaction, retention, brand engagement, and positive word of mouth, coupled with reduced complaints and support issues related to data handling, are rewards of delivering privacy-focused CX. In addition, data quality will improve as customers provide more accurate, voluntary, and helpful information. This data is critical to a successful personalization strategy and enables more informed decisions across Marketing, Product, and Customer Support teams.

From the business perspective, CX, when leading with privacy, offers a competitive advantage. Transparent practices and customer-centric controls can set a brand apart in a crowded market. Privacy is a differentiator, and brands that prioritize it across the customer journey will stand out. As consumers become more privacy-conscious, the brand position is strengthened. These practices align with evolving customer expectations of proactivity, security, and personalization.

Privacy-driven CX builds trust, ensures compliance, and reduces legal and financial risk to the business. Companies that proactively protect customer data minimize the likelihood of breaches and non-compliance, avoiding the legal

pitfalls and damaged reputations that come with them. This approach significantly reduces audit findings and legal review issues, saving time, resources, and costs related to operational disruptions, remediation efforts, and regulatory penalties. More important, it represents a strategic investment in a future-proof foundation that can more easily adapt as privacy laws, regulations, and industry standards evolve.

Privacy-Driven Experiences Put the Customer First

In today's digital landscape, companies are eager to collect more customer data to drive innovation and fuel growth. At the same time, consumers are becoming increasingly concerned about the safety, security, and ethical use of their personal information. As the scope and volume of data collection expand, so too do calls for greater transparency and stronger regulatory oversight.

Organizations embracing privacy-centered design can bridge this gap, addressing customer concerns, staying ahead of regulatory requirements, and leveraging data to unlock growth and build a sustainable competitive advantage. By putting privacy at the core of CX, businesses can earn trust, foster loyalty, innovate responsibly, and truly put the customer first.

Links

1. https://kpmg.com/us/en/articles/2023/bridging-the-trust-chasm.html

2. https://www.forbes.com/councils/forbesbusinesscouncil/2024/12/11/2025-privacy-first-strategies-shaping-customer-experience-and-trust/

3. https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/quantumblack/our-insights/why-digital-trust-truly-matters

4. https://www.whitecase.com/insight-our-thinking/us-data-privacy-guide?s=data%20privacy%20guide

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KIA ONLINE COMMUNITY MEMBER SPOTLIGHT

THOMAS HARDEN
Senior Director of Customer Care

The Black Tux

Delving into the world of customer Thomas is the Head of Operations for Customer Care at The Black Tux, overseeing both internal teams and the brand's offshore BPO partner. Since joining the company in 2022, he has led end-to-end operations, including training, quality, and voice of the customer — working cross-functionally with showroom teams and warehouse operations to ensure a seamless, elevated experience for every customer.

Over the past two years, Thomas and his team have not only met but exceeded every KPI placed in front of them. Still, his sights are set on what's next: the coming customer experience revolution. Yes, AI is part of that shift, but for Thomas, it's about something even deeper. He believes the future lies not just in measuring CSAT or NPS, but in understanding the story behind the score.

Driven by a mission to transform data into meaningful insights, Thomas leads with curiosity, empathy, and a deep respect for the people on his team. Because when customer care professionals feel seen, supported, and empowered, they bring their best to every interaction.

Tailored for Excellence

The Black Tux is elevating customer experience through precision, empowerment, and seamless service.

Execs In The Know (EITK): The Black Tux has revolutionized the suit rental experience. How does your customer care team ensure a seamless and elevated experience from the first interaction to the final fitting?

Thomas Harden: To start, you have two fantastic options with us: our exclusive online fit algorithm or one of our fabulous showrooms across the U.S. We nail it the majority of the time right there — and that's the end of the story! We're done, and you're welcome!

If, by chance, something was missed along the way, just reach out to our customer support team. Our people are well-trained, and we don't hold them back. We empower our team to make the best decision for you from their perspective. This keeps us from getting in our own way and ensures we deliver the best service possible!

EITK: With both digital and in-person customer touch points, what strategies have you implemented to create a consistent and personalized experience across all channels?

Thomas: We are excited this year with our transformation in Customer Care as we have a whole new tech stack! We chose Gladly as our new CRM, Maestro for quality management, and Simplesat to gather customer feedback. These platforms work beautifully together, giving us the foundation we need to deliver even more personalized service. This integrated approach will mean our team will also see all information in one place without jumping systems. As we venture into AI territory, it gives us room to grow. What's next for us? We're adding chat support and designing bots to be more interactive on the easy items like "where's my order" and simple replacements. Our goal is always to not only make items simple for customers, but our agents as well. The great news? We've always empowered our agents to delight customers. Now with everything integrated, we're elevating the customer experience even further!

EITK: You've led multi-site contact centers and global vendor management. What are the key challenges of scaling customer care operations, and how do you maintain service excellence at scale?

Thomas: The challenges I face are what many of my peers experience. We want to keep our culture represented not just at the home base but also with our vendors. We benchmark like everyone else; conversations per agent/hour (not my main driver), average handle time, and where agents fall on the curve, quality, CSAT, and NPS are big for me — not necessarily the score itself, but the

feedback we receive from our customers. Whatever your focus ... do just that. Focus on what matters and expect nothing less than that standard. It'll be tough in the beginning, but you'll thank yourself later.

I'm a huge fan of Roger Dooley, who wrote *Friction*. He gets it, in my opinion. Identify friction and work like hell to eliminate it. Customer service isn't rocket science, we just made it that way. Whoever does this the quickest in any industry wins! Period. That's always front of mind in any business item I'm tackling.

Scaling operations can be tough in our industry as pressure mounts to hire people quickly and train them even quicker. The race isn't always to be the swiftest in all cases. You can pay now or pay later. That's my philosophy. I'm fortunate to work for an organization that understands that. If you need to push agents out quickly, don't train them on

everything at once. Do it in pieces. If you have the time, do it right the first time and deliver a quality product to your customers.

I can't drive this point home enough: kill the friction points, people! Also, I'm involved! I meet and hold meetings across the entire organization (in-house and vendors). I don't leave messaging to chance and let staff know if something is done differently to contact me directly. We find people who really want to work for our organization, and we do what we say. That makes it easier to scale when needed. Our last two years of hiring have been from word of mouth of existing agents. You don't need to work on the outside of the house if it's a mess internally.

EITK: Retail associates play a pivotal role in The Black Tux experience. How does your team support them to ensure customers receive exceptional service at every showroom?

Thomas: Our showrooms are extremely important to our customer experience as they provide our customers a direct touch point to who we are as an organization. They do an excellent job each and every day!

Our showroom teams have direct access to our customer care. We never leave our showroom teams on an island. If they happen to need help, we ensure we find the remaining answers or solutions to items that need to be solved.

I have to note I have an outstanding relationship with the showroom leaders, and due to our communications, it helps from top to bottom. Everyone understands what our focus is ... the customer!

> ## Culture is everything, and we fight like crazy to protect it.

EITK: What role does technology play in your customer care strategy? Are there any innovations you're particularly excited about to enhance the customer experience?

Thomas: This is a major play for our customer care strategy, and we have made investments and flipped the majority of our tech stack. It's not just an investment in technology but in our people. We want our agents to be efficient.

In regards to what I'm excited about? There are two categories for me. First, the present moment and getting the easy stuff done on the front end, including questions such as, where's my order? Can I add/replace an item? What qualifies for reimbursements? Second is the future of artificial intelligence (AI). This includes capabilities like AI

understand and can want better, so that helps drive service excellence to our customers.

I don't want to sidestep the development and mentoring question. In a mentor, you have to find someone who challenges you to be the best you. I was lucky to have people see me for the talent I possessed. I'm actually just now understanding some of the life lessons they taught me. In development, you have to be your own advocate at times. A couple of years ago, I invested in an executive coach, and it changed my headspace about my approach and growth.

EITK: The Black Tux is known for taking the guesswork out of the rental process. What insights from customer feedback have been most impactful in refining the service model?

Thomas: We actually read all of our customer feedback! We don't collect it for databases. We genuinely love feedback. We know what we do well. And our customers let us know: "I felt like a model, the clothes fit me fantastic, the color scheme, your showrooms, and customer service were amazing." Also, we are just as interested in what we can do better when customer feedback includes, "my size was off because of XYZ, I wish you made this size for a certain style, or you missed the mark on this one." We dive into trends and patterns and make thoughtful adjustments

voice handling mid-level issues, intelligently determining when to escalate to a live agent, and deflecting more interactions that may seem to require human support but actually don't – depending on what that looks like for your business.

EITK: You're a strong advocate for leadership development and mentoring. How do you cultivate a customer care culture that empowers teams to drive service excellence?

Thomas: I could actually discuss this topic at length. It's that saying, "You don't know what you don't know." This is actually so true. Many individuals are smart but don't understand their particular organization. Navigation is different between organizations, and most want great leaders but don't invest even in their mid- to high-potential talent.

I was lucky that a couple of people noticed my talent even when I wasn't serious and got me on track. I am transparent and ask people what they want in life. No matter the answer, I tie that into our mission and values as a company. You have to cultivate that. We bring examples that people

> **The best way to refine any model is to speak with your customers and get direct feedback. We actually love interacting with our customers; they define and drive our product.**

where our customers ask. Many of us reach out to customers after reading feedback to ensure we understand their concerns. The best way to refine any model is to speak directly with your customer. We actually love interacting with our customers; they define and drive our product. When you leave the customer out of the process, you're asking for trouble.

EITK: With your experience leading Voice of the Customer (VOC) programs, how do you translate customer insights into meaningful business decisions?

Thomas: I am very fortunate to be embedded with our leadership team. I haven't had that opportunity for the majority of my career. I used to not know if my thoughts made it to certain discussions. Therefore, I am careful and strategic when delivering information. I ensure that when I'm passionate about a topic, I have not only data but trending data and normally have a visual package to go with the information if needed.

I also have one person on my direct team who is dedicated only to DSATs. We know if something is agent, policy, or customer-driven. We spend a lot of time in this category because having your customers' pulse is truly our lifeline to our business.

EITK: The Black Tux stands out for its attention to detail, from fabric quality to fit precision. How does customer feedback shape product development and service improvements?

Thomas: Unfortunately, in questions and conversations around topics like this, I never will get into the details (gotta keep our competitors guessing!). What I will say is our co-founder and CEO, Andrew Blackmon, is all about the details. He reads customer feedback and is engaged with where we source from; he visits and is well-informed about our vendors and materials used. He is constantly providing everyone with feedback. At the end of the day, our reputation depends on customer feedback.

EITK: Can you share an example of how your team has gone above and beyond to turn a customer challenge into a memorable experience?

Thomas: Vague answer alert! Here's the deal. I've been in this service for quite a while. I've learned that when you share some of the crazy things you do for people and others read it, they want that as well! You can't be everything to everyone is what I've learned. Just know: we do some crazy things for our customers at times. Sometimes, even against our policy. We may read an email and say, "Okay, let's make this happen for this customer!" We did some amazing things during the Los Angeles wildfires. It makes me appreciate what we stand for at the end of the day as a company.

EITK: Looking ahead, what excites you most about the future of customer care for The Black Tux?

Thomas: Our future! The tech stack changes will, of course, play an important role for my team. We've spent the first quarter standing the platforms up. We will fine tune this quarter and then we won't look in the rear-view mirror. This will also enable staff to see what is possible and begin learning new technology that's good for everyone! We have delivered extraordinary results back to the business including balance of great CSATs and QA, low attrition rates, and overall happy people. I don't say that lightly. Most of my peers know that day comes when agents want more and may spread their wings and go to other places that we may not have slots for. I really am excited when people grow, with me or somewhere else. My job is to look around the corner as much as possible and anticipate and be ready to execute. I look forward to coaching, developing, and providing growth to as many as possible. I've developed some that have surpassed my position. When I speak to them, that's a great place for me. When people know what your true intentions are for them, that's true coaching and growth and they will help provide you with the next flock of talent!

Execs In The Know

Thank you to Thomas Harden for his leadership, participation, and insights. To connect with Thomas or participate in the wider conversation, consider joining the Execs In The Know "Know It All" (KIA) Community. The KIA Community is a private, online community designed exclusively for CX Leaders at consumer-facing brands. Come learn, share, network, and engage to innovate.

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