CX Insight

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15 YEARS
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The
Anticipation Era
How prediction, trust, and leadership are redefining modern CX

The Future is Predictive: Inside the Shift Toward Anticipatory CX

Leading in 2026: Reclaiming Connection in an Age of Intelligent Isolation

The best way to predict the future is to lead it.

Brand Spotlight: Fanatics

in this issue

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Welcome

to the January 2026 issue of *CX Insight* magazine, an Execs In The Know publication.

The Future of CX Is Still Human

As 2026 takes shape, one thing is unmistakably clear: customer experience has entered a more demanding, more human era. Predictive models have become widely adopted. Yet, alongside this acceleration, CX leaders are navigating how to scale intelligence without losing trust, connection, and judgment. This issue reflects that moment, giving readers a grounded look at how leaders are balancing progress with purpose.

Across these pages, you'll hear how to move beyond reactive service into anticipatory, proactive care using data, AI, and governance to reduce friction before customers ever feel it. You'll also see how brands like Fanatics and CHEP are redefining experience by pairing advanced systems with deep respect for emotion, sustainability, and human-centered design. From predictive supply chains to emotionally intelligent fan experiences, the through line is consistent: technology works best when it strengthens, not replaces, the relationships at the heart of CX.

We also introduce an important reflection for the year ahead in The New Human Touch: Re-Earning Trust in the Age of AI. As intelligent systems become more capable, leadership itself is being reshaped. Trust, clarity, and connection are strategic imperatives. As you explore this issue, our hope is that you find perspective and insights to carry forward with renewed energy. Because the future of CX won't be defined just by how fast we automate, but by how intentionally we lead.

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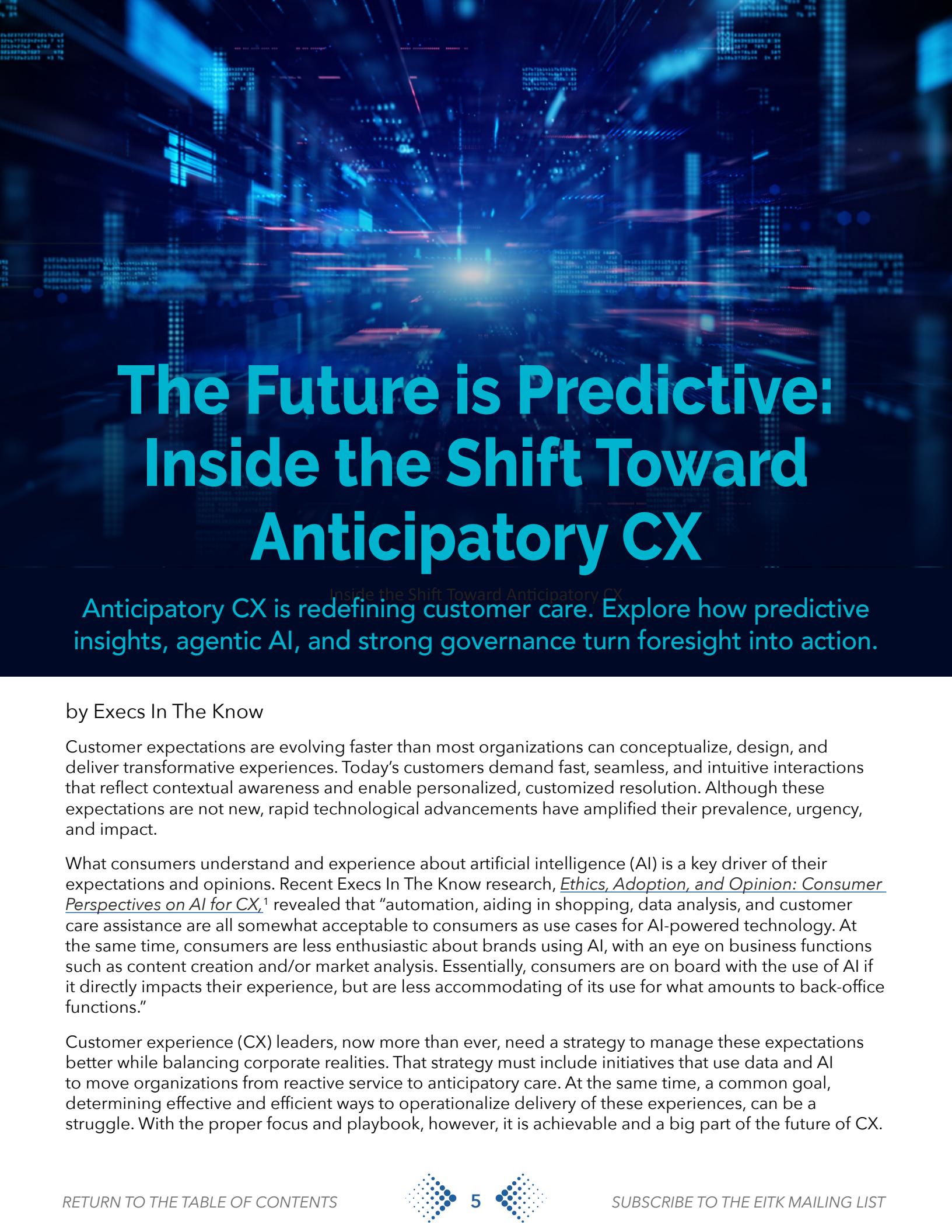
The Future is Predictive: Inside the Shift Toward Anticipatory CX

Anticipatory CX is redefining customer care. Explore how predictive insights, agentic AI, and strong governance turn foresight into action.

by Execs In The Know

Customer expectations are evolving faster than most organizations can conceptualize, design, and deliver transformative experiences. Today's customers demand fast, seamless, and intuitive interactions that reflect contextual awareness and enable personalized, customized resolution. Although these expectations are not new, rapid technological advancements have amplified their prevalence, urgency, and impact.

What consumers understand and experience about artificial intelligence (AI) is a key driver of their expectations and opinions. Recent Execs In The Know research, *Ethics, Adoption, and Opinion: Consumer Perspectives on AI for CX,*[1] revealed that "automation, aiding in shopping, data analysis, and customer care assistance are all somewhat acceptable to consumers as use cases for AI-powered technology. At the same time, consumers are less enthusiastic about brands using AI, with an eye on business functions such as content creation and/or market analysis. Essentially, consumers are on board with the use of AI if it directly impacts their experience, but are less accommodating of its use for what amounts to back-office functions."

Customer experience (CX) leaders, now more than ever, need a strategy to manage these expectations better while balancing corporate realities. That strategy must include initiatives that use data and AI to move organizations from reactive service to anticipatory care. At the same time, a common goal, determining effective and efficient ways to operationalize delivery of these experiences, can be a struggle. With the proper focus and playbook, however, it is achievable and a big part of the future of CX.

Understanding Anticipatory CX

As customer service shifts away from being purely reactive and backward-looking, organizations have new opportunities to anticipate customer needs. A first step is aligning on the definitions and applications of two key future-focused terms: predictive and anticipatory.

TERM	DEFINITION	APPLICATION
Predictive: relates to data	Predictive analytics involves using historical data and AI-powered machine learning algorithms to predict future customer behaviors, needs, and outcomes. This allows businesses to be proactive in addressing customer concerns and optimizing their journeys.[2]	Organizations can use predictive analytics for: • likelihood to contact • churn risk • next-best action/offer • sentiment
Anticipatory: relates to action	Anticipatory CX uses the predictions revealed in the analysis to take proactive steps to resolve customer issues. This type of intervention occurs before the customer contacts for help.	Companies intervene in the experience with: • automated actions • proactive outreach • preemptive fixes • seamless resolutions

Simply put, predictive analytics deliver insights and knowledge that lead to anticipatory CX actions, such as experience design and delivery. CX-leading brands across several verticals are already creating these positive experiences and memorable moments for customers. A few examples include:

- **Automotive:** Dealerships can text vehicle owners to schedule routine maintenance ahead of dashboard alerts, which is more convenient and prevents avoidable car problems.

- **Financial Services:** Banks can send timely reminders about upcoming direct deposits, bill payments, or low-balance risks to help customers avoid fees and reduce financial stress.

- **Healthcare:** Providers can send pre-visit check-in links and digital forms to streamline intake and reduce in-office wait times.

- **Retail:** Stores can proactively keep shoppers informed with real-time updates on inventory, order status, shipping progress, and delivery timing.

- **Travel:** Airlines can alert passengers of flight delays and proactively offer rebooking options to prevent missed connections and minimize disruption.

- **Utilities:** Power providers can proactively communicate planned outages, service interruptions, and restoration timelines, so customers know what to expect and when service will return.

In our [October 2024 KIA Spotlight](#)[3] with Shannon Burch, Vice President of Experience at Neo Financial, she shared how proactive, real-time notifications and digital alerts help customers stay ahead of deposits, payments, and balance risks. These timely nudges reduce unnecessary fees, ease financial stress, and reinforce trust through thoughtful, human-centered design.

In a retail context, Michael Kors illustrates how real-time inventory visibility, proactive order and shipping updates, along with [AI-enabled service tools, keep customers informed throughout the purchase journey.](#)[4] This reduces uncertainty while preserving the high-touch experience customers expect from a global luxury brand.

The prevalence of anticipatory experiences has grown as companies expand their channel offerings and more consumers rely on mobile and wearable devices for real-time information. Beyond generating valuable data for organizations to mine, these devices also serve as direct-to-consumer communication channels, enabling brands to deliver anticipatory experiences and interventions. While this approach is prevalent in the health and wellness industry, other industries are rapidly expanding their communication strategies to meet customers where they are and capitalize on emerging technology to share information at the right moment.

Balancing Technology with People and Process

Although the concept of anticipatory CX is not new, agentic AI is supercharging predictive analytics and empowering brands to deliver proactive experiences at scale. Agentic analytics is the application of AI agents for data analysis and insight generation. In the context of data analytics, AI agents can perform tasks such as data exploration, pattern recognition, and predictive modeling, often at scales and speeds beyond human capabilities. From there, agentic agents can make decisions and take actions, such as orchestrating end-to-end tasks, handling exceptions, and driving desired outcomes with little to no human intervention.

But as with any technology deployment, the tech stack alone will not deliver successful experiences; instead, focused leadership and operational discipline are required. CX leaders must set clear direction on where AI should and should not be used, what experiences matter most, and how much automation aligns with corporate strategy. Without that clarity, even the most advanced technology can deliver inconsistent or unscalable experiences.

Process experts must be tasked with defining new workflows, seamless handoffs, exception paths, and escalation points so that AI and humans work together smoothly. Operating models need to be redesigned to ensure AI is layered into the right processes at the right time, avoiding confusion for employees and friction for customers. Continuous improvement processes are arguably the most important to update and refine with agentic AI and anticipatory experiences. These processes must ensure human-in-the-loop (HITL) oversight to train and tune AI and handle escalations, as needed.

When AI agents and systems observe and learn from humans, they can use that knowledge in future interactions and contain more inquiries in self-service channels. AI systems can also synthesize updated information for knowledge base articles that human agents can access, improving experiences throughout the customer and employee journey. Human feedback on AI outputs also helps these tools learn to improve their accuracy, which will further increase customer satisfaction and trust in information from AI.[5]

Because AI increasingly influences decisions and actions, trust is a prerequisite. Customers and employees need confidence that AI outputs are accurate, fair, and aligned to policy. They also always need to have a clear path to human support and intervention when needed. Building trust requires transparent change management, ongoing training and communication, and consistent performance optimization.

In the travel sector, American Airlines[6] illustrates how proactive flight delay notifications and real-time rebooking options help minimize disruption and keep customers informed during moments of uncertainty. Through predictive analytics and integrated digital tools, the airline anticipates issues before they escalate. This preserves trust while reducing stress across the traveler journey.

Finally, governance ensures AI is safe, compliant, and accountable as it evolves and expands to take on additional tasks. Apparent oversight, audits, data privacy protections, testing, monitoring, and guardrails are required. Successful organizations view agentic AI deployments as cultural transformations, not just as technology deployments.

Improving Frontline Performance

Anticipatory CX not only improves customer interactions; it also enhances the impact of frontline work. Human agents benefit from clearer customer intent signals, enabling them to resolve issues more efficiently and effectively. Escalations and associated customer frustration are also reduced, helping agents focus on delivering consistent, seamless experiences that follow the process and uphold the brand promise.

Human agents can spend valuable interaction time deepening customer relationships since anticipatory CX reduces friction and increases personalization. The resulting improvements in satisfaction, loyalty, cost reduction, and experience consistency greatly benefit overall operational performance.

With agentic AI deployments, robust operational processes that support transformational technology, and a stronger ability to anticipate and proactively solve customer needs, human agents are freed up to add more value to the experience. Anticipatory CX removes contacts that usually consume service interactions, including status updates, repetitive verification, context sharing, and preventable escalations. Agents are empowered to deliver empathy, build trust, and solve the more complex, high-stakes issues that need the human touch – something technology cannot replicate.

Anticipatory experiences lead to calmer, less frustrating experiences for both customers and employees. Without heightened negative emotions, the conversation shifts to a more personalized, authentic interaction where the customer feels heard and the brand is represented more positively. These interactions also provide opportunities for proactive education, preventive support, and stronger advocacy, making the agent a trusted advisor to the customer and positively impacting retention.

Building an Anticipatory CX Playbook

As customer expectations skyrocket and technology advances rapidly, leaders need to build their organization's anticipatory CX playbook to start or expand the delivery of these experiences. This work should begin with building or optimizing the agentic analytics foundation, a key enabler for predictive CX. As with any data initiative, predictive analytics is most effective with a clean, comprehensive dataset that includes structured and unstructured input from across the organization, ensuring the end-to-end customer journey is represented.

The need for ethics and governance is also persistent, as with other data projects. Organizations must be transparent, have strict data privacy protocols, and have explainable models in place. The predictive systems that power anticipatory CX must understand what to do and when to do it, being guided by a "do no harm" approach.

Experimentation labs are also critical to the success of AI-powered predictive analytics and anticipatory CX. Organizations need a safe, controlled environment to validate assumptions, fine-tune models, and assess real-world impact before full-scale production deployment. These labs enable organizations to test how predictive insights influence customer behavior, uncover quality blind spots, and evaluate the accuracy and fairness of AI-driven decisions.

This approach ensures that predictive models are not only technically sound, but also contextually relevant, emotionally intelligent, and aligned with operational goals. Testing labs turn AI potential into more practical, trustworthy customer and employee outcomes.

Implementing HITL protocols further enhances an organization's ability to deliver anticipatory CX. In practice, HITL shows up through deliberate human interjection, leaders and frontline experts reviewing outputs, validating assumptions, and course-correcting the system in real time. These human touch points create a continuous feedback loop that sharpens prompts, policies, and training, ensuring anticipatory CX evolves with intent rather than automation alone.
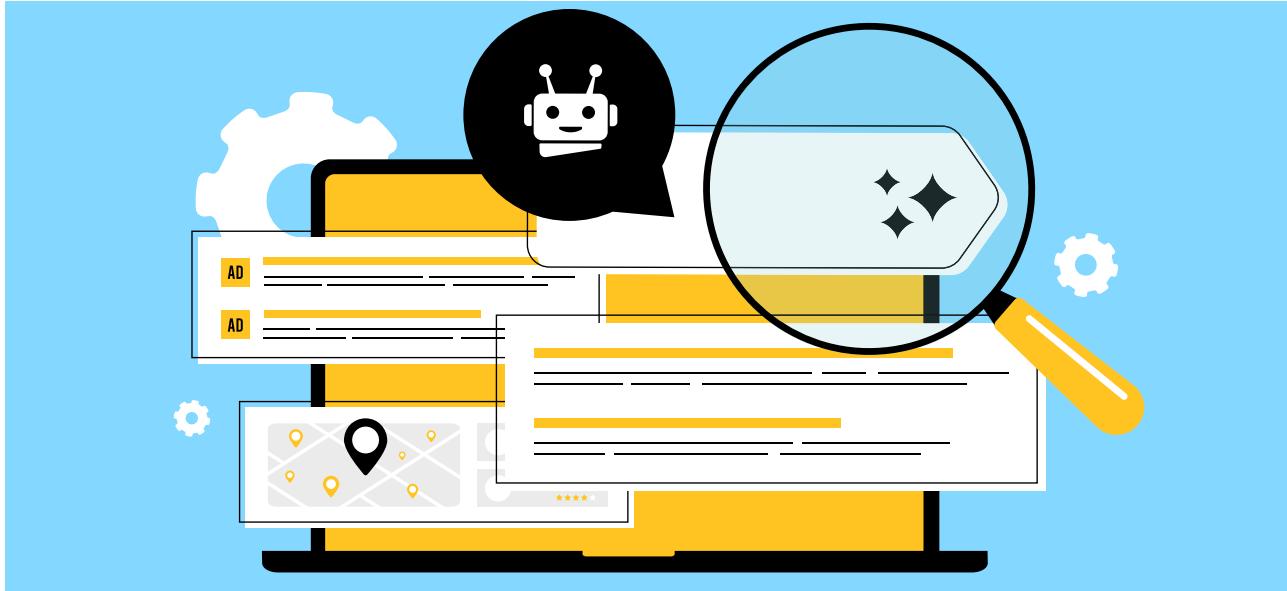
Reflecting on Key Takeaways

Data-informed experiences are the future of CX. And to deliver anticipatory CX supported by predictive analytics, leaders must devise a strategy that differs from traditional technology deployments and, instead, overhauls business processes and transforms the culture. Brands that anticipate needs are CX frontrunners for both customers and employees.

Delivering these experiences drives operational performance, enhances customer and employee satisfaction, and fulfills the brand promise by providing targeted, highly personalized interactions that result in prompt resolution.

An anticipatory CX strategy ensures that brands are always one move (at least!) ahead of their customers and the competition.

Article Links

1. https://execsintheknow.com/knowledge-center/customer-experience-research/hot-topics-research/ethics-adoption-and-opinion-consumer-perspectives-on-ai-for-cx/

2. https://www.genesys.com/definitions/what-are-predictive-analytics-in-cx

3. https://execsintheknow.com/magazines/october-24/kia-online-community-member-spotlight/

4. https://execsintheknow.com/michael-kors-customer-experience-blending-ai-personalization-and-human-connection/

5. https://execsintheknow.com/knowledge-center/customer-experience-research/hot-topics-research/ethics-adoption-and-opinion-consumer-perspectives-on-ai-for-cx/

6. https://execsintheknow.com/magazines/july-2025/american-airlines-approach-to-scalable-human-centered-care/

How Quince Used AI to Turn Customer Support Data into Predictive CX Insights

A real-world look at how Quince leveraged AI and a custom GPT to democratize customer insights, accelerate decision-making, and enable anticipatory CX across the organization.

by Sagarika Prusty, Director - Analytics, Quince

Customer support has always been a gold mine of insight. Every interaction tells a story about friction in the customer journey, gaps in product design, operational breakdowns, or emerging risks. Yet for most organizations, that story is difficult to tell clearly. Support data is often buried in dashboards, trapped in unstructured text, or accessible only to analysts who can translate it into reports and insights.

We set out to solve a familiar CX challenge: **How do you move from raw customer data to actionable insights quickly, consistently, and at scale without making insight generation dependent on people or processes?** The answer was an end-to-end, AI-powered Voice of the Customer (VoC) platform designed to **democratize customer support data across the entire organization.**

The Foundation: Moving from Tags to Intelligence

The first hurdle in democratizing data is its quality. Calls, chats, and emails contain valuable signals, but reading through thousands or millions of comments is not scalable. Legacy "disposition codes" or manual tagging are notoriously unreliable, often dependent on an agent's interpretation.

Our first step was building a robust **AI Intent Model** that analyzes 100% of our contacts. Instead of relying on a human to categorize a ticket, our model automatically enriches every interaction with:

✔ **Intent & Summarization:** What actually happened? (Item has been delayed beyond the promised date.)

✔ **Root Cause** (No movement in tracking.)

✔ **Sentiment & Churn Risk:** How frustrated is the customer, and what is the likelihood of churn?

✔ **Operational Metrics:** Automatically calculating **First Contact Resolution** (FCR) and **Effort Scores** based on the actual dialogue.

✔ **Any other safety flags or privacy concerns**

Instead of treating support interactions as qualitative noise, we transformed them into structured, consistent data points. Every contact became immediately understandable and comparable, allowing trends to surface without manual review.

This alone significantly reduced analysis time, but it was only the beginning.

Augmentation: Enriching the Voice of the Customer with Business Context

Customer experience doesn't exist in isolation. To generate meaningful insight, VoC data must be connected to the broader business.

We enriched each summarized interaction with **order and product level data**, such as SKU, size, fit, fulfillment details, and purchase history. This allowed us to link customer sentiment and intent directly to tangible business drivers.

Suddenly, CX teams could move beyond "what customers are contacting us about" to "why this is happening now." Product issues, operational gaps, and merchandising challenges became visible through the lens of real customer conversations.

Support data evolved from a reactive reporting tool into a **proactive decision-making asset.**

Example: Many customers in a particular zip code and carrier are complaining about delays in receiving items, indicating an issue with a particular sort code.

The Breakthrough: A Custom GPT for Self-Service Insight Generation

Despite better data, one challenge remained: accessibility. We could have added it all into a dashboard. But dashboards still required interpretation, filters, and time. Insight generation was faster, but still needed effort.

To solve this, we built a **custom GPT on top of our enriched VoC dataset.**

Instead of navigating dashboards, stakeholders can now ask questions in natural language:

✓ "How many customer contacts did we receive today, and how does that compare to last week?"

✓ "Are there any new topics trending over the past few days?"

✓ "Which contact reasons saw the biggest week-over-week increase?"

✓ "Are we seeing more size or fit issues for specific products?"

Within seconds, the system synthesizes data, identifies trends, and delivers clear answers. What once required manual analysis now happens **in minutes or less.**

This marked a critical shift: insight generation became **self-service, consistent, and scalable.**
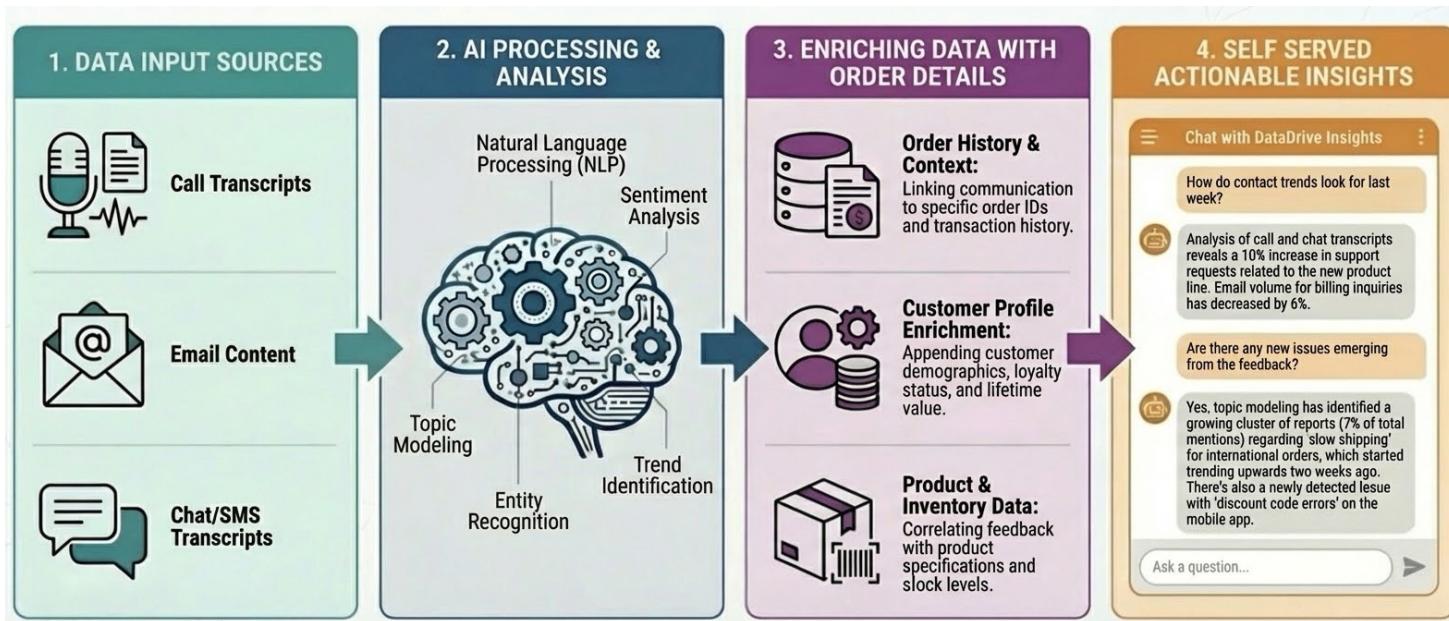
Steps from raw unstructured data to self-serve insights

How Different Teams Use the Platform Today

The impact of democratized VoC insights is visible across the organization.

CX Leadership

CX leaders use the platform daily to monitor contact volume, track trends, and identify emerging risks. Instead of relying on lagging indicators or static weekly reports, leadership now has visibility into customer experience and the ability to act faster.

Merchandising and Product Teams

Merchandising teams use the same system to understand which products are driving increased contact rates, particularly around size, fit, or quality issues. These insights directly inform assortment decisions, product improvements, and vendor conversations.

Product teams are using it to identify friction in the products, like issues with creating return labels or placing orders in the checkout process. They use it to identify friction points quickly and add them to the product roadmap.

The Broader Organization

Perhaps most important, the platform is accessible to everyone. There is no gatekeeper, no specialized training required, and no dependency on a single analyst or team. Anyone can explore customer feedback and generate insights relevant to their role.

Custom GPT Configuration

Front End UI

Sample prompt and VoC output

> **At Quince, the real breakthrough was not the AI itself. It was removing friction between questions and answers. When insights become instant and self-service, teams do not wait for reports. They act. That speed fundamentally changes how quickly we can identify risk, fix issues, and improve the customer experience.**
>
> *- James Cave, Head of CX, Quince*

The New Reality: Data → Insight in Minutes

The democratization of data has fundamentally changed our organizational culture. We have moved from a "person-dependent" model to a "self-service" model.

IMPACT AREA	BEFORE (LEGACY REPORTING)	AFTER (CUSTOM GPT PLATFORM)
Accessibility	Limited to Analysts/Power Users	Accessible to all departments
Speed	Weekly/Monthly	Instant
Depth	Quantitative (Charts only)	Qualitative & Quantitative (Thematic summaries)
Effort	High (Tedious manual reading)	Low (Natural language queries)

Conclusion: The Future of CX is Conversational

Democratizing the Voice of the Customer is no longer a technical challenge; it is a leadership opportunity. By leveraging AI to summarize every contact and a Custom GPT to make that data searchable, we have removed the friction between the customer's problem and the company's solution.

The data is no longer a "black box" owned by the support department. It is a shared, living resource that informs every part of the business, from the warehouse to the boardroom. In an era where customer expectations are higher than ever, the ability to turn noise into knowledge in minutes isn't just an advantage; it's a necessity.

Adoption of AI for CX is up. Yet confidence lags.

A new paradox is shaping customer experience.

Consumers are increasingly using AI-powered CX solutions, yet ethical concerns and skepticism is rising.

New research from Execs In The Know, developed in partnership with Microsoft, explores the AI trust gap and how CX leaders can close it through smarter design, transparency, and experiences that consistently exceed expectations.
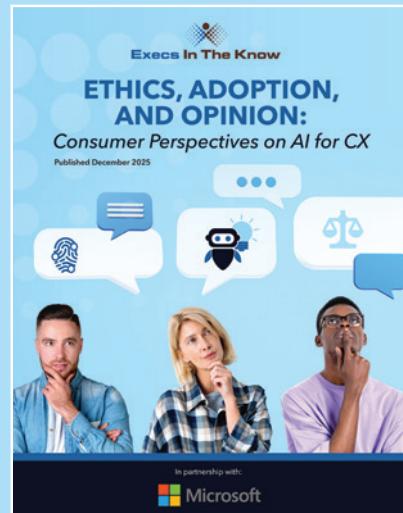
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BRAND SPOTLIGHT
Fanatics

From Game Day to Every Day:
How Fanatics Is Redefining the Fan Experience

Inside Fanatics' playbook for turning passion into purpose and Fans into lifelong ambassadors.

by Execs In The Know

Maureen Barnett
Vice President of Global Fan Experience

At Fanatics, sports fandom isn't just a pastime; it's an identity. From the elation of a buzzer-beater to the heartbreak of a missed field goal, every win, loss, and milestone carries meaning. Maureen Barnett, Vice President of Global Fan Experience at Fanatics, has built her career around understanding the emotional pulse and translating that into a customer experience that feels as personal as the game itself.

In this exclusive Brand Spotlight, Maureen opens up about the company's journey to transform service centers into "experience hubs," empower frontline teams as brand ambassadors, and use AI not to replace human connection, but to deepen it. Her philosophy is simple yet powerful: When you lead with passion, purpose follows, and loyalty takes care of itself.

In a world of endless transactions, Fanatics proves that connection still wins championships. Under Maureen's leadership, the brand continues to blur the line between customer and community, turning passion into purpose and Fans into family.

For CX leaders everywhere, her message is a reminder that no matter how fast technology evolves, the heart of experience remains timeless: listen deeply, care genuinely, and always lead with the Fan first.

Execs In The Know (EITK): Your keynote at the Customer Response Summit (CRS) San Diego focused on the emotional connections that sports create. How do you translate that same sense of passion and loyalty into the way Fanatics designs its customer experience?

Maureen Barnett: At Fanatics, we live and breathe Fan passion. It's not something we build into our strategy; it **is** our strategy. Every package we ship carries a story: a championship remembered, a family moment celebrated, a legacy passed down. Our teams know that they're not just sending packages; they're delivering moments that matter and helping to create memories that last a lifetime.

We talk about our Fans constantly. We share their stories, sometimes the funny ones, sometimes the heartbreaking ones, because that's what keeps our work grounded in purpose. When a Fan shares that their late father's team jacket arrived in time for the memorial game, or that their child's first jersey made it to the mailbox before the big win, it connects our employees to something much bigger than ecommerce. It builds an emotional connection between our employees and our Fans.

> **Every package we ship carries a story — a championship remembered, a family moment celebrated, a legacy passed down.**

EITK: You've spoken about transforming service centers into "experience hubs." What does that look like in practice, and what can other brands learn from your approach?

Maureen: It starts with listening. Fan feedback is our North Star. It tells us what's working, what's not, and where we need to pivot. We don't just review survey data; we dig into the why behind it. That insight drives everything from process improvements to tool enhancements to the tone of our messaging.

One of the biggest shifts we made was reimagining the roles of our team members. They're no longer "agents," they're *ambassadors* of the Fan experience. Their job isn't just to answer questions or close a ticket; it's to make sure our Fans feel seen, heard, and valued.

Every week, we gather as a team to review Fan feedback and performance measures. We celebrate wins, identify new opportunities, and make quick adjustments. It's a living, breathing process, and it keeps us aligned to what matters most: our Fans.

EITK: Fanatics has redefined customer service agents as true brand ambassadors. What changes culturally, operationally, or technologically did that require?

Maureen: Culturally, it meant embracing a mindset of *Fans First* in everything we do. We empower our teams to act with empathy and creativity, not scripts. If a Fan is heartbroken about a delayed delivery before the Super Bowl, our teams step in, solve the problem, and make it right.

Operationally, we built systems that support that empowerment. Our teams meet Fans where they are (voice, chat, SMS, email) because flexibility is a form of respect. Technologically, we've layered in AI-powered tools that handle simple tasks quickly, freeing our ambassadors to focus on conversations that require a human touch. That combination of culture, operations, and technology allows us to show up consistently, at scale, with empathy intact.

Maureen: We see every interaction as a chance to connect, not just transact. Our team celebrates right alongside our Fans. We cheer with them after the win, we commiserate after the loss, and we're always ready with a solution when something doesn't go as planned.

Our gear often marks major life moments: the jersey a father buys for his daughter's first game, or the championship cap worn to a family reunion. We treat those purchases with the same reverence that Fans bring to their teams. That shared emotion creates a relationship that lasts long after checkout.

> **Automation should amplify humanity, not erase it.**

EITK: Technology and automation are essential to modern CX, but so is human warmth. How do you strike a balance between efficiency and personal connection?

Maureen: The balance is found in listening to what really matters to Fans. Sometimes it's speed; other times it's understanding. We've learned that while technology can make transactions faster, humans make them meaningful.

We hear passion in every conversation (joy, frustration, pride, nostalgia) and that tells us something powerful: people don't come to Fanatics just to buy merchandise; they come to *feel part of something bigger.*

That realization reshaped our approach entirely. We use AI to remove friction and empower employees, but the heart of our operation remains human. We understand our Fans' emotions and their feedback to us is invaluable as we continue to chase perfection for Fans.

EITK: Sports are defined by moments. How does Fanatics capture and reflect those moments in ways that create lifelong memories?

EITK: You've led in multiple industries. What lessons from those experiences have shaped your approach to CX at Fanatics?

Maureen: Across every industry I've worked in, one truth holds: customers have choices, and the experience you deliver determines how they feel about your brand and whether they advocate for it.

Whether you're in retail, tech, or sports, people want to feel valued. The best CX isn't complicated; it's consistent, human, and rooted in genuine care. The details may change by industry, but the principle doesn't: *if customers know that you care, it builds lifelong relationships and trust in your brand.*

We see our fans' emotions not as noise to filter out, but as data worth honoring.

EITK: Fanatics operates on a massive global scale. What challenges and opportunities come with ensuring a consistent Fan experience across markets?

Maureen: The pace of sports is fast. Seasons change, teams evolve, and Fan expectations continue to rise. Our challenge is staying agile without sacrificing consistency. We have to anticipate what Fans want before they even know they want it, whether it's the latest player jersey, a limited-edition drop, or support in a new channel across multiple time zones.

What keeps us aligned is our foundation: five core values that guide every Fan interaction. No matter where our employees are in the world, those values ensure every Fan feels the same level of care and enthusiasm. That's how we deliver a truly *global* experience that still feels personal.

EITK: AI is reshaping customer experience across industries. How is it enhancing the Fan experience at Fanatics, and where should brands be cautious?

Maureen: AI has become one of our strongest allies. It helps us move faster, personalize at scale, and understand fans on a deeper level. From predicting needs to surfacing insights that make interactions smoother, it's a game-changer.

But we're careful not to let AI replace the human connection that defines our brand. The magic of CX happens in the spaces where emotion lives, connecting people. My advice to other leaders: let AI do the heavy lifting and let humans connect with the soul of your customer experience.

> **Fan passion is in our DNA. We cheer with them after the win, we commiserate after the loss, and we're always ready to make it right.**

EITK: What's been one of your most memorable customer experiences, and how has it shaped your perspective?

Maureen: I think everyone in CX has that one "never again" moment, a poor experience that shaped how we lead today. For me, it reinforced how critical it is to set clear expectations and hire the right people for the right roles.

At Fanatics, the stories that stand out most are the emotional ones. The Fan who cried tears of joy when a signed jersey arrived, or the one who shared their heartbreak after a loss. These moments remind us why we do what we do.

Every laugh, every tear, every "thank you" is a reflection of the connection we've built. Being part of those experiences and leading a team that helps create them is the greatest privilege of my career.

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 faced by today's leading brands.

Thank you to Maureen Barnett and the Fanatics team for contributing to this Execs In The Know Brand Spotlight.

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Leading in 2026: Reclaiming Connection in an Age of Intelligent Isolation

As AI accelerates, CX leaders confront a quieter challenge: isolation. This article explores why connection is now a strategic leadership imperative and how leaders can actively rebuild it.

by Execs In The Know

There has never been a more capable generation of customer experience (CX) leaders. Today's CX executives oversee global operations, artificial intelligence- (AI-) enabled service ecosystems, predictive analytics, omnichannel orchestration, and frontline teams navigating relentless change. The scope of responsibility is broader, the pace faster, and the expectations higher than at any point in the industry's history.

And yet, beneath that sophistication, a quieter reality is emerging. Many CX leaders are carrying their work, their decisions, and themselves more alone than ever before. Not because they lack people around them, and not because they lack the tools or data. But because the nature of leadership itself has fundamentally shifted. Responsibility has intensified, expectations have expanded, decision cycles have shortened, and the spaces where leaders once processed complexity together have slowly, almost invisibly, eroded.

We are more operationally connected, yet more emotionally isolated. And for leaders tasked with designing connection at scale, that tension deserves deeper examination.

The Rise of Intelligent Isolation

Isolation today doesn't look like disengagement or withdrawal. It shows up in calendars filled edge-to-edge with purposeful meetings, conversations optimized for alignment rather than exploration, and in moments where uncertainty is managed privately because public processing feels risky. Leaders are present, informed, and decisive, yet increasingly alone in how they carry the weight of their role.

In a recent *Psychology Today*[1] analysis of executive loneliness, leaders reported maintaining confidence and capability outwardly while privately experiencing exhaustion and disconnection. The higher the role, the more pressure leaders feel to appear confident, even as uncertainty grows. Over time, that sustained emotional masking doesn't just drain energy; it deepens isolation by removing safe spaces to process doubt aloud.

This is what can be described as intelligent isolation: a form of isolation shaped by progress and systems designed for speed, scale, and clarity. These systems excel at execution, but they rarely pause to ask what leaders need to remain grounded, human, and connected. As we explored earlier this year, curiosity and courage aren't soft traits.[2] They're the conditions that allow leaders to process uncertainty together rather than in isolation.

Research increasingly reflects what many senior leaders already sense. Gallup[3] has found that workplace loneliness affects employees at every level, including executives, and that frequent loneliness is associated with lower engagement and higher stress. According to the World Health Organization (WHO) Commission on Social Connection,[4] loneliness is a public health concern with implications for both mental and physical well-being. Importantly, this research points to a paradox: increased communication does not guarantee increased connection.

> ## The best leaders create space for others, including themselves, to think.
>
> — Shep Hyken

The Leadership Paradox

Even as AI adoption accelerates, the emotional and cognitive burden on leaders hasn't eased. In fact, while [90% of organizations have deployed or plan to deploy AI],[5] more than half of CX leaders say a significant portion of customer interactions remain too complex for automation. That unresolved complexity doesn't disappear; it shifts and lands squarely on leaders and frontline teams.

For CX leaders, this paradox is especially acute. Their role is fundamentally relational. They serve as stewards of trust between brands and customers, leaders and agents, systems and humans. They are tasked with designing experiences that feel personal at scale, even as technology introduces new layers of abstraction.

CX leadership carries a distinct kind of weight. They translate emotion into metrics and metrics back into human outcomes. Along the way, they absorb customer frustration, agent fatigue, executive urgency, and technological promise while being expected to remain steady, optimistic, and decisive.

This burden is structural, not personal. In fact, recent Execs In The Know research found that just [one-third of CX leaders believe their organization is effectively aligning AI, data, and human judgment across teams.][6] When systems fail to connect, leaders become the connective tissue and burnout, doing integration work that should be shared across the organization.

Burnout Isn't Just About Exhaustion

Burnout is often framed as a capacity issue: too much work, too little rest. But among experienced CX leaders, burnout more often stems from compression; the gradual shrinking of space where leaders can reflect, question, and connect without consequence.

Compression happens when:

- ✔ Complexity increases faster than processing time
- ✔ Stakes rise faster than support structures
- ✔ Expectations for certainty outpace the reality of ambiguity

When leaders consistently absorb pressure without shared sensemaking, something subtle occurs. Curiosity narrows, emotional range tightens, and risk tolerance shifts. Decisions become heavier, not because leaders are less capable or the work itself has become harder, but because they are carrying too much context alone.

In CX, where empathy and judgment are core competencies, this matters deeply. CX leaders do not just manage systems; they model how humans show up inside them. Their presence influences frontline confidence, leadership trust and, ultimately, customer perception.

Isolation doesn't make leaders ineffective, but it does make leadership more fragile.

Why Connection Feels Harder Even as Tools Improve

It would be easy to blame technology for this moment. But most CX leaders know that narrative doesn't hold up. Leadership isolation didn't begin with AI; it existed long before copilots and predictive automation entered the picture.

CX leaders were already navigating rising complexity with fewer peer forums, limited protected time for reflection, and mounting expectations for decisiveness. Intelligent systems simply arrived in an environment that had already been optimized for efficiency, not connection.

A recent workplace survey[7] of 1,000 U.S. knowledge workers found workplace loneliness is rising as employees practice "cognitive outsourcing." Employees encouraged to rely on AI tools report significantly higher levels of loneliness, suggesting that as work becomes more automated, the need for intentional human connection doesn't disappear; it intensifies.

When deployed thoughtfully, AI does something profoundly valuable. It reduces friction, absorbs repetitive work, surfaces insights faster, and creates operational breathing room. It allows leaders to spend less time assembling information and more time interpreting it.

This erosion of reflection time mirrors what's called the "age of distraction," where leadership clarity doesn't disappear; it gets crowded out.[8]

> ## The strongest CX strategies are built in conversation, not isolation.
>
> — Esteban Kolsky

How CX Leaders Are Actively Rebuilding Connection

What's changed over the past year is not the presence of isolation, but how leaders are responding to it. Many CX leaders have moved beyond simply naming the challenge. They are redesigning how connection functions inside their leadership practice by creating fewer, higher-quality spaces for shared sense-making.

Some leaders are reclaiming connection by restructuring how decisions are made. Instead of carrying AI governance, ethical judgment, or escalation logic alone, they are formalizing shared ownership through cross-functional councils and peer advisory forums. These groups don't dilute accountability; they distribute judgment in a way that reflects the reality of complex CX environments.

Others are using AI itself as a lever for reconnection. Rather than allowing efficiency gains to be absorbed by volume, they are deliberately reinvesting reclaimed time into coaching, frontline listening, and leadership reflection. In these organizations, automation doesn't just accelerate output; it creates space for presence.

We're also seeing leaders normalize uncertainty earlier in decision cycles. Leaders are pressure-testing assumptions with peers, inviting disagreement before positions harden, and acknowledging what they don't yet know. This doesn't slow execution; it strengthens it. Shared thinking surfaces blind spots sooner and builds collective confidence rather than performative certainty.

Perhaps most important, CX leaders are rebuilding peer connection outside formal reporting lines. Trusted communities, private forums, and closed-door conversations are becoming essential leadership infrastructure. These spaces allow leaders to speak candidly about the emotional realities of AI adoption, frontline fatigue, and ethical tension.

These practices don't eliminate isolation entirely, but they do interrupt it.

AI and Emotional Bandwidth

This shift from isolation to intentional connection is where AI's real leadership impact begins.

As AI becomes embedded in CX operations, it introduces a subtle leadership inflection point. Intelligent systems now support summarization, drafting, forecasting, and decision support. When used well, they reduce cognitive load and create room for judgment, coaching, and strategic thinking. At its best, AI is not a replacement for human leadership. It amplifies existing priorities.

This helps explain why more than half of CX leaders report no meaningful improvement in customer satisfaction following AI deployments.[9] Efficiency alone does not resolve the human side of leadership. CX leaders understand this instinctively: automation handles scale, but humans handle meaning.

Community as a Strategic Leadership Layer

This is where the conversation shifts from observation to opportunity. Community is no longer a "nice to have" for leaders. It is a strategic layer, one that strengthens judgment, accelerates learning, and mitigates the hidden costs of isolation. True leadership community is not just about networking or visibility but about being in conversation with peers who understand the realities of CX leadership: the tradeoffs of AI deployment, the emotional demands of frontline work, and the complexity of balancing cost, care, and credibility.

True leadership community is about shared sense-making. It's where leaders can explore complexity, exchange lived experience, and test ideas. Our Know It All (KIA) Community is designed for this exact purpose. It's a private, sales-free forum where CX leaders build on collective intelligence through honest, peer-level exchange. As intelligent systems take on more execution, leadership increasingly centers on where humans stay in the loop, how trust is maintained, and how values are operationalized at scale.

> **The more sophisticated our AI becomes, the more valuable the human connection becomes. Looking ahead, CX won't be measured by how much AI can do. It'll be measured by how wisely we choose when it shouldn't. By how seamlessly we blend efficiency with empathy and how we use technology to deliver more humanity, not less.**
>
> — Ebrahim Hyder, Vice President, Customer Experience, Michael Kors

What We're Seeing Across the CX Landscape

CX leaders are asking different questions than they were even two years ago as they navigate a paradox: AI is now firmly embedded in customer operations, yet human connection feels more fragile than ever. Adoption is accelerating, but trust remains conditional. Customers aren't rejecting AI; they're rejecting experiences that feel inaccurate or disconnected from context. At the same time, internal fragmentation is surfacing as a critical risk. Siloed data, disconnected front- and back-office workflows, and unclear ownership are eroding both employee confidence and customer continuity.[10]

What's emerging is a clear shift in leadership thinking: performance matters more than novelty, ethics and transparency are now table stakes, and value must be realized in weeks, not years. The most forward-looking organizations are using AI not to distance themselves from customers, but to strengthen the system around them by cleaning data, carrying context across journeys, supporting agents at moments of emotional intensity, and reinforcing a simple truth customers already know. There is only one brand experience, and it either feels connected, or it doesn't.

What these patterns reveal isn't a technology problem but a leadership moment. As AI systems become more capable, leaders are being asked to operate in environments that are faster, more complex, and less forgiving than ever before. Each decision carries greater consequences. Missteps (ethical, operational, or human) travel further and faster. And the expectation to "have the answer" has quietly intensified, even as the variables multiply.

Many CX leaders describe a familiar tension of more tools, more data, and more dashboards, yet fewer moments to pause, pressure-test assumptions, or sense-check decisions with peers who truly understand the weight of the role. In the drive to modernize, optimize, and scale, leadership itself has become increasingly solitary. But the next era of CX won't be won through individual endurance. It will be shaped by leaders who recognize that connection is not a soft skill; it is a strategic capability. One that influences how trust is built, how teams perform, and how organizations respond when complexity inevitably shows up.

One leadership reframe is this: strength is no longer characterized by how much a leader can carry alone. It's defined by how intentionally leaders stay connected to their peers, to their teams, and to their own sense of clarity and purpose. In CX, where trust is both the outcome and the operating principle, this distinction matters. Leadership practiced in isolation creates fragile systems that fracture under pressure. Leadership grounded in connection builds resilience across people, processes, and the moments that matter most to customers.

> ❝
> **Leadership is a team sport, whether we design it that way or not.**
>
> — Marbue Brown, Founder, The Customer Obsession Advantage
> ❞

Reclaiming Connection

Reclaiming connection doesn't require slowing innovation or retreating from technology. It requires integrating progress more deliberately into the human systems that sustain it.

The most effective CX leaders aren't choosing between AI and humanity. They're designing environments where technology delivers speed, scale, and consistency, and leadership anchors meaning, ethics, and trust.

Connection is not a personality trait or cultural nicety. It is a leadership practice that must be modeled, protected, and normalized at the most senior levels.

The future of CX will not be shaped by intelligent platforms alone. It will be shaped by leaders who choose to lead *with* others, not simply over them. Because no matter how advanced our systems become, leadership was never meant to be a solitary endeavor. And in an age of intelligent isolation, choosing connection may be the most strategic decision a leader can make.

Article Links

1. https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/body-meet-mind/202507/what-happens-when-leaders-feel-invisible-at-work

2. https://execsintheknow.com/magazines/july-2025/curiosity-and-courage/

3. https://www.gallup.com/workplace/645566/employees-worldwide-feel-lonely.aspx

4. https://www.who.int/news/item/30-06-2025-social-connection-linked-to-improved-heath-and-reduced-risk-of-early-death

5. https://execsintheknow.com/knowledge-center/customer-experience-research/cx-leaders-trends-insights/cx-leaders-trends-insights-2025-corporate-edition/

6. https://execsintheknow.com/knowledge-center/customer-experience-research/cx-leaders-trends-insights/cx-leaders-trends-insights-2025-corporate-edition/

7. https://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20250724315281/en/MOO-Survey-Finds-79-of-Knowledge-Workers-Feel-Lonely-at-Work-Gen-Z-Most-Affected

8. https://execsintheknow.com/magazines/october-2025/leading-with-clarity-in-the-age-of-distraction/

9. https://execsintheknow.com/knowledge-center/customer-experience-research/hot-topics-research/state-of-the-tech-ai-in-the-contact-center/

10. https://execsintheknow.com/breaking-down-the-back-office-what-cx-leaders-told-us-about-the-next-era-of-customer-experience/

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KIA ONLINE
COMMUNITY MEMBER SPOTLIGHT

Inside the CHEP U.S. CX Vision: Predictive Service, Circularity, and Customer Value

Discover how CHEP blends predictive insights, circularity, and visibility to deliver smarter, more resilient supply chain experiences.

James Glover
Vice President,
Customer Experience and Quality,
CHEP U.S.

CHEP
A Brambles Company

In today's increasingly complex supply chain landscape, customer experience has become as critical as operational efficiency. Few leaders sit at that intersection more clearly than James Glover, Vice President of Customer Experience and Quality at CHEP U.S., the largest global share, repair, and reuse network of pallets and containers.

With over two decades of experience across functions in CHEP U.S., James has played a key part in supporting the organization's evolution, expanding from a pooled platform provider and logistics partner to a strategic enabler of visibility, sustainability, and data-driven decision-making. His perspective reflects not just the mechanics of a global supply network, but the human and operational nuances required to deliver experiences that feel effortless, transparent, and genuinely value-adding.

In this KIA Spotlight, James shares what it takes to build customer journeys that are predictive rather than reactive, the metrics that matter in a network where goods move constantly, and how sustainability and circularity are reshaping expectations across the industry. From harmonized data foundations to AI-driven insights and the growing importance of human-centered design, his reflections offer a blueprint for CX leaders navigating rapid change. Whether you're in logistics, manufacturing, retail, or any data-rich operation, this conversation sheds light on what it looks like to deliver smarter, more resilient, and customer-first supply chain experiences.

Execs In The Know (EITK): As Vice President of Customer Experience & Quality at CHEP U.S., how do you define a "best-in-class" customer journey in the supply chain space?

James: I wholeheartedly believe a best-in-class journey should be effortless, transparent and value-driven. In my role at CHEP, this means designing systems and processes that truly put our customers first, delivering the end-to-end visibility and real-time insights

they expect. These capabilities enable faster, smarter decisions and help us move beyond transactions to build trusted partnerships. And this approach aligns with the industry's shift toward connected, circular supply networks, where data-driven collaboration reduces waste and drives efficiency at every stage.

> "Being part of the KIA community is a combination of inspiring, future-forward, and challenging — all wrapped into one. When I look to my industry peers who are part of the community, I'm able to lean into their expertise and apply some of that knowledge in my world, even through varied business focuses. In joining the esteemed group of KIA Champions named, I'm honored to share the stage with fellow CX champions who I admire and those who advocate to drive change in customer experience."

> **A best-in-class journey should be effortless, transparent, and value-driven.**

EITK: What KPIs or outcomes matter most when evaluating the impact of CX in such a complex, global logistics network?

James: Customer experience is a multi-faceted journey. While traditional measures like NPS and satisfaction scores are essential, they only tell part of the story. From my experience in B2B logistics and with pooled platform programs, it's important to pair these metrics with operational measures such as DIFOT (delivered in full, on time) and CIFOT (collected in full, on time). Together, these insights give a more complete view of how well we're supporting customers and how efficiently goods are moving through the network.

Going the extra mile means looking beyond service and delivery metrics to include sustainability outcomes, like emissions reduction and waste elimination. These measures also build future-readiness, as efficiency and environmental impact become increasingly inseparable in today's supply chains. In this way, we help contribute to our customers' goals of staying competitive and resilient in a changing market.

EITK: You've led the CHEP movement toward predictive service. What lessons have you learned about anticipating customer needs before they arise?

James: The strength of your data can either enable or impede progress, and we're fortunate to have a strong foundation. What we've discovered along the way is that predictive service works best when systems are connected and consistent (unified), as well as when the same methodology is used across platforms (harmonized). When everyone works from the same playbook and shares a single version of the truth, projections become far more accurate and reliable.

> **Predictive service works best when systems are unified and everyone shares a single version of the truth.**
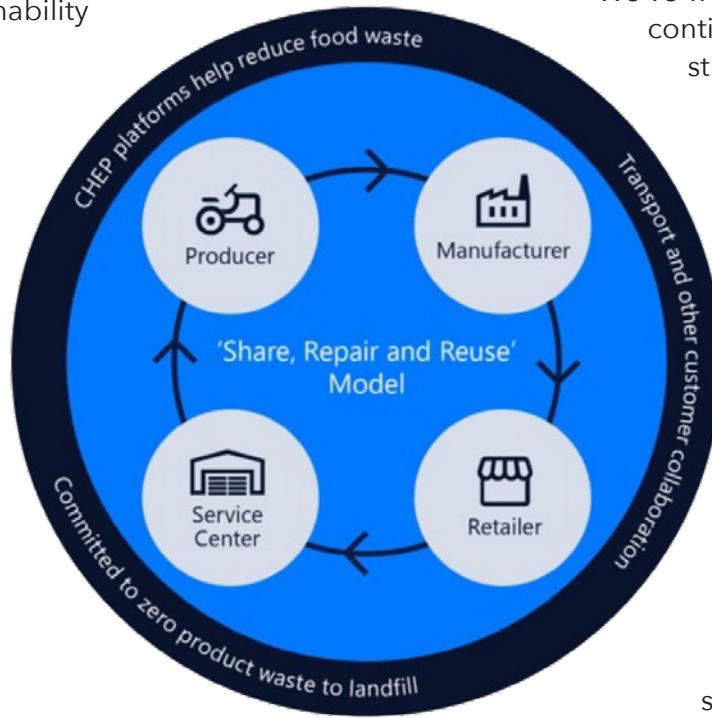
We've worked hard to build and continuously improve these strong data fundamentals. Now, we're exploring predictive tools that can identify potential needs early, such as inventory fluctuations or temperature changes in cold chains, so customers can act quickly and confidently. Looking beyond CHEP, I see these tools positively impacting the future of supply chains, where data helps prevent disruptions rather than simply respond to them.

CHEP platforms help reduce food waste

Transport and other customer collaboration

Committed to zero product waste to landfill

Producer

Manufacturer

'Share, Repair and Reuse' Model

Service Center

Retailer

EITK: CHEP helps global CPG and retail leaders deliver goods seamlessly across the supply network. How do you ensure customers feel the total value of CHEP's services beyond the pallet?

James: CHEP is in the unique position of having end-to-end supply chain visibility because of the nature of our circular business model. It allows us to identify inefficiencies, uncover opportunities and foster collaboration both within and beyond our customers' networks – seeing every touch point from field to retail shelf.

The real magic happens when we turn those insights into action. Whether it's eliminating empty miles through optimized transport solutions or strengthening resilience with data-driven intelligence, we deliver measurable value that goes far beyond our shipping platforms. Ultimately, our goal is to help customers achieve cost savings, environmental gains and operational excellence in various ways that make their supply chain smarter and more connected.

> **Digital tools should make things easier and support a human-centered program. The best approach combines automation with empathy.**

EITK: CHEP leads the way in sustainable pooling solutions. How do sustainability and circularity shape CX today?

James: Sustainability and circularity are reshaping customer experience by influencing how companies build trust and deliver value. In the U.S., our model fosters engagement beyond a single transaction through ongoing data transparency, collaborative solutions and measurable impacts that align with customers' ESG priorities. By embedding sustainability into nearly every touch point of a customer's journey, we help them reduce waste, optimize costs and share personalized, verified results that elevate their brand. This approach moves sustainability from a compliance checkbox to a powerful driver of loyalty and long-term partnership.

EITK: From FMCG to retail to manufacturing, your customers are navigating rapid change and evolving expectations. Where do you see the greatest opportunities for innovation in the supply chain CX?

James: One of the biggest opportunities lies in increasing supply chain visibility. Disruptions often happen because something goes unnoticed, like temperature fluctuations in a cold chain. By leveraging data from smart devices, we can detect issues early and help customers act fast. For example, monitoring temperature and dwell time for fresh produce can prevent spoilage, reducing unsaleables and food waste. These advancements turn data-driven insights into meaningful action, making supply chains more resilient and efficient.

EITK: How do you see AI and automation transforming supply chain CX in the next 3-5 years, and how is CHEP preparing for that shift?

James: AI and automation will make supply chains smarter, faster and more connected than ever before. These innovative solutions enable real-time visibility, predictive insights and streamlined workflows, reducing manual steps and helping organizations make informed decisions more quickly. Beyond speed, AI can support better forecasting and personalization, while automation enhances consistency and safety across operations.

This combination of technologies really positions supply chains to move from manual— and often siloed processes to fully integrated and intelligent networks.

At CHEP, we're exploring these technologies through pilots and partnerships, while strengthening fundamentals like data integrity and harmonization. Like any business, our efforts aim to make insights reliable and scalable long-term.

> **Sustainability is no longer a checkbox — it's a driver of loyalty and long-term partnership throughout the supply chain.**

EITK: What advice would you give other CX leaders about striking the right balance between digital transformation and maintaining human-centered service?

James: I encourage other CX leaders to think in terms of "both," and not "either/or." Some customers want self-service tools, while others value a phone call or face-to-face support, so it's important to consider their preferences and meet them where they are. At the end of the day, digital tools should make things easier and support a human-centered program. The best approach combines automation with empathy, so technology handles routine tasks while people focus on what matters most: building trust, solving complex issues and strengthening relationships.

EITK: What core values or principles guide you when leading teams through change and transformation?

James: I remind myself and my teams that change can feel uncertain, so it's important to explain why it's happening and what the benefits are. Keeping communication open and consistent builds trust and helps everyone feel part of the process. Plus, similar to customer experience, relationships are key. By creating a space for dialogue and encouraging collaboration, teams can feel more supported and connected during transformational periods.

EITK: When you step away from supply chains and customer strategy, what passions or hobbies help recharge your creativity and leadership?

> **When data helps prevent disruptions rather than simply respond to them, supply chains become more resilient, efficient, and future-ready.**

James: Creativity often comes from stepping away from the desk. For me, that means sport fishing to clear my mind, reset and give myself space to think differently. Recently, I've also started learning dance styles like salsa and bachata. It's a challenge, but it reminds me that growth often starts with trying something new and stepping outside of your comfort zone. Both activities teach patience and adaptability, which are useful in leadership, too.

EITK: Can you share the best customer experience you've ever had as a customer yourself, and what made it stand out?

James: One experience that really stood out was with a subscription apparel company. They noticed my sizing needs were changing and proactively adjusted my orders without extra cost. Even better, they followed up monthly to check in. That level of personalization and proactive care was impressive. It reinforces that great customer experience isn't just about fixing problems; it's about anticipating needs and making customers feel genuinely valued.

Execs In The Know

Thank you to James for his leadership, participation, and insights. To connect with James or participate in the wider conversation, consider joining the "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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Execs In The Know
15 YEARS CX EXCELLENCE

The New Human Touch: Re-Earning Trust in the Age of AI

As AI reshapes customer experience, trust, not efficiency, becomes the differentiator.

by Execs In The Know

For the better part of a decade, customer experience (CX) leaders have been asked some version of the same question: Can artificial intelligence (AI) deliver?

- ✓ Can it reduce friction?
- ✓ Can it handle volume?
- ✓ Can it operate at a scale humans simply can't?

Most organizations now know the answer. AI can deliver, often faster and more consistently, than any human-led system ever could. But a quieter, more important question has emerged in its place, one that doesn't show up neatly on a roadmap: **Can AI earn trust?**

> **What will distinguish the next generation of CX leaders is not how quickly or broadly they deploy AI, but how deliberately they embed it into systems of judgment, accountability, and care.**

As AI becomes embedded across customer-facing interactions, from chat and voice to personalization engines, recommendations, and automated decisioning, customers are no longer evaluating technology in isolation. They are evaluating the brand judgment behind it.

Every automated interaction is now interpreted as intent, every decision carries meaning, and every moment either reinforces confidence or erodes it. In this new reality, the human touch hasn't disappeared. It has simply moved upstream, into how experiences are designed, governed, explained, and felt.

They are also the moments where trust is decided.

Trust Has Become the New CX Currency

Customer trust has always mattered, but AI has changed its economics. When trust is broken in a human interaction, the impact is often contained. When trust is broken in an automated one, it scales instantly. One poorly designed workflow can undermine thousands of interactions before anyone realizes what's gone wrong.

Trust erodes not because AI exists, but because it is applied without balance or choice. Only 32% of consumers believe companies are doing a good job balancing AI-powered and human assistance. And nearly two-thirds say there is too much AI in customer service journeys.[1]
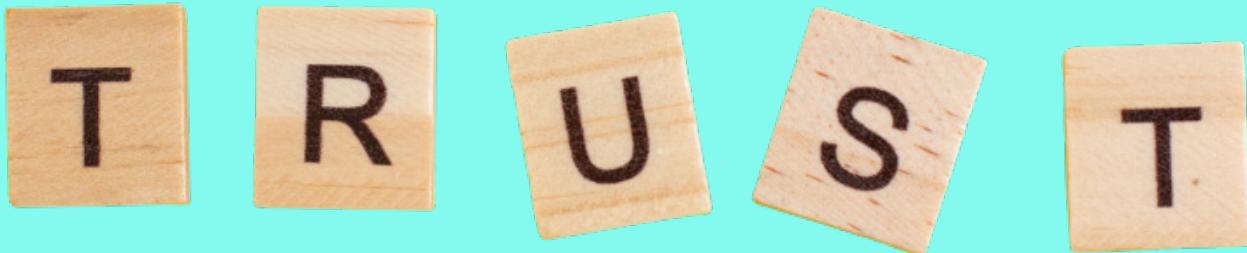
This is why trust now behaves like a form of currency in CX. It compounds when handled carefully, and it devalues quickly when mishandled. According to the 2024 Edelman Trust Barometer,[2] trust now outweighs traditional drivers like price and convenience when customers decide which brands deserve their loyalty.

At the same time, the financial consequences of broken trust are becoming more immediate. PwC's CX research[3] shows that even long-standing brand affinity can be undone by a single experience that feels dismissive, confusing, or misaligned with customer expectations, particularly when technology mediates the interaction. Customers may not articulate this explicitly, but they feel it. And once confidence is lost, it is far harder to recover than it is to measure.

The CX Conversation Has Shifted

In early AI deployments, organizations focused on containment, deflection, and cost-to-serve. The priority was keeping operations moving. Today, that framing feels incomplete. The most forward-looking CX leaders are asking more uncomfortable, and more strategic, questions:

- ✓ Does this experience reflect how we want customers to feel about us?

- ✓ Are we transparent enough about how decisions are made?

- ✓ When something goes wrong, do customers know who, or what, is accountable?

- ✓ Would we be comfortable explaining this interaction on a main stage?

This is the inflection point. AI is no longer just a back-end efficiency lever; it has become a frontline representative of brand values, and customers are paying attention.

Designing AI Experiences That Customers Can Trust

Trust is rarely built through a single interaction. It is built through consistency, clarity, and restraint over time. Trust-first AI experiences don't begin with features; they begin with intent. They start by asking: What should a customer reasonably expect from us in this moment?

That expectation shapes everything, from tone and timing to escalation paths and transparency. Customers don't need every technical detail, but they do need to understand when automation is involved, what it is doing on their behalf, and where the boundaries are. This expectation is increasingly explicit. Salesforce's _State of the Connected Customer_ research[4] shows that a majority of consumers want brands to be transparent about when AI is used and how it influences outcomes. Transparency doesn't diminish confidence; it reinforces it.

In a recent research report on _Ethics, Adoption, and Opinion: Consumer Perspectives on AI for CX,_[5] 72% of consumers believe brands should clearly identify when an interaction is powered by AI. Among customers aged 60-plus, that expectation rises to 83%.

Equally important is emotional context. A billing question after a declined payment carries different emotional weight than a product inquiry during normal business hours. Systems that treat those interactions as equivalent may be efficient, but they feel tone-deaf.

A shipping update checked out of curiosity feels different than one opened after a customer has already rearranged plans. A policy explanation requested during onboarding carries less weight than the same explanation delivered after a denied claim or unexpected charge. A service outage notification read during off-hours is not the same as one encountered mid-task, mid-deadline, or mid-crisis. The brands earning trust are designing AI to recognize context, not just intent, and to default to help rather than deflection when stakes are high.

Efficiency and Empathy Are Not Opposites

One of the most persistent myths in CX is that efficiency and empathy exist in tension with one another. In practice, they are often strongest when designed together. AI excels at pattern recognition, recall, and speed. Humans excel at judgment, emotional nuance, and repair when things go wrong. The most effective CX organizations are not choosing between the two; they are intentionally pairing them.

Execs In The Know's recent article on agentic AI[6] in the contact center outlines a clear human–AI operating model, distinguishing when AI should assist, lead with oversight, or operate autonomously. This reinforces that trust depends on when judgment is handed off, not just whether automation exists.

McKinsey research[7] consistently shows that organizations combining AI-driven insights with human judgment outperform automation-only models on customer satisfaction, not just efficiency. When humans remain in the loop, customers feel the difference. The reason is simple: Customers don't want faster answers at the expense of feeling understood. They want experiences that respect both their time and their emotions.

Yet in practice, many AI deployments stop short of this balance. While AI often optimizes operations, it frequently stalls when it comes to customer trust. The findings in the *State of the Tech: AI in the Contact Center report*[8] show that 53% of CX leaders report no significant improvement in customer satisfaction (CSAT) after implementing AI, and only six percent say AI has greatly increased CSAT despite widespread productivity gains.

Re-Training Teams for AI-Assisted Emotional Intelligence

Technology transformations often focus heavily on tools and insufficiently on people. AI changes the nature of frontline work, but it doesn't remove the need for human judgment. In fact, it raises the bar to maintain it. Agents today are being asked to interpret AI-generated insights, assess their relevance, and decide when to follow them and when not to. This requires a new kind of skill set: AI-assisted emotional intelligence.

> **Customers don't want faster answers at the expense of feeling understood.**

It's the ability to understand how recommendations are generated without treating them as absolutes. It's knowing when automation has missed something subtle and stepping in with empathy. It's maintaining an authentic human voice even when supported by machine intelligence. Leading organizations are investing in training that demystifies AI rather than positioning it as an authority. When agents understand how systems work, they are better equipped to use them responsibly, and to challenge them when needed. That confidence translates directly to customer trust.

According to Accenture,[9] consumers who trust companies are 54% more likely to buy again. Yet, only 39% trust companies to have good intentions, and 43% trust their claims.

Measuring Trust

If trust is the outcome, measurement has to evolve. Traditional metrics like handle time and containment still matter, but they tell only part of the story. They don't capture how customers feel during automated interactions, or whether confidence is building or eroding over time.

Many CX leaders are expanding their measurement frameworks to include sentiment shifts, friction at hand-off points, and customer confidence indicators following AI-mediated interactions. Gartner predicts[10] that in 2026, most CX organizations will move away from traditional satisfaction surveys in favor of real-time sentiment and behavioral analytics, reflecting a broader shift toward measuring trust as it evolves.

Trust is not static; it changes with every interaction. And, increasingly, AI makes those moments visible if organizations choose to measure them.

Governance Is a CX Responsibility

As AI influences more customer-facing decisions, governance can no longer sit exclusively with legal, compliance, or IT teams. Trust-first organizations treat governance as part of the CX operating model. That means defining accountability for automated decisions, auditing for bias regularly, and establishing clear escalation paths for edge cases where ethical judgment is required.

World Economic Forum research highlights[11] this tension, with a significant share of consumers expressing concern about bias and misuse in AI-driven services, particularly in regulated and high-stakes industries.

Customers may not frame these concerns in technical language, but they feel the impact when systems behave unfairly or inconsistently. Governance, in this context, is not about slowing innovation. It is about protecting credibility at scale.

Hyper-Personalization Under the Trust Microscope

Few areas of AI create more tension than personalization. When done well, personalization saves time, reduces effort, and makes customers feel known. When done poorly, it feels intrusive, unsettling, and overly familiar.

Customers value relevance, but only when personalization feels ethical, transparent, and genuinely helpful. The difference often comes down to agency.

Do customers understand why they are seeing certain recommendations? Can they control how their data is used? Does personalization feel like support, or surveillance? The answers to those questions determine whether personalization builds trust or quietly undermines it.
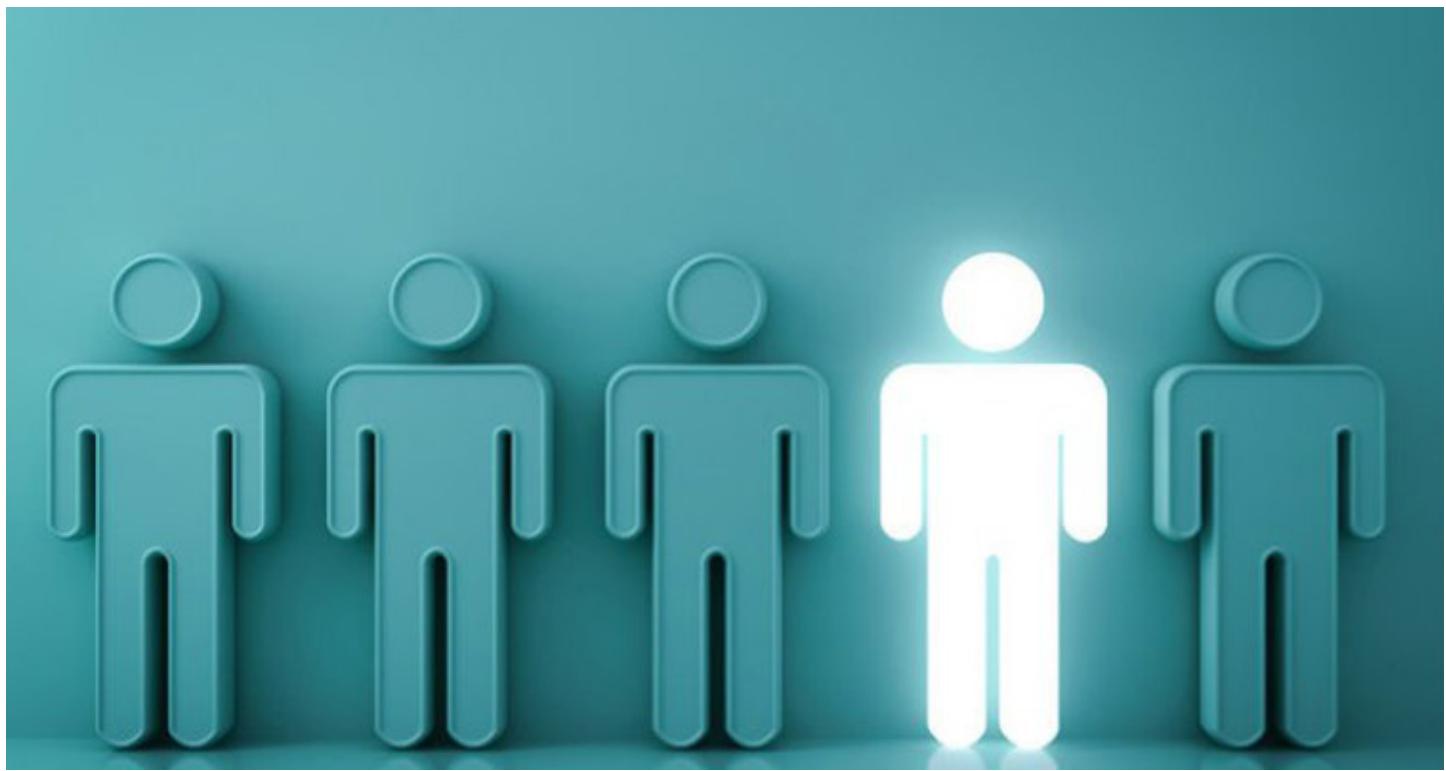
Personalization as Empowerment

Trust-centered personalization is not about how much data a brand can gather, but how intentionally it chooses to use it. It is grounded in restraint and respect, favoring opt-in models over inference, explaining value in plain language, and giving customers real agency rather than hiding controls in fine print or fragmented settings. When personalization is designed this way, it feels less like targeting and more like service.

The most trusted brands resist the temptation to know everything. Instead, they focus on knowing what genuinely matters in the moment and being explicit about where the line is drawn. They communicate not only what data is used, but why and, just as important, what is deliberately left unused. In an era where AI makes nearly anything technically possible, trust is often built through judgment: the conscious decisions organizations make about when not to personalize, when not to predict, and when to leave space for the customer to lead.

The New Human Touch

AI has changed the mechanics of CX, but it hasn't rewritten the emotional contract customers expect brands to honor. They still want to feel respected. They still want clarity when something goes wrong. And they still want confidence that someone, human or machine, is acting in their best interest, not simply following a script.

What will distinguish the next generation of CX leaders is not how quickly or broadly they deploy AI, but how deliberately they embed it into systems of judgment, accountability, and care. The new human touch is not a retreat from technology. It is the discipline of designing trust into every interaction, upstream, by default, and on purpose long before a customer ever becomes aware of the machine behind it.

That expectation is already here. And, increasingly, it is the standard by which customers decide which brands are worth their loyalty and which are not.

Article Links

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3. https://www.pwc.com/us/en/services/consulting/business-transformation/future-customer-experience-is-supply-chain.html

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