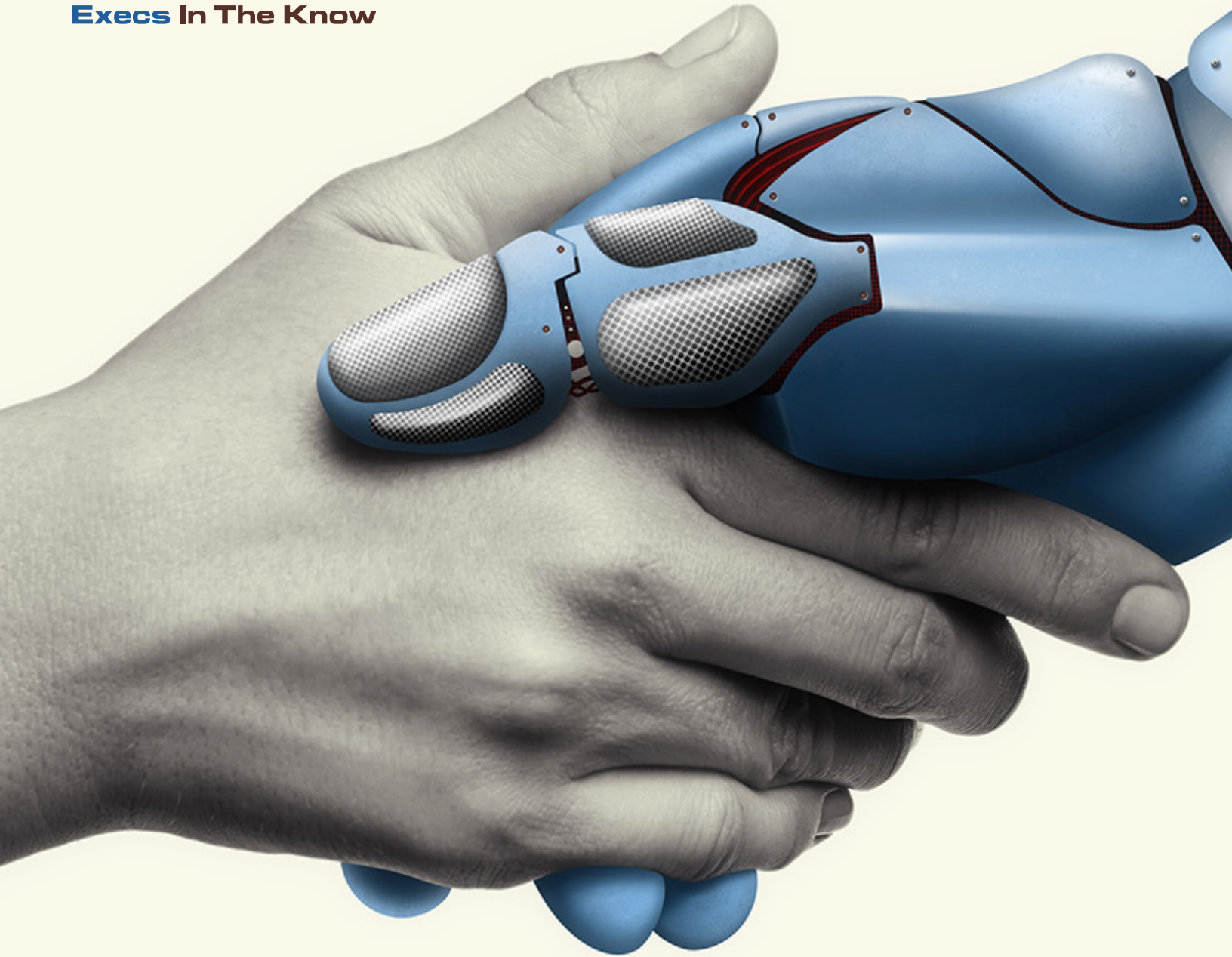




Execs In The Know



# **Consumer Perspectives on Contact Center Agents and Soft Skills**

## **A Comparison Between Live and AI-Powered Agents**

Published May 2026

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# INTRODUCTION

As artificial intelligence- (AI-) powered solutions become more embedded in customer care, this research explores a critical question for CX leaders: How do consumers truly evaluate live agents versus AI, and what do they expect from each?

The findings in this report point to a clear, but nuanced reality. While consumers are increasingly open to engaging with AI, live agents still set the standard for overall experience quality. In fact, 68% of consumers say interactions with live agents are “Better” or “Much Better” compared to AI-powered agents versus just 53% who say the same about AI-powered agents (page 6) versus live agents, highlighting a meaningful perception gap that organizations must address.

At the same time, consumer openness to AI is stronger than ever, particularly at the front end of the journey. Fifty-five percent of consumers say they are “Comfortable” or “Extremely Comfortable” interacting with AI-powered agents that mimic human qualities (page 10), and 71% feel neutral or better about AI being their first point of contact (page 11). However, this openness comes with heightened expectations. Consumers are not looking for AI to replicate human interactions perfectly, but they do expect AI to deliver speed, ease, and accuracy while simultaneously reserving human engagement for moments that require deeper problem-solving, nuanced judgment, or genuine reassurance.

Perhaps most important, this research reveals what consumers value most in an AI interaction is not personality, but performance. Across interactions, the most critical attributes are consistently tied to resolution. This becomes even more pronounced as issue complexity increases, where 58% of consumers prefer a live agent for complex issues (page 13), and 81% say access to a live agent is important in those moments (page 14). Together, these findings underscore the need for CX leaders to move beyond a “human vs. AI” mindset and, instead, design experiences where each plays a distinct, complementary role aligned to consumer expectations.

## **Top Findings for CX Leaders:**

- 68% of consumers rate live agents as “Better” or “Much Better” vs. 53% for AI-powered agents when the two are compared against each other (page 6)
- 71% of consumers feel neutral or better about AI as a first point of contact (page 11)
- 58% of consumers prefer live agents for complex issues, and 81% say access to a live agent is important in those scenarios (pages 13 and 14)
- Consumers cite “Knowledge/Accuracy” (14%) and “Efficiency” (13%) as AI strengths, while “Empathy” and “Fairness” lag behind (page 7)

# SURVEY RESULTS

# LIVE AGENTS VERSUS AI-POWERED AGENTS

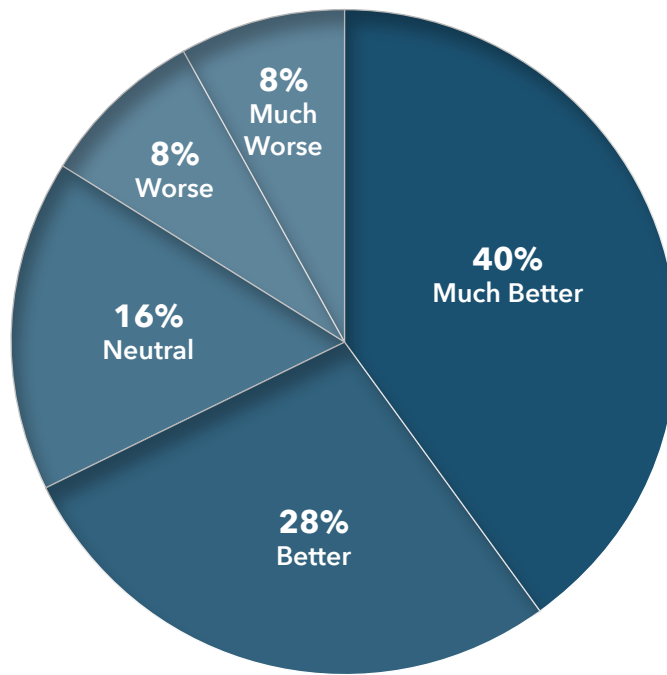


## Live Agents Versus AI-Powered Agents

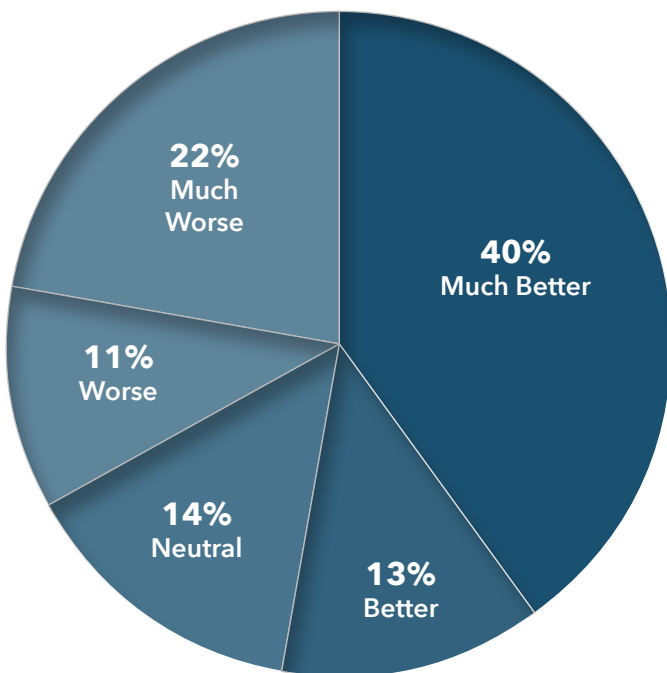
### How Live and AI-Powered Agents Compare

In a pair of questions aimed at understanding how consumers perceive the quality of their interactions between live and AI-powered agents, it's clear consumers favor the live agent experience. While only 16% of survey respondents consider the live agent interactions to be "Worse" or "Much Worse" than an AI-powered agent interaction, 33% feel those interactions are "Worse" or "Much Worse" when comparing AI-powered agents to live agent interactions. In other words, AI-powered agents have a lot of room for improvement to be able to achieve an interaction experience as good as or better than the experience they get with a live customer care agent.

In your opinion, how do customer care interactions with live agents compare with those of AI-powered agents (such as chatbots or virtual assistants)?



In your opinion, how do customer care interactions with AI-powered agents (such as chatbots or virtual assistants) compare with those of live agents?



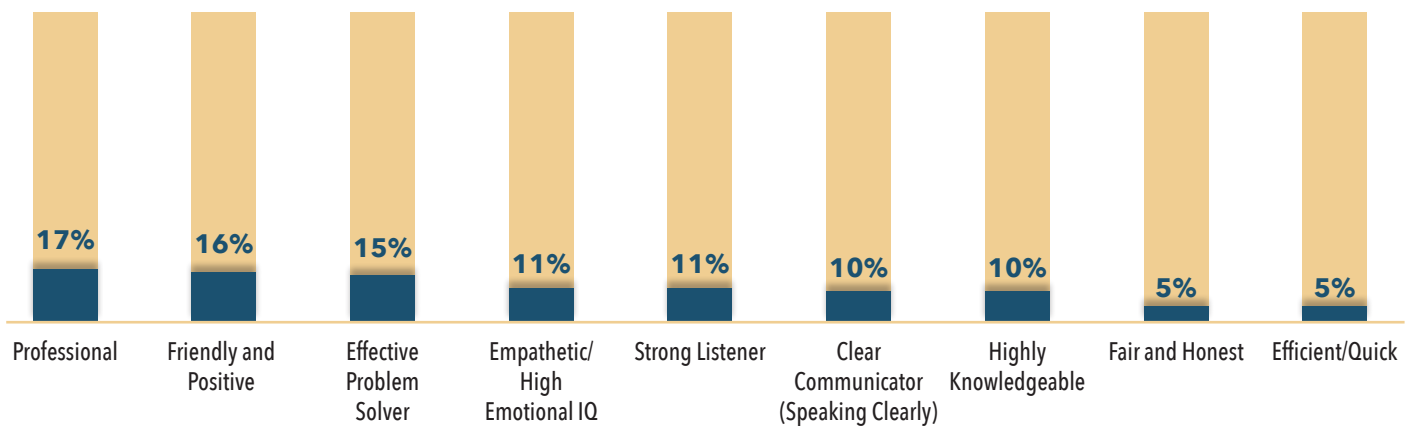
# Live Agents Versus AI-Powered Agents

## Areas Where Agents Are Performing Best

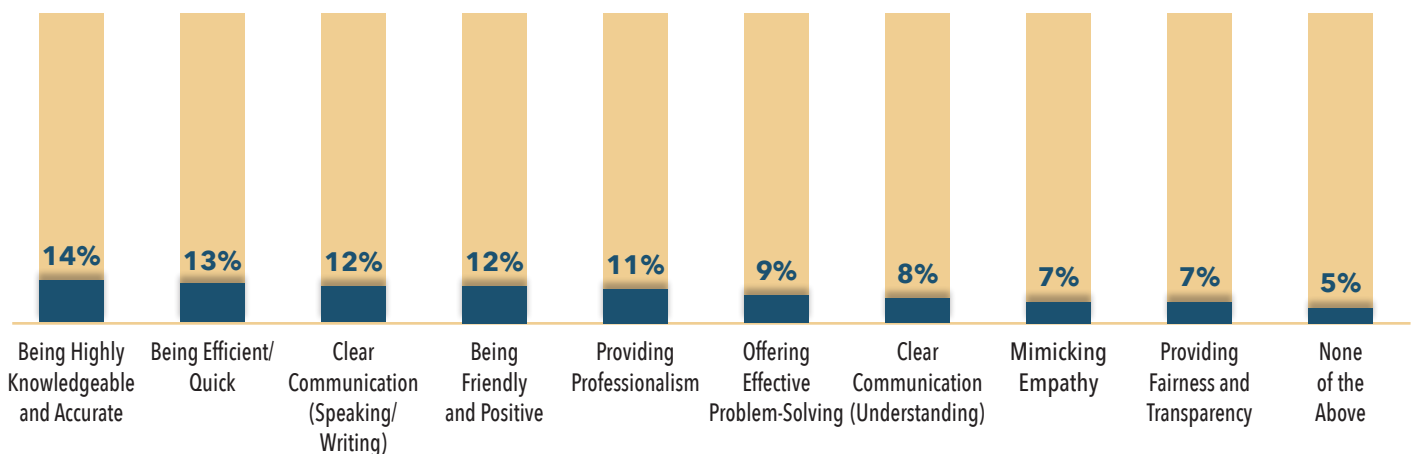
Recalling that survey respondents have a more favorable view of live agent interactions versus AI-powered agent interactions, the below set of questions sought to ascertain how each agent type performed best. On the live agent side, consumers felt "Professionalism," "Friendly and Positive," and "Effective Problem-Solving" were areas of strength, while "Fair and Honest" and "Efficient/Quick" represented areas of opportunity. For AI-powered agents, consumers felt "Highly Knowledgeable and Accurate" and "Efficient/Quick" were strong suits, while "Mimicking Empathy" and "Fairness and Transparency" were areas for improvement. Furthermore, five percent of survey respondents felt AI-powered agents weren't performing best in any area (or at least in any of the areas included in the provided responses).

Interestingly, there was overlap when it comes to "Fairness," suggesting that companies should pay close attention to the policies and procedures that both live and AI-powered agents must abide by. Brands should ask themselves if such policies are fair and friendly to customers and, if not, what changes can be made to enhance the perception of fairness among consumers.

### In which area do you feel live customer care agents are performing best currently?



### In which area do you feel AI-powered customer care agents are performing best currently?



## Live Agents Versus AI-Powered Agents

### Most Critical Soft Skills

When survey respondents were asked which skills were most critical for live agents to provide excellent care, “Effective Problem Solver” gained the most attention, followed closely by “Highly Knowledgeable.” Interestingly, “Effective Problem-Solving” was a Top 3 response on the previous page when respondents were asked to identify in which areas live agents were excelling, though “High Knowledgeable” was a Bottom 3 response in the same set of results. To better align customer expectations to actual performance, brands should consider focusing on Agent Knowledge, as well as communication. These skill sets also align with results on page 9, where consumers were asked where companies should be focusing their training and coaching efforts. Clearly, consumers expect – and need – more from live agents in the key areas of knowledge and communication.

Of the following, which is most critical for a live customer care agent to provide excellent care?



When consumers were asked a similar question to the above – for AI-powered agents rather than live agents – responses were similar, but with a few key differences. First and foremost, consumers expect AI-powered agents to be “Highly Knowledgeable and Accurate,” like their live agent counterparts. But consumers also expect to have clear communication with AI-powered agents both in terms of understanding and communicating (either written or spoken).

Of the following, which is most critical for an AI-powered customer care agent to provide excellent care?

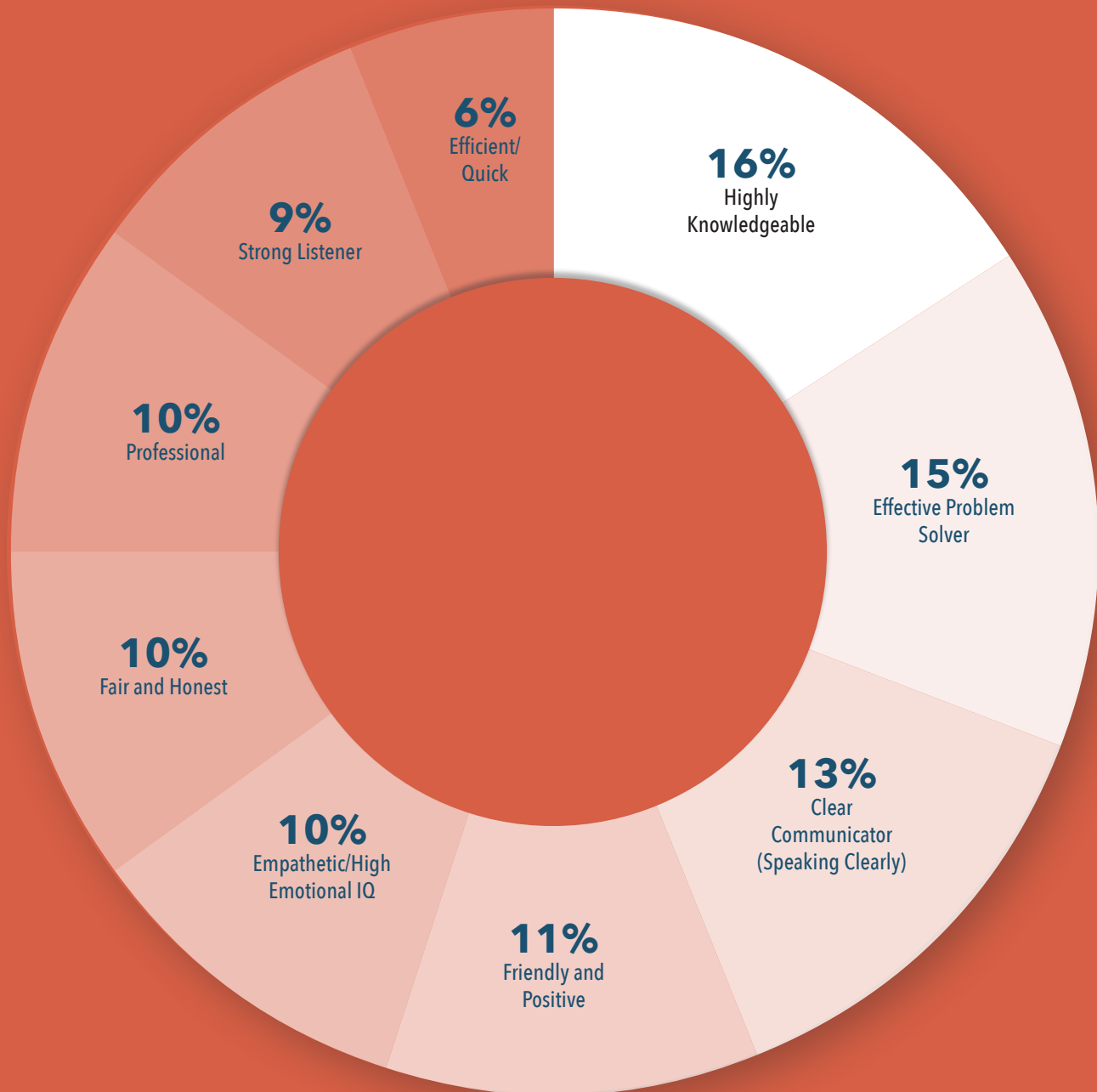


# Live Agents Versus AI-Powered Agents

## Training Focus – Live Agents

As revealed on the previous page, consumers believe “Highly Knowledgeable” and “Effective Problem Solver” to be the Top 2 most critical attributes for live agents to provide excellent care. So, it follows that those same two attributes top the list of where consumers think companies should focus when it comes to training and coaching live customer care agents. “Highly Knowledgeable” is an area where brands should pay close attention, since only 10% of consumers felt this was an area where live agents were currently performing the best (page 7). Highly knowledgeable agents know their products and services inside and out. They also have a superb understanding of company policies and are willing to help customers navigate those policies, leading to fewer escalations, reduced customer effort, and a quicker path to a satisfactory resolution.

Which characteristics do you believe companies should focus on when training and coaching their live customer care agents?



# Live Agents Versus AI-Powered Agents

## Consumer Opinions on AI Mimicking

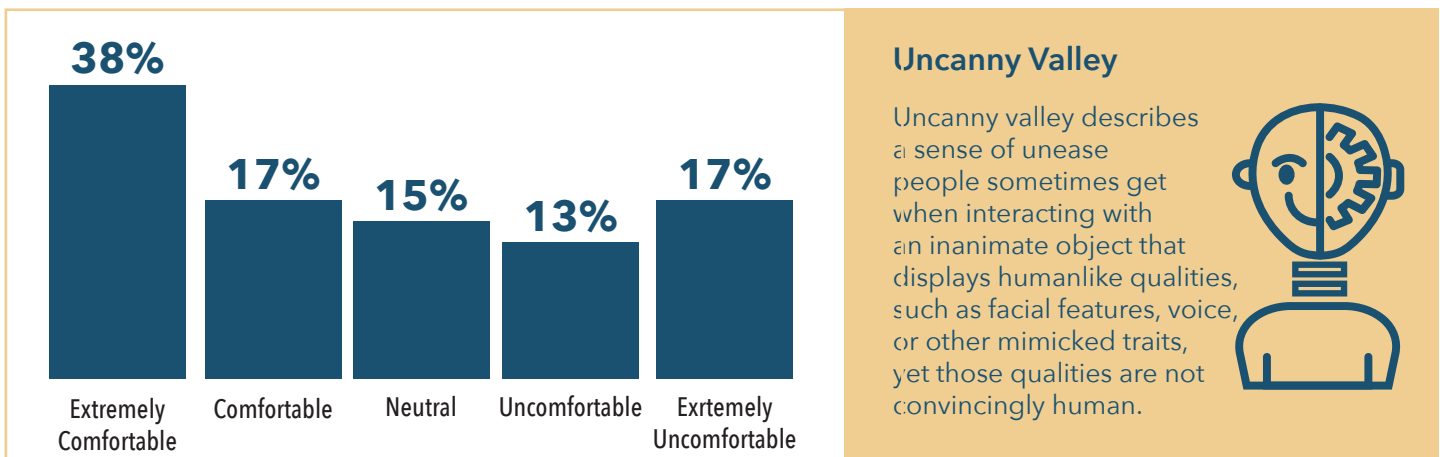
When consumers were asked which humanlike quality they felt AI-powered customer care agents would be best capable of mastering in the future, an interesting response emerged, with 18% indicating “Highly Knowledgeable and Accurate.” What makes this response so interesting is the fact that “Highly Knowledgeable” is also the top response when consumers were asked where companies should focus their training efforts (page 9), while simultaneously being considered an area of current weakness for live agents (page 7). Taken together, these results suggest that companies that are looking to AI to strengthen the knowledge and accuracy of their live agents are well aligned with the interests of consumers. Furthermore, agent-assisting AI solutions are, for most companies, a logical first step on the AI for CX journey.

### Which humanlike characteristics do you believe AI-powered customer care agents will be capable of mastering in the future?



The largest percentage of survey respondents (38%) are “Extremely Comfortable” with AI-powered agents being designed to mimic human qualities. This bodes well for companies and solution providers that are striving for more humanlike experiences with AI. Conversely, a total of 30% of consumers are either “Uncomfortable” or “Extremely Uncomfortable” with the idea of AI behaving humanlike. Regarding these consumers, companies should seek to understand the source of the discomfort, even going so far as to explore concepts such as “uncanny valley,” and how such phenomenon might be overcome in a CX environment, such as clear identification of AI and even user controls for tailored experiences.

### How comfortable would you be with an AI-powered customer care agent being designed to mimic human qualities like empathy, humor, and friendliness?

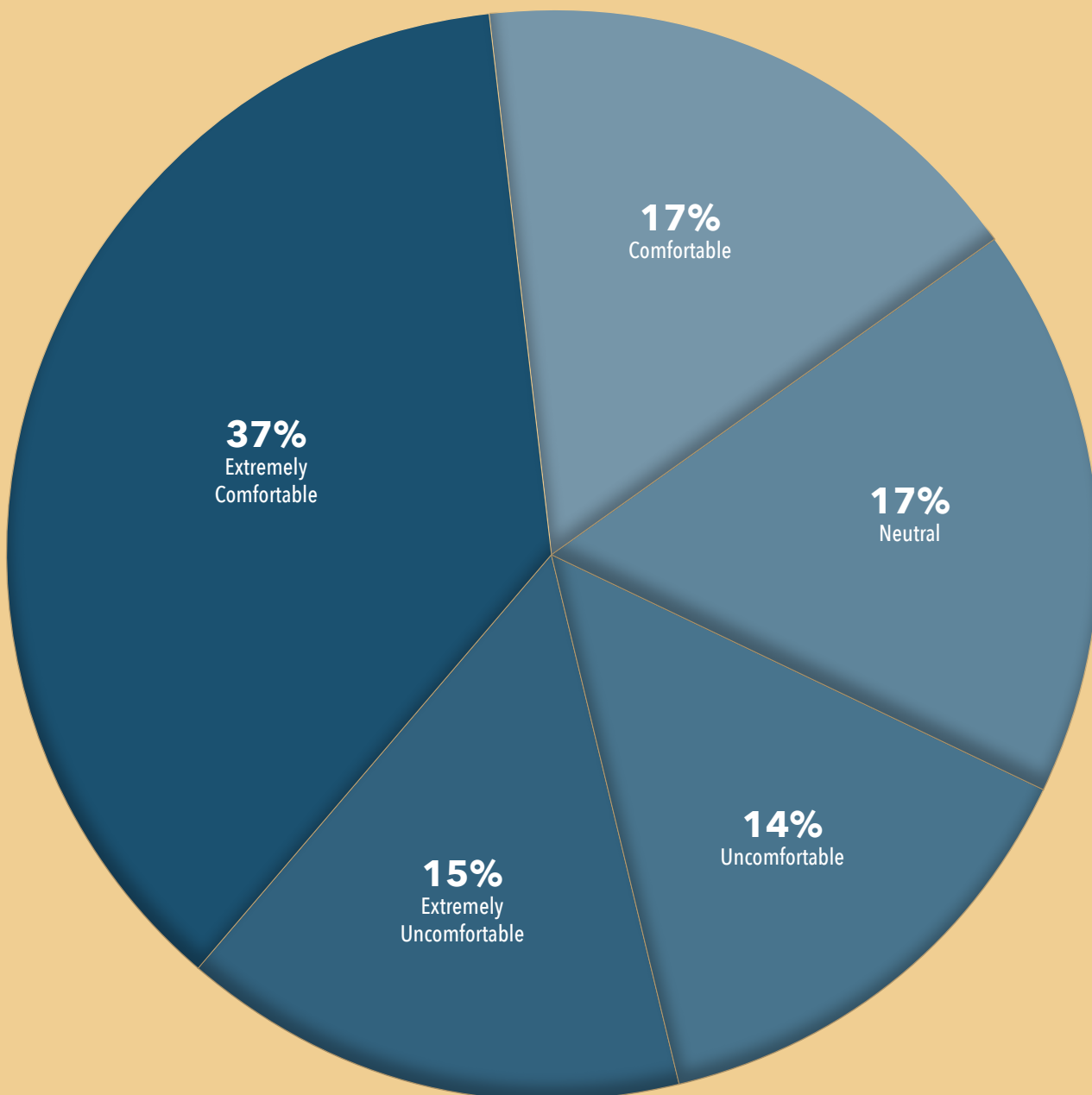


## Live Agents Versus AI-Powered Agents

### AI as a First Point of Contact

Like results on the previous page, the largest percentage of survey respondents in the results below (37%) indicated they were "Extremely Comfortable" with an AI-powered agent being their first point of contact. Granted, the question doesn't specify whether the issue in question was Simple or Complex, and this would likely have a material impact on results. Still, a significant portion of consumers (71%) feel "neutral" or better about the idea of first dealing with an AI-powered agent. This is great news for any brand making investments in the space, and certainly represents an ongoing shift in consumer opinion regarding AI for CX.

How comfortable are you with utilizing an AI-powered customer care agent as your first point of contact with a company when trying to resolve a customer care issue?



**SIMPLE ENGAGEMENTS  
VERSUS  
COMPLEX ENGAGEMENTS**

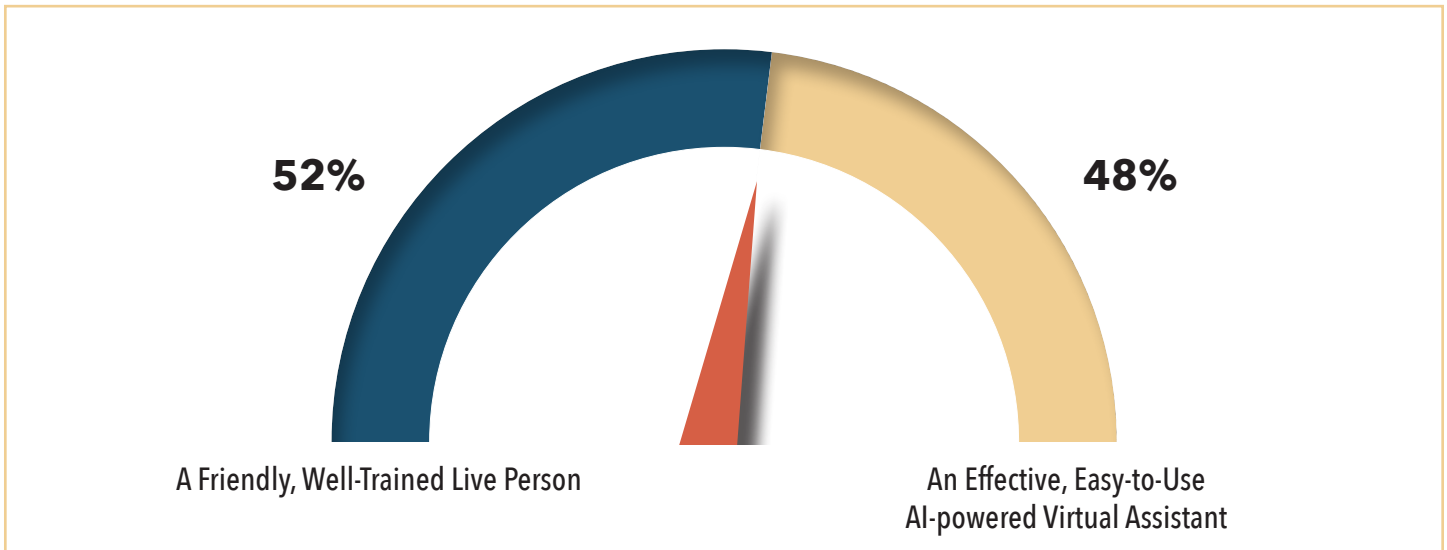


# Simple Engagements Versus Complex Engagements

## Consumer Agent Preference by Complexity

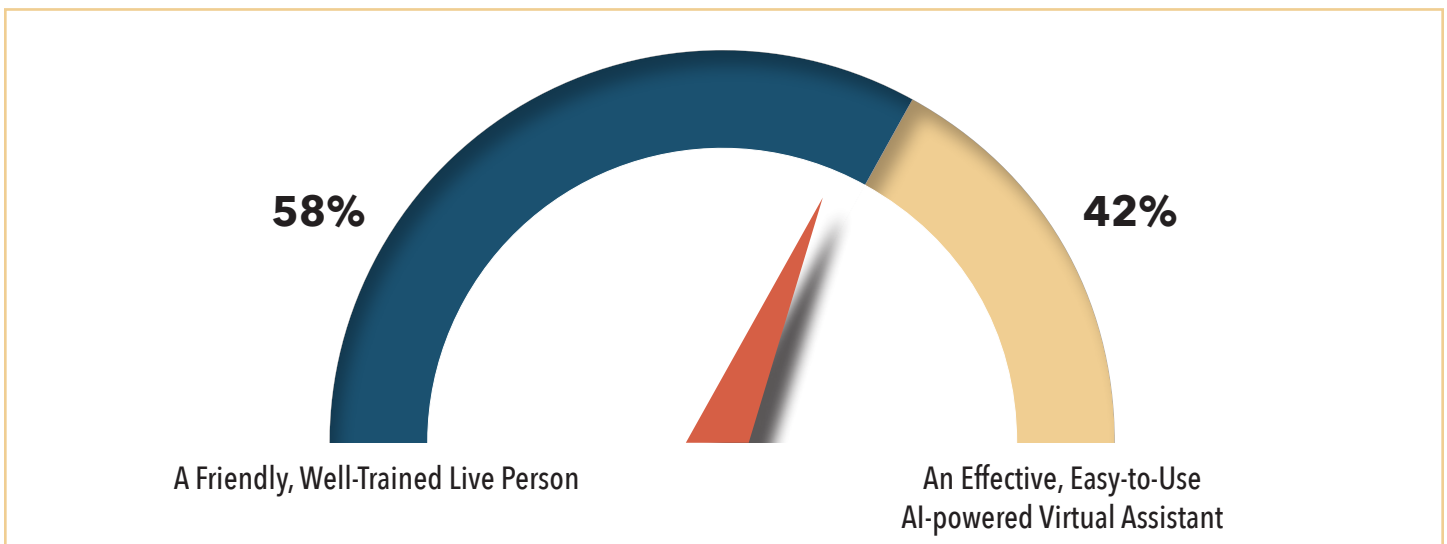
A slight majority of consumers (well within the surveying margin of error of roughly five to six percent) would rather interact with a live agent versus an AI-powered agent. This result is consistent with other results found throughout Execs In The Know's wider body of research. Although consumers are adapting to AI-powered solutions, there is still a very high comfort level and familiarity with having a human on the other end of an interaction.

**When trying to resolve a SIMPLE customer care issue, like updating your account information or paying a bill, which would you rather interact with?**



Not surprisingly, when a customer care issue is framed as "COMPLEX" instead of "SIMPLE," significantly more survey respondents would opt for a live agent engagement over an AI-powered agent. This makes perfectly good sense given AI's challenges in "Offering Effective Problem-Solving" (page 7). With 15% of survey respondents saying live agents excel most at providing effective problem-solving compared to only 9% of respondents saying the same of AI-powered agents, it's clear that AI's problem-solving algos have room for improvement.

**When trying to resolve a COMPLEX customer care issue, like updating your account information or paying a bill, which would you rather interact with?**

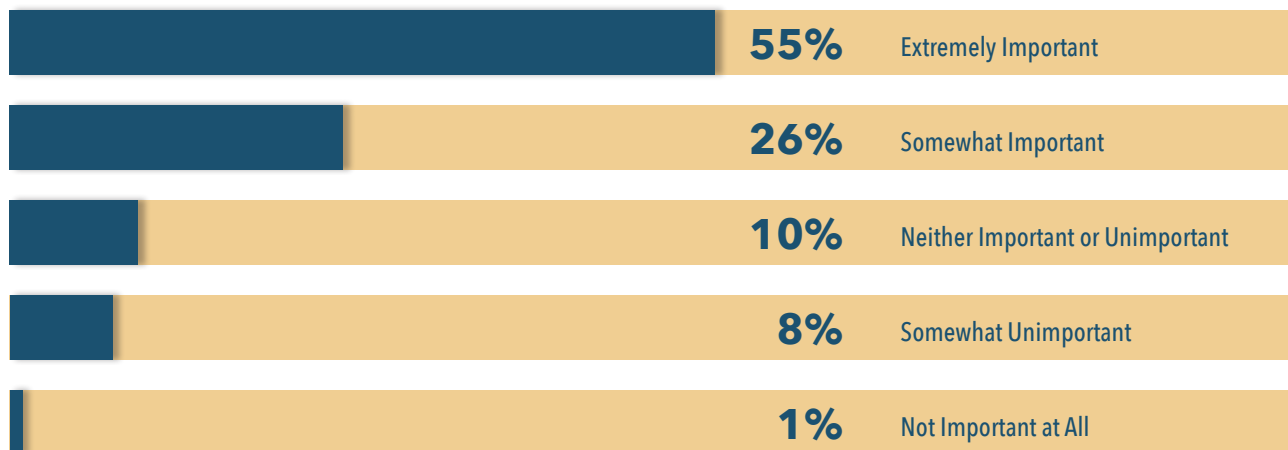


# Simple Engagements Versus Complex Engagements

## Importance of Live Agent Access and Balance

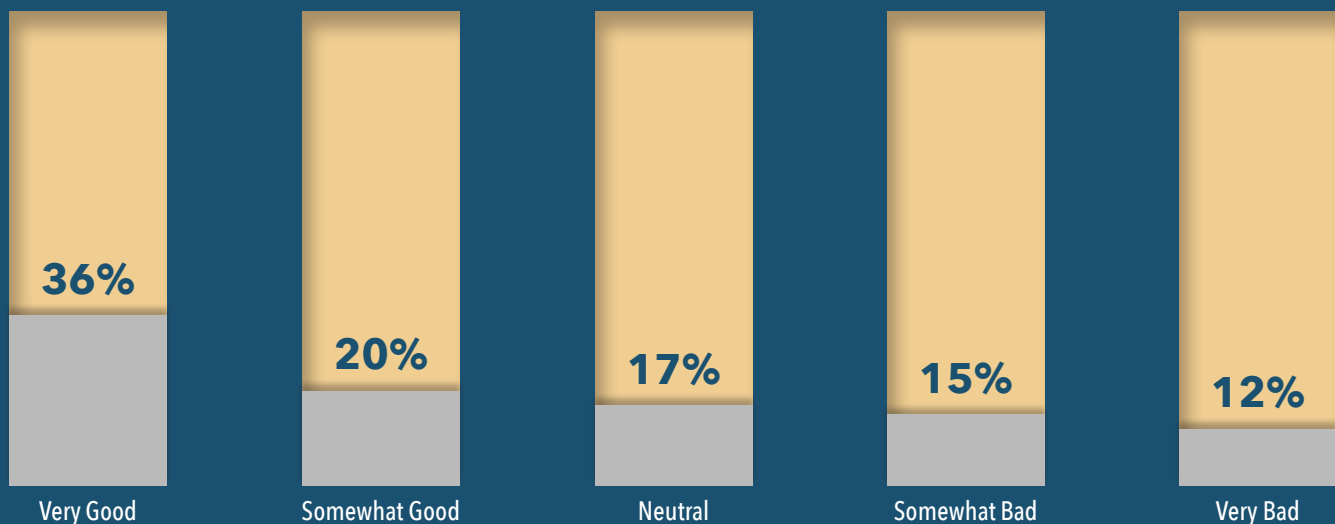
Alongside agent preference questions (previous page), survey respondents were also asked about the importance of having access to a live agent when trying to tackle a COMPLEX issue. Not surprisingly, 81% of respondents indicated that access to a live agent was either “Extremely Important” or “Somewhat Important” when facing a COMPLEX issue, while only one percent of respondents thought such access was “Not Important at All.”

**How important is it to have access to a live customer care agent when trying to resolve a COMPLEX customer care issue, like correcting a billing error or getting a refund?**



In a result that is encouraging for further investment in AI and other smart tools for CX, 56% of survey respondents felt most companies were doing “Very Good” or “Good” in striking the right balance between human and automated assistance. This is especially encouraging given the negative reputation automated solutions earned during the onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic when many self-help solutions were quickly deployed, sometimes at the expense of quality and thorough testing. Several years on, it’s clear many companies have moved from the rapid deployment phase and into a process of refining and reiterating.

**In your opinion, how are most companies doing at striking a balance between live and automated assistance in helping customers resolve their customer care issues?**

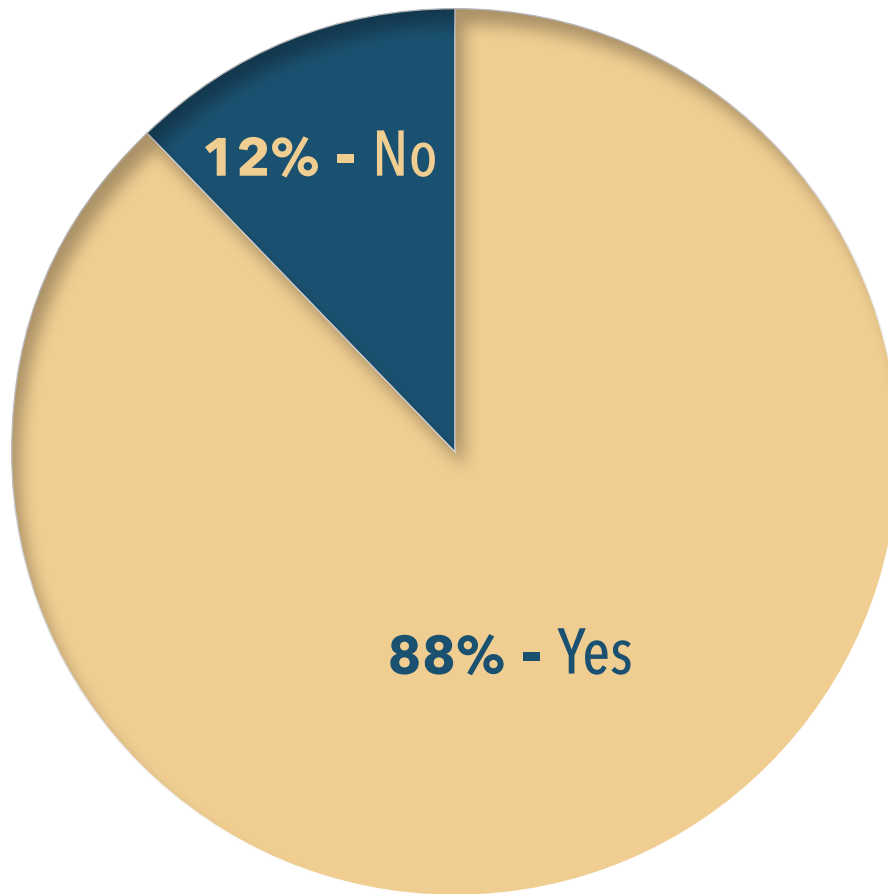


## Simple Engagements Versus Complex Engagements

### Presence of Language Barriers

Interestingly, communication barriers (i.e., accent and language) are equally present regardless of an issue being SIMPLE or COMPLEX. This should be of concern to brands, and for several reasons. First and foremost, the prevalence of issues related to communication is very high, as experienced by nearly nine in ten consumers (88%). Secondly, the communication issues are severe enough for complexity to be inconsequential in determining prevalence of the issue.

**Has language or an accent barrier ever impacted your customer service transaction when trying to resolve a SIMPLE customer care issue, like updating your account information or paying a bill?**



**Has language or an accent barrier ever impacted your customer service transaction when trying to resolve a COMPLEX customer care issue, like correcting a billing error or getting a refund?**

**88%**  
Yes

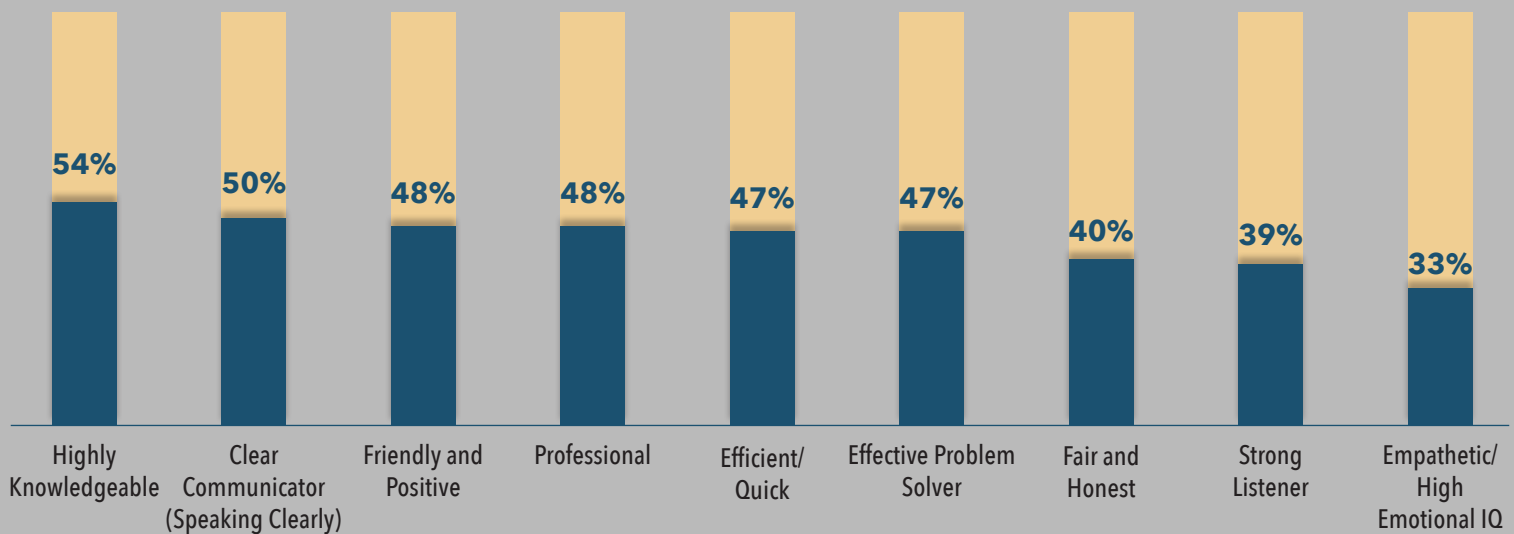
**12%**  
No

# Simple Engagements Versus Complex Engagements

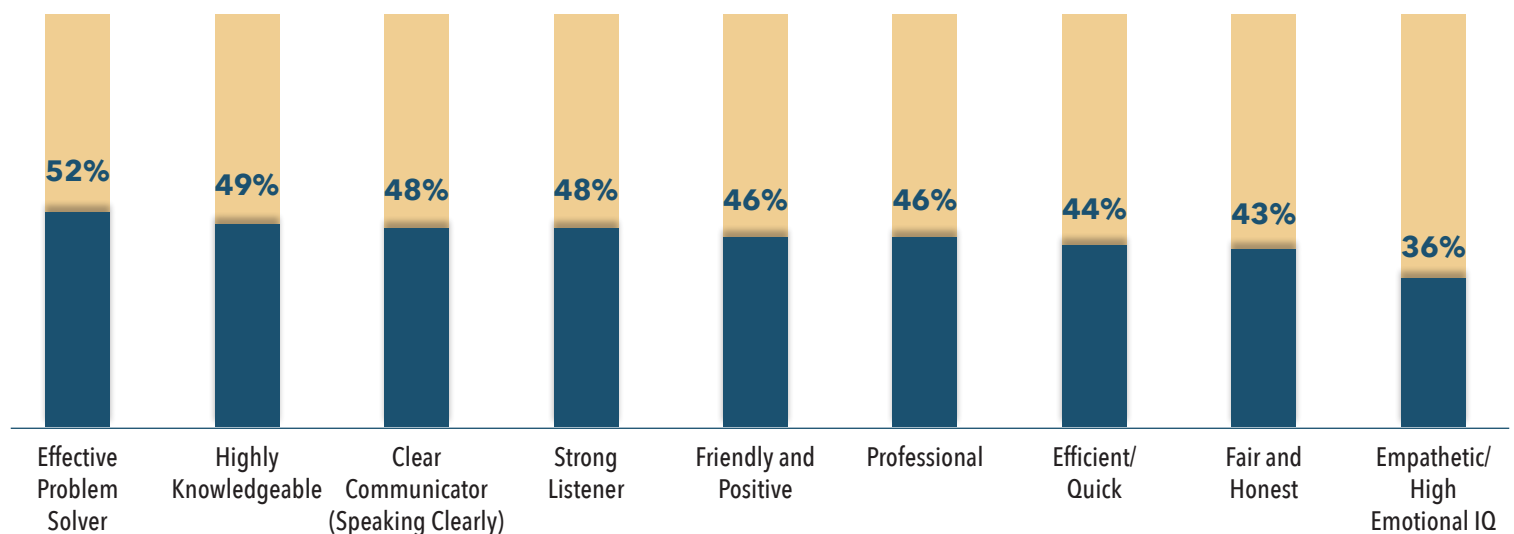
## Characteristics of Importance (Live Agents)

In examining how consumers value agent soft skills (aka agent characteristics), it's clear that some differences emerge depending on whether an issue is SIMPLE or COMPLEX. Starting with the similarities, consumers value live agents that are "Highly Knowledgeable" and "Clear Communicators" regardless of whether an issue is SIMPLE or COMPLEX. In terms of differences, consumers are more likely to point to the importance of things like "Friendly and Positive" when issues are SIMPLE, and "Effective Problem-Solving" when issues are COMPLEX. But perhaps the most striking aspect about the below results is how closely everything ranked in the minds of survey respondents, regardless of issue complexity. In other words, consumers seem to want and expect it all when it comes to agent soft skills. Furthermore, companies can't afford to hyper-focus on one particular area at the expense of another. Live agents must be well-rounded individuals in order to truly deliver on what's important to consumers.

Which of the following agent characteristics are most important to you in dealing with a live customer care agent when trying to resolve a SIMPLE customer care issue, like updating your account information or paying a bill? (Select all that apply.)



Which of the following agent characteristics are most important to you in dealing with a live customer care agent when trying to resolve a COMPLEX customer care issue, like correcting a billing error or getting a refund? (Select all that apply.)

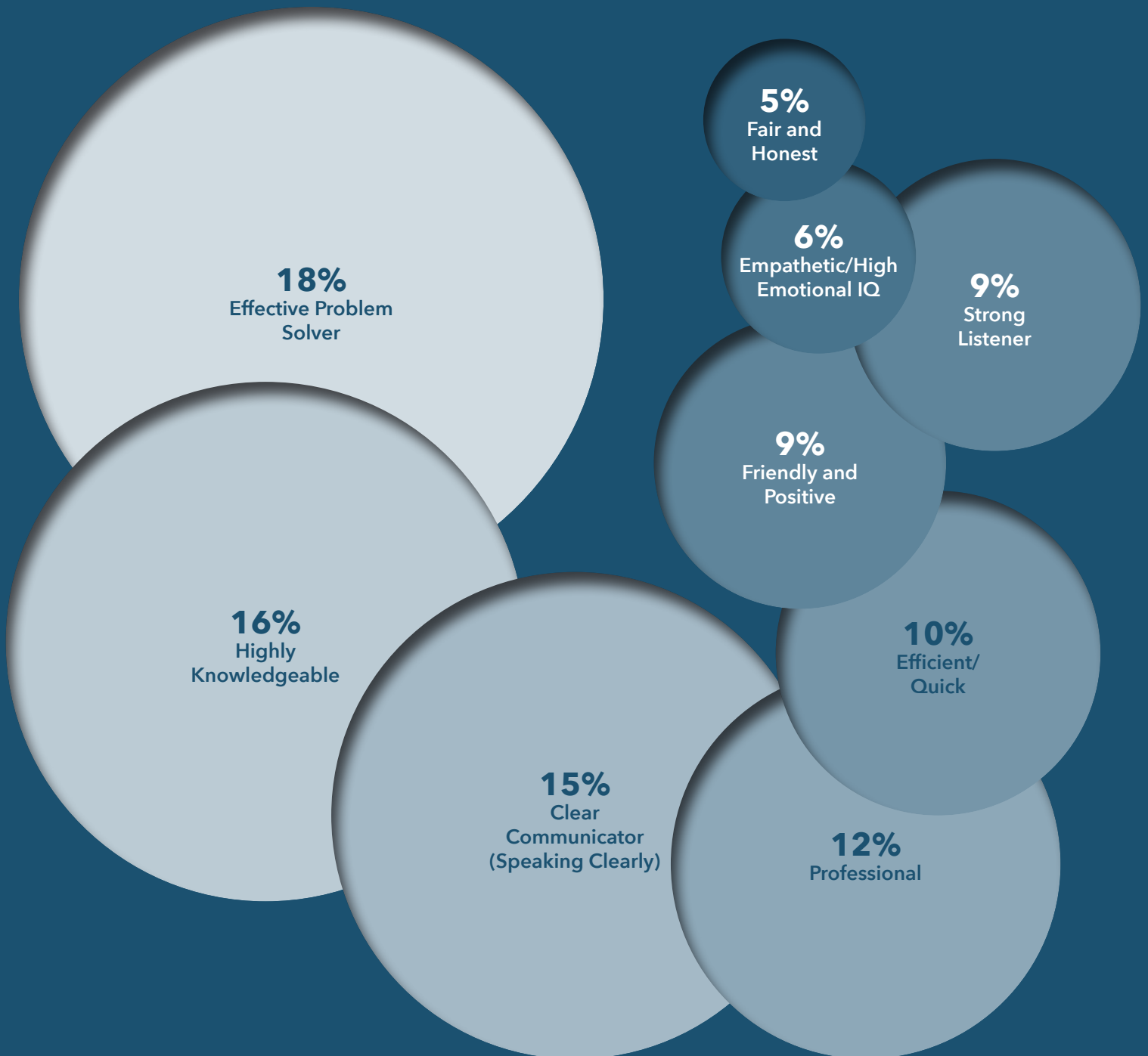


# Simple Engagements Versus Complex Engagements

## Characteristics of Importance (Live Agents), cont.

In what is perhaps a definitive view of what's important to consumers when it comes to interacting with a live customer care agent, survey respondents leaned heavily into problem-solving, high knowledge, and clear communications. Each were geared toward resolution, while characteristics more akin to personality traits (like agent empathy and friendliness) were not as highly prized by survey respondents.

Whether a customer care issue is SIMPLE or COMPLEX, which of the following agent characteristics are most important to you in dealing with a live customer care agent?



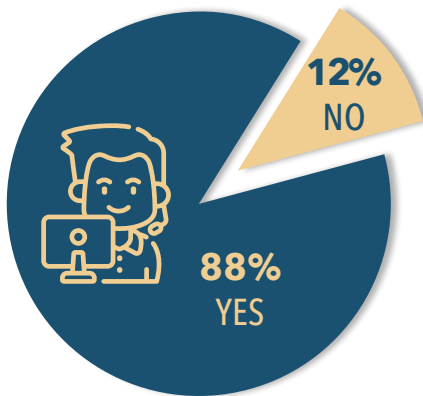
# OPINIONS ON SOFT SKILLS

## Opinions on Soft Skills

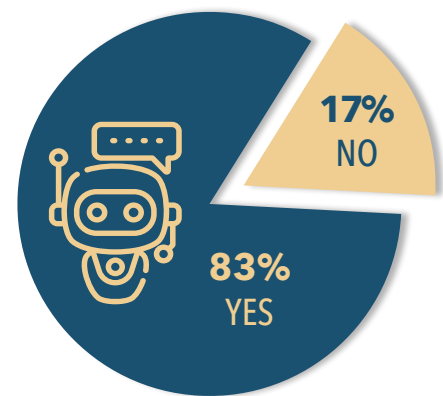
### Agent Use and Instances of Complexity

In a set of questions aimed at understanding levels of consumer exposure to both live and AI-powered agents, consumers interact with live agents at a slightly higher rate. Furthermore, these questions were each used as screening questions for all the responses found throughout this section of the report. Consumers were only asked their opinions about the various soft skills if they had actually interacted with a live or AI-powered agent within the previous 12 months.

Have you had a customer care experience with a brand involving a live customer care agent within the past 12 months?

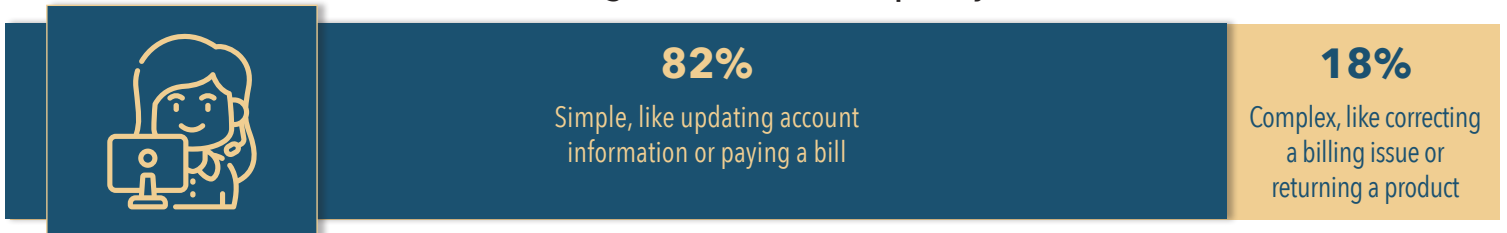


Have you had a customer care experience with a brand involving an AI-powered chatbot or virtual assistant within the past 12 months?

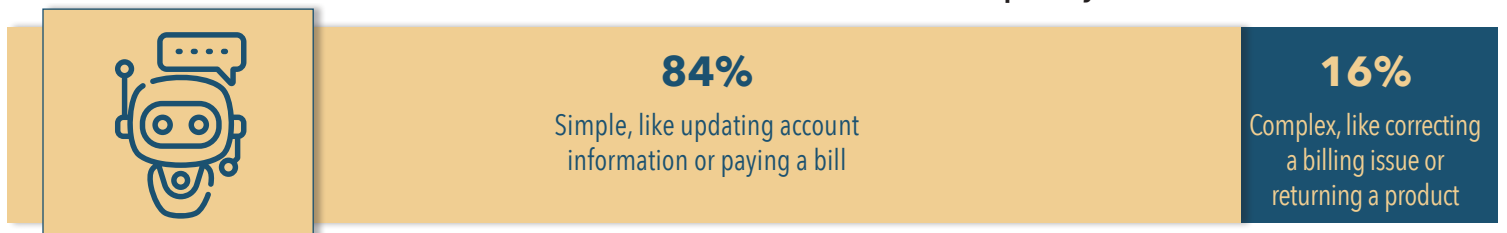


Like the results above, there was very little difference between live and AI-powered agents in terms of the breakdown in use between SIMPLE and COMPLEX issues. Whether a consumer was interacting with a live agent or an AI-powered agent, they were tackling a SIMPLE issue about 80 to 85% of the time. This was an interesting result, as one might expect consumers to gravitate more strongly to AI-powered solutions when tackling SIMPLE issues. Instead, this result seems to suggest consumers are open to attempting to use AI-powered solutions regardless of issue complexity. This result is further supported on page 11, with 71% of consumers indicating they are either comfortable or neutral about the idea of having an AI-powered agent as their first point of contact in attempting to resolve a customer care issue. Brands should seek to capitalize on this openness of the consumer by doing everything possible to create positive, effective experiences with AI-powered solutions to help consumers feel justified in their openness to using such solutions.

How would you describe your most recent interaction with a live customer care agent in terms of complexity?



How would you describe your most recent interaction with an AI-powered chatbot or virtual assistant in terms of complexity?



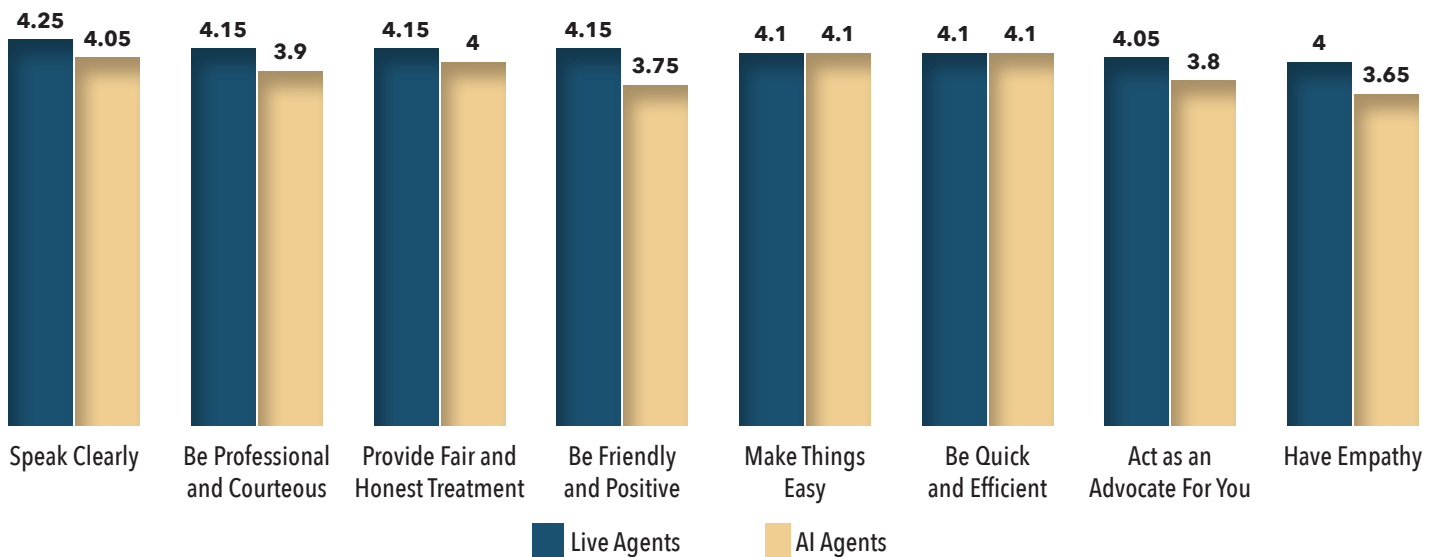
## Opinions on Soft Skills

### The Importance of Soft Skills by Agent Type

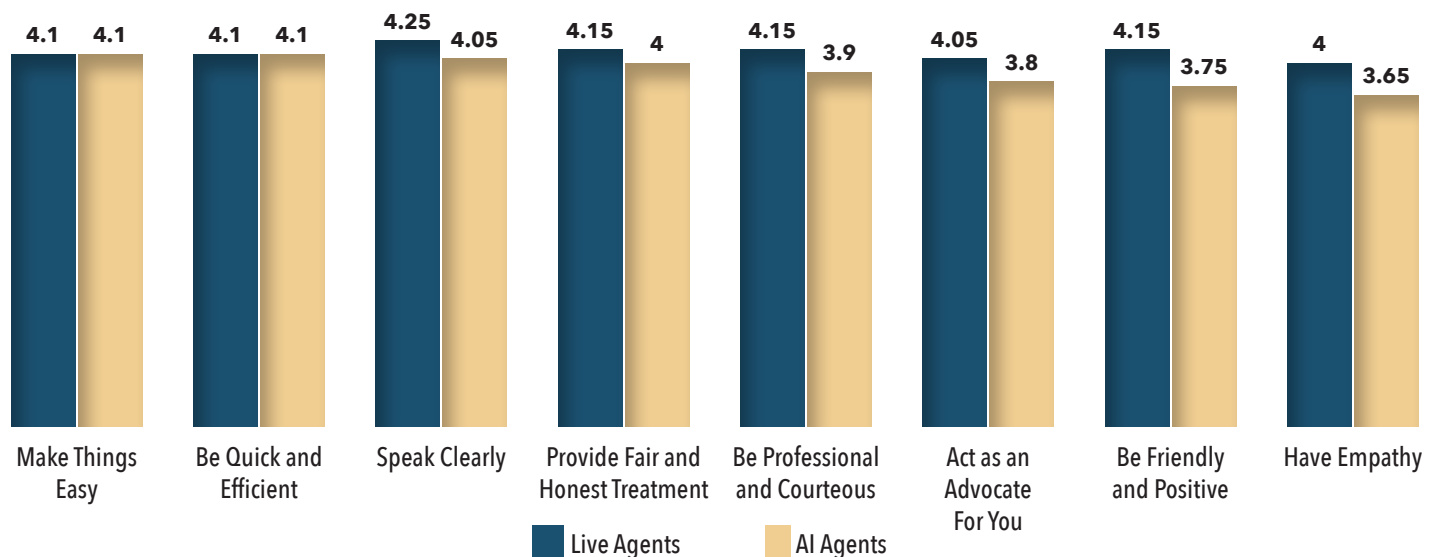
In a series of 16 separate questions, consumers were asked to indicate how important each of the below soft skill actions were to them. Consumers who had an interaction with a live agent were asked about these skills in relation to their most recent live agent engagement. Likewise, consumers who had an interaction with an AI-powered agent were asked about these soft skills in relation to their most recent interaction. The two charts below contain the same exact data, with the top chart arranged in descending order based on live agent results and the bottom chart based on AI-powered agent results.

When examining how the results break down, consumers are far more concerned with humanlike qualities for their live agent interactions. Things like clear communication, professionalism, and fairness top the list. But when it comes to AI-powered agents, process-focused skills were far more important with things like ease, speed, efficiency, and clarity topping the list. In other words, consumer expectations are different between live and AI-powered agents, with consumers expecting a more humane experience when dealing with a live agent.

During your most recent interaction with a Live/AI agent(s), how important was it for the customer care agent(s) to [INSERT SOFT SKILL ACTION] when helping to resolve your customer care issue?



During your most recent interaction with a Live/AI agent(s), how important was it for the customer care agent(s) to [INSERT SOFT SKILL ACTION] when helping to resolve your customer care issue?

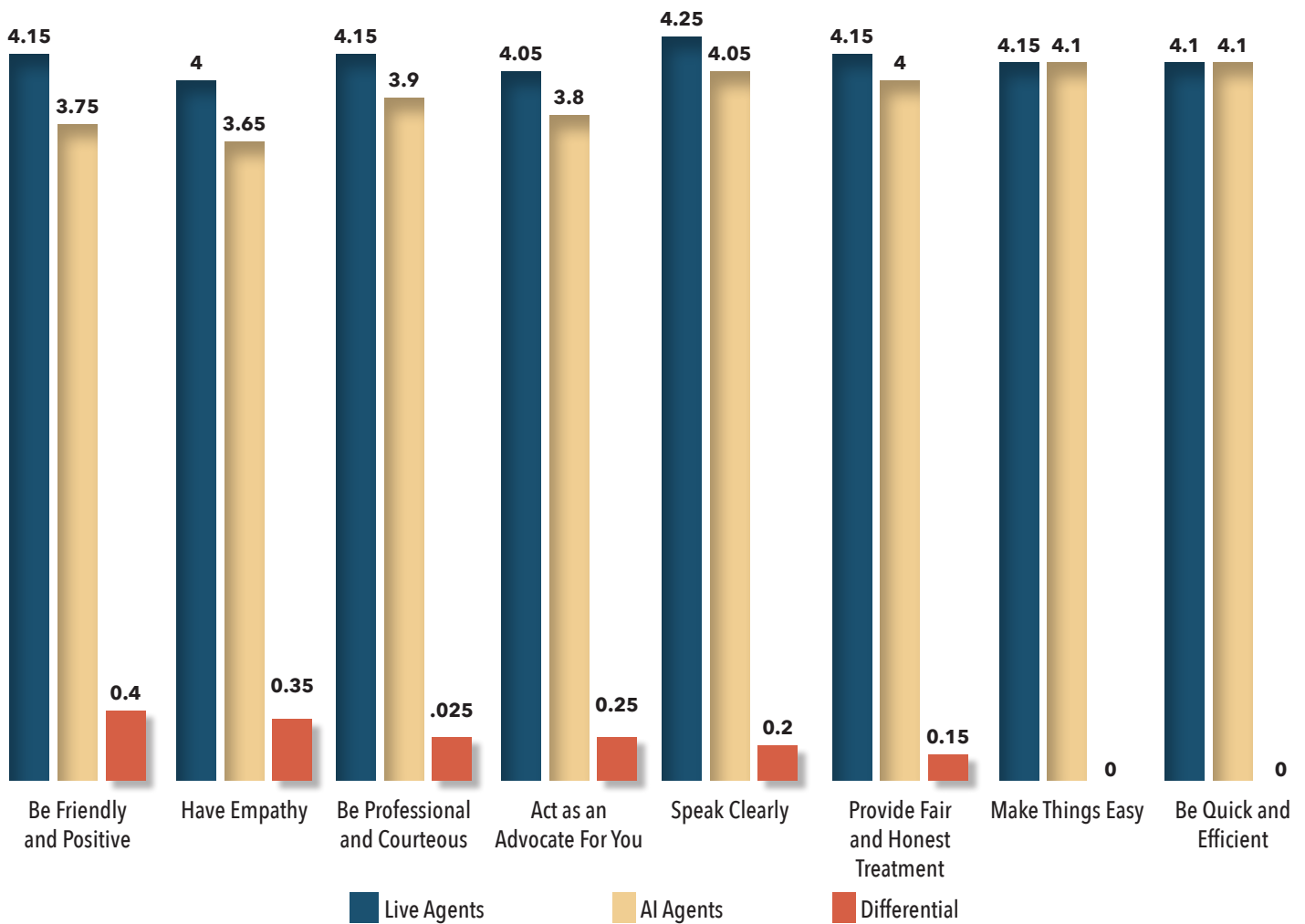


## Opinions on Soft Skills

### The Differentials of Soft Skill Importance

Taking a deeper dive into the findings from the previous page, the below chart highlights the differential between results when consumers were asked to identify the importance of a series of agent soft skills for both live and AI-powered agents. One way to interpret the differential is to assume the larger the number, the more lenient consumers are with AI-powered agents on those soft skills. In other words, "Be Friendly and Positive" is far more important for a live agent than an AI-powered agent. Conversely, "Make Things Easy" and "Be Quick and Efficient" are equally important to consumers regardless of whether they are interacting with a live or AI-powered agent. Brands should consider these differences as they strategize where to tweak their AI models to make their AI-powered agent more lifelike and accommodating of consumer expectations.

During your most recent interaction with a Live/AI agent(s), how important was it for the customer care agent(s) to [INSERT SOFT SKILL ACTION] when helping to resolve your customer care issue?



## Key Takeaways and Considerations

Achieving CX success is no longer about choosing between human and AI interactions. Instead, it is about effectively orchestrating the two together. Consumers are signaling a clear willingness to engage with AI-powered solutions, yet they remain highly sensitive to where and how those solutions are applied. When AI delivers speed and simplicity, it is welcomed. When it falls short on problem-solving or creates friction, the need for human intervention becomes immediate and non-negotiable.

One of the most important insights for CX leaders from this research is the redefinition of “soft skills” in a hybrid service environment. For live agents, soft skills still carry a deeply human expectation. Customers want to feel heard, treated fairly, and supported. However, when it comes to the AI experience, these qualities are secondary to the ability to resolve issues efficiently and accurately. Consumers are far more forgiving of AI’s emotional limitations, but are far less tolerant of inefficiency or confusion. In this sense, AI is not expected to be human, but it is expected to be effective and easy to use.

The findings also highlight an opportunity to rethink how organizations invest in both agent enablement and AI strategy. The data suggests that improving agent knowledge, communication, and problem-solving capabilities may yield greater returns than continued emphasis on surface-level experience enhancements. Similarly, AI investments should prioritize augmenting these same capabilities, particularly in areas where humans currently struggle such as knowledge access, speed, and consistency.

Finally, the results point to the importance of intentional experience design across the full customer journey. Consumers are not rejecting AI, but they are evaluating it and comparing it to their best experiences with the technology. CX leaders must design pathways that intelligently match interaction type to issue complexity, while always ensuring seamless transitions between AI and human support. The future of CX will belong to organizations that can deliver both efficiency and assurance, all at the right moment and in the right way.

Possible Actions for CX Leaders:

- Redesign service journeys based on complexity, not channel
- Rebalance training toward resolution excellence, doubling down on improving knowledge, problem-solving, and communication clarity
- Use AI to augment (not replace) agent capabilities
- Set and manage expectations for AI interactions by clearly identifying when an interaction is AI-powered and prioritizing ease, speed, and transparency
- Continuously measure and align to what consumers value

## Methodology

This report was developed using a multi-module, multi-cohort series of consumer surveys conducted on the SurveyMonkey online surveying platform. Consumer surveying occurred across four unique survey modules from November 7 through November 9, 2024 using SurveyMonkey Audience, a survey panel targeting platform. Sample sizes for individual questions ranged from 286 to 335. All respondents were U.S.-based individuals ages 18 years or older.

## About Execs In The Know

Execs In The Know brings together customer experience (CX) leaders from across industries in an effort to advance the conversation and set a new agenda for delivering amazing experiences for consumers. As a global community of the brightest minds in CX, Execs In The Know provides opportunities to learn, share, network, and engage to innovate. Operating under the motto, "Leaders Learning From Leaders," Execs In The Know facilitates many opportunities for community engagement, such as its biannual national Customer Response Summit and private online community, Know It All "KIA." There are also exclusive, laser-focused engagements like industry briefings and executive roundtables. Execs In The Know also guides and informs the industry with a rich tapestry of CX-related content that includes *CX Insight* magazine, industry research, webinars, blogs, and much more.

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