



CX LEADERS

TRENDS & INSIGHTS

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Execs In The Know®

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PREFACE

Customer experience (CX) continues to evolve at a remarkable pace. New technologies, expanding channel choice, rapidly advancing artificial intelligence (AI), and changing consumer behaviors – all are reshaping how customers interact with brands and how organizations design customer care. Yet amid all that change, many of the things consumers value most remain remarkably familiar: getting the right answer, reaching capable help, being treated fairly, avoiding unnecessary effort, and having confidence that a company will follow through.

The *2026 CX Leaders Trends & Insights: Consumer Edition* explores this intersection of change and continuity. And this year's findings tell a decidedly mixed story. Thirty-six percent of consumers say resolving customer care issues has become easier, yet First Contact Resolution (FCR) fell from 69% to 61%, while the percentage of consumers saying companies are meeting their customer service needs and expectations dropped from 74% to 65%. Multichannel use also declined sharply even as consumers reported using a broader portfolio of individual solutions. Rather than pointing toward progress or decline, these results reveal an experience landscape that is becoming more complex, and they hint at a consumer who is increasingly selective about how, when, and where they seek help.

Central to this year's research is a deeper examination of customer confidence and assurance. The results make clear that confidence in customer care is not simply an operational measure. Eighty-six percent say a great customer service experience increases their trust in a brand, while 74% say confidence in customer service significantly or immensely influences whether they continue doing business. Conversely, 87% have stopped or slowed doing business with a company because of poor customer support.

Technology is also creating new possibilities, but not automatic customer acceptance. Two-thirds of consumers are comfortable with AI completely resolving an issue without human involvement, yet only 27% believe today's AI-powered tools greatly benefit their customer care interactions. Consumers appear increasingly open to automation when it performs well, while becoming less tolerant of inaccurate answers, endless loops, excessive effort, and difficult escalation.

Taken together, the findings reinforce that great CX is not created by any single channel, technology, metric, or interaction. It emerges when people, processes, policies, data, and technology work together to create experiences that feel dependable. Our hope is that this report gives CX leaders the benchmarks, insights, and consumer perspective needed to evaluate where their organizations are succeeding, where friction remains, and where the greatest opportunities for meaningful improvement exist.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHORS

One of the most interesting aspects of this year's research is how often the findings resist a simple interpretation. Although phone use increased substantially, consumers increasingly embrace digital solutions when they are confident those solutions will work. Multichannel use fell sharply, yet First Contact Resolution (FCR) declined as well. Reported self-help use dropped, while future intent to use self-help increased. And although 67% of consumers are comfortable allowing AI to completely resolve an issue, only 27% currently believe AI greatly improves their customer care interactions.

These contradictions ultimately helped reveal what we believe is one of the report's most important themes: Consumers are less attached to a particular channel or service model than they are to confidence in the outcome.

Customers will use automation. They will use live support. They will move across channels or stay within one. They are flexible. What matters is whether the experience gives them confidence that they are understood, that progress is being made, and that a satisfactory resolution is within reach.

An idea that surfaced repeatedly throughout the research: clear communication, easy access to a live person, knowledgeable representatives, accountability, proactive updates, preserved context, and fair outcomes all contribute to confidence. And when immediate resolution is not possible, consumers tell us that visibility and communication can help preserve trust along the way.

As always, these findings are not intended to prescribe a single operating model. Every customer base, journey, and organization is different. Instead, we encourage readers to use the research as a benchmark and a catalyst for asking better questions about the experiences they create: Where are customers losing confidence? What creates unnecessary effort? Where does technology genuinely improve the journey? And where can people, process, and technology work better together?

We hope the findings and the perspectives throughout the report help advance these conversations.



Execs In The Know



John McCahan
Chief Customer
Experience Officer
(Page 24)

MICHAEL KORS

Ebrahim Hyder
Vice President, Customer
Service
(Page 53)



Lisa Oswald
SVP and Global Head of
Member Services
(Page 58)



Brian Jeppesen
Director, Contact Center
Operations
(Page 55)



Mark McKercher
VP, Global Support
(Page 60)



carhartt

Angela Bragg
VP, Consumer and
Customer Care
(Page 78)

SURVEY RESULTS

METHODOLOGY

This report, the *2026 CX Leaders Trends & Insights: Consumer Edition*, was developed using a multi-module, multi-cohort series of consumer surveys conducted on the SurveyMonkey online surveying platform. Consumer surveying occurred across eleven unique survey modules from July 22 through July 30, 2026 using SurveyMonkey Audience, a survey panel targeting platform.

Sample sizes for individual questions ranged from 250 to 467. All respondents were U.S.-based individuals ages 18 years or older.

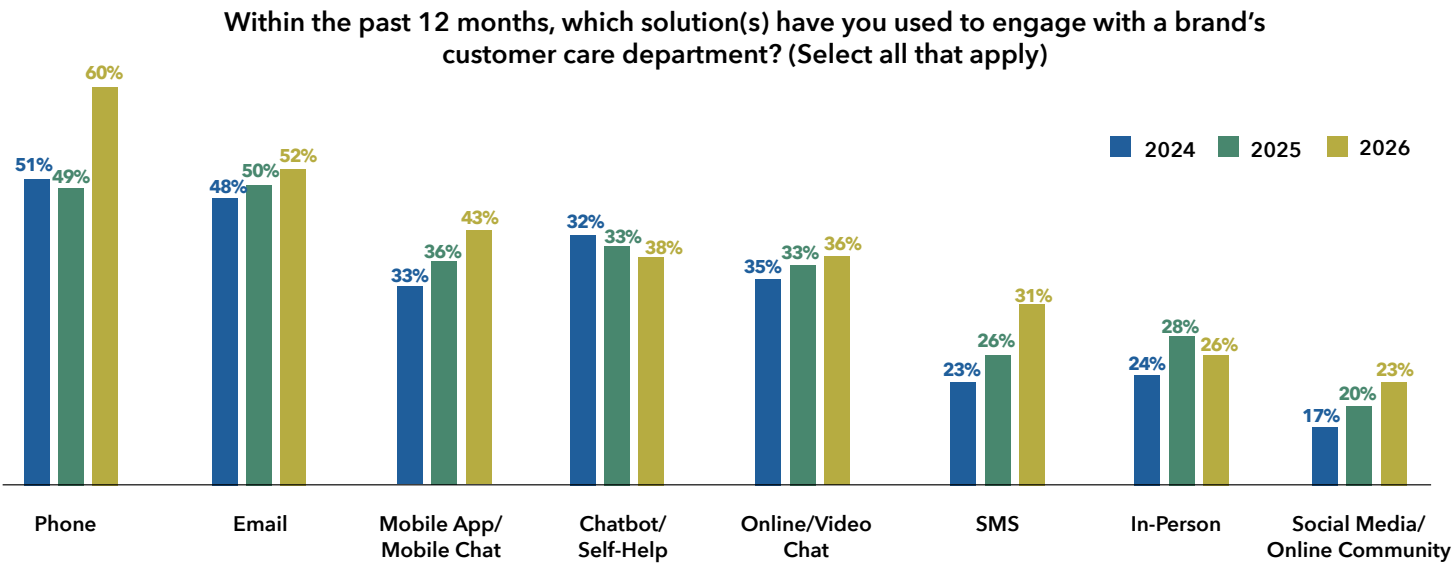
THE STATE OF
CUSTOMER
EXPERIENCE
TODAY



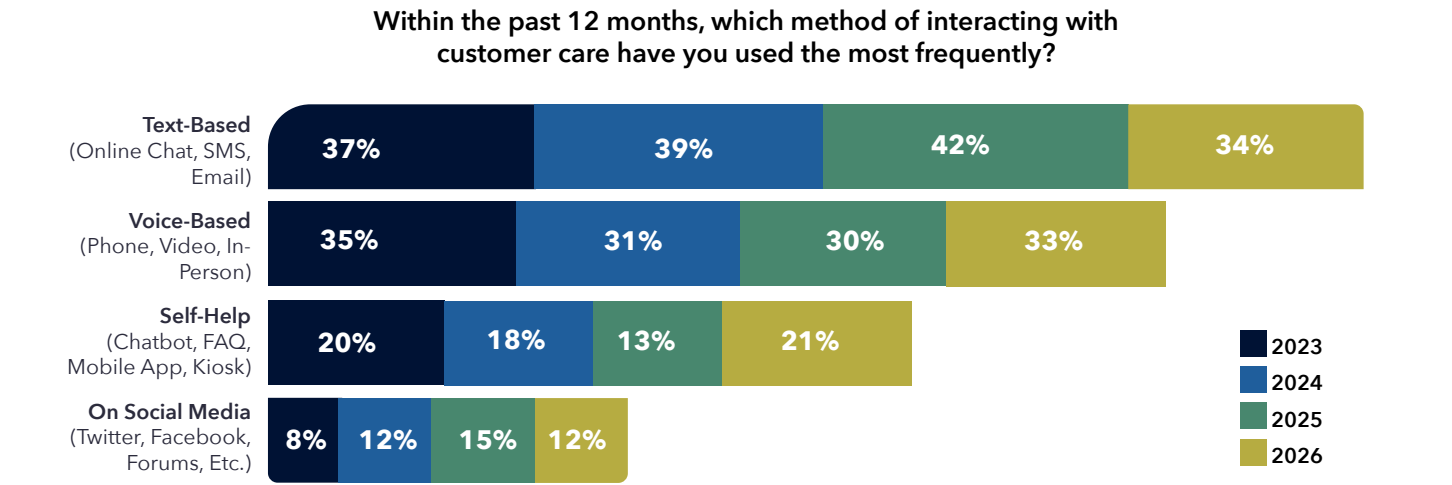
THE STATE OF CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE TODAY

CUSTOMER CARE CHANNEL AND SOLUTION USE

After several years of gradual migration away from Voice-Based care, 2026 brought a notable reversal. Phone use climbed 11 points year-over-year, from 49% to 60%, making it the most-used solution among survey respondents. Email also edged higher, while Mobile App/Mobile Chat, Chatbot/Self-Help, Online/Video Chat, and SMS all posted modest gains. The result is not a retreat from digital care so much as evidence that consumers continue to use a broad portfolio of service options. Moreover, this comes alongside an interesting decrease in multichannel use (page 36). This suggests consumers (and perhaps brands) are becoming more selective (and guided) in matching specific channels to meet specific needs. In this environment, Phone seems to function as a “Confidence Channel” within a contact center space increasingly crowded with options.



Most-frequently-used channel data tells a similarly mixed story. Text-Based care fell from 42% to 34%, Voice-Based care rose to 33% from 30%, while Self-Help climbed from 13% to 21%. These movements suggest that channel behavior remains fluid and highly dependent on issue type, urgency, and confidence in resolution. For brands, the goal should be less about driving consumers toward a single preferred channel and more about making every entry point effective, easy to navigate, and easy to transition away from should the customer need be a mismatch to the channel’s capability.



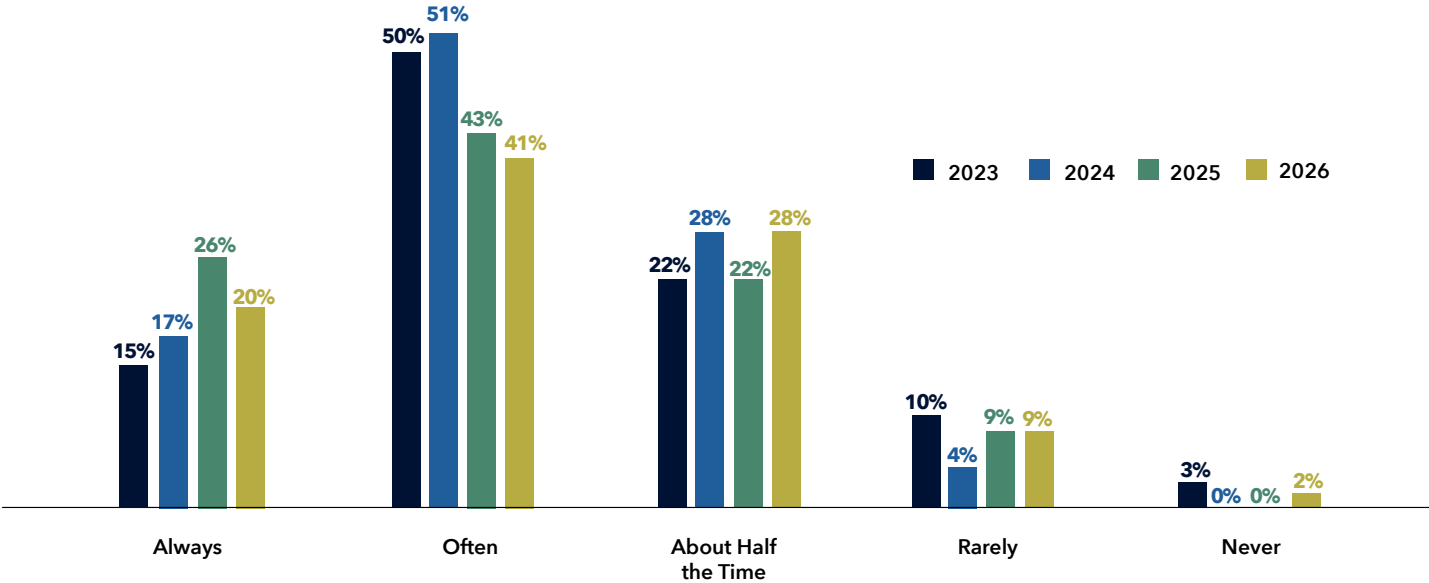


THE STATE OF CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE TODAY

FCR AND MEETING NEEDS AND EXPECTATIONS

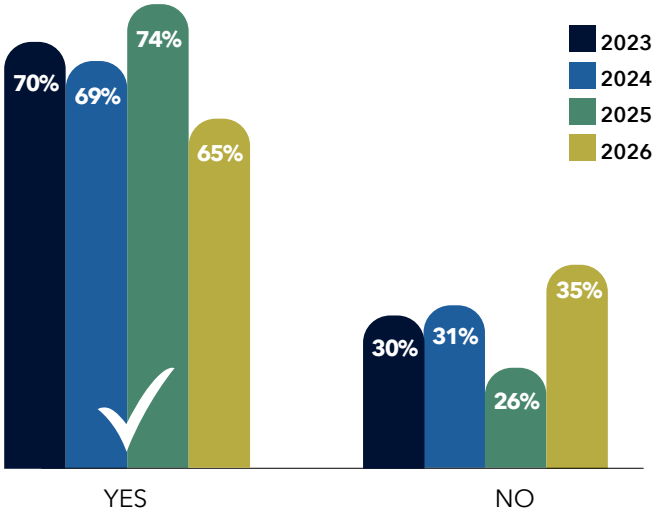
Only 61% of consumers say issues are resolved “Always” or “Often” on first contact in 2026, down from 69% in 2025. “Always” responses fell from 26% to 20% YoY, and “Often” from 43% to 41%. This is a meaningful shift within the context of years of investment in routing, knowledge, automation, and agent enablement. CX leaders should consider closely examining repeat contacts, transfers/escalations, unresolved follow-ups, channel re-entry, and channel mismatches involving issue complexity, working to ensure that First Contact Resolution (FCR) reflects the customer’s actual experience rather than an internal case-closure event.

How often are your customer care issues resolved during the first instance of contacting a company’s customer care department?



Only 65% of consumers say today’s customer care departments are meeting their service needs and expectations, down nine points YoY. The decline suggests that operational improvement alone is not keeping pace with what consumers now expect in terms of access, speed, transparency, continuity, and resolution. Elsewhere in the study, more consumers say issue resolution has become easier (page 9), yet consumers are telling us that confidence erodes when communication breaks down, live help is difficult to reach, or customers must repeat information. Leaders should consider treating expectations as a moving benchmark and move toward a deeper understanding of consumer perspectives on issues like trust, confidence, and future expectations.

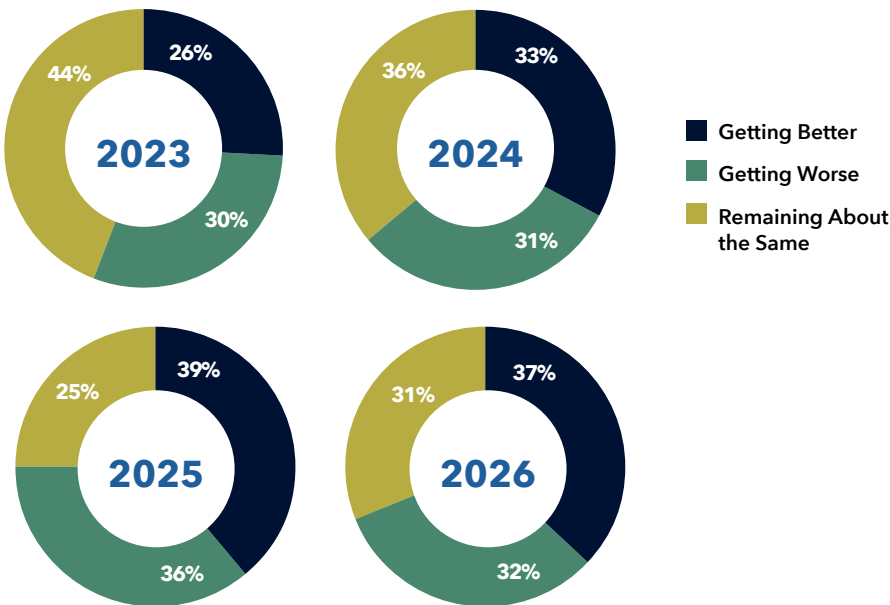
Do you feel that the customer care departments of today’s companies are generally meeting your customer service needs and expectations?





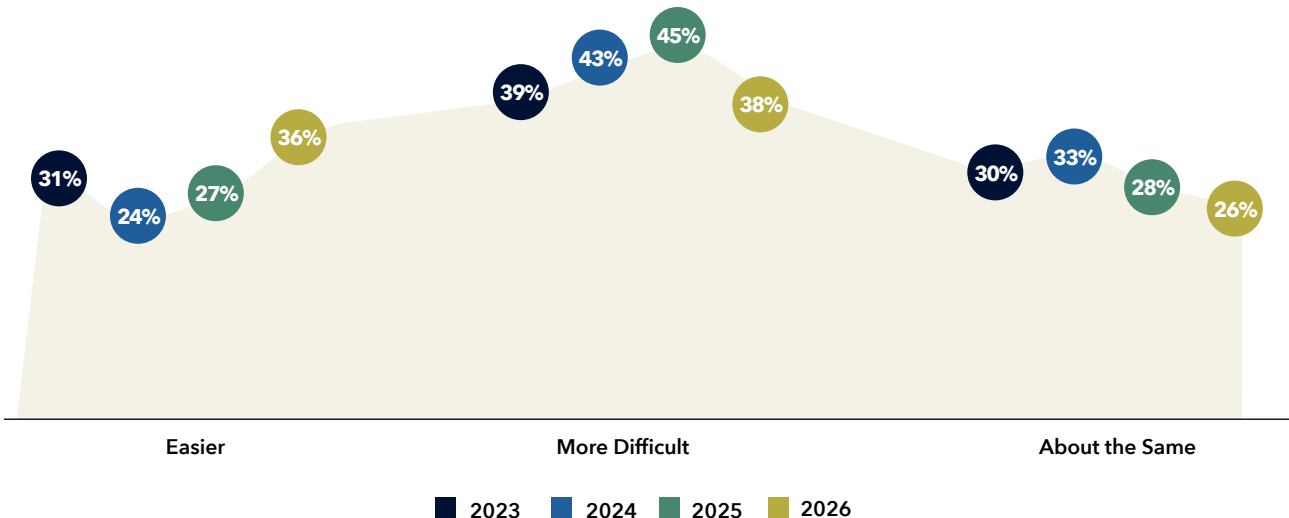
Consumer sentiment remains split on the issue of improving customer care, with 37% of respondents saying companies are getting better while 32% say worse. The absence of a clear positive majority suggests industry improvements are uneven or don't meet rising consumer expectations. That ambiguity fits the wider 2026 story when some indicators have improved, while others have slipped. For CX leaders, the lesson might be that new technology adoption or isolated KPI gains are not enough to overcome challenges at the foundational level, including processes, strategies, and core competencies.

In general, do you think that companies are getting better or worse at providing good customer care?



Thirty-six percent of consumers say resolving customer care issues has become easier, up from 27% in 2025. This is one of the more encouraging YoY movements, but it coexists with softer first-contact resolution (page 8) and heightened challenges in meeting expectations (page 8). The tension suggests some components of journeys may be improving even while the end-to-end experience remains inconsistent, or expectations are rising faster than execution. CX leaders should seek to understand where effort is lacking ease, particularly in reaching a live person (page 28), repeating information (page 50), and forced multichannel journeys (page 36).

Do you feel that resolving customer care issues with brands has gotten easier or more difficult in recent years?

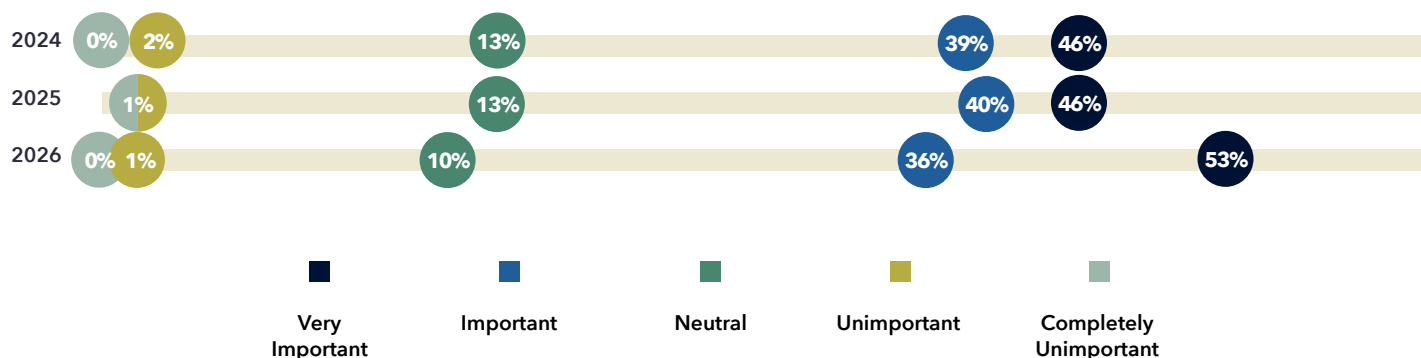


THE STATE OF CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE TODAY

IMPACT ON BRAND OPINION

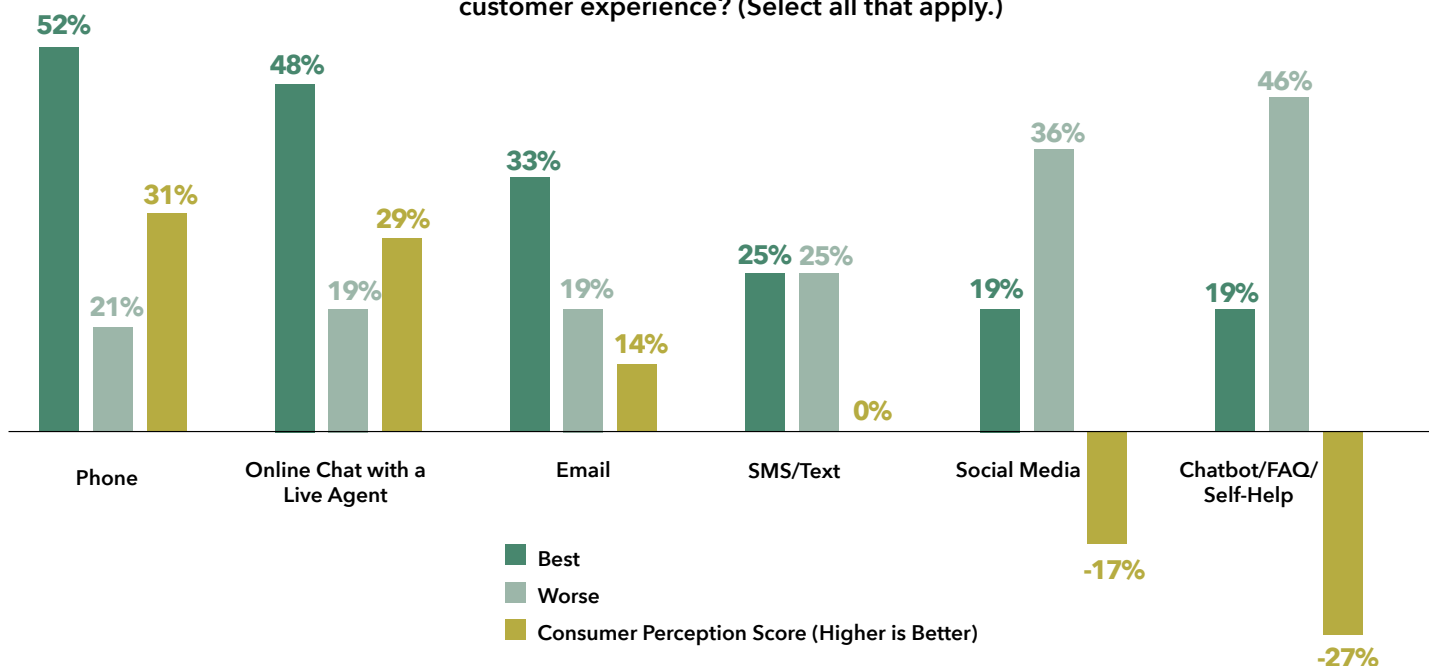
Customer care remains a major brand-shaping experience with 53% of consumers calling it “Very Important” and another 36% labeling it as “Important,” leaving only a small minority who view it as neutral or in any way unimportant. This means service performance is part of a brand’s promise rather than a downstream support activity. The finding connects directly with the new confidence data where 86% of consumers agree that great customer service increases overall brand trust (page 15) and 86% of consumers have remained loyal to a brand primarily because of excellent customer service (page 23). Understanding this linkage can help strengthen the business case for CX investments, tying operational measures such as resolution, access, and communication to trust, retention, and long-term customer value.

How important is your experience with a brand’s customer care department in shaping your opinion of that brand?



Phone and Online Chat lead on Consumer Perception Score among all channels, with Phone identified as “Best” by 52% of consumers and Online Chat by 48%. Conversely, Chatbot/FAQ/Self-Help and Social Media carry the weakest net Consumer Perception Scores. The result reinforces a critical distinction between channel availability, channel use, and experience. Self-service, for example, can successfully complete heavy volume on simple tasks, yet it is still perceived as frustrating or restrictive by some. Leaders should compare utilization with satisfaction, completion, repeat contact, abandonment, and escalation. A channel is not successful simply because customers enter it. Success often depends on whether the right customer was put in the right channel to resolve their specific issue.

Which of these customer support channels typically provides the best/worst customer experience? (Select all that apply.)





CUSTOMER CONFIDENCE, ASSURANCE, TRUST, AND LOYALTY

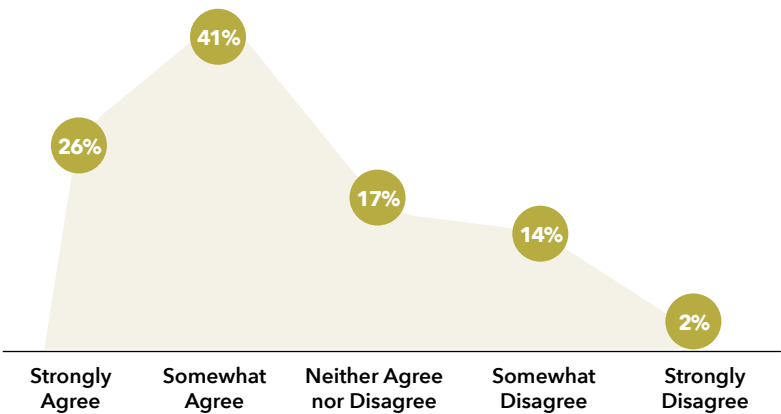


CUSTOMER CONFIDENCE, ASSURANCE, TRUST, AND LOYALTY

CONFIDENCE IN A RESOLUTION AND SATISFACTION

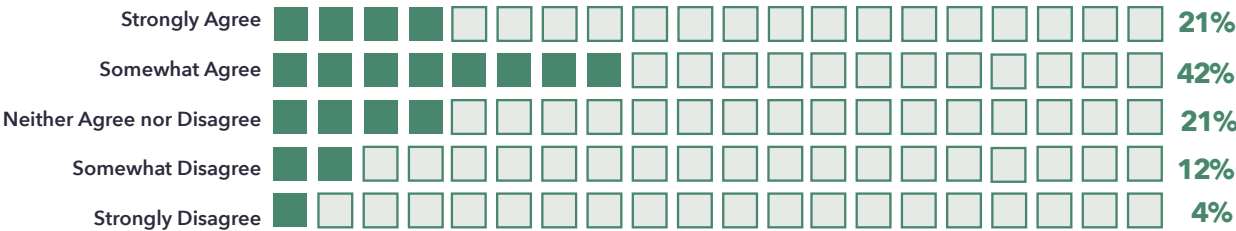
How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statement: When I contact a company's customer service department, I am confident my issue will ultimately be resolved?

Two-thirds (67%) of consumers express confidence that a company will ultimately resolve their customer service issue. This establishes an encouraging but incomplete baseline. Later findings show consumer confidence hangs on clear communication, live access, knowledgeable help, reduced effort and repetition, smooth transfers, and quick resolution times. For CX leaders, confidence can serve as an upstream measure of whether the operating model feels dependable to consumers. Tracking it alongside FCR, effort, repeat contacts, and status visibility may reveal risk before dissatisfaction becomes churn.



Sixty-three percent of consumers are confident their customer care issue will be resolved to their satisfaction, slightly below the 67% who are confident it will be resolved at all. That four-point gap, while small, matters. It's the distinction between simply closing a case and delivering a satisfactory outcome. The distinction appears again in the multichannel data (page 39), where 85% ultimately resolve their issue but only 64% are "Satisfied" or "Very Satisfied," demonstrating that outcome and experience quality are not interchangeable. CX leaders should consider defining resolution from the customer's perspective and validate whether the solution was fair, complete, and durable — not merely whether the workflow reached an internal closed status.

How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statement: When I contact a company's customer service department, I am confident that my issue will be resolved to my satisfaction?

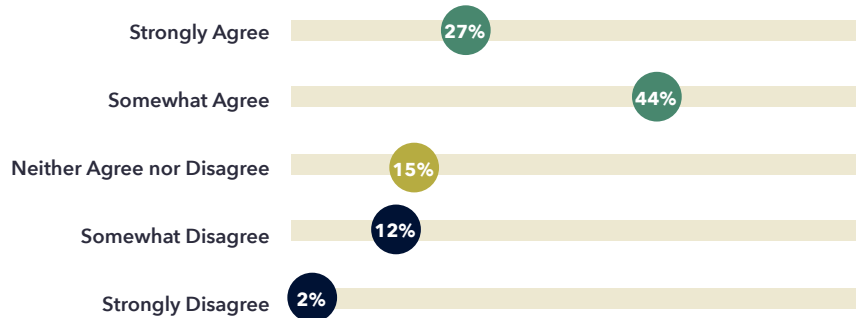


CUSTOMER CONFIDENCE, ASSURANCE, TRUST, AND LOYALTY

RECONTACT AND TRUST

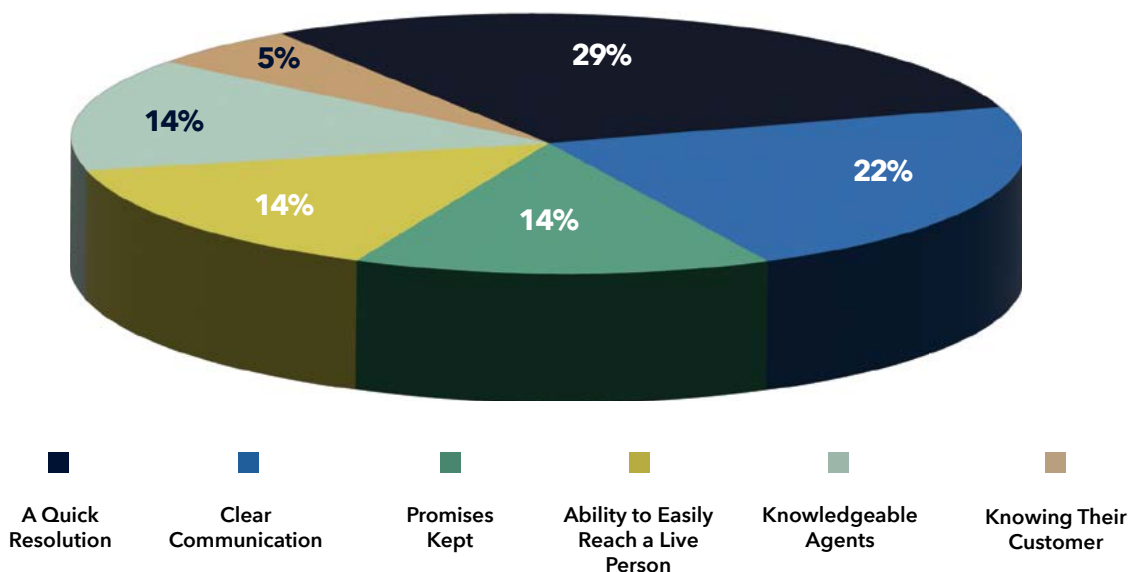
Seventy-one percent of consumers are confident that once a company says an issue has been resolved they will not need to contact the company again, while 14% lack such confidence. This is a useful test for resolution durability because repeat contact often exposes gaps hidden by traditional closure metrics. This result should be read alongside the decline in first-contact resolution and the high frustration associated with repeating information. A case can be marked complete while the customer still doubts whether the underlying problem is truly finished. Leaders should consider tracking reopen rates, repeat contacts for the same issue, and post-resolution confirmation to ensure 'resolved' means durable resolution from the customer's point of view.

How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statement: After a company tells me my issue has been resolved, I am confident I won't need to contact them again?



A Quick Resolution is the biggest driver of customer service trust at 29%, followed by Clear Communication at 22%, along with "Promises Kept," "Easy Access to a Live Person," and "Knowledgeable Agents" each at 14%, respectively. Clearly, trust is built on both outcome and process. The ranking echoes the broader confidence findings, where communication and live access are the strongest builders of confidence, and their absence the strongest destroyers of confidence. CX leaders should think about whether trust is being treated as an abstract brand attribute, and whether it can be operationalized through resolution quality, communication standards, accessible escalation, knowledge, and reliable follow-through.

What is the biggest factor that determines whether you trust a company's customer service?



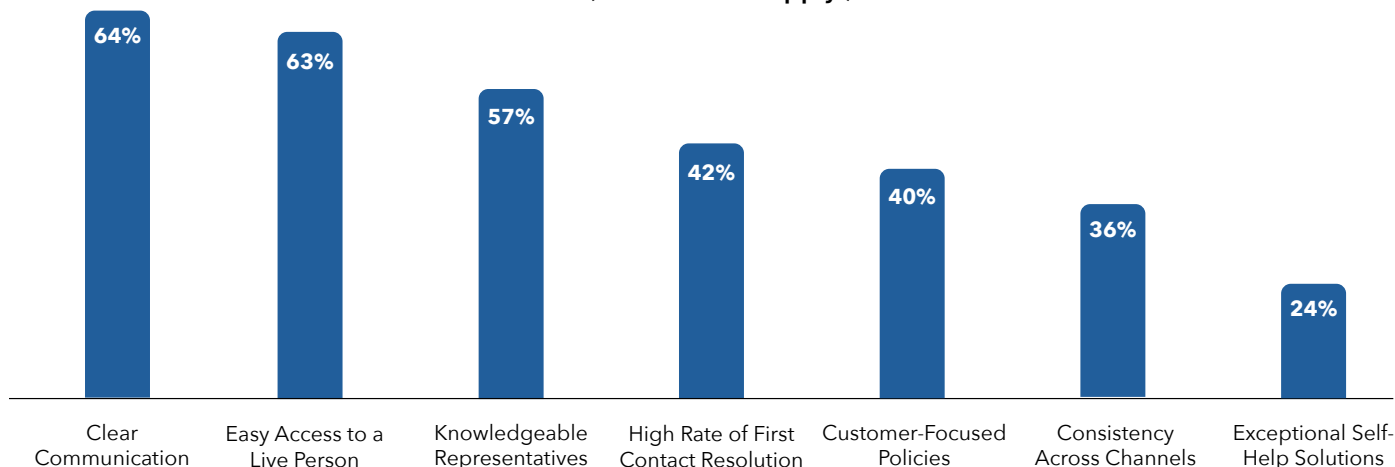


CUSTOMER CONFIDENCE, ASSURANCE, TRUST, AND LOYALTY

WHAT BUILDS AND DESTROYS CONFIDENCE

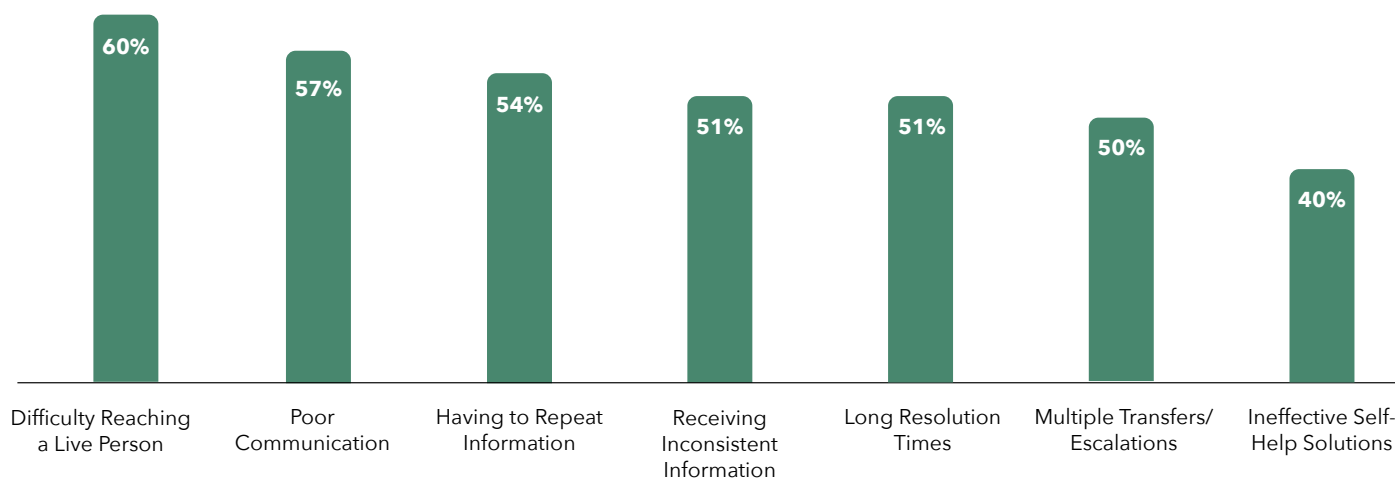
"Clear Communication" (64%), "Easy Access to a Live Person" (63%), and "Knowledgeable Representatives" (57%) are the strongest confidence builders. The pattern shows that confidence is cumulative and depends on the whole process working in concert. Notably, the leading factors are less about delight than reducing uncertainty. Customers want to understand what is happening, reach capable help, and receive a dependable answer. CX leaders might consider using these factors as a practical design checklist, auditing journeys for clarity, accessibility, competence, continuity, policy flexibility, and whether automation reliably advances the customer toward resolution.

Which of the following increases your confidence in a company's customer service?
(Select all that apply.)



In a near mirror image of the confidence-builder chart (above), results below show confidence is not lost through one specific point of failure. It erodes when the attributes of the journey make the customer feel the company lacks context, ownership, or control. For leaders, these are highly actionable failure signals. Journey analytics should identify where customers repeat themselves, lose context, wait without updates, or struggle to reach the right resource before those moments translate into distrust or churn.

Which of the following reduces your confidence in a company's customer service?
(Select all that apply.)



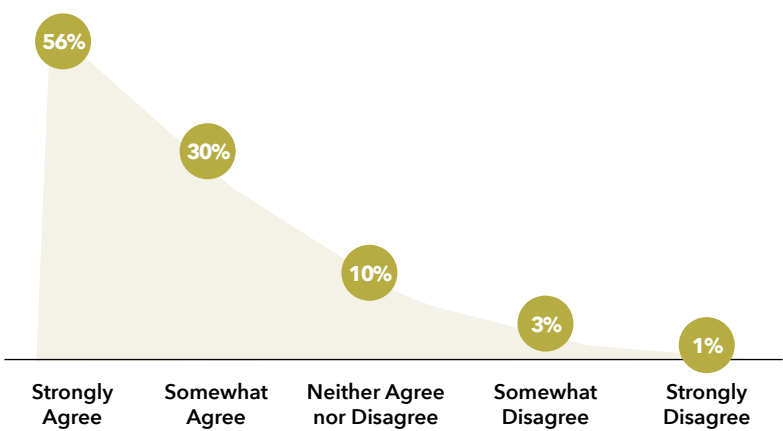


CUSTOMER CONFIDENCE, ASSURANCE, TRUST, AND LOYALTY

BRAND TRUST AND CONFIDENCE'S IMPACT ON RETENTION

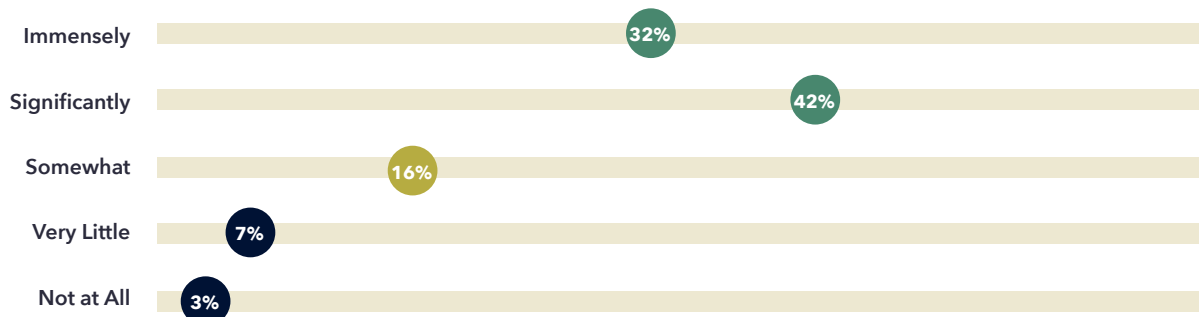
Most consumers (86%) agree that a great customer service experience increases their overall trust in a brand. This moves customer care beyond transaction-level satisfaction and establishes it as a meaningful contributor to enterprise brand trust. And it is a relationship reinforced elsewhere in this research: consistently excellent service is credited with preserving loyalty (page 23), while poor support causes customers to slow or stop doing business (page 25). For CX leaders seeking executive support, this creates a stronger investment narrative. Improvements in resolution, communication, access, and ownership are not only operational gains; they protect and strengthen the trust in the broader organization.

How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement: A great customer service experience increases my overall trust in a brand?



Confidence in customer service heavily influences consumers in their decision to continue doing business with a company, with 74% of consumers saying it influences their decision either “Immensely” (32%) or “Significantly” (42%). This directly connects service confidence to business success, establishing a strong link between CX metrics and retention. Combined with trust and loyalty findings elsewhere in this report, results suggest that consumers evaluate customer care as a form of risk protection. In other words, consumers are more willing to stay with a brand when they believe the company will take care of them if a problem arises. Leaders should consider measuring confidence alongside other critical measures like satisfaction and retention.

How much does confidence in a company’s customer service influence your decision to continue doing business with them?



The responses received to the open-ended question below can be summed up in one simple statement: Assurance comes from proof, not promises. Consumers aren't asking for grand gestures. Consumers are asking companies to be accessible, understand the problem, take ownership, communicate progress, and finish what they started. This conclusion is very strongly supported by both the responses received to the question below, as well as the wider results contained within this report. Moreover, several of the strongest comments explicitly call for knowledgeable employees who can problem-solve, depart from scripts, and make decisions without repeated escalation. This connects directly to the wider finding that consumers want agents who are empowered to do the right thing for the customer.

“CUSTOMER ASSURANCE MEANS FEELING UNDERSTOOD, PROTECTED, RESPECTED, AND GENUINELY CARED FOR BY A COMPANY. WHAT IS THE ONE THING COMPANIES COULD DO TO MAKE YOU FEEL A GREATER SENSE OF CUSTOMER ASSURANCE?”

Below are select verbatim responses to the above open-ended question that was asked of consumers that are indicative of the overall themes reflected in the responses received.

“

“They can resolve my issue the first time and send an email confirmation.”

“Quick help, live person, and quick resolution are my greatest reasons to do business again with a company.”

“Making sure your representative have both the knowledge and autonomy to resolve issues (throw the script, mostly, out the window and help reps problem solve).”

“They listen and follow through with my requests.”

“Fix my problems fast without putting me in a loop.”

“Give customer service agents the ability to make executive decisions in nuanced situations in order to resolve my issues as a customer without delay or several transfers.”

“Keep their promises. Follow up with customers.”

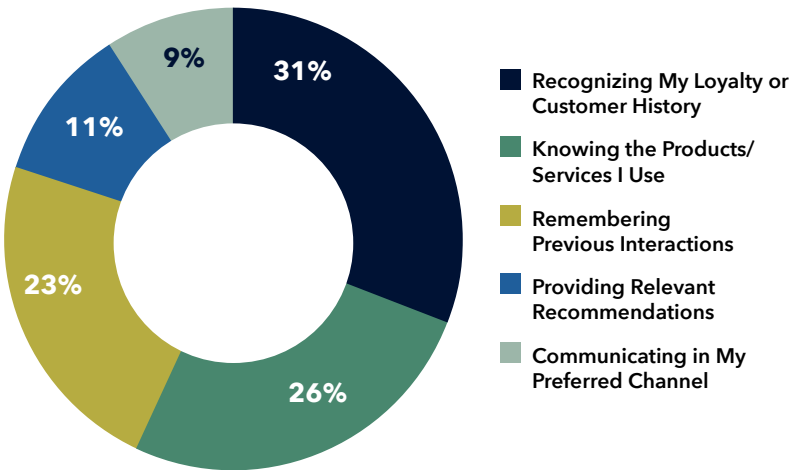
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PERSONALIZATION’S IMPACT ON TRUST AND THE VALUE OF PROACTIVE CARE

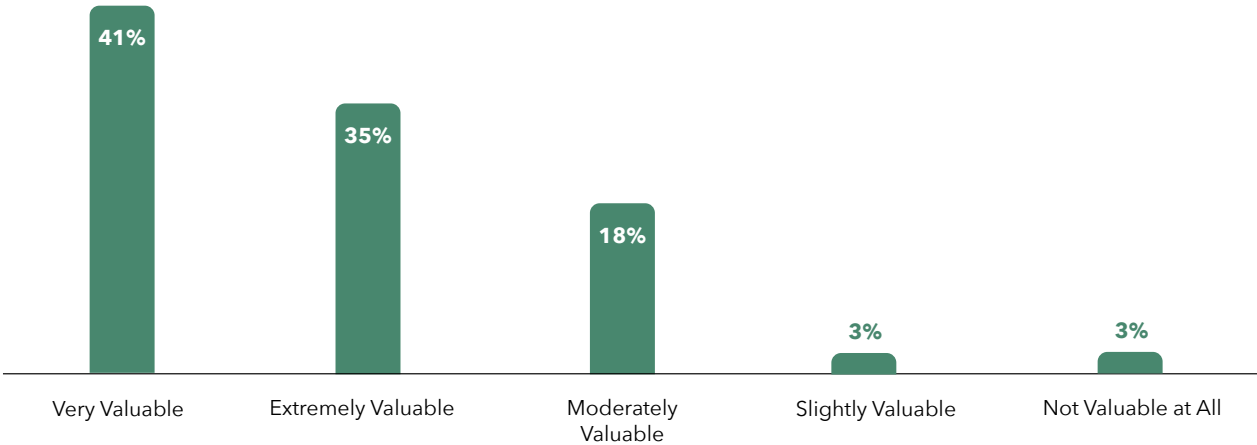
Recognizing customer loyalty or history (31%) is the leading driver of trust when it comes to personalization, followed by knowing which products or services a customer uses (26%) and remembering prior interactions (23%). Consumers appear to value personalization most when it reduces effort and proves the company knows a customer as an individual. This aligns with the Human Element findings, where most consumers value agents knowing their history (page 64), and tracks with rising consumer frustration around repeating information (page 50). The implication is to prioritize contextual personalization over promotional personalization, helping customers avoid the frustration of rebuilding context every time they seek help.

Which type of personalization most improves your trust that you’ll have a positive customer service experience?



Three-quarters (76%) of consumers indicate proactive care and communication with the companies they do business with is valuable, while only a small minority (6%) see little or no value in such activities. Proactive care shifts the service model from waiting for customer contact to reducing uncertainty before it becomes effort. That matters because the effort involved in waiting, following up, and/or finding the right place to get help are among the largest drivers of dissatisfaction. Furthermore, proactive communication is shown to increase trust for 77% of consumers (page 18), strengthening the value proposition of proactive care.

How valuable is proactive care and communication (real-time updates, fraud, alerts, preemptive notification of issues, etc.) from the companies you do business with?

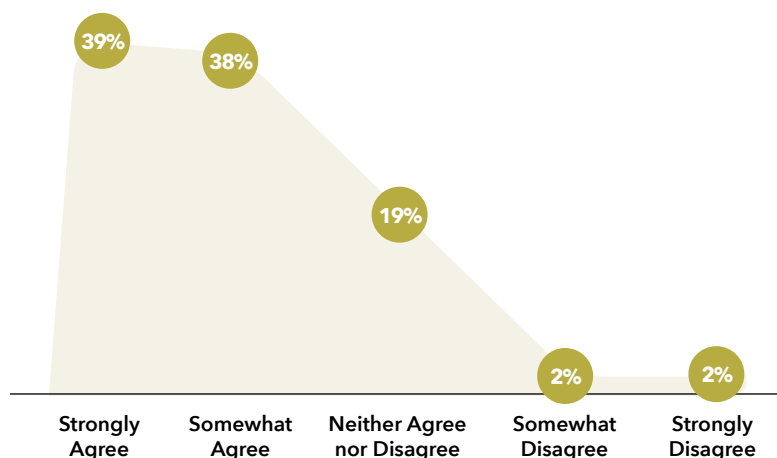




PROACTIVE CARE'S IMPACT ON TRUST AND STATUS ACCESS

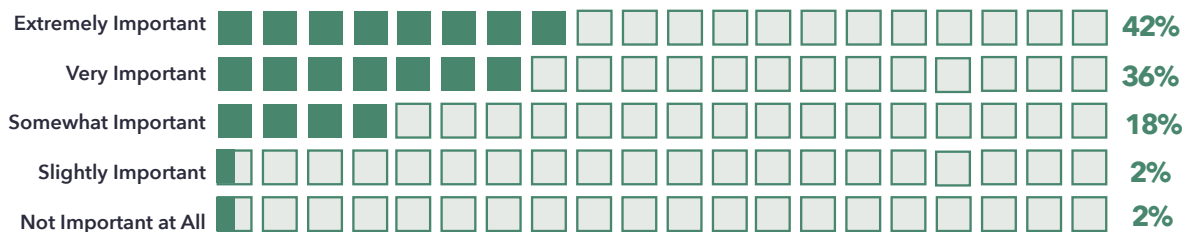
A full 77% of consumers agree that proactive communication increases their trust in a company, including 39% who "Strongly Agree." Only 4% of consumers disagree. This elevates proactive communication from a convenience feature to a trust-building capability. The result connects directly with consumer desire for regular updates, accurate timelines, and reduced effort. For leaders, the opportunity lies in making communication part of the workflow rather than an optional courtesy. Triggered updates, ownership changes, next-step confirmations, and realistic promises can all preserve confidence during long or complex cases.

How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement:
Proactive communication increases my trust in a company?



Being able to check the status of a customer service issue at any time is highly valued by consumers with 78% labeling it as "Extremely Important" or "Very Important." Consumers increasingly expect service cases to provide the same visibility they receive when tracking a package, a payment, a rideshare, or a travel itinerary. These findings help explain why silence and a lack of follow-up can sometimes create so much effort in and of itself. Uncertainty becomes a reason to contact the company again. CX leaders can potentially reduce both customer anxiety and inbound volume through self-service case tracking, milestone notifications, realistic timelines, clear ownership, and defined next actions. Assurance improves when customers can see evidence that the issue is progressing and a resolution is in sight.

How important is it to be able to check the status of your customer service issue at any time?





MAINTAINING TRUST AND CONFIDENCE THROUGHOUT THE PROCESS

In response to the open-ended question below, it's apparent that when immediate resolution is not possible, consumers feel communication becomes the bridge between uncertainty and trust. Consumers repeatedly call for proactive updates, realistic timelines, clear explanations, continued ownership and, critically, follow-through on commitments. The open-ended responses closely reinforce the quantitative findings that show 77% agree proactive communication increases trust (page 18), 78% highly value anytime issue-status visibility (page 18), and frequent updates are valued nearly as highly as speedy resolution (page 20). Importantly, consumers are not suggesting communication can replace resolution with several responses simply saying companies should "fix it." Rather, the findings suggest brands can preserve confidence during unavoidable delays by showing customers that progress is occurring, expectations are credible, and someone remains accountable until the issue is fully resolved.

"WHEN YOUR ISSUE CANNOT BE RESOLVED IMMEDIATELY, WHAT CAN A COMPANY DO TO HELP YOU MAINTAIN TRUST AND CONFIDENCE THAT YOUR ISSUE WILL BE RESOLVED?"

Below are select verbatim responses to the above open-ended question that was asked of consumers that are indicative of the overall themes reflected in the responses received.

“

"Give me an accurate timeline of when it will be resolved. And follow through."

"Maintain regular communication with me via email or phone to update me on the status of my issue or help request. Provide a temporary remedy if an immediate one cannot be reached."

"Written communication, planned follow-up with dates, and sticking to those dates."

"Commit to a resolution date and initiate follow up themselves if that date will be missed."

"A clear timeline and method of communicating (or checking) updates."

"Open line of communication about when and how the problem will be resolved. If not now, I would like updates on what they are doing to try to get a resolution."

”

On a 10-point scale of value, consumers assign speedy resolution an average value of 8.12, confirming that speed remains one of the strongest service priorities. The score is consistent with quick resolution ranking first as the single biggest factor in customer service trust (page 13). That said, speed should not be interpreted as a mandate to optimize handle time at the expense of completeness, context, or fairness. First-contact resolution softened in 2026 (page 8), and poor resolution or follow-up remains the leading trigger for lost business (page 25). CX leaders should consider optimizing time-to-resolution while protecting resolution quality, ensuring that faster does not equate to a superficial or incomplete solution.

On a 10-point scale, how much do you value a speedy resolution when working with a brand to resolve a customer care issue?



Frequent updates receive an average value of 8.03 out of 10, virtually equal to the 8.12 assigned to speedy resolution (above). That narrow gap is one of the report's clearest demonstrations that communication can be as important as the speed of an outcome. It also helps explain why proactive care, status visibility, and clear communication perform so strongly across the confidence section. Customers want the issue solved quickly, but when that is simply not possible, they want to know the company still has control. Leaders should consider treating update quality and cadence as measurable service capabilities, particularly for complex cases, escalations, outages, investigations, and other interactions where an immediate resolution is unrealistic.

On a 10-point scale, how much do you value frequent updates when working with a brand to resolve a customer care issue?

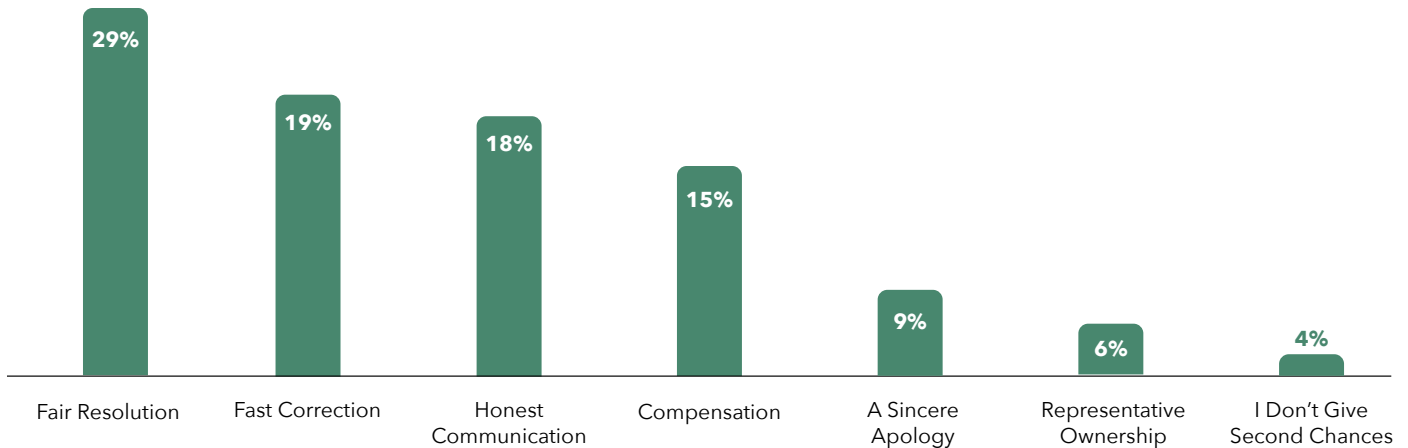


CUSTOMER CONFIDENCE, ASSURANCE, TRUST, AND LOYALTY

SECOND CHANCES AND PERMANENT DAMAGE TO TRUST

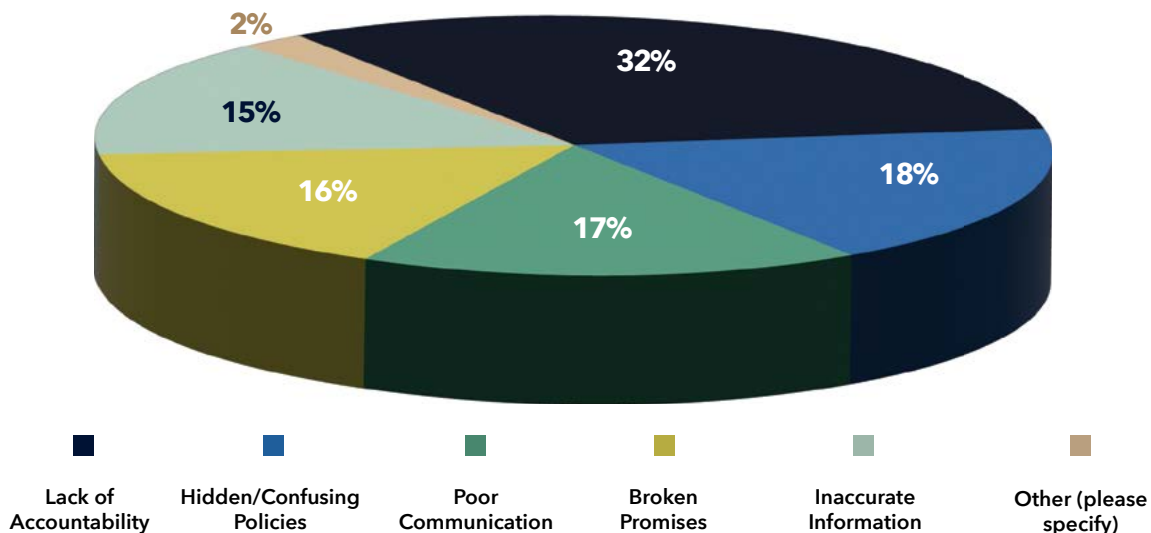
A “Fair Resolution” is the leading factor (29%) for consumers in earning a second chance after a service mistake, ahead of “Fast Correction” (19%) and “Honest Communication” (18%). Consumers are signaling that recovery begins with making the situation right, not merely acknowledging that it went wrong. This aligns with the broader confidence framework of quick resolution, clear communication, promises kept, and accountability all repeatedly surfacing as the building blocks of trust. For CX leaders, service recovery should be designed as an operating capability. Frontline employees and escalation teams need authority, clear remedy standards, and access to context so they can deliver a fair outcome quickly and communicate it credibly.

If a mistake occurs during your care experience, what most determines whether you'll give a company a second chance?



“Lack of Accountability” is the action most likely to permanently damage customer service trust among consumers at 32%, far ahead of “Hidden/Confusing Policies” (18%), “Poor Communication” (17%), “Broken Promises” (16%), and “Inaccurate Information” (15%). These results show that customers judge not only the original failure but how the organization responds to it. A mistake can often be recovered when ownership is visible. On the other hand, avoidance, sloppy handoffs, and policy-driven deflection signal that no one is accountable for an outcome. When case ownership is made explicit, employees are empowered to act, and escalations do not become responsibility transfers, trust is more easily maintained. Furthermore, accountability is especially important when automation or multiple departments are involved.

Which action is most likely to permanently damage your trust in a company's customer service?

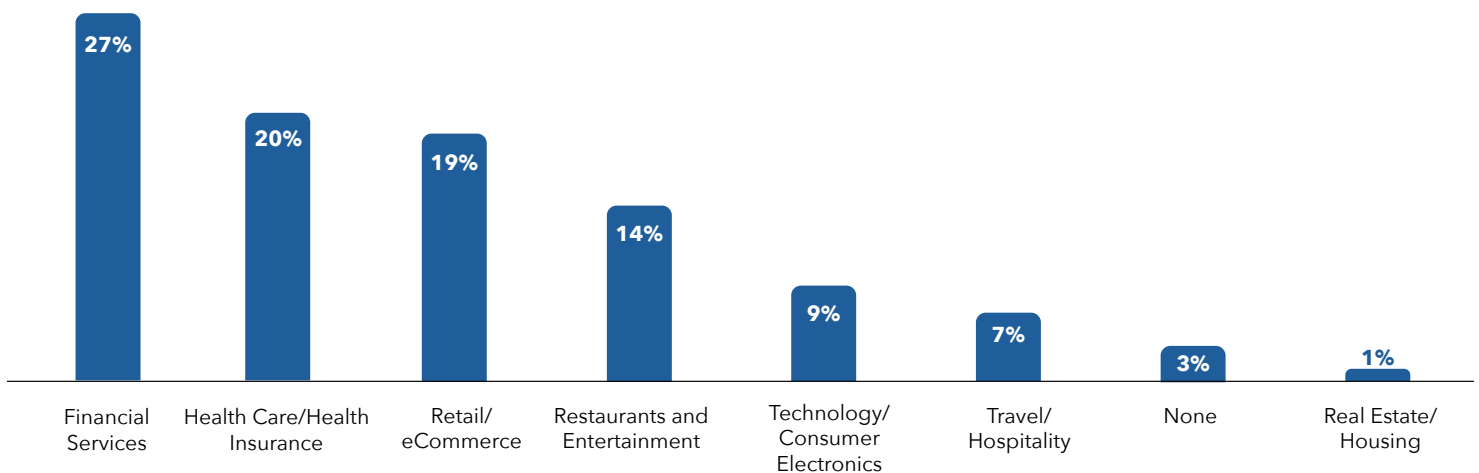




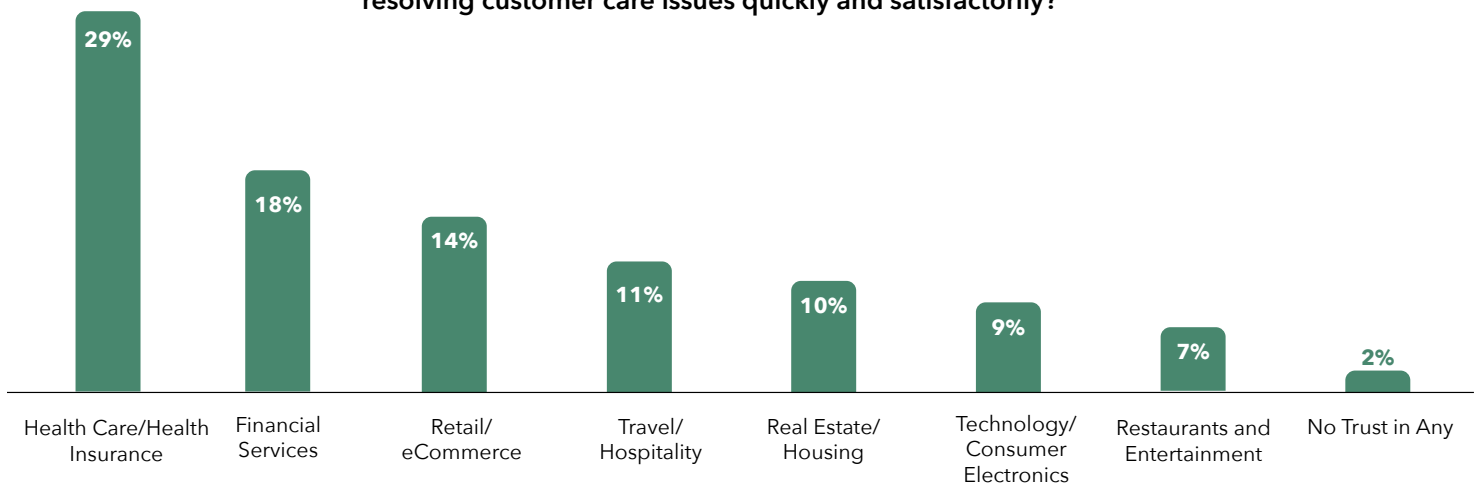
CUSTOMER CARE TRUST AND MISTRUST

Financial Services is the most frequently named trusted industry for resolving issues quickly and satisfactorily among consumers at 27%, followed by Health Care/Health Insurance (20%), Retail/eCommerce (19%), and Restaurants/Entertainment (14%). Interestingly, several of these same high-stakes industries also rank among the least trusted, with Health Care/Health Insurance leading at 29%, followed by Financial Services (18%) and Retail/eCommerce (14%). The overlap points to polarization and inconsistency rather than category reputation. When service outcomes affect health, money, travel, or other essential needs, customers may judge the experience more intensely, making confidence especially sensitive to access, accuracy, ownership, communication, and policy. The takeaway is to look beyond aggregate trust scores and examine trust more closely by journey and issue type, prioritizing the moments where inconsistent execution carries the greatest customer consequence.

Which business vertical do you have the most trust in when it comes to resolving customer care issues quickly and satisfactorily?



Which business vertical do you have the least trust in when it comes to resolving customer care issues quickly and satisfactorily?

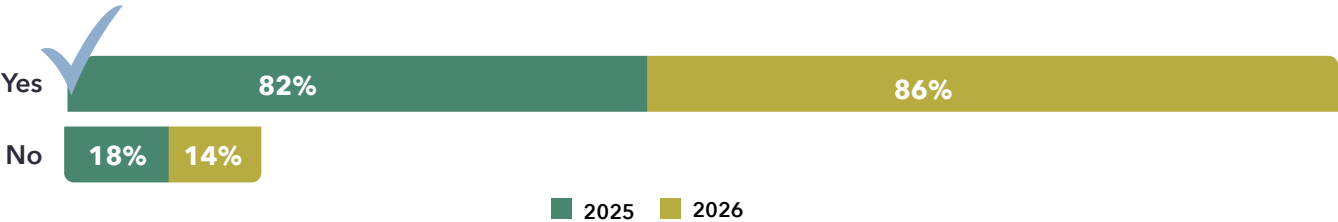




IMPACT OF CONSISTENTLY EXCELLENT CARE ON LOYALTY

Eighty-six percent of consumers say they have stayed loyal to a company primarily because of consistently excellent customer service even when other options were available, up from 82% in 2025. This is strong evidence that service quality is directly tied to business success. The finding reinforces the new confidence metrics that suggest customers stay when they believe the organization will resolve issues, communicate clearly, and take ownership, while poor experiences trigger churn. For CX leaders, loyalty should not be treated solely as a reflection of product or service satisfaction. Consistent service execution, effective recovery, and confidence in future support can all reduce switching risk and strengthen the return on investments in people, process, data, and technology.

Have you ever stayed loyal to a company primarily because of consistently excellent customer service, even when other options were available?

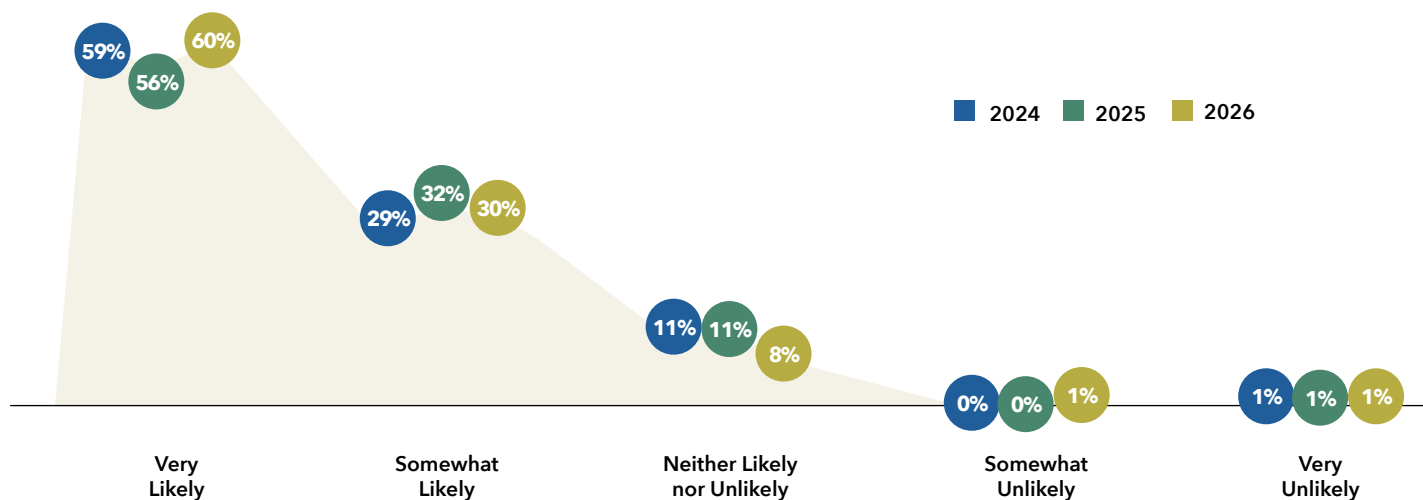


CUSTOMER CONFIDENCE, ASSURANCE, TRUST, AND LOYALTY

IMPACT OF POSITIVE CARE ON LOYALTY

Ninety percent of consumers say a positive customer care experience is “Very Likely” or “Somewhat Likely” to increase their loyalty. This aligns with the 86% brand-trust finding (page 15) and the 74% who say service confidence influences whether they continue doing business (page 15). Leaders can use these connections to translate operational performance into a clearer enterprise narrative, one that states improving resolution, ease, communication, access, and recovery does more than protect CSAT — it can strengthen retention and the customer’s willingness to choose the brand again.

How likely is it that a positive customer care experience will increase your loyalty as a customer?



A positive care experience equates to loyalty. What strategies have been most effective in turning great service experiences into long-term customer relationships?

“At Fellers, we’re finding that loyalty isn’t won in the big moments — it’s won in the recovery moments. Anyone can deliver a good experience when nothing goes wrong. The strategies that actually move the loyalty needle show up when something does.

- 1. Close the loop, every time.** When a customer raises an issue, we’re treating resolution as step one and follow-up as step two. A quick check-in after the fix — “did this actually solve it for you?” — is proving to do more for trust than the original fix itself.
- 2. Give agents room to own the outcome.** We’re moving away from rigid scripts toward empowering frontline reps to make the call that’s right for the customer in front of them. Early on, it’s clear customers remember being treated like a person, not a ticket.
- 3. Measure relationships, not just resolutions.** First-contact resolution tells you if you solved the problem. It doesn’t tell you if you earned the next order. We’re starting to pair CX metrics with account-level retention data to see the real connection between service quality and lifetime value.



The data backs this up — 60% of consumers tell us a positive care experience is “Very Likely” to increase their loyalty. Coming into this a few months in, what’s striking me most is that the companies winning long-term aren’t the ones avoiding friction; they’re the ones turning friction into proof they can be trusted.

FELLERS

John McCahan
Chief Customer Experience Officer



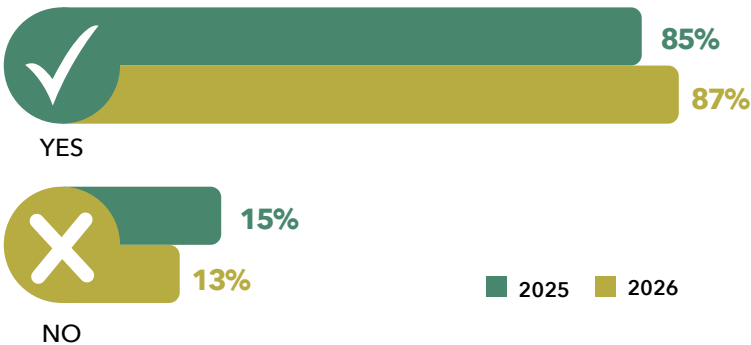


CUSTOMER CONFIDENCE, ASSURANCE, TRUST, AND LOYALTY

LOSS OF BUSINESS DUE TO POOR CARE

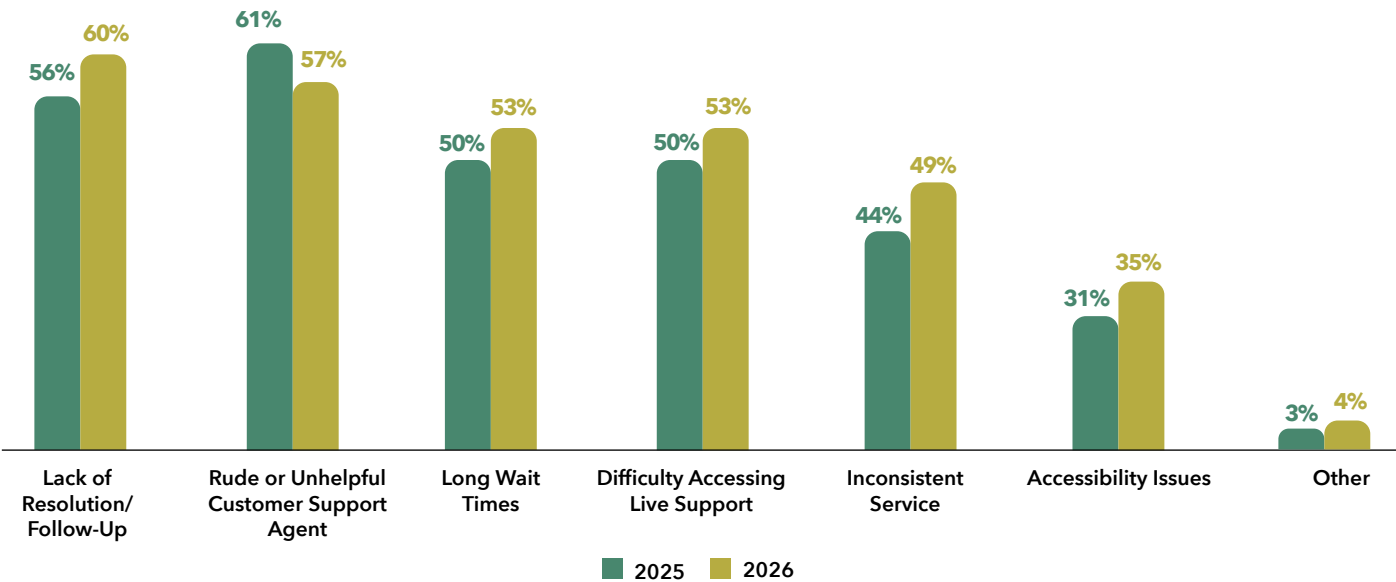
Have you ever stopped or slowed doing business with a company due to a poor customer support experience?

Eighty-seven percent of consumers indicate they have stopped or slowed doing business with a company because of a poor customer support experience. The finding shows the downside of poor service experience is as commercially important as the loyalty upside of great service (page 23). CX leaders should consider how they might track churn and reduced spend following service failures where possible, particularly after repeat contacts, escalations, long waits, and unresolved cases. Connecting service events to commercial behavior can make the cost of poor CX more understandable to executive leadership.



“Lack of Resolution/ Follow-Up” (60%) and “Rude or Unhelpful” agents (57%) are the two major contributors leading to consumers stopping or slowing business with companies, but several other factors heavily contribute to churn. The breadth of these triggers shows risk is created across people, process, policy, and channel design. Leaders should think about identifying which failure modes are most common in their own high-value journeys and prioritize root-cause reduction. Recovery programs can help, but preventing these predictable breakdowns is likely to create greater loyalty and lower cost.

What type of customer support experience could or would lead you to stop or slow your business with a company? (Select all that apply.)

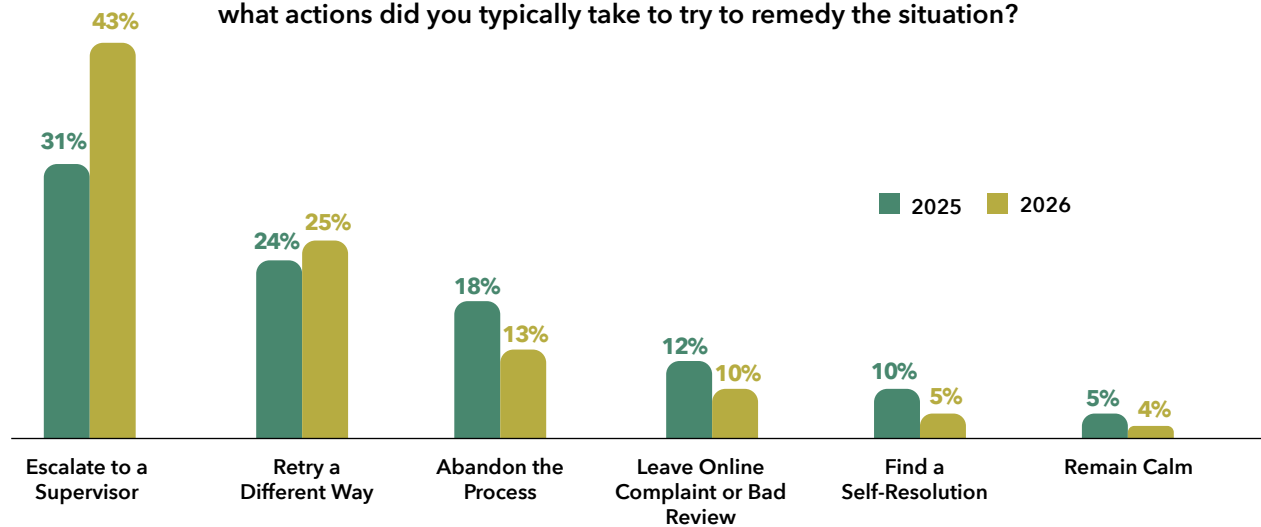


CUSTOMER CONFIDENCE, ASSURANCE, TRUST, AND LOYALTY

ACTIONS TO REMEDY AND USE OF PERSONAL DATA

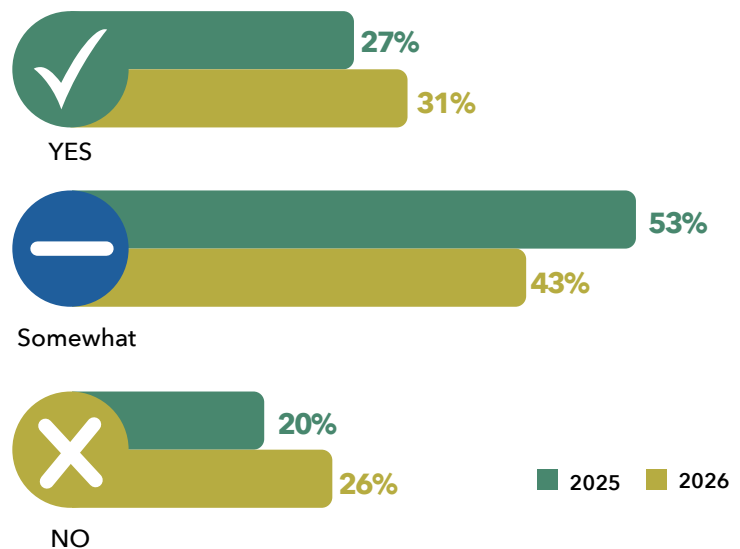
When asked what actions consumers take to remedy a situation, “Escalation to a Supervisor” rose sharply to 43% in 2026, up from 31% in 2025. Consumers appear increasingly willing to push for ownership rather than simply accept a failed first path. That behavior fits the broader decline in first-contact resolution (page 8) and the importance consumers place on accountability, live access, and fair outcomes (page 21). For CX leaders, rising escalation can be a diagnostic signal rather than merely a workload problem. Analyzing why customers seek supervisors (things like policy constraints, knowledge gaps, inadequate authority, channel failure, or repeated contact) and addressing those causes upstream can be a boon for boosting CSAT scores. Furthermore, better frontline empowerment may prevent escalation while improving confidence and resolution.

When dealing with a poor customer service experience, what actions did you typically take to remedy the situation?



Are companies transparent about how your personal data is collected and used during your customer interactions?

Only 31% of consumers say companies are transparent about how personal data is collected and used during customer interactions. This creates an interesting tension as personalization and AI depend on broader access to customer history, behavior, and context. Consumers clearly value companies remembering them (page 17), yet confidence can erode if data use feels opaque or uncontrolled. CX leaders should consider pairing personalization with clearly defined governance. When companies explain why information is being used, minimize unnecessary collection, and give customers meaningful control, trust in personalization (and the collection of personal data) grows.



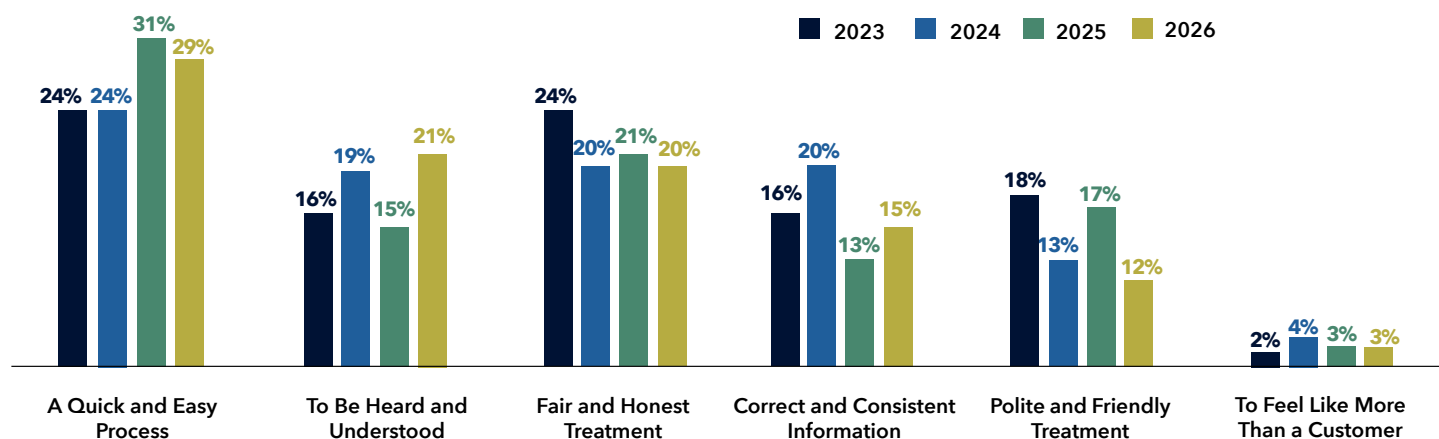


CUSTOMER EXPECTATIONS AND PRIORITIES

WHAT'S MOST IMPORTANT AND DRIVERS OF FRUSTRATION

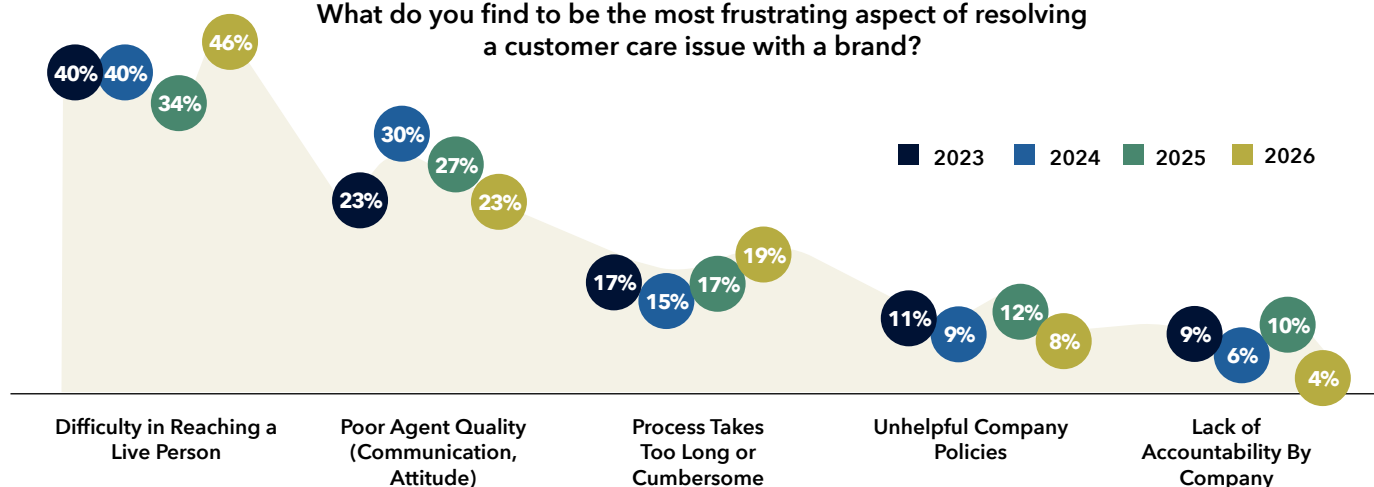
Assuming a satisfactory resolution, “A Quick and Easy Process” (29%) is most important to consumers when resolving a customer care issue, followed by “To Be Heard and Understood” (21%), and “Fair and Honest Treatment” (20%). These results show consumers define great care through a blend of effort, understanding, fairness, and accuracy rather than any single soft skill. This connects closely with the Human Element findings, where clarity and knowledge outrank friendliness, and with confidence data emphasizing communication and access. CX leaders should consider the potential of designing experiences around competence without friction. In other words, solve efficiently, show understanding, provide consistent information, and treat customers fairly throughout the journey.

Aside from getting your issue resolved satisfactorily, what is most important when dealing with a large brand to resolve a customer care issue?



“Difficulty in Reaching a Live Person” jumped to 46% in 2026, up from 34% in 2025, making it the leading frustration by a wide margin. “Poor Agent Quality” follows at 23% alongside “Cumbersome Processes” at 19%. Consumer acceptance of AI and self-service is simultaneously increasing, indicating that consumers are not necessarily rejecting automation itself — they are reacting negatively when automation becomes an access barrier or when complexity requires a human path that is difficult to reach. This calls for an evaluation of strategies for handling “trapped customer” moments. Brands should ask themselves what they can do to make escalation easier based on intent, failure signals, emotion, and issue complexity rather than forcing customers to exhaust every automated option before granting access to a human agent.

What do you find to be the most frustrating aspect of resolving a customer care issue with a brand?

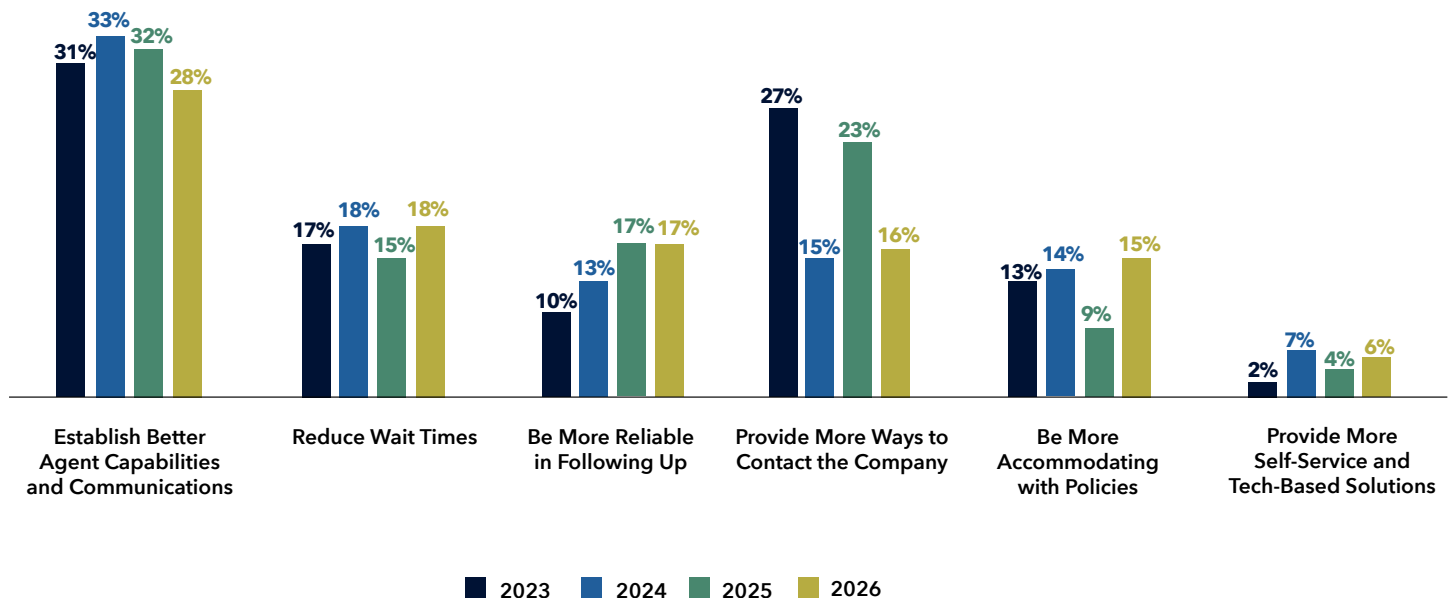




MAKING RESOLUTIONS AS EASY AS POSSIBLE

“Better Agent Capabilities and Communications” remains the leading improvement consumers want at 28%, while “Reduced Wait Times” and “Be More Reliable in Following Up” each draw meaningful support at 18% and 17%, respectively. These results align with the report’s largest effort drivers: waiting, finding help, repetition, and difficulty following up. Combined with consumers’ preference for knowledgeable, context-aware agents, CX leaders should consider targeting the friction between channels and the teams that provide live support. Ease comes with giving employees better knowledge and authority, reducing avoidable waits, carrying context forward, following up reliably, and simplifying policies that turn otherwise solvable issues into prolonged journeys.

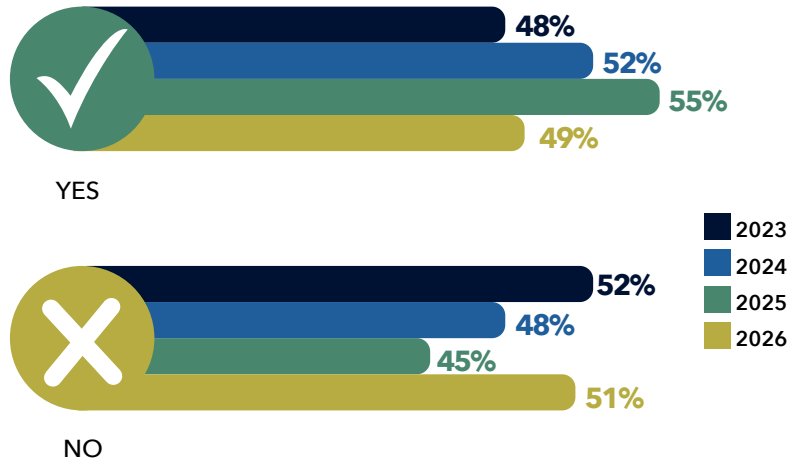
What can brands do differently to make the resolution process as easy as possible?



PREFERENCE CHANGES AND CAUSES OF CHANGE

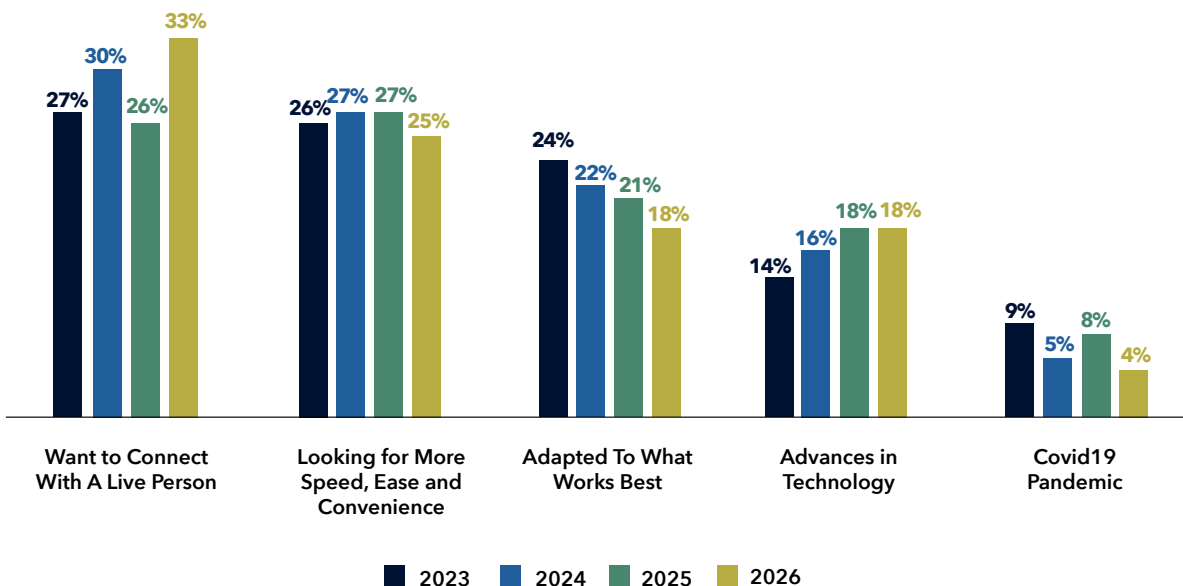
Roughly half (49%) of consumers say their preferred customer care contact method has changed in recent years, down from 55% in 2023. This moderation suggests channel preferences may be stabilizing after several years of rapid digital adoption, but it does not imply customers have settled on one universal channel. As shown elsewhere, simple issues produce a balanced mix across chat, phone, and email, while complex issues strongly favor Phone (page 32). CX leaders might consider understanding why customers prefer a channel for a specific job rather than pouring resources into chasing a single 'channel of the future.' Intent, urgency, confidence, and complexity remain the strongest determinants when it comes to channel preference.

Has your preferred contact method changed in recent years?



"Want to Connect with a Live Person" is once again the leading cause for changing channel preferences among consumers, at 33% — up from 26% in 2023. "More Speed, Ease, and Convenience" follows at 25%. This helps explain the rebound in Phone use (page 7) and the rising frustration around live access. Consumers are not abandoning digital care, but they appear increasingly sensitive to whether a channel can deliver confidence and conversational flexibility when the issue is uncertain or complex. Leaders should treat live access as part of digital design, using smart routing and escalation to preserve choice rather than forcing their customers into an automated track they might not prefer.

What caused your preferred contact method to change?



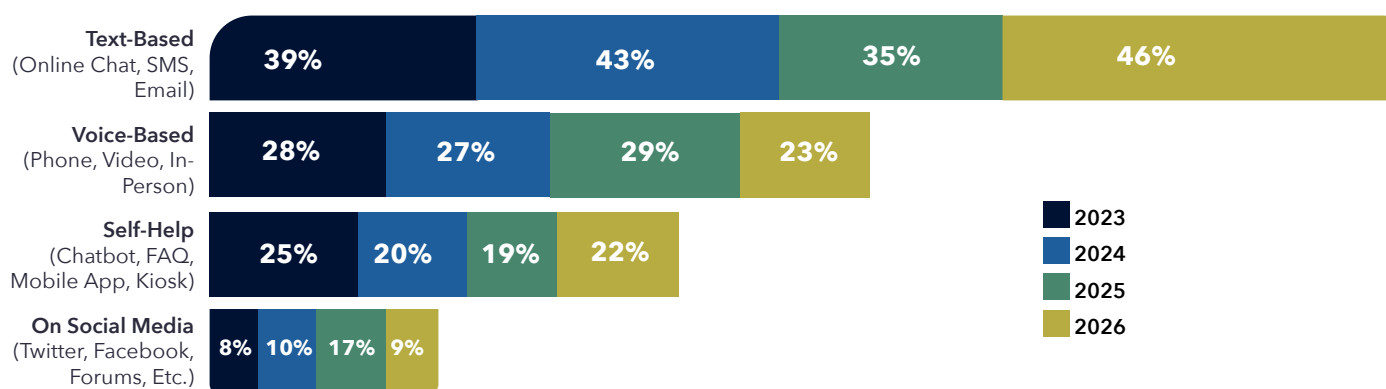
CUSTOMER EXPECTATIONS AND PRIORITIES

CHANNEL PREFERENCE AND FACTORS

DETERMINING PREFERENCE

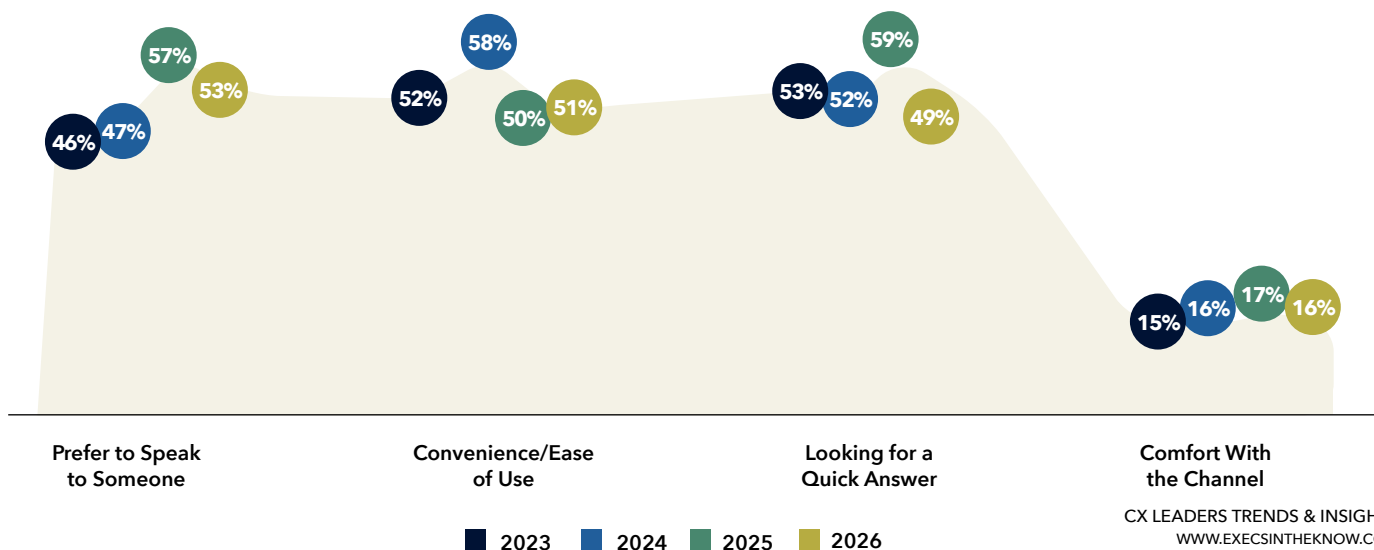
When consumers are told their issue will be resolved regardless of channel, Text-Based care is the clear leader at 46%, up from 35% in 2025. Simultaneously, Voice fell to 23% (down six points), Self-Help hit 22%, and Social Media dropped to 9% (down eight points YoY). By removing uncertainty from the equation, channel preference dramatically diverges from use (page 7), suggesting many consumers choose Phone not because conversation is inherently preferred, but because they associate it with a greater chance of successful resolution. The takeaway: digital adoption depends on earned resolution confidence. Improve digital containment, accuracy, continuity, and escalation, and customers will choose lower-cost text or self-service channels without being pushed there. But these channels must be easy to use and effective to move from an option to a preference.

If you knew your customer care issue would be resolved regardless of contact channel, which would be your preferred contact method?



“Prefer to Speak to Someone” (53%), “Convenience/Ease of Use” (51%), and “Looking for a Quick Answer” (49%) are all nearly equal drivers of channel preference, while “Comfort with the Channel” is much less influential at 16%. These results, which have been incredibly consistent over the years, show exactly how pragmatic consumers are. Consumer choice is based on the expected results and the effort required, and not much else. This reinforces the report’s broader story that confidence, access, speed, and issue type determine channel behavior. CX leaders should consider segmenting channel strategy by customer intent and desired outcome.

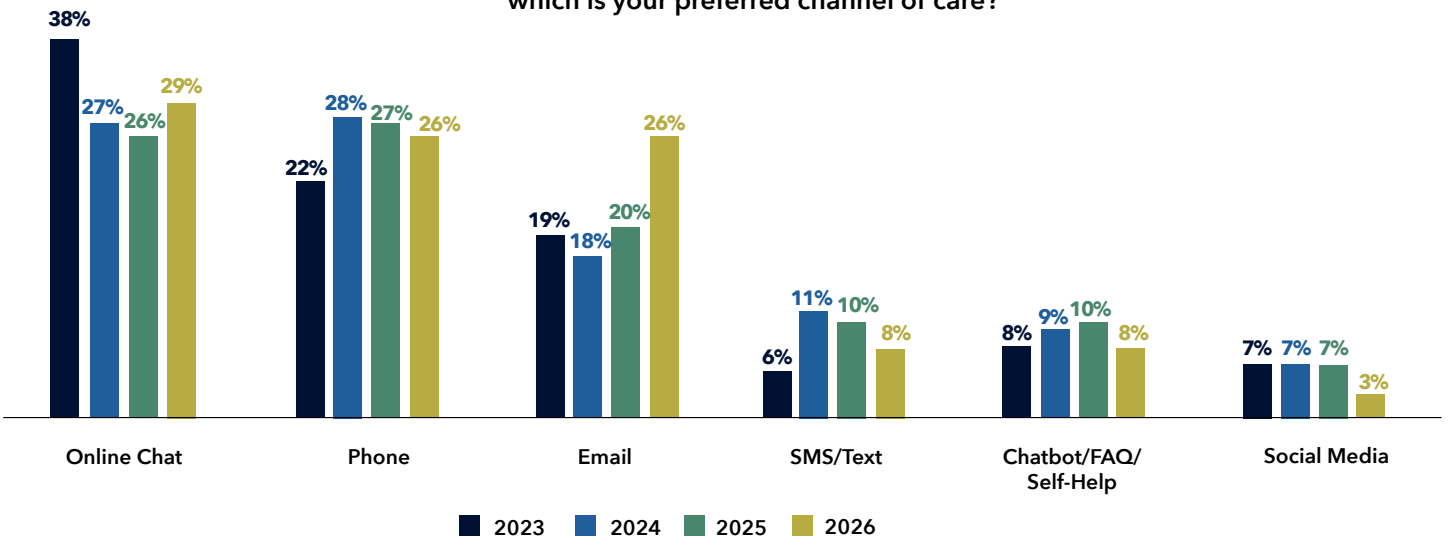
What are the biggest factors in determining your preferred channel of care? (Select all that apply)



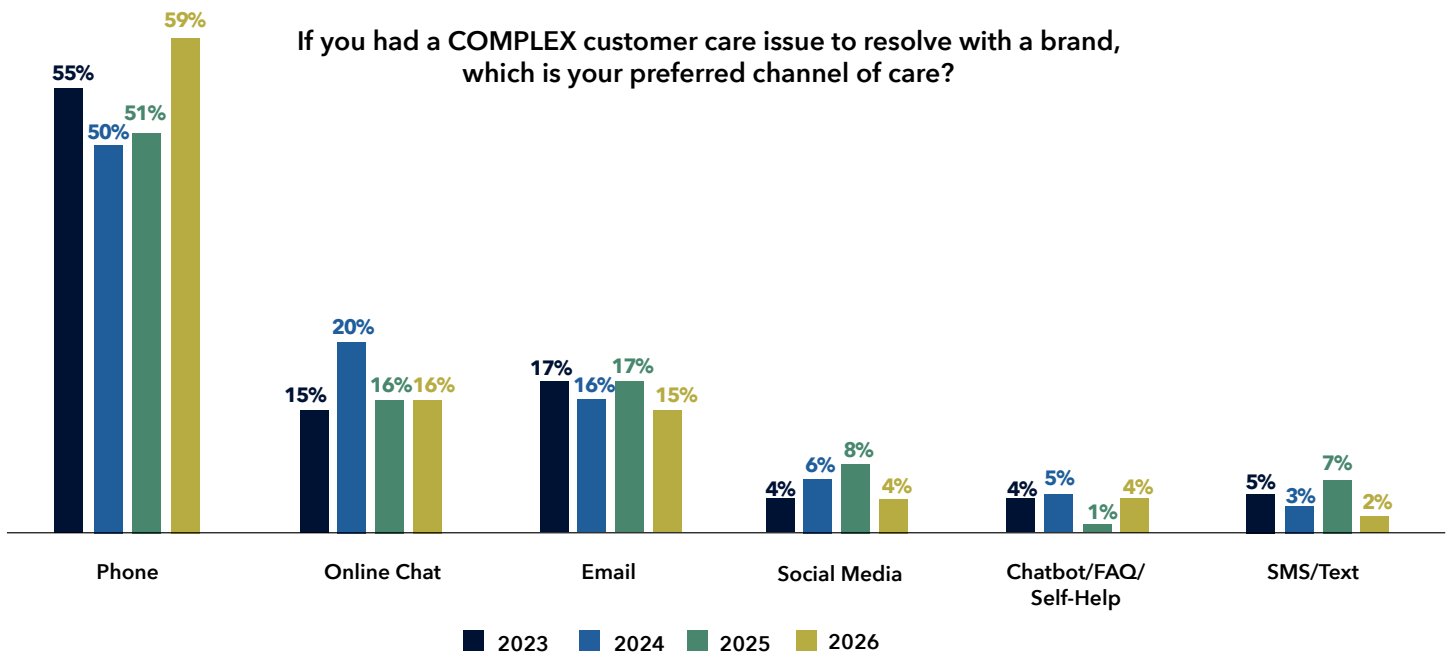
PREFERRED CHANNEL BASED ON ISSUE COMPLEXITY

As demonstrated in past years, channel preference shifts dramatically with issue complexity. For simple needs, consumer preferences are evenly spread across Online Chat (29%), Phone (26%), and Email (26%), suggesting routine work can be handled effectively through a range of digital and assisted options. On the other hand, Phone dominates at 59% for complex issues, far ahead of Online Chat (16%) and Email (15%). The contrast reinforces a broader theme in the research: consumers are not inherently loyal to one channel, but they are highly sensitive to whether a channel can deliver confidence and resolution for the task at hand. These results beg for intent- and complexity-based routing. Delivering on expectations becomes easier when brands deploy a strategy of using automation to streamline routine interactions while making richer human support easy to access when judgment, reassurance, context, and flexibility matter most.

If you had a **SIMPLE**, transactional customer care issue to resolve with a brand, which is your preferred channel of care?



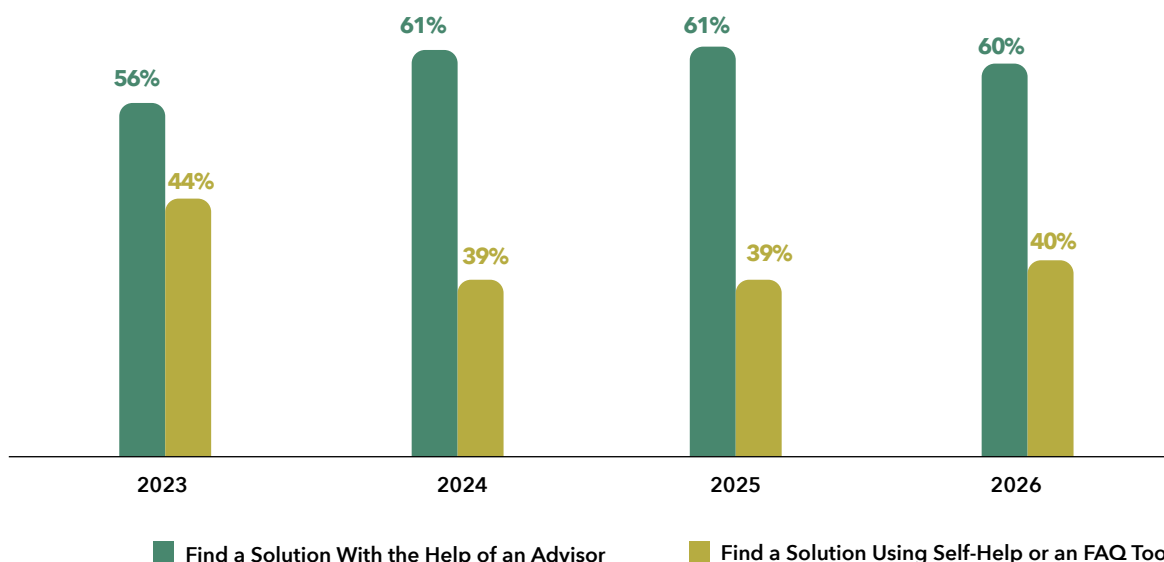
If you had a **COMPLEX** customer care issue to resolve with a brand, which is your preferred channel of care?



AGENT VERSUS SELF-HELP AND TEXT VERSUS CALL

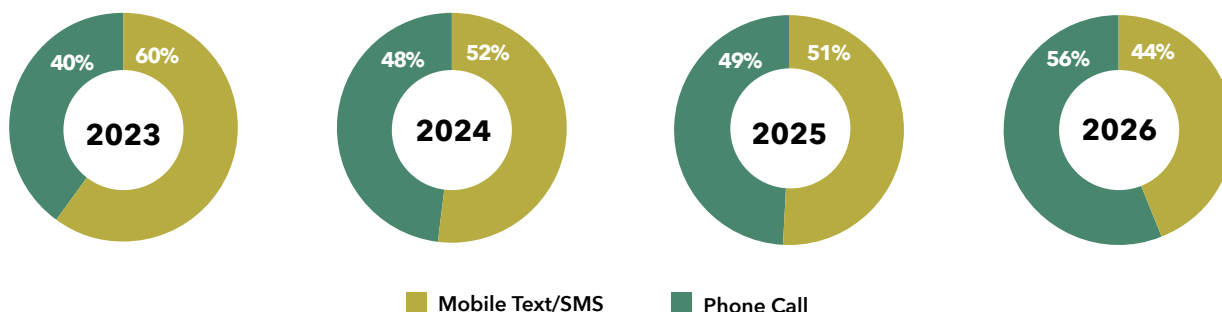
Even when consumers are assured the issue will be resolved, 60% prefer finding a solution with the help of an advisor versus 40% who prefer self-help, a split that has remained remarkably stable. The persistence of this preference suggests human assistance provides value beyond resolution alone. Given the fact that self-service completion rates are strong (page 44) and future intent is growing, this result is clearly not a rejection of automation. Leaders should treat self-service as an option customers willingly choose for the right intents, while preserving an accessible human layer when context, emotion, or complexity makes assistance more valuable.

If you knew your customer care issue would be resolved, which scenario sounds more appealing to you?



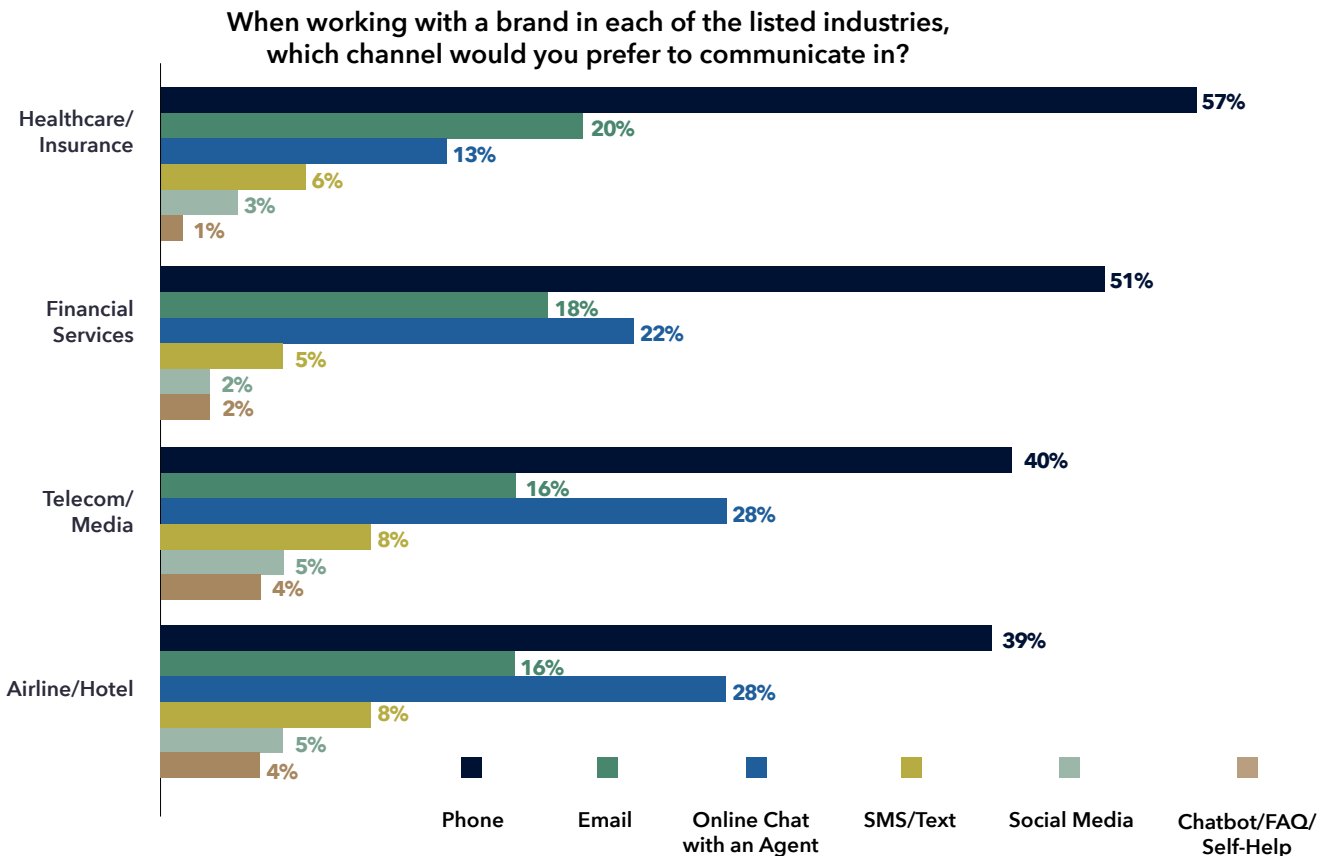
When comparing consumer preference between Text with Call (and assuming an easy, satisfactory resolution), Phone leads 56% to 44% in 2026, continuing a pattern seen in both 2024 and 2025. The shift adds another signal that Voice has sustained its relevance, even as consumers continue using a wider range of digital channels. Combined with the 59% preference for Phone on complex issues (page 32) and the increase in consumers seeking live access, results suggest confidence and responsiveness may currently outweigh the convenience of asynchronous text for many interactions. Leaders should consider continuing investments in digital channels, but not at the expense of high-quality Voice experiences or easy movement between self-help and live assistance.

If you knew your issue would be resolved easily and to your satisfaction, which method would you prefer when interacting with a brand's customer care team?



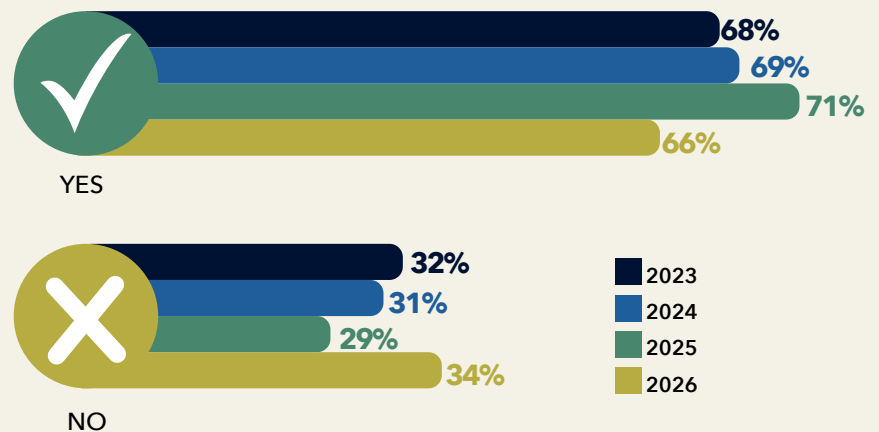
CHANNEL PREFERENCE BY INDUSTRY AND PAYING FOR BETTER SERVICE

Phone strongly leads channel preferences in every industry measured, reaching 57% in Health Care/Health Insurance and 51% in Financial Services, with smaller but still clear leads in Telecom/Media and Airline/Hotel. The stronger preference for Phone in high-stakes categories reinforces the role of complexity, risk, and reassurance in channel choice. Consumers may tolerate more automation for routine retail or telecom needs, but issues related to money and health often require richer dialogue or increased accountability. CX leaders should consider the impact of forcing customers into channels, especially when accounting for the consequence of failure, issue complexity, customer vulnerability, and the need for real-time clarification.



Most consumers (66%) would be willing to pay a little more for a product or service if it meant receiving world-class customer support, down from 71% in 2025. The finding suggests excellent service can contribute to perceived value and premium brand positioning, not only retention. It is consistent with the strong links between care, trust, confidence, and loyalty seen elsewhere in this report. This does not mean simply charging more for service. It means real investments in access, resolution, communication, and agent empowerment, all of which can differentiate a service experience in verticals where the products/services themselves are increasingly difficult to distinguish.

Would you be willing to pay a little more for a product or service if it meant you'd get a world-class customer care support?

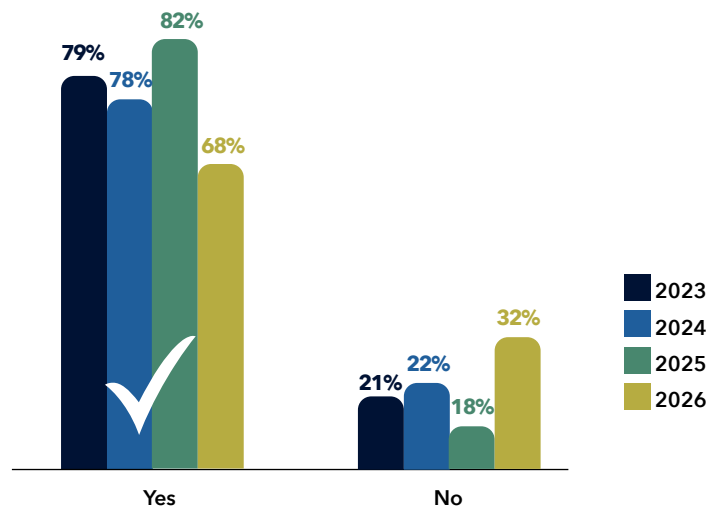




THE **MULTICHANNEL JOURNEY**

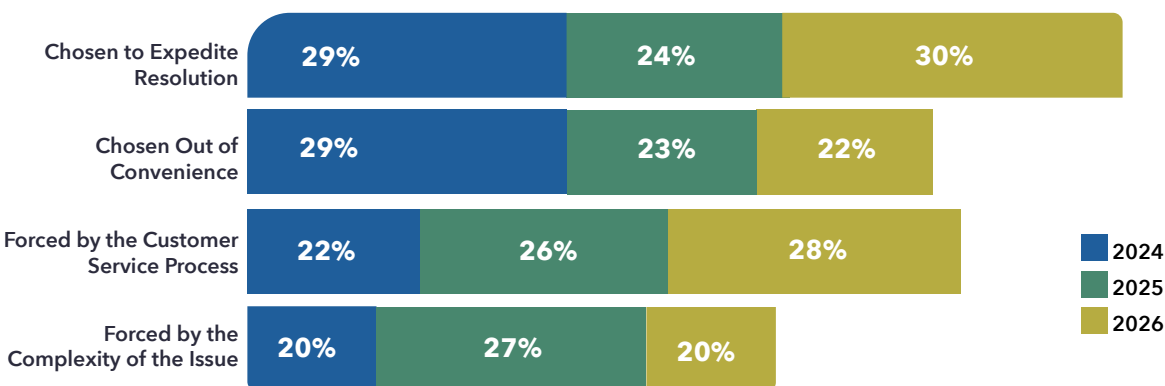
Sixty-eight percent of consumers indicated they had used multiple channels to resolve a single customer care issue in the prior 12 months, down sharply from 82% in 2025. The decline is striking, but it should not be assumed that single-channel containment improved, especially in the context of falling FCR (page 8) and individual solution use increasing across most channel types (page 7). A more plausible story is that consumers are becoming more selective about which channels they use based on issue type. CX leaders might consider investigating whether lower multichannel use reflects better routing, containing repeat contacts, increased customer self-selection, and/or more capable self-help solutions.

Within the past 12 months, did you use multiple channels (like phone, email and social media) to resolve a single customer care issue?



Among multichannel users, 28% were forced across channels by the customer service process and 20% by issue complexity. On the flip side, 30% chose multiple channels to expedite resolution and 22% for convenience. Nearly half of multichannel journeys are therefore forced rather than intentionally chosen. That distinction is critical because satisfaction is materially higher when customers choose multichannel rather than when the process or issue forces them into it (page 40). For leaders, multichannel success should not be measured by the mere presence of multiple channels. Tracking the reason for switching, identifying dead ends and policy-driven transfers, and converting unavoidable transitions into context-rich handoffs that feel intentional rather than like restarting all over are critical to achieving multichannel success.

Why did the process take you across multiple channels?

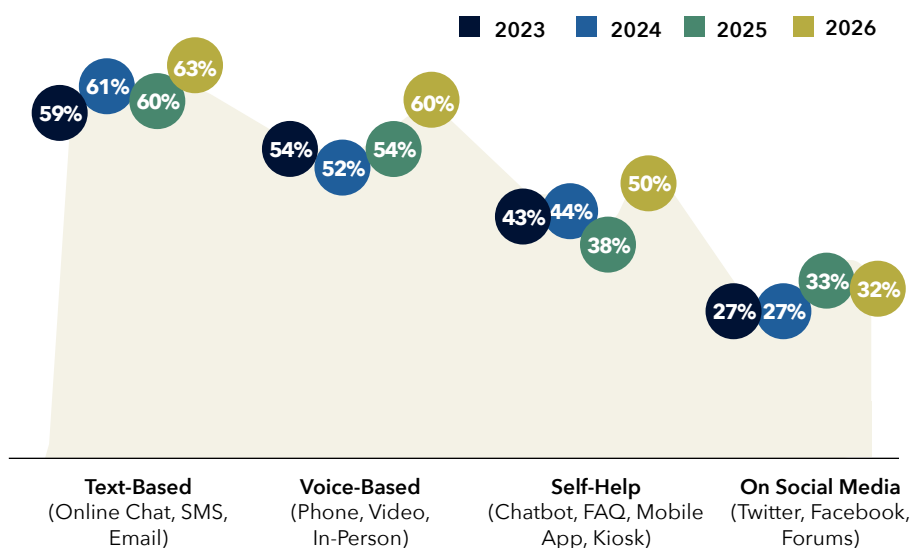




SOLUTIONS USED IN THE MULTICHANNEL JOURNEY

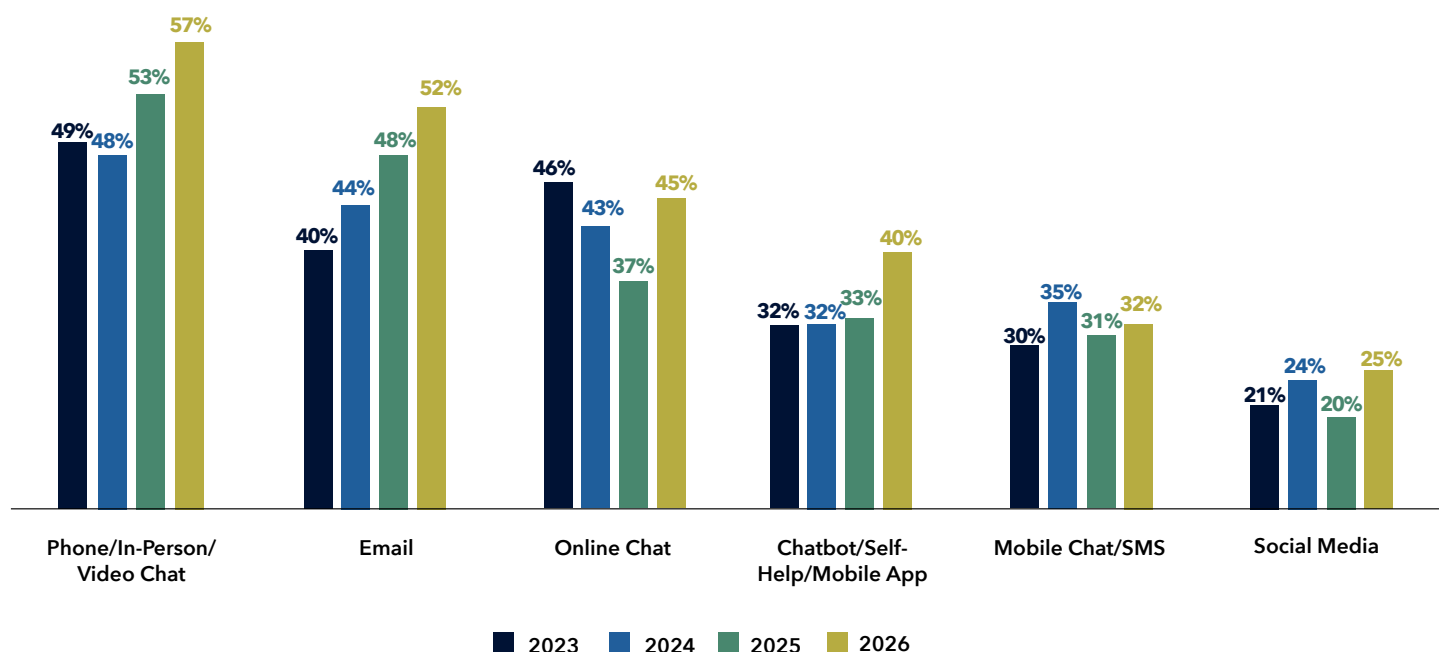
Text-Based solutions were a part of the journey for 63% of multichannel users, Voice-Based by 60%, Self-Help by 50%, and Social Media by 32%. The most notable change is the growth of Self-Help participation, even as overall multichannel use declined. This suggests digital tools are increasingly part of the journey mix, but the later start/end data shows they do not always finish the work they begin. For CX leaders, the question is not whether digital channels are present, but how effectively they are in containing and completing an interaction.

In which ways did you interact with the brand as a part of your multichannel customer service experience? (Select all that apply)



Within multichannel journeys, Phone/In-Person/Video Chat is used by 57% of consumers, followed closely by Email (52%), and Online Chat (45%). The wider spread shows that contemporary multichannel journeys are genuinely heterogeneous rather than dominated by one predictable sequence. That said, every additional entry point creates another opportunity for a smooth transition. In other words, it is an opportunity to carry through identity, history, and case context. CX leaders should consider mapping common channel combinations and assess the transfer quality between them. Identifying pain points based on real journey paths (especially the transitions that generate repetition, delays, and escalations) is a first step in building greater multichannel quality.

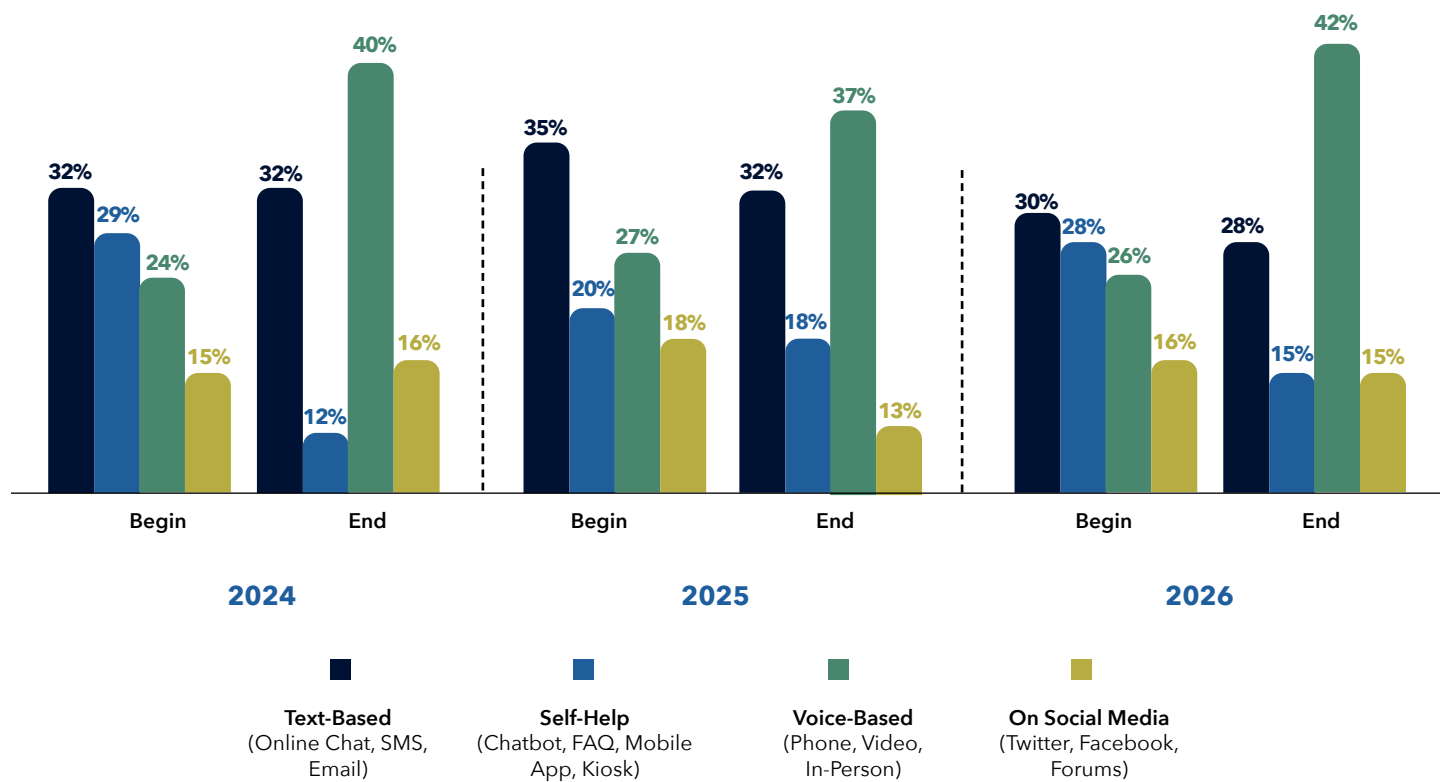
Which specific solutions did you use as a part of your multichannel customer care experience? (Select all that apply)



JOURNEY BEGIN AND END POINTS AND CONSISTENCY

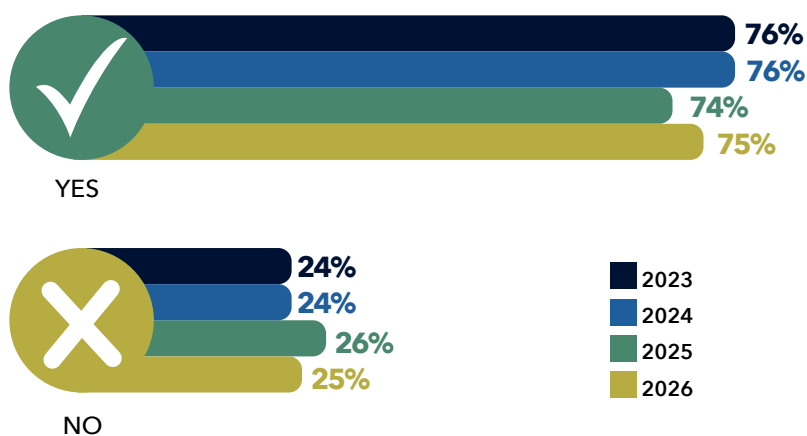
The most revealing movement across multichannel “begin” and “end” points is from Self-Help to Voice. Self-Help begins 28% of consumer multichannel journeys but ends only 15% of journeys. Conversely, Voice begins only 26% of journeys while ending 42%. This suggests self-help often functions as an entry point, but human-assisted channels remain the resolution destination when complexity, uncertainty, or automation limits resolutions. The pattern mirrors the strong consumer preference for Phone on complex issues and the widespread demand for easy access to live help. CX leaders should consider treating digital-to-human escalation as a designed part of the multichannel journey. By preserving authentication, intent, history, attempted steps, and case status, escalations become continuations rather than restarts.

In which channel did your multi-channel engagement begin/end?



Consistency between channels has remained relatively stable across the dataset, with 75% of multichannel users stating as much in 2026. A three-quarter consistency rate is encouraging, but consistency alone does not guarantee low customer effort or success. Customers can get the same policy or tone across channels yet still be made to feel like they are restarting the process. When the same information, customer context, case status, commitments, and resolution path travel with the customer, the multichannel journey will feel personalized. Measuring cross-channel repetition and handoff quality can help reveal orchestration gaps.

Was your interaction with customer care consistent across all channels?

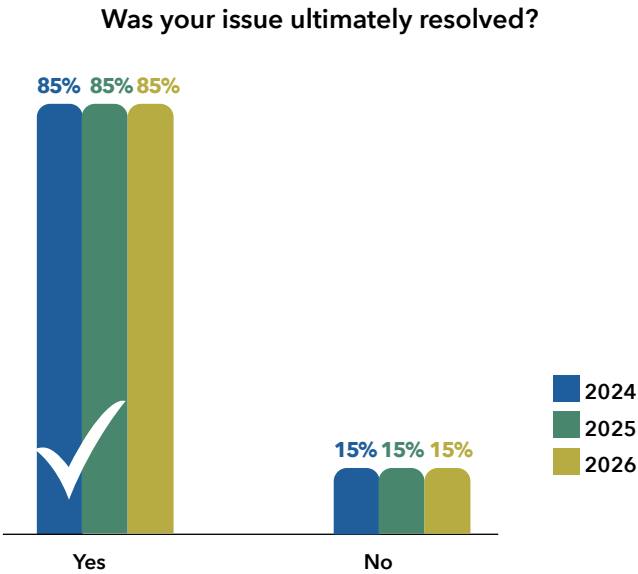




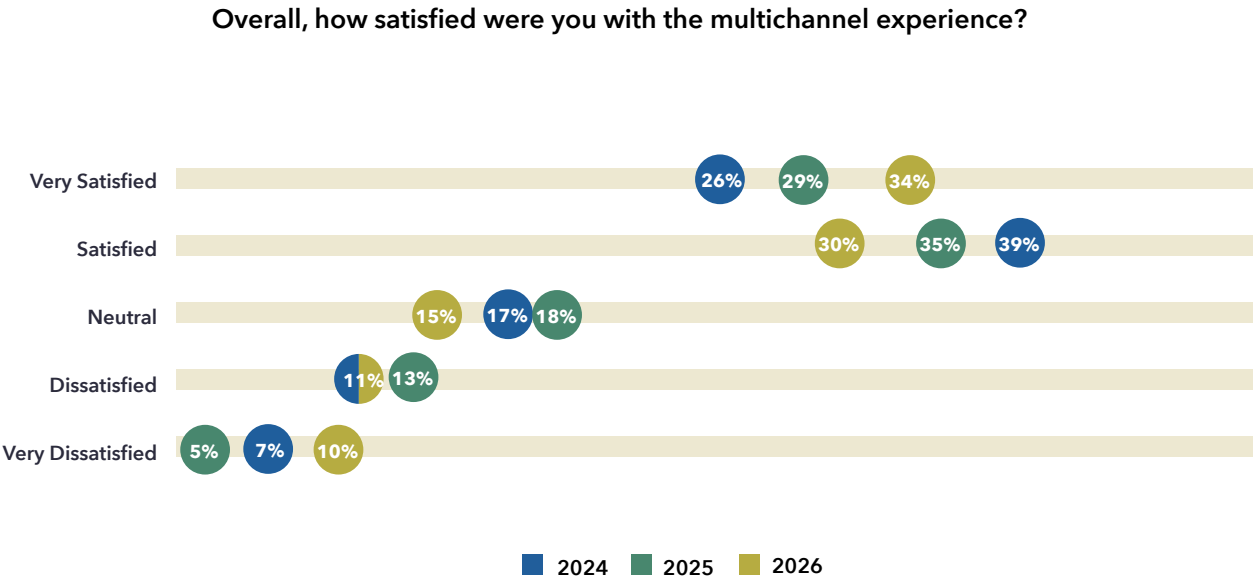
THE MULTICHANNEL JOURNEY

MULTICHANNEL RESOLUTION AND SATISFACTION

Multichannel issue resolution rates remain steady at 85%, unchanged across the last several years. That is a strong outcome measure and shows that channel switching can eventually lead to a successful resolution. However, “eventually” matters. With a lower overall FCR (page 8), and a multichannel satisfaction score (below) that is meaningfully weaker than the resolution rate (85%), customers may often be made to feel like they are enduring avoidable effort before getting a resolution. One way to understand the issue is to contextualize end-to-end resolution time, number of contacts, escalations, channel switches, and repeated information. A journey that succeeds only after multiple attempts may be operationally closed but still undermine confidence, satisfaction and, ultimately, customer loyalty.



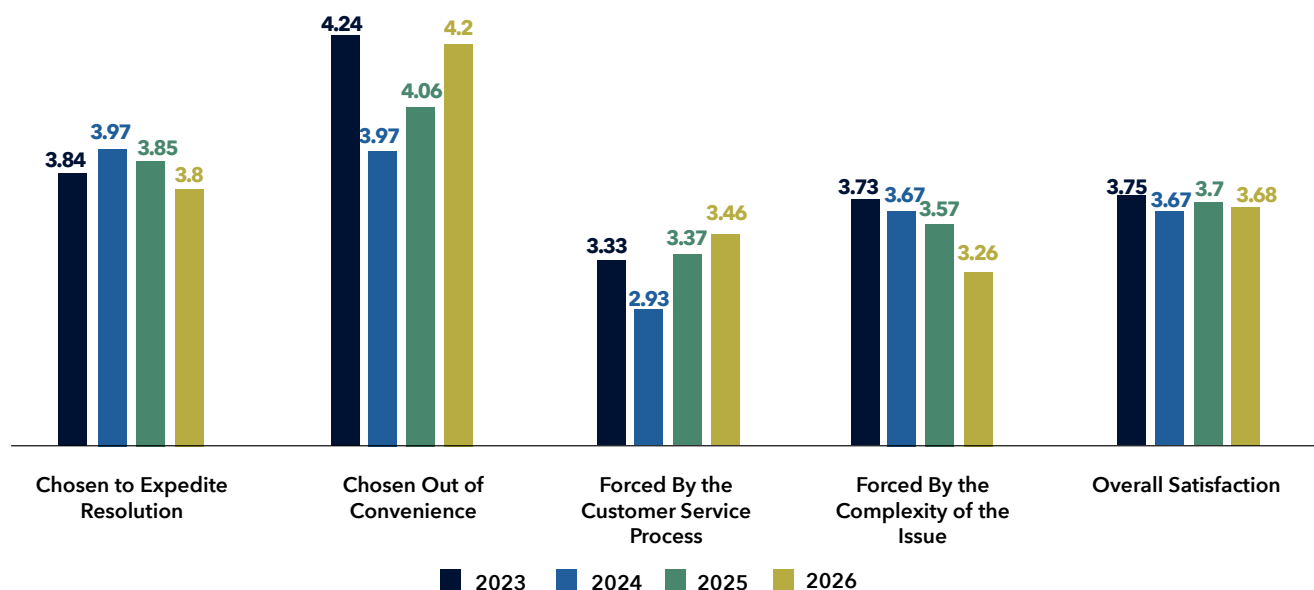
When asked about their satisfaction with the multichannel experience, 64% of consumers were either “Very Satisfied” or “Satisfied.” The 21-point gap between resolution (85%, above) and positive satisfaction is one of the strongest reminders that outcome and journey quality are very different measures. Customers can get the problem solved and still resent the time spent, effort given, and uncertainty in getting there. For effective change, satisfaction should be viewed alongside forced channel changes, reasons for switching, effort, and case duration. Improving multichannel CX is less about adding channels and more about reducing the friction customers experience as they are either forced or choose to move between channels.



AVERAGE SATISFACTION AND RESOLUTION BY REASON

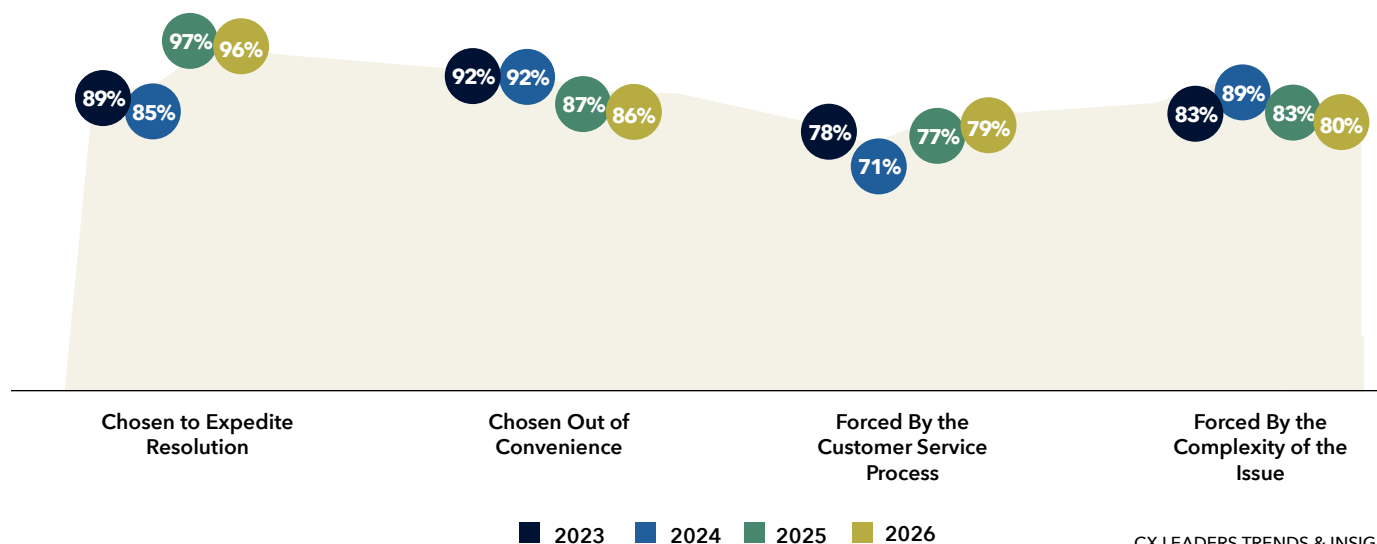
Multichannel satisfaction is highest when customers self-select such a journey, either for convenience or to expedite resolution. Satisfaction falls materially when customers are forced across channels by issue complexity or by the service process itself. When customers move voluntarily, multiple channels feel like flexibility. When the system pushes customers around, the same behavior feels like friction and failure. CX leaders should view KPI metrics of voluntary versus forced multichannel journeys. The goal is not to eliminate all channel switching, but to reduce unnecessary switching and make unavoidable movement deliberate, informed, and context-rich.

**Average Level of Satisfaction (on a 5-Point Scale)
By Reason For Taking a Multichannel Approach**



Like multichannel satisfaction (above), there is a clear resolution penalty associated with forced journeys. This is important because an organization looking only at resolution might conclude its multichannel model is working well. But a deeper look tells a different story. CX leaders should consider using a balanced scorecard for multichannel care that starts with whether a multichannel journey is forced or self-selected, then cross-reference this with journey context like resolution, satisfaction, effort, etc. A successful outcome should not require an unnecessarily forced or difficult path.

Resolution Rate % By Reason For Taking a Multichannel Approach

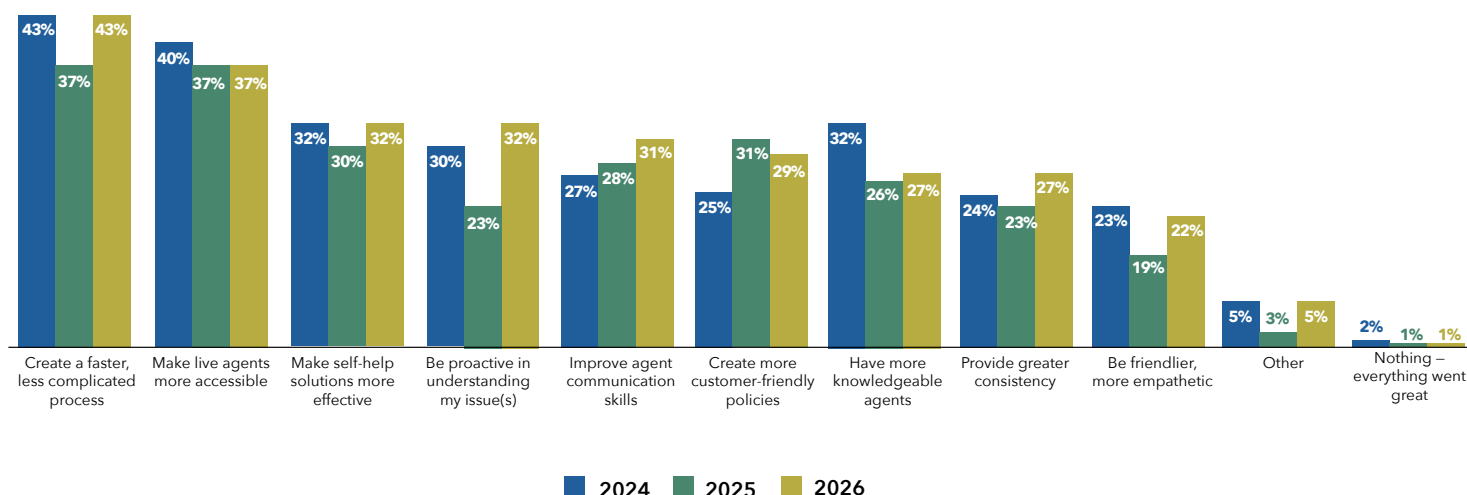


THE MULTICHANNEL JOURNEY

IMPROVING THE MULTICHANNEL JOURNEY

A faster, less complicated process is seen as the leading improvement opportunity among consumers (43%), followed by easier access to a live agent (37%). The improvement agenda, as seen by consumers, spans people, process, policy, and technology rather than pointing to one missing feature. This breadth is consistent with the rest of this year's consumer survey results. Lower effort, stronger digital tools, accessible human help, better communication, and context that travels — all of these must work together in concert to create an exceptional multichannel journey. This is perhaps the clearest indication that multichannel experiences should be managed as an end-to-end journey, and that journey should be optimized across organizational boundaries rather than attempting to improve each channel in isolation.

What could the customer care team you interacted with have done differently to improve your overall multichannel experience? (Select all that apply.)



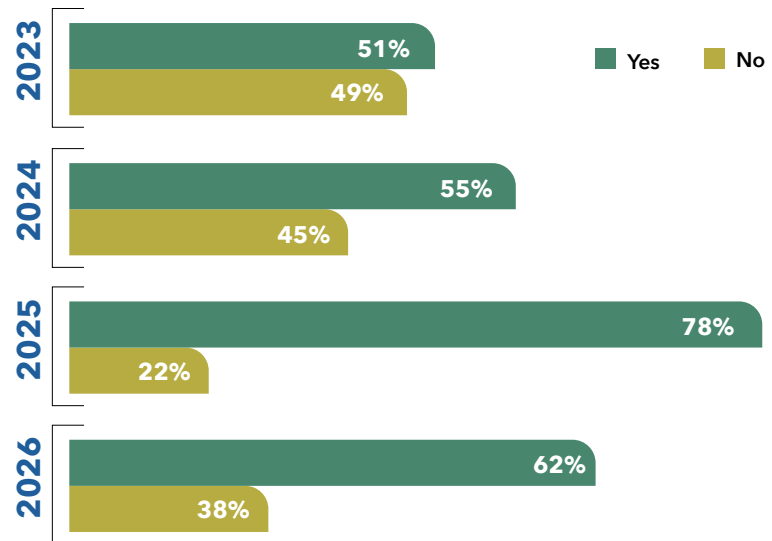
SELF-SERVICE AND CUSTOMER EFFORT

SELF-HELP AND CUSTOMER EFFORT

SELF-HELP AND SOLUTION USE

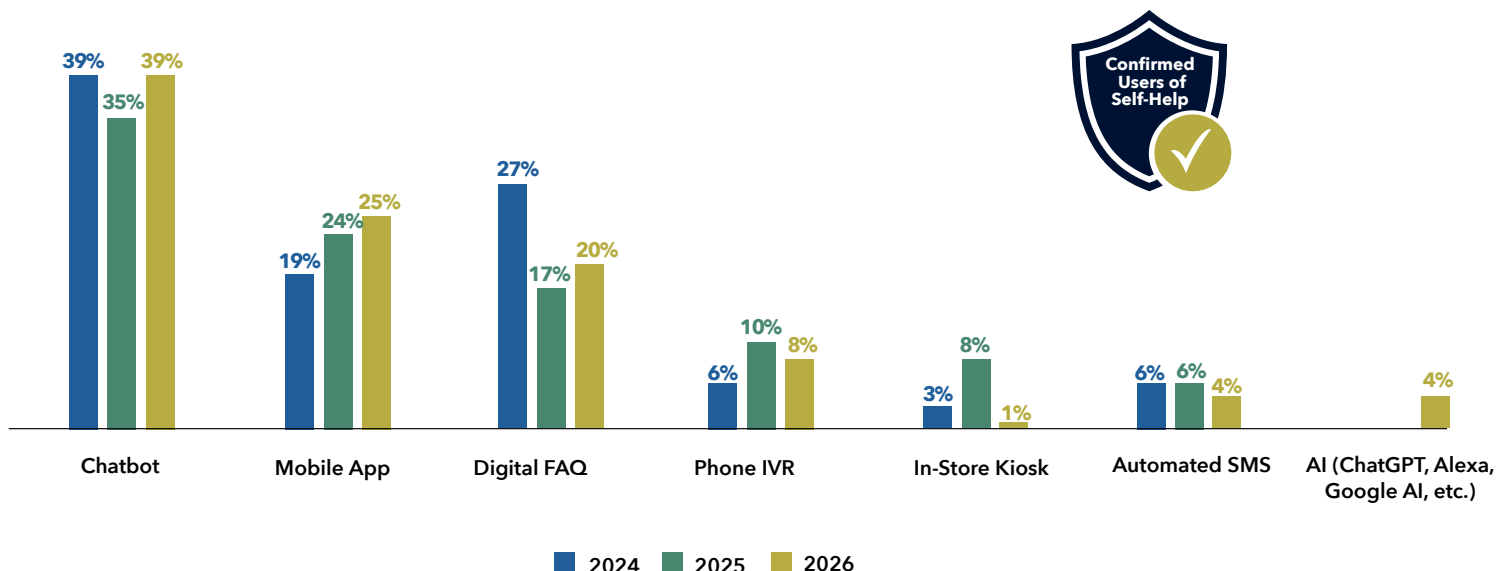
Reported self-help use fell from 78% in 2025 to 62% in 2026 — a notable shift, but not one to be interpreted as a collapse in demand. Instead, the result may indicate that consumers are becoming more selective about when self-help is appropriate. At the same time, the 2025 result may have been indicative of AI's acceleration into the market — as much a reflection of availability as consumer choice. CX leaders should measure self-help success by containment, effort, repeat contacts, abandonment, and a willingness to reuse — not by raw adoption alone.

Have you used a self-help or unassisted tool (like a chatbot or an online FAQ) to find an answer, make a purchase, or resolve a customer care issue within the past 12 months?



Chatbots remain the most utilized self-help tool among consumers at 39%, followed by Mobile Apps at 25% and Digital FAQs at 20%. The mix shows self-help is not one experience but a portfolio of tools with different strengths and maturity levels. That matters because overall perceptions of self-help remain mixed even though completion is strong. CX leaders might avoid treating self-help as a single category. Instead, they might consider comparing performance by tool and intent, identifying where each solution consistently resolves, where customers abandon, and which interactions regularly escalate into assisted channels.

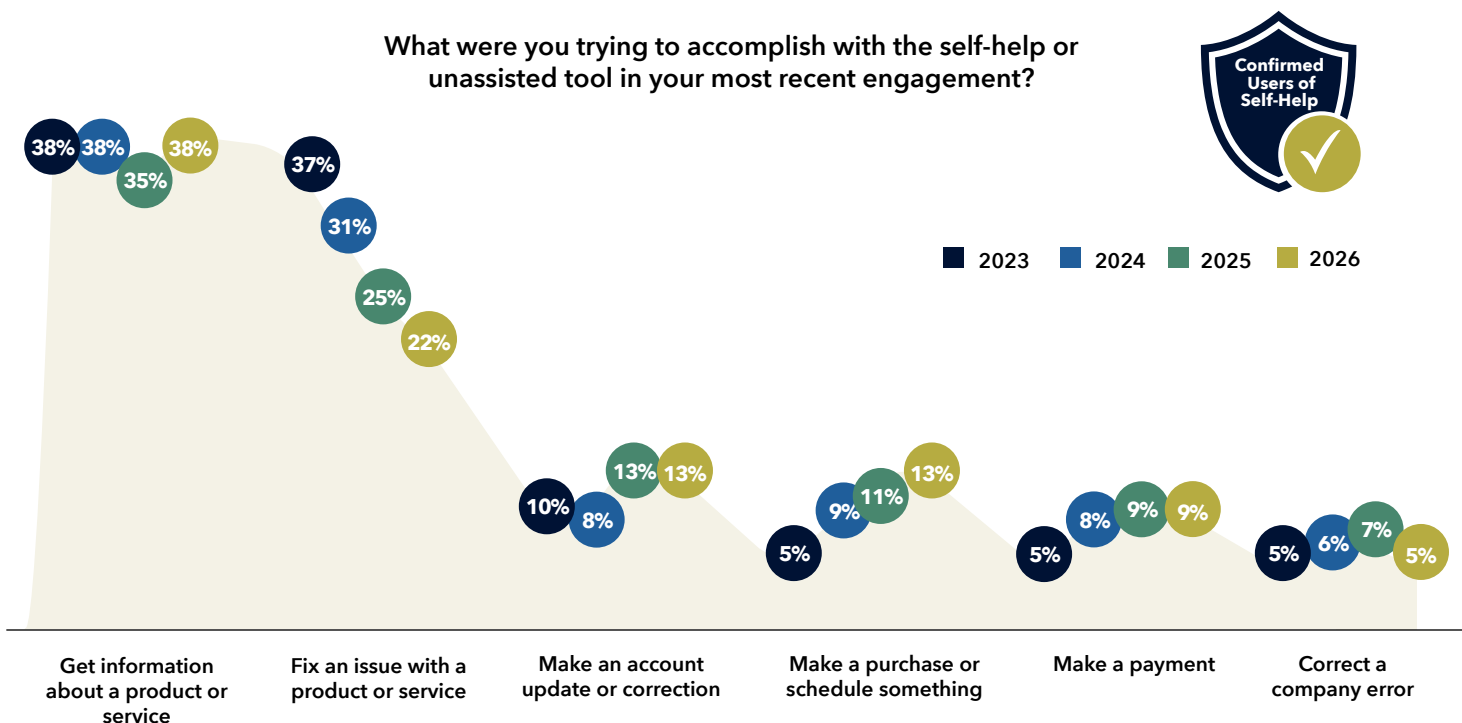
Thinking about your most recent attempt to answer a question, make a purchase, or resolve an issue using such tools, which self-help or unassisted tool did you use?



SELF-HELP AND CUSTOMER EFFORT

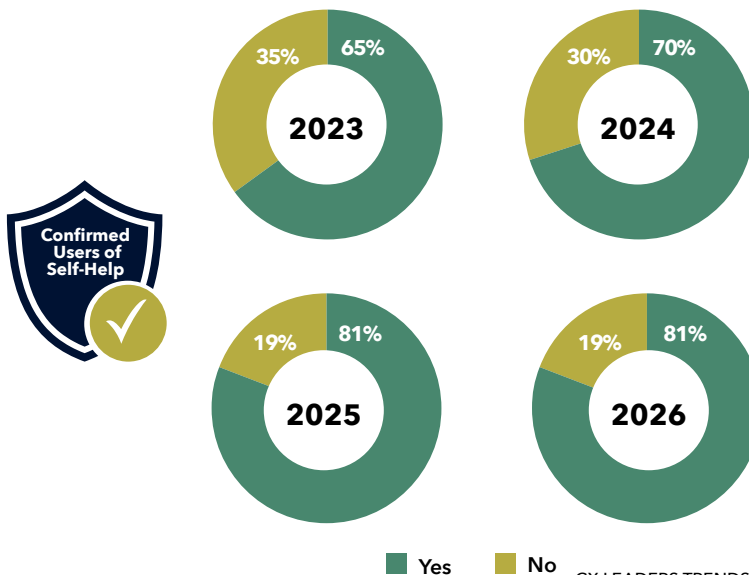
INTENT AND COMPLETION RATES

Seeking product or service information leads self-help intent at 38%, while attempting to fix an issue accounts for 22%. The wider distribution confirms that while self-help is suited to fulfilling a broad set of needs, consumers are focused in their actual use. It also helps explain why complex issues still drive customers toward human assistance. One approach might be to expand automation where task structure, data access, and policy rules support simple, dependable resolution — then add complexity only as performance proves itself.



Self-help completion rates held steady YoY, with 81% of consumers indicating they were able to successfully complete their transaction or find the information they sought. This is an important counterweight to the decline in annual self-help use. Many automated journeys are functionally successful even when they are not especially preferred or memorable. In managing self-help solutions, completion should remain a core metric, but not the only one. A truer picture emerges when completion is paired with effort, resolution time, abandonment, customer confidence, and whether customers return to the solution for future issues.

Were you able to complete your transaction or find the information you were looking for using the self-help or unassisted tool?



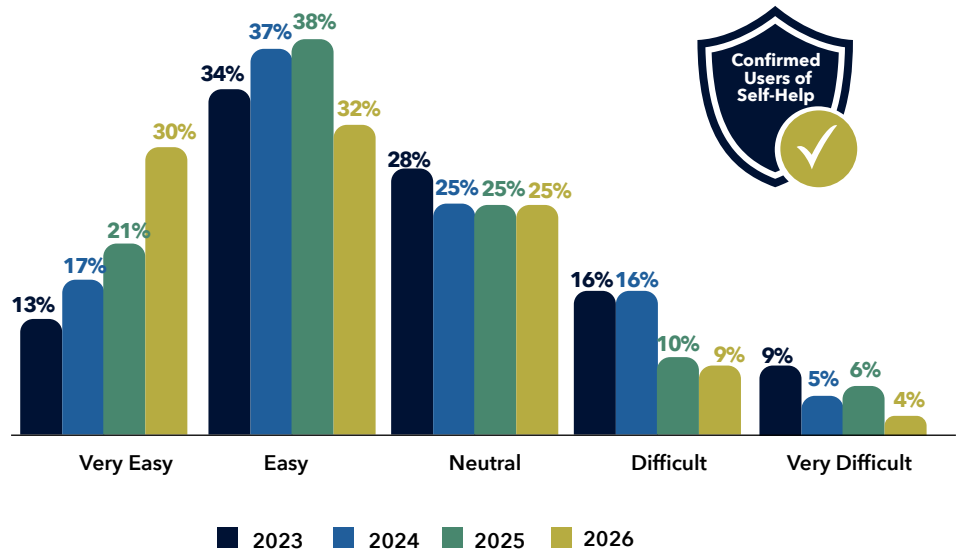
Yes No

SELF-SERVICE AND CUSTOMER EFFORT

SELF-HELP DIFFICULTY OR EASE

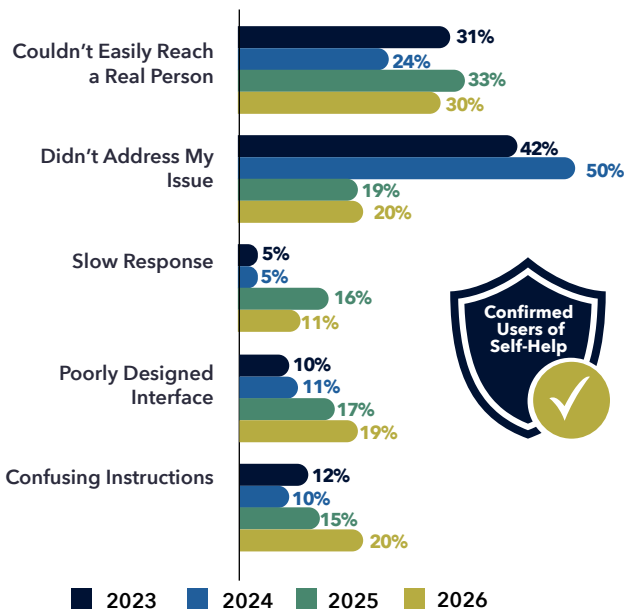
How difficult or easy was it to use the self-help or unassisted tool to attempt to accomplish your intended objective?

Most consumers (62%) rate their recent self-help experience toward the easy side of the scale, but the distribution still leaves a meaningful group who experience difficulty or neutrality rather than clear ease when using self-help. The result helps explain why completion can remain high while overall perception of self-help is mixed. A customer may eventually finish the task but still spend too much time navigating, interpreting options, or determining whether the tool can handle a specific issue. CX leaders should consider tracking time on task, loops, failed searches, abandonment, re-entry, and escalation, using those signals to simplify the experience before customers lose confidence.

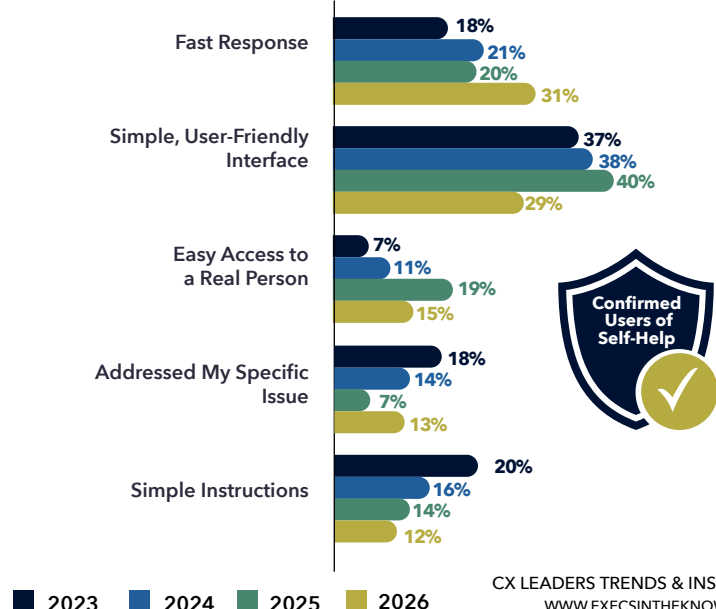


In digging into why a self-help solution is perceived as easy or difficult to use, difficult experiences were associated with an inability to reach a live person, irrelevant or poor responses, excessive effort, and confusion about what to do next. Easier experiences, on the other hand, are characterized by speed, ease, task-specific capability, and easy access to a human when needed. Together, the findings suggest that ease depends on both the quality of the automated experience and the strength of its safety net. This closely mirrors the report's AI findings around accuracy, comprehension, usability, and live access. For CX leaders, the goal should shift to confidence rather than containment — make the right path obvious, minimize steps, improve intent recognition and content relevance, and surface escalation options before frustration turns into abandonment.

Thinking about the previous question, what made the self-help or unassisted tool difficult to use?



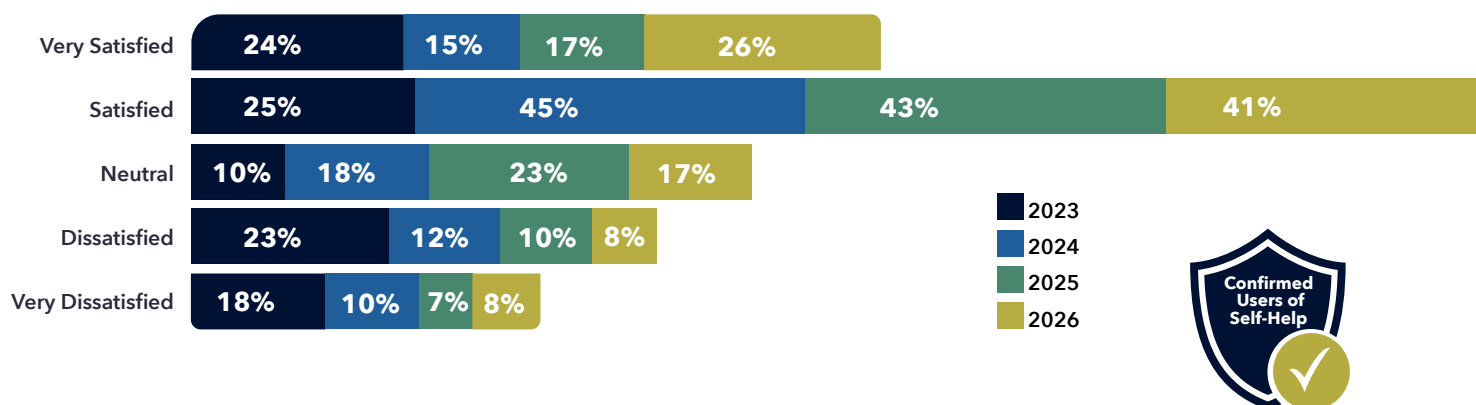
Thinking about the previous question, what made the self-help or unassisted tool easy to use?



SELF-HELP SATISFACTION AND FUTURE INTENT

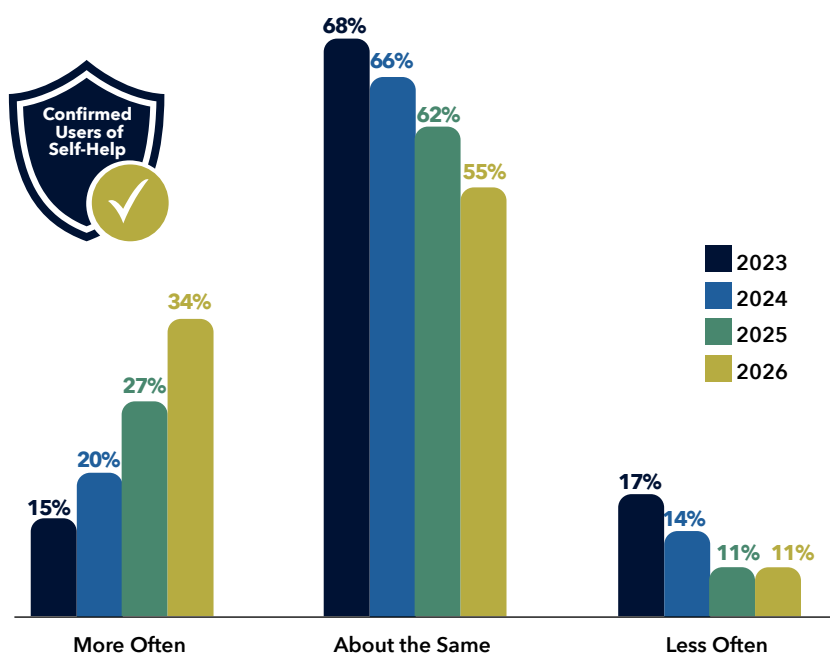
Sixty-seven percent of consumers are satisfied or very satisfied with their most recent self-help experience, while dissatisfaction remains a minority (16%). This result stands in contrast to declining annual use (page 43) and weaker general perceptions. CX leaders might gain insight by distinguishing transaction-level satisfaction from broader channel perception. Improving the latter will require consistently successful experiences over time, especially in moments when the self-help path reaches its limits and must hand off cleanly to create a positive overall experience.

What was your overall level of satisfaction with your most recent use of a self-help or unassisted tool to find an answer, make a purchase, or resolve a customer care issue?



Do you plan on using self-help or unassisted tools more often or less often in the future?

About one-third (34%) of consumers expect to use self-help more often in the future, up seven points from 2025 and up a significant 19 points from 2023. At the same time, only 11% of respondents plan to use self-help less and the majority (55%) expect roughly the same level of use. Future intent remains positive despite the 2026 drop in reported annual usage. The combination suggests consumers are not rejecting self-help but are instead willing to expand using it when tools become better. For CX leaders, there is an opportunity to earn use through improved accuracy, ease, effectiveness, and seamless escape routes. Future adoption is likely to follow confidence based on experience rather than a business strategy to shift volume away from assisted channels.

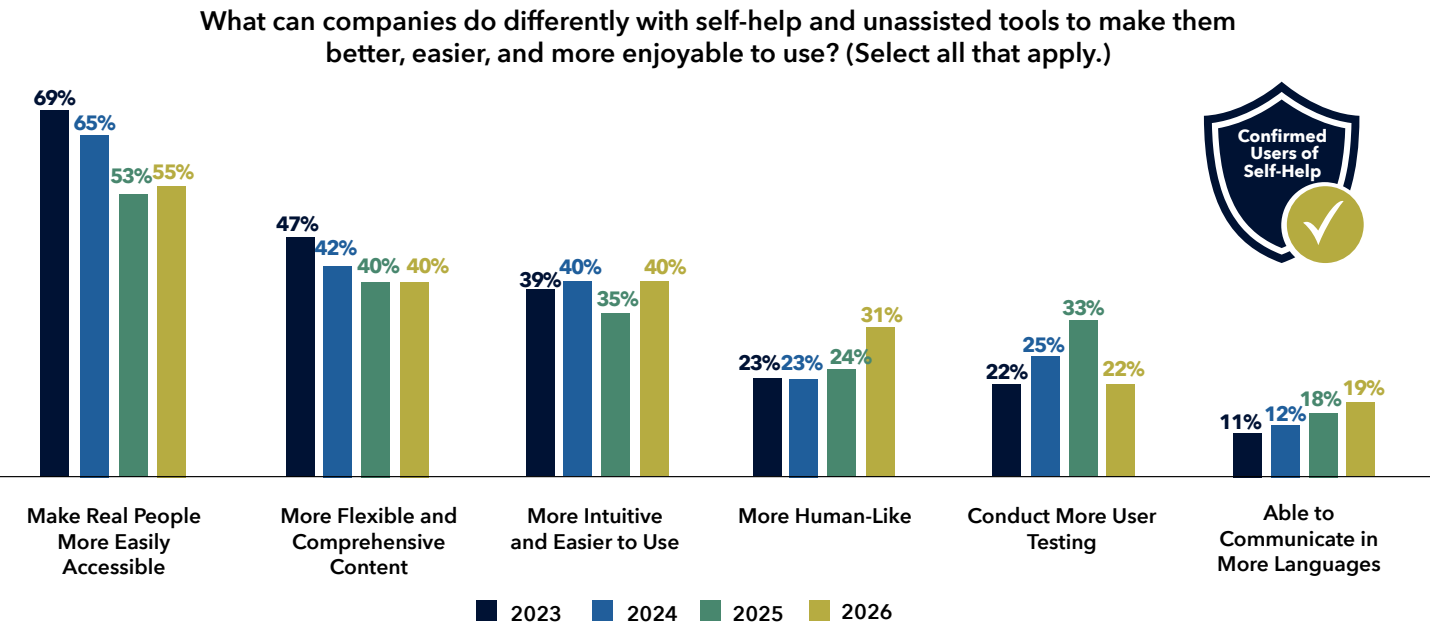




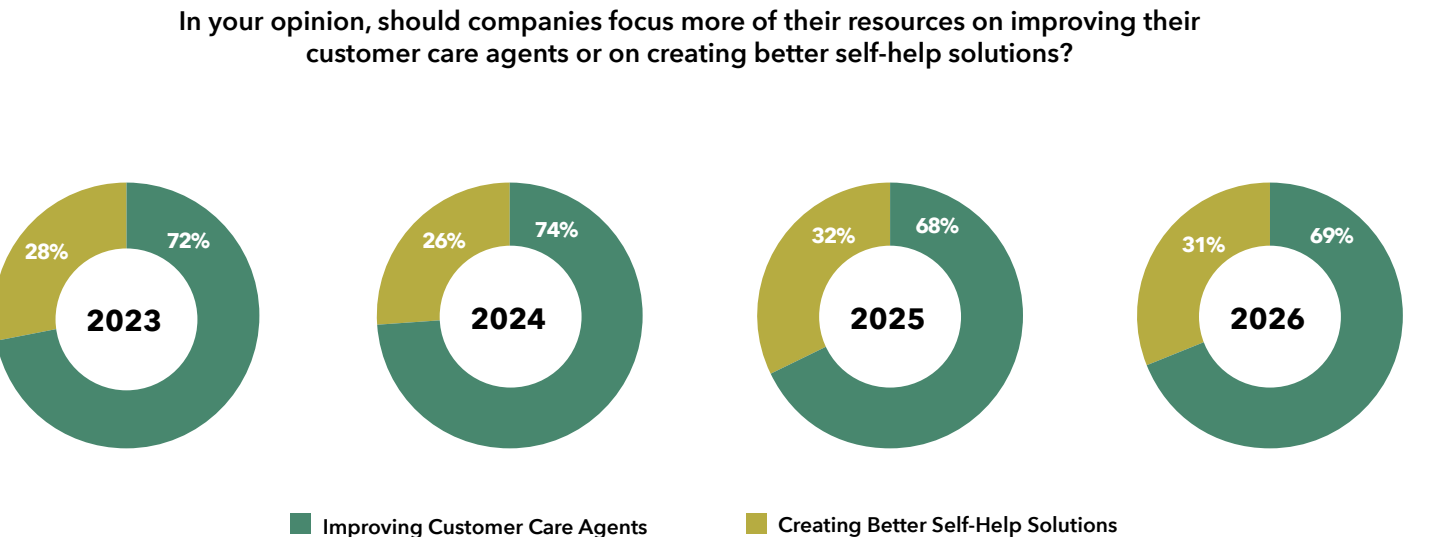
SELF-SERVICE AND CUSTOMER EFFORT

OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT

Making real people more easily accessible continues to lead the way when consumers are asked how self-help solutions can be improved, sitting at 55% in 2026, followed by more flexible and comprehensive content and more intuitive experiences at 40% each, respectively. These rankings make it clear that better self-help is not simply “more automation.” Customers want capable tools plus an obvious continuation path when automation fails to reach a solution. CX leaders should consider prioritizing flexible content, better intent handling, inclusive language support, and context-rich escalations. The strongest self-help experiences are those that solve the task or quickly identify when a human is needed and make a smooth, speedy handoff.



Most consumers (69%) continue to lean toward companies focusing more resources on improving customer care agents rather than creating better self-help solutions. Consumers appear to view the human layer as the critical backstop for complexity, uncertainty, and failed automation. The implication is not to reduce digital investment but to balance it with highly capable, empowered human agents. Automation should absorb appropriate work while quickly identifying what’s out of bounds and appropriately routing (with context) to a well-trained agent who is empowered and ready to help.

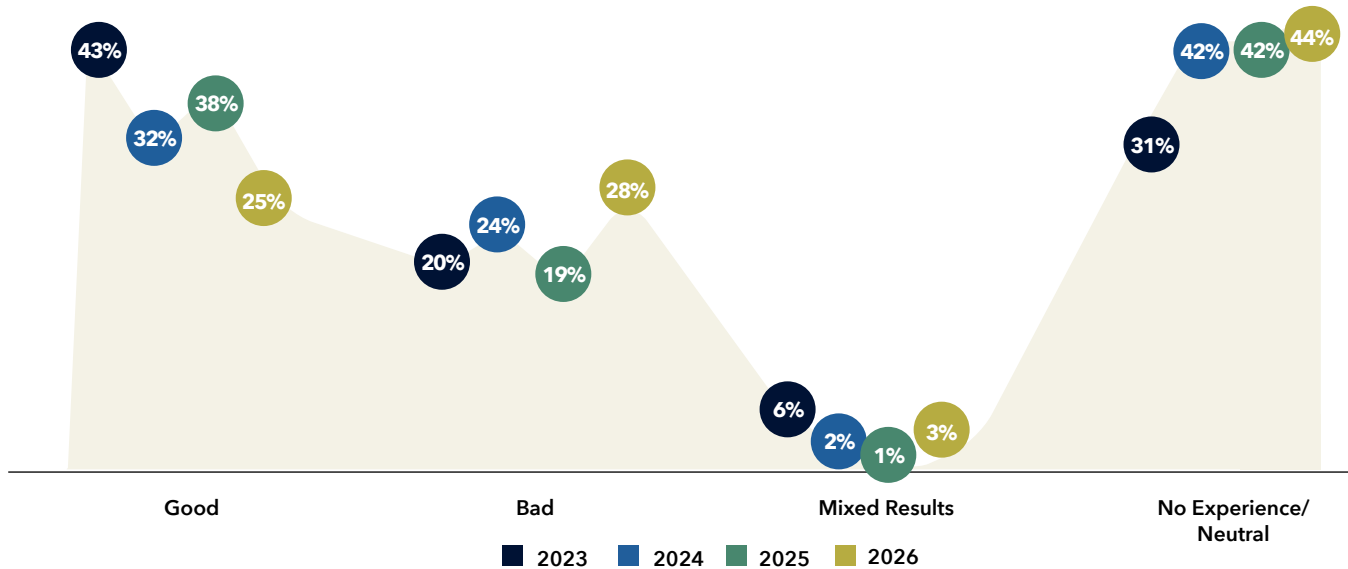


SELF-SERVICE AND CUSTOMER EFFORT

SELF-HELP EXPERIENCES

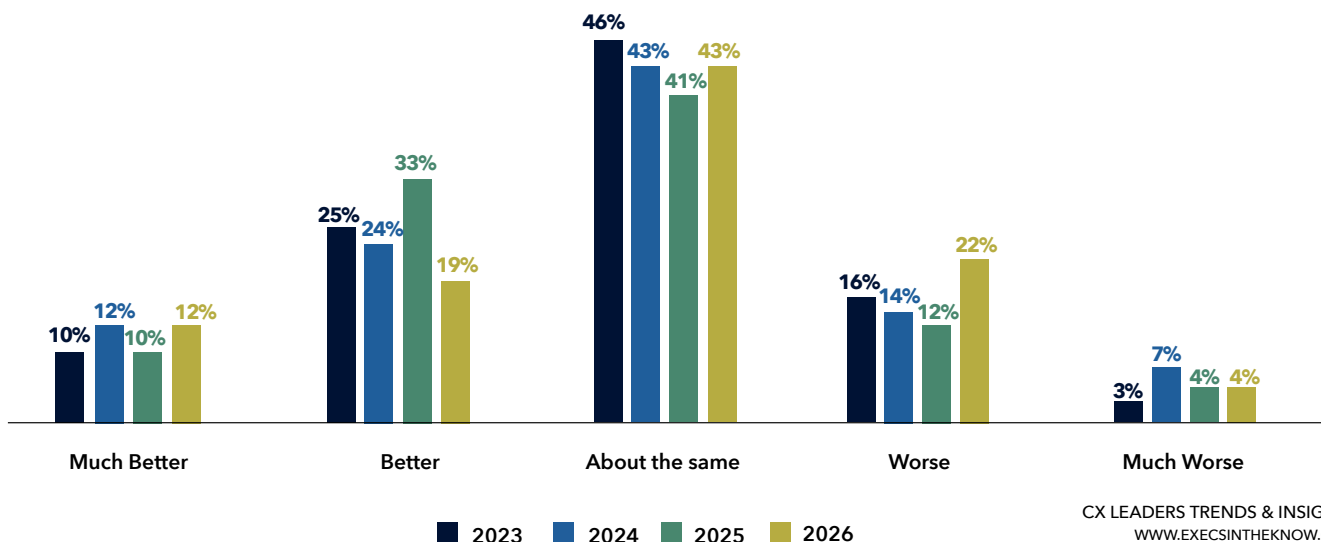
Among all consumers (not only those screened for self-help use), only 25% describe recent self-help experiences as “Good,” while a slightly larger share characterizes them as “Bad.” This broad perception is less positive than the transaction-level satisfaction (page 46) and completion measures (page 44) of confirmed users. The difference highlights an important measurement lesson — functional success does not automatically create confidence in or positive impressions toward a channel. CX leaders should consider asking not only whether a task was completed, but how constrained, impersonal, or effortful the experience felt. Repeated exposure to mediocre automation can shape future channel choice even when individual transactions technically succeed. This is a useful benchmark for tracking whether future investments improve impressions, and not just outcomes.

Please describe your experiences using self-help solutions (chatbots, IVRs, FAQ, mobile apps) to resolve customer care issues. Are the experiences good, bad, or other?



Only 31% of consumers say self-help solutions have gotten better in recent years, while 26% say they have gotten worse, with a large plurality (43%) seeing little change. This suggests rapid investment in automation has not translated into a universally perceived improvement in the overall customer experience. This is consistent with the report’s AI findings where consumers are open to greater autonomy but remain highly focused on solution quality when it comes to accuracy, comprehension, and frustration with reaching a live person. For CX leaders, the goal should be an improved experience rather than simply looking to deploy the newest feature or the latest version. When brands measure whether customers can solve more intents, with fewer loops, less effort, and less need to restart elsewhere, an improved self-help CSAT will follow.

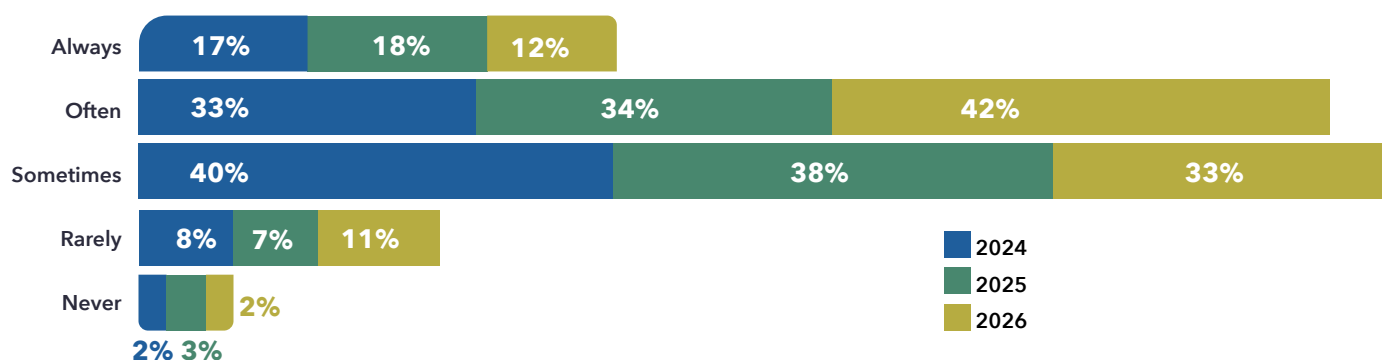
Have you noticed whether or not self-help solutions have gotten better or worse in recent years?



ABANDONMENT AND COMPLEXITY RESTRAINT

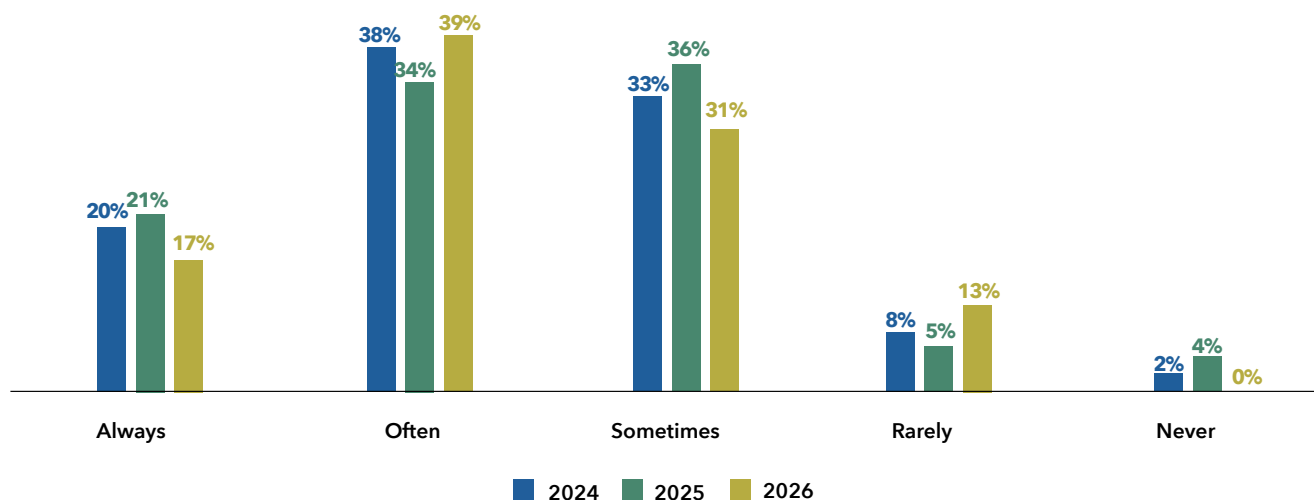
More than half of consumers (54%) say they always or often abandon a self-help solution because it is too difficult or unable to resolve their issue, while only a small minority (13%) say they rarely or never do so. Abandonment is a direct signal and is especially important because self-help frequently begins multichannel journeys that later finish in Voice (page 38). Monitoring abandonment by intent, step dropout, and failure reason, then proactively routing customers when a failure occurs are all steps in the right direction. Recognizing failure early can reduce wasted time, effort, and broken loops that expose the challenges of reaching a live person.

How often do you abandon a self-help solution because it's either too difficult to use, or it's unable to help you resolve your issue?



Most consumers (56%) say their customer care issues are “Always” or “Often” too complex to be resolved by self-help or automated solutions, while relatively few (13%) say “Rarely” and none say “Never.” This defines the practical boundary of automation from the customer’s perspective. It also explains the continued dominance of Phone for complex issues (page 32) and the preference for advisor help even when resolution is guaranteed (page 33). This is why attempting containment across all intents may drive frustration for customers. When complexity, risk, and emotion are factors in channel routing, customers feel heard, understood, and valued.

How often do you feel like your customer care issues are too complex to be resolved by a self-help or automated customer care solution?

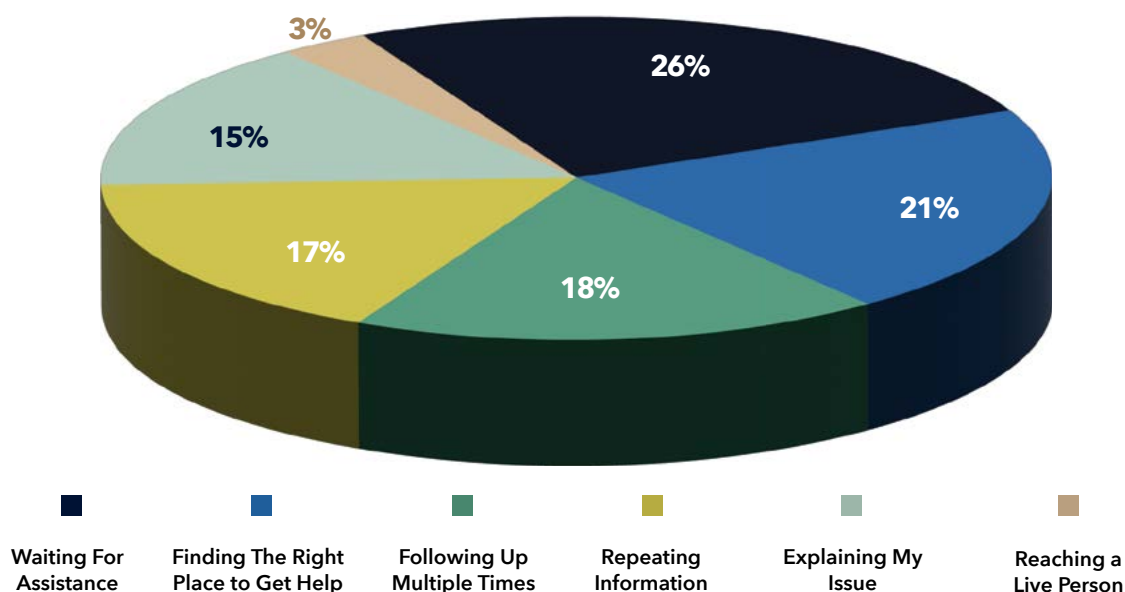


SELF-SERVICE AND CUSTOMER EFFORT

EFFORT AND FRUSTRATION

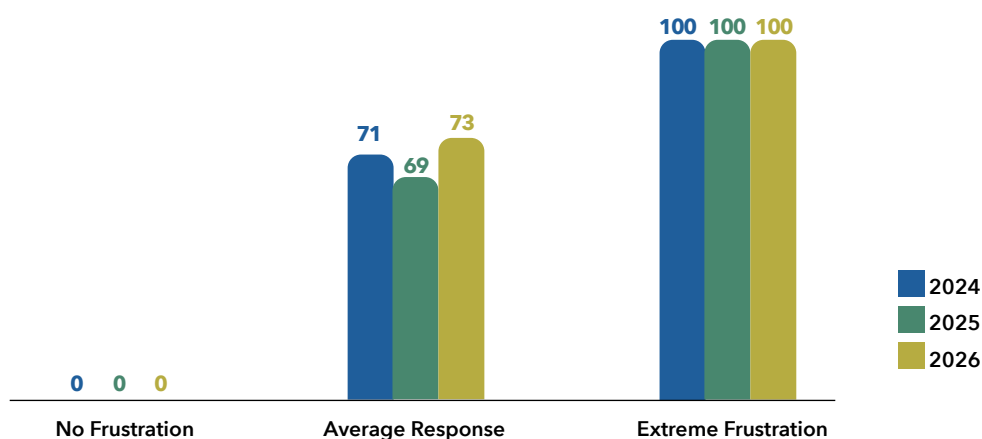
Waiting (26%) is the largest single source of effort for consumers during their most recent customer service experience, followed by finding the right solution (21%), multiple follow-ups (18%), repeating information (17%), and explaining the issue (15%). The ranking is notable because these are basic journey mechanics rather than advanced experience features. They connect directly to the report's confidence and assurance themes — customers lose confidence when access is difficult, communication and follow-through are weak, and context does not carry forward. Customer effort is reduced through better routing, status visibility, callback options, persistent context, greater case ownership, and proactive follow-ups rather than focusing on trying to solve an issue solely within a single channel.

Thinking about your most recent customer service experience, which required the MOST effort?



Average frustration with repeating account or personal information increased slightly to an average response of 73 in 2026, up from an average response of 69 YoY. The worsening score is particularly striking after years of investment in chasing an omnichannel experience. Repetition also appears as a major confidence killer (page 14) and is perhaps one reason continuity with the same agent matters to consumers (page 63). Frustration is reduced when authentication, interaction history, case notes, previous commitments, and attempted self-help steps travel with the customer. When every handoff begins with context rather than rediscovery, the journey to customer success is shortened.

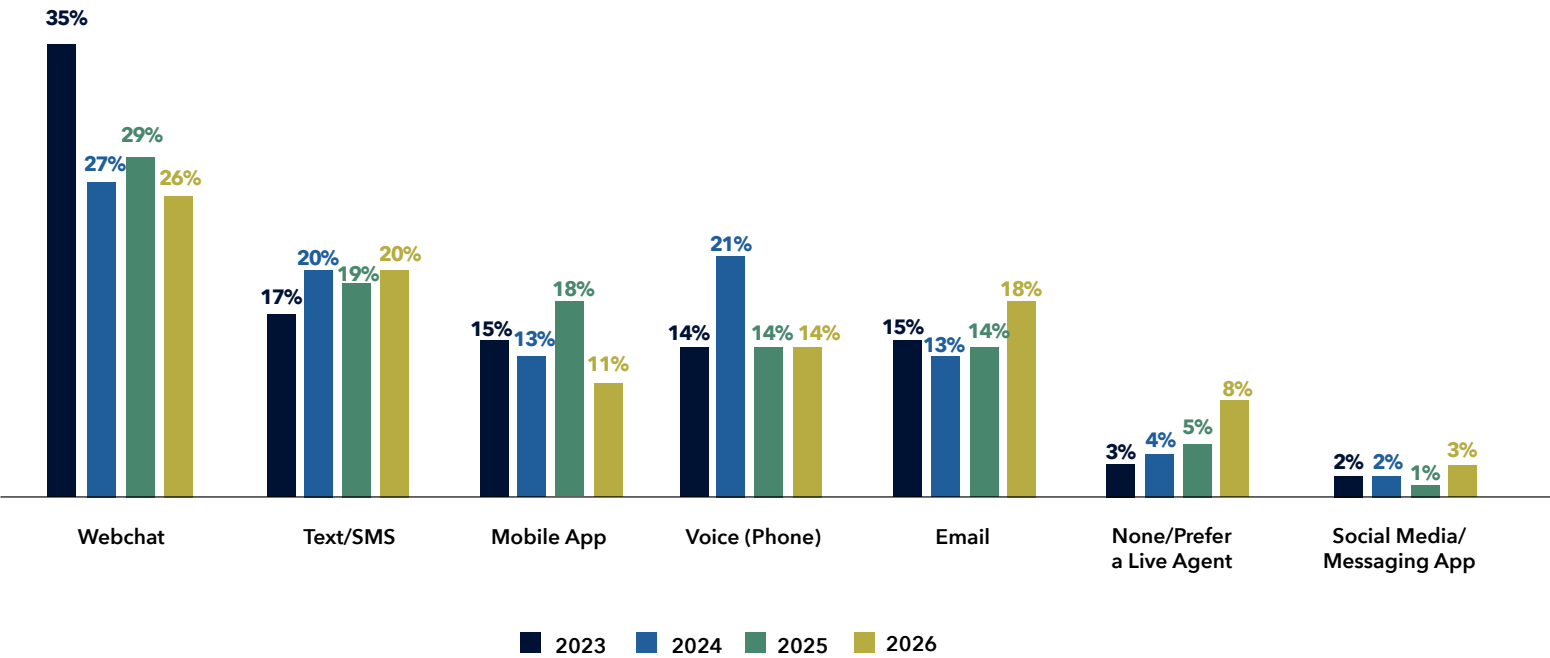
How frustrated are you by having to repeat information (account or personal) in trying to resolve a customer care issue?



AI-POWERED CUSTOMER CARE

Webchat leads preferred AI engagement at 26%, followed by Text/SMS at 20%, Email at 18%, Voice at 14%, Mobile App at 11%, and smaller shares for social messaging or avoiding AI altogether. No single interface dominates, suggesting consumers think about AI as a capability that can exist across channels rather than as one separate destination. That fits the broader rise in individual channel usage and reinforces the need to embed AI where customers already choose to interact. CX leaders should prioritize consistent AI behavior, context, and governance across solutions so the customer receives the same understanding and resolution capability whether the interaction begins in chat, text, email, phone, or on an app.

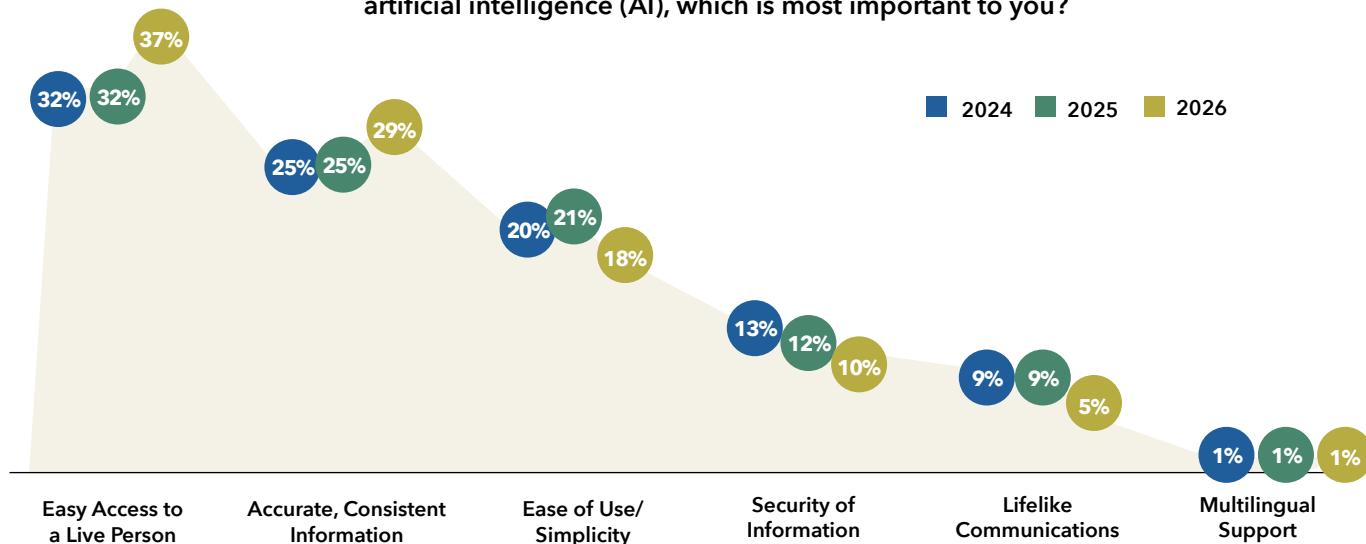
If you had to engage with an Artificial Intelligence (AI)-powered customer care agent (non-human) to resolve an issue, which would be your preferred method of engagement?



PREFERRED AI SOLUTION AND WHAT IS MOST IMPORTANT

“Easy Access to a Live Person” (37%) is the leading requirement for AI-powered customer care among consumers, followed by “Accurate, Consistent Information” (29%). This, and other results in the AI section, point to a consumer open to AI-powered solutions conditional on control and dependable performance. It also mirrors the wider confidence findings, where live access and clear communication are among the strongest builders of trust. This all indicates that a successful AI strategy should not be measured solely on a technology solving an issue autonomously. Success comes when the experience meets expectations. That happens when escalation design, accuracy, privacy, usability, and a strong human safety net are built into every AI journey.

When resolving a customer care issue, using a solution powered by artificial intelligence (AI), which is most important to you?



When interacting with AI, consumers value accurate resolutions, clear communication, and easy access to a live person. How are you designing AI experiences that build confidence?

“

As our organization continues to expand the use of AI within customer service, we’ve learned that confidence is built less by sophisticated technology and more by creating experiences that feel natural, trustworthy, and effortless for the customer. The research reinforces what we’ve observed firsthand: customers care most about accurate answers, clear communication, and an easy path to a live person when needed.

As we develop our agentic voice experience, we’ve invested significant time ensuring that our voice AI, Mia, reflects the Michael Kors brand. This extends beyond the words she uses. We partner with our Editorial team to evaluate tone, pacing, vocabulary, and conversational style so that the experience aligns with the voice customers encounter in our marketing campaigns, websites, and stores.

Equally important is eliminating friction. We have intentionally designed our AI experience to recognize signs of customer frustration, hesitation, or repeated requests. When a customer asks for a human, or the AI detects that a live representative may be better positioned to help, the interaction transitions seamlessly to one of our Style Consultants.



MICHAEL KORS

I believe that customers don’t judge AI by how human it sounds. They judge it by how easy it is to get what they need. When AI delivers accurate information, reflects your brand, and makes it effortless to reach a human, confidence naturally follows.

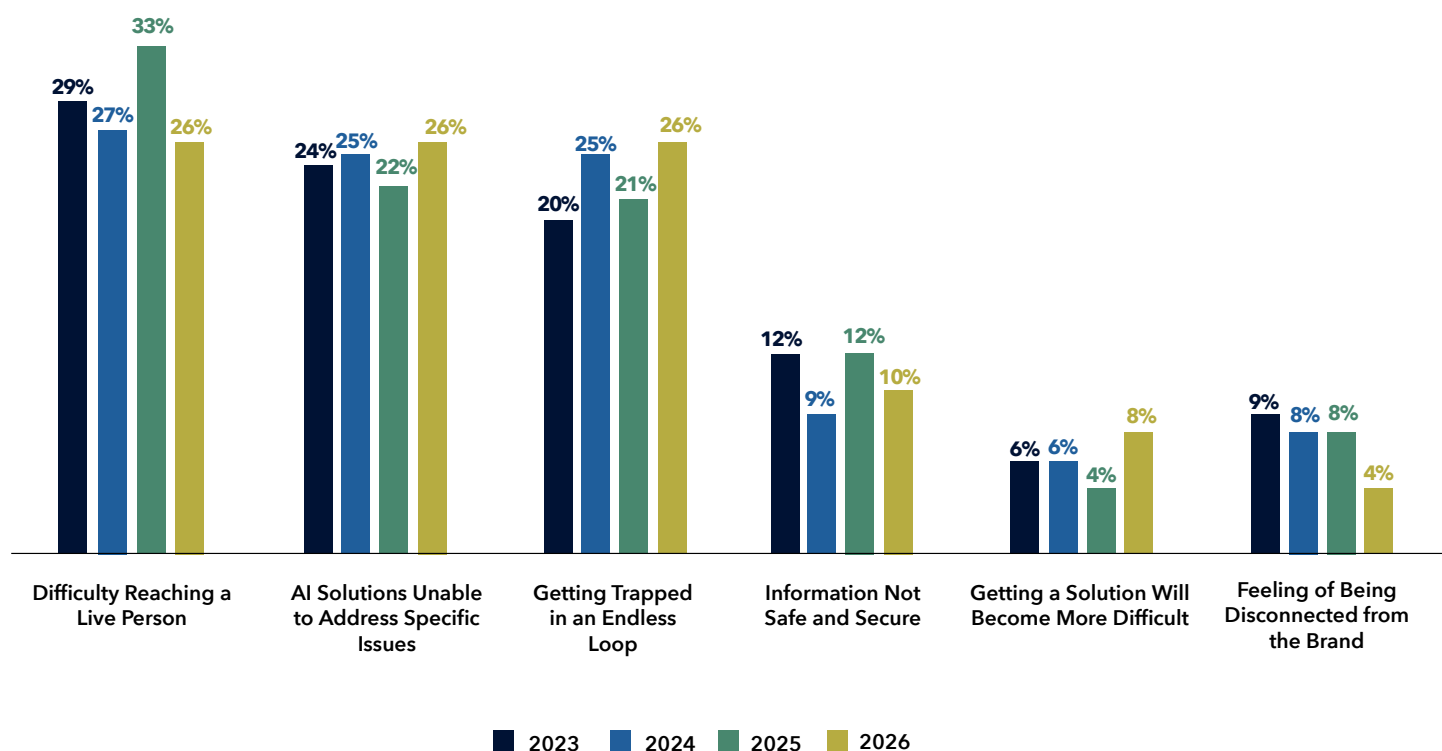
For me, the future of AI-enabled customer care is not about replacing human interactions. It’s about creating a trusted front door to the brand while ensuring human expertise is always available when it matters most.

”

Ebrahim Hyder
Vice President, Customer Service

Rather than one dominant concern, three practical failure modes now tie at 26% — “Difficulty Reaching a Live Person,” “AI Solutions Unable to Address Specific Issues,” and “Getting Trapped in an Endless Loop.” All this suggests consumers are becoming less concerned about AI’s impersonality and more focused on whether it actually works. These results continue to support the thesis that accuracy, ease, and efficacy are the strongest levers for greater adoption. The priorities are increasingly clear; successful AI depends on capability, containment quality, and graceful escalation — not simply providing access to the technology.

What’s your biggest concern with companies increasingly relying on AI solutions for customer care?

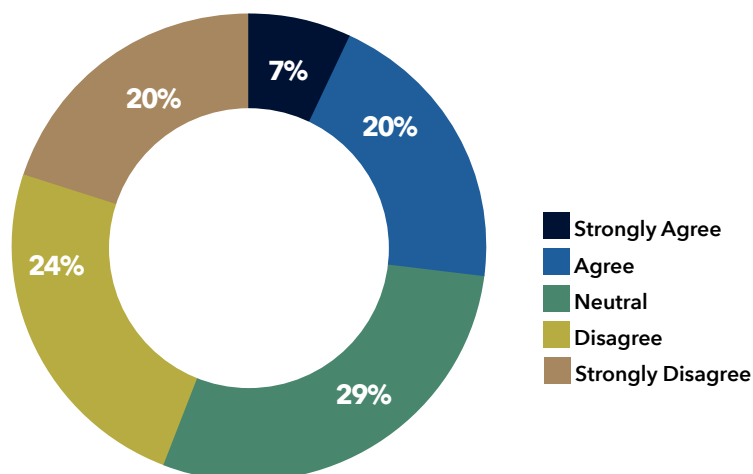


AI-POWERED CUSTOMER CARE

BENEFITS OF AI-POWERED TOOLS

Only 27% of consumers agree that AI-powered tools and solutions greatly benefit their customer care interactions with brands, while 44% disagree and 29% remain neutral. This creates a clear gap between belief in the potential of AI and satisfaction with current execution. Elsewhere, 67% say they are comfortable with fully autonomous resolution (page 60) and 43% say successful AI-only resolution would improve brand perception (page 56), showing consumers are not fundamentally opposed to the model. The implication is to move the conversation from adoption to performance. CX leaders should be asking themselves (and their customers) which capabilities are most likely to close the gap and drive the experiences their customers have grown to expect.

How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement: AI-powered tools and solutions greatly benefit my customer care interactions with brands?



Consumer opinions on AI continue to evolve. What has your organization learned about introducing AI and its impact on customer and business outcomes?

“ Post-pandemic, our call center faced 40-minute wait times and near-50% abandon rates. After evaluating conversational AI vendors, we chose a partner that delivered a natural voice that sounded like my best agent.

Starting with simple transfers and FAQs on a 40,000-call/month line, the assistant handled 87% of calls on day one and has sustained 80%+ of calls annually. This cut abandons to under 10% and freed agents for complex, revenue-generating work. We've since expanded to full reservations and secure payment processing, with the assistant now handling 30%+ of those calls.

Expected benefits included:

- **Lower costs:** The assistant runs at 100% utilization, 24/7, with no sick days, at a fraction of agent costs
- **Revenue generation:** It books 2,500 reservations per month generating \$500K, \$6M annually.
- **Reduced staffing needs:** Roughly 25%, matching call-handling offload

The unexpected benefit was lower attrition. Contact centers often see up to 100% annual turnover—typically from repeatedly replacing the bottom 25% of staff. Cutting staffing needs by roughly 25% breaks that cycle. Our attrition dropped by half, leading to a more experienced, tenured team and better customer experience.



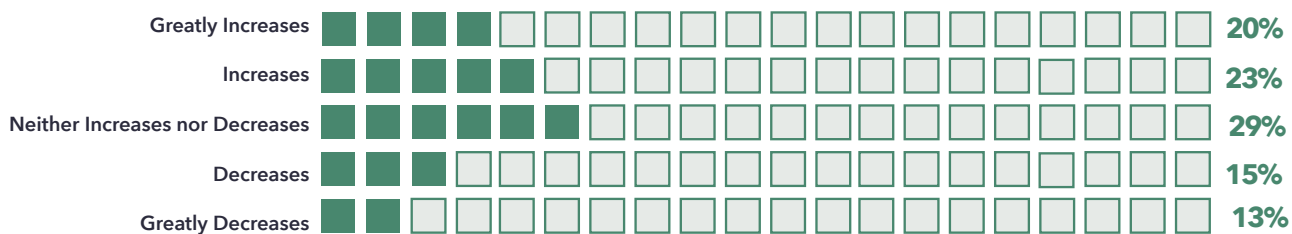
Brian Jeppesen
Director, Contact Center Operations



AI'S IMPACT ON PERCEPTION AND ATTRIBUTE OF IMPORTANCE

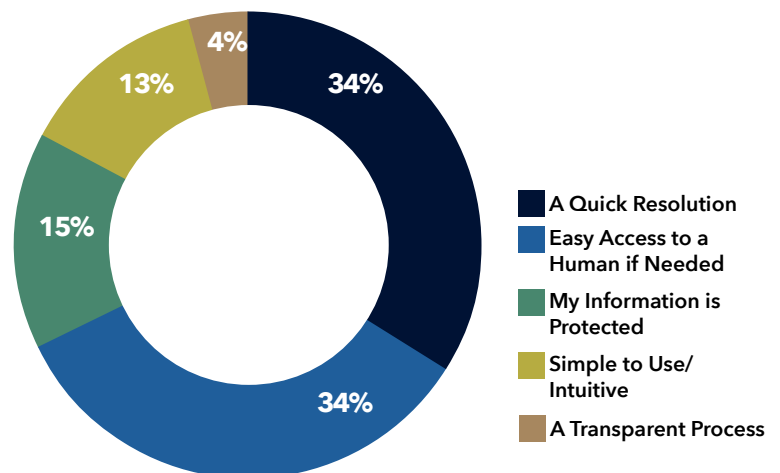
If AI successfully resolved an issue without human assistance, 43% of consumers say their perception of the company would increase, 29% say it would not change, and 28% say it would decrease. The positive balance suggests autonomous resolution can create brand value rather than merely reduce cost. Consumers appear willing to reward a company when AI demonstrates competence and convenience, but the meaningful negative responses show execution must be trustworthy. When autonomous AI is evaluated through customer outcomes, automation can strengthen a brand, yet a failed autonomous interaction may do the opposite.

If a company successfully used AI to solve your issue without requiring human assistance, how would it affect your perception of that company?



If an AI solution successfully handled your customer service issue from start to finish, which attribute would be most important?

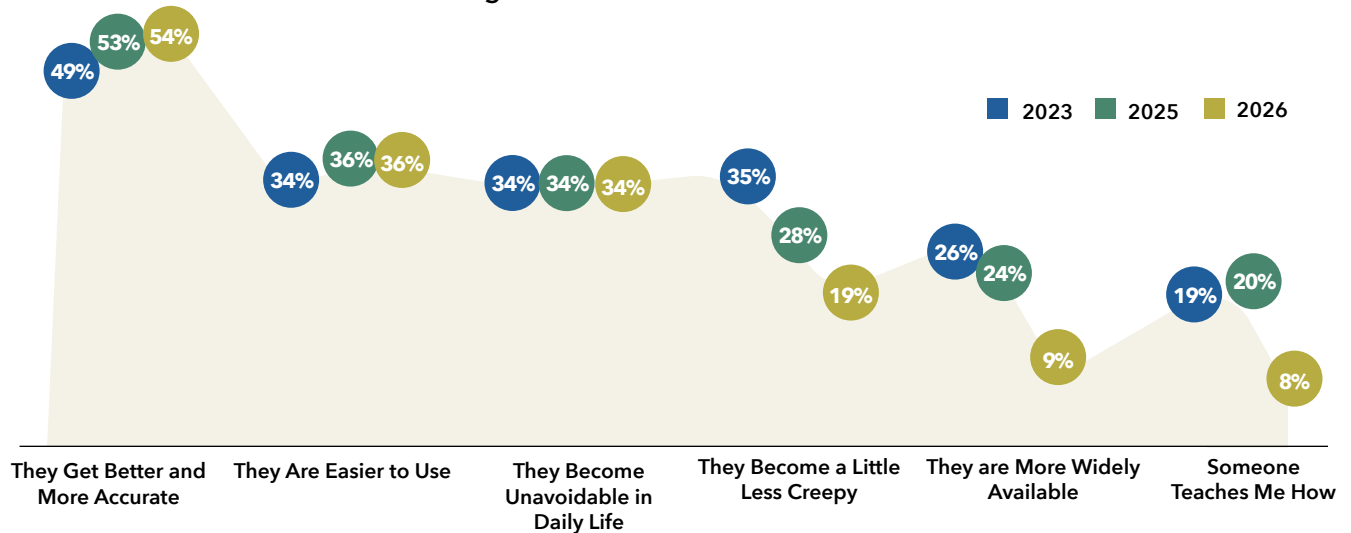
"A Quick Resolution" and "Easy Access to a Human if Needed" tie as the two most important attributes of an end-to-end AI interaction among consumers at 34% each. As demonstrated in multiple results, consumers want autonomy alongside a human-based safety net. That combination is consistent throughout the report, where consumers are increasingly willing to let technology take ownership, but confidence depends on accurate outcomes, accessible escalation, privacy, and control. For CX leaders, autonomous does not need to mean a closed loop. When AI is built to work independently while accounting for the exception, getting an ultimate resolution begins to feel a little more frictionless.



GREATER ADOPTION AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT

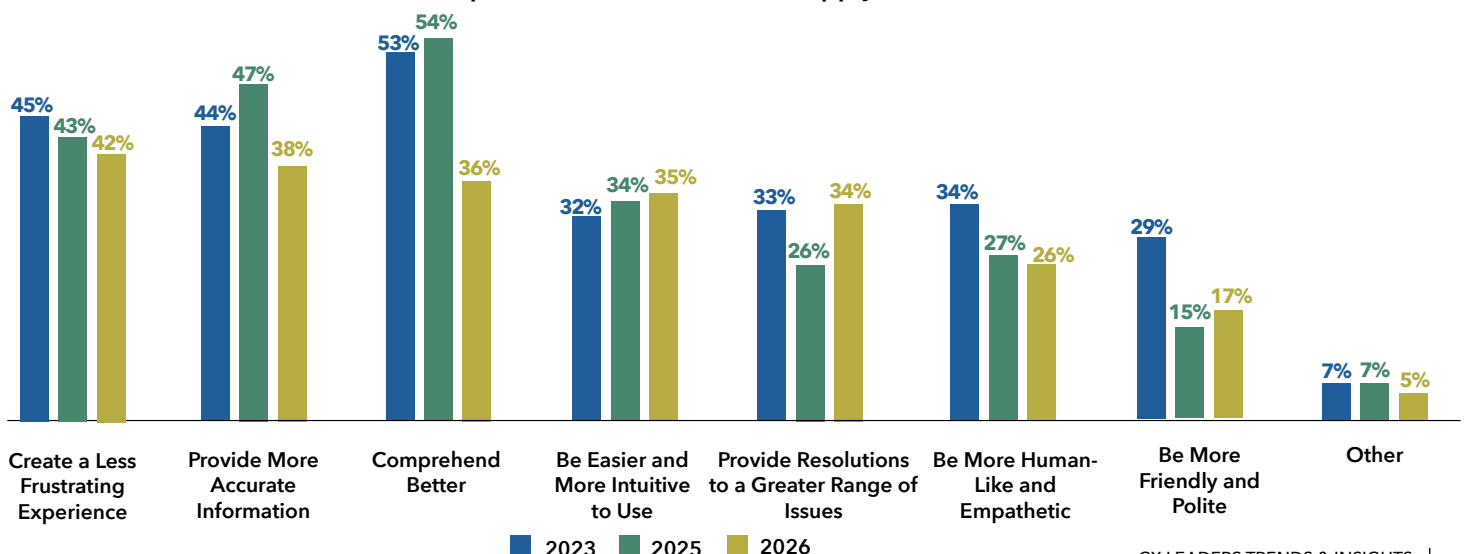
Better and more accurate AI has steadily strengthened as the leading adoption lever among consumers, rising from 49% in 2023 to 53% in 2025 and 54% in 2026. Easier use has remained relatively stable at 34–36%, while several earlier barriers have declined sharply such as wanting AI to feel “less creepy” (from 35% to 19%) and wider availability (from 26% to 9%). This distinct pattern suggests familiarity and access are becoming less important obstacles. Consumers increasingly know what AI is and how it is supposed to work. The hurdle is now execution. In the near term, greater adoption will likely depend less on promotion or exposure and more on proving that AI can accurately understand intent and reliably resolve an issue.

What would make you more likely to use AI-powered technologies when working to resolve a customer care issue?



In 2023 and 2025, “Comprehend Better” dominated consumer views on improvement opportunities (at 53% and 54%, respectively), but that number fell sharply in 2026, to 36%. Less frustration is now the leading improvement priority at 42%. That does not mean comprehension has stopped mattering, but it may mean the technology has made meaningful gains in how it understands. Consumers may now be judging AI across the full journey ... does it not only understand, but does it act predictably, avoid loops, solve enough issues, and make the interaction easier? AI is perhaps best understood when it is evaluated not just as a cost saver or as a deflection tool, but as an experience and a system for generating resolutions for customers.

In your opinion, in what ways are AI-powered customer care solutions most in need of improvement? (Select all that apply.)

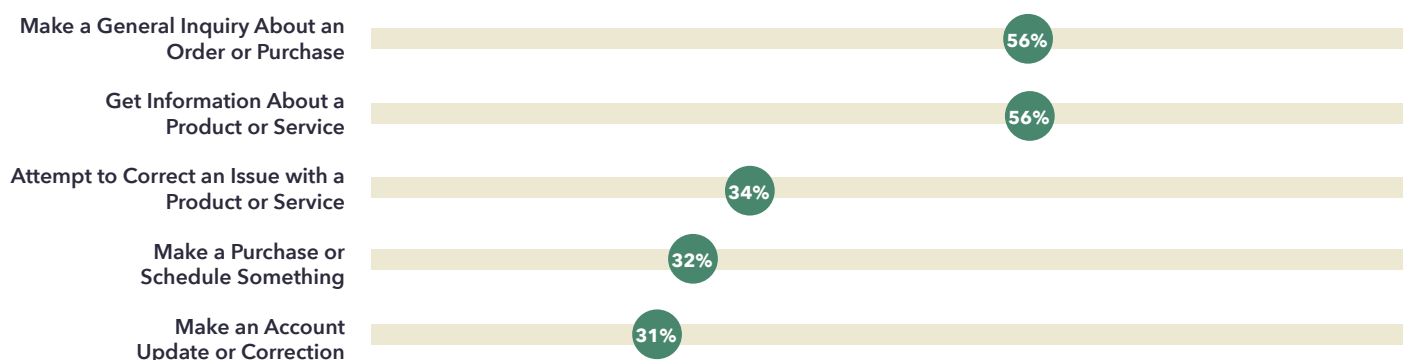


AI-POWERED CUSTOMER CARE

CONSUMER COMFORT WITH AI

Consumers are most (and equally) comfortable using AI for general inquiries or to get information about a product or service (both at 56%); that comfort drops to 34% for correcting an issue, 32% for purchases or scheduling, and 31% for account updates or corrections. This pattern establishes a natural progression for AI autonomy from lower-risk information to higher-consequence actions. It mirrors channel preferences elsewhere, where automation and digital options perform best for simple work while human help dominates complex or uncertain situations (page 32). CX leaders can use these preferences to sequence implementation ... to prove accuracy and trust incrementally, then expand transaction authority as controls, data access, and customer confidence mature.

Of the following tasks, which would you feel comfortable doing with the aid of an AI-powered solution? (Select all that apply.)



How does your organization determine which customer interactions are best suited for AI and where human expertise continues to add the most value?

In many ways, deploying AI in the contact center is the logical place to start in your business — high volume, transactional, easy to measure, and the potential for high impact. Even so, we began with a discipline that sounds obvious but can be surprisingly rare: we never deploy AI for the sake of AI. Our automation decisions begin with a real business problem worth solving, focusing on high-volume, low-complexity transactions — transactions with a binary outcome — to increase the likelihood of a correct resolution.

For us, that problem was clear: our member base is growing, contact volume grows with it, and doubling our customer service spend is not an option. We launched with three workflows that fit our “problem worth solving” profile, restricting AI agents to those alone, then expanded to everything else that fit the definition.



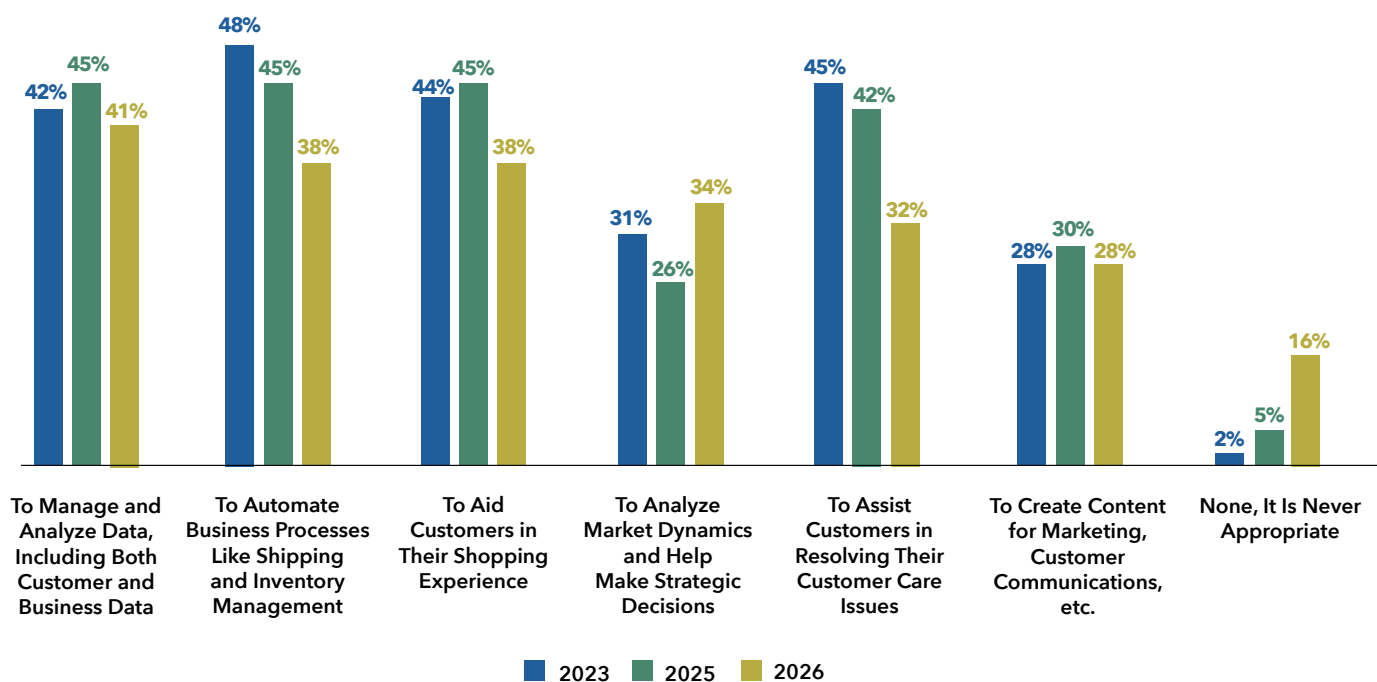
Most AI projects fail not because the technology falls short, but because no one captured how people actually make decisions before automating them. Human expertise adds the most value where customer questions get complicated: interactions requiring judgment, empathy, and interpretation — the ambiguous request, the frustrated member, the exception the rules cannot anticipate. Automating transactional work doesn't diminish the human role; it protects it.



Lisa Oswald
Senior Vice President and Global Head of Member Services

Compared with prior years, consumer acceptance of AI declined across several prominent use cases; business-process automation fell to 38%, shopping assistance to 38%, and customer-care resolution to 32%. At the same time, the percentage saying AI is never appropriate rose sharply from 2% in 2023 and 5% in 2025 to 16% in 2026. Market analysis is the exception, increasing to 34%. This creates an important tension with the separate finding that 67% are comfortable with AI independently resolving an issue (page 60). Consumers appear open to effective AI outcomes without granting brands blanket approval to deploy AI everywhere. That fits the wider research, where only 27% say current AI greatly benefits customer care (page 55), and it cannot be overstated that human access is the most important safety net whenever AI is involved.

In your opinion, in which of the following scenarios is it appropriate for brands to utilize chatbots, generative content, and other AI-powered solutions and technologies? (Select all that apply.)

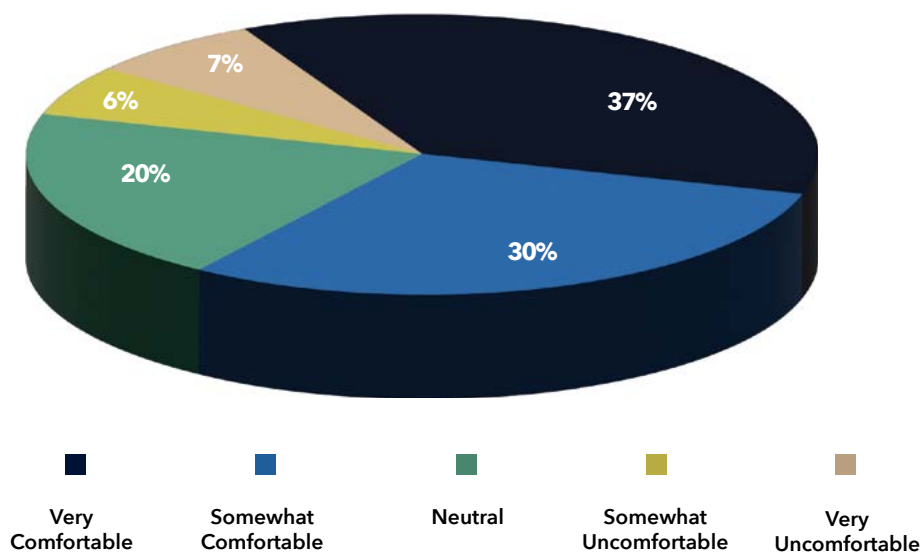




COMFORT WITH AN END-TO-END AI EXPERIENCE

Two-thirds of consumers (67%) are “Very Comfortable” or “Somewhat Comfortable” with an AI-powered customer service assistant completely resolving an issue without human involvement, while only 13% are uncomfortable. This is one of the strongest indicators that consumer acceptance is moving beyond a chatbot-versus-agent debate. The rest of this AI section clarifies the conditions; autonomous resolution must be accurate, easy, secure, and backed by easy access to human help when needed. For CX leaders, the strategic question is no longer simply whether consumers will accept autonomous AI. It is where autonomy can be deployed responsibly, what guardrails are required, and which metrics prove it is improving resolution rates, reducing effort, building confidence, and cultivating trust.

If an AI-powered customer service assistant could completely resolve your issue without human involvement, how comfortable would you be with that experience?



Consumers are increasingly comfortable with AI. What capabilities, governance, and safeguards do you believe organizations need before attempting fully autonomous CX?

“

The data is encouraging: 67% of consumers are comfortable with AI fully resolving their issues. But in enterprise B2B, the bar is different. Our customers are tax and compliance professionals managing significant financial and regulatory risk. A wrong answer isn't just frustrating — it can lead to a filing error, a penalty, or audit exposure.



Before we get to fully autonomous CX, there are a few things we need to get right. The AI must know the domain, not just sound like it does. We need to know when to bring a human into the conversation and make that handoff seamless (that's been a huge focus for us in 2026). And we need the right governance in place to understand where AI is performing well, where it isn't, and improve quickly.

There's obviously a big efficiency opportunity with AI in CX. But for me, the more interesting opportunity is trust. If we can make the experience faster and easier without asking customers to trade away confidence in the answer, that's when AI can become extremely powerful.

SOVOS

Mark McKercher
VP, Global Support

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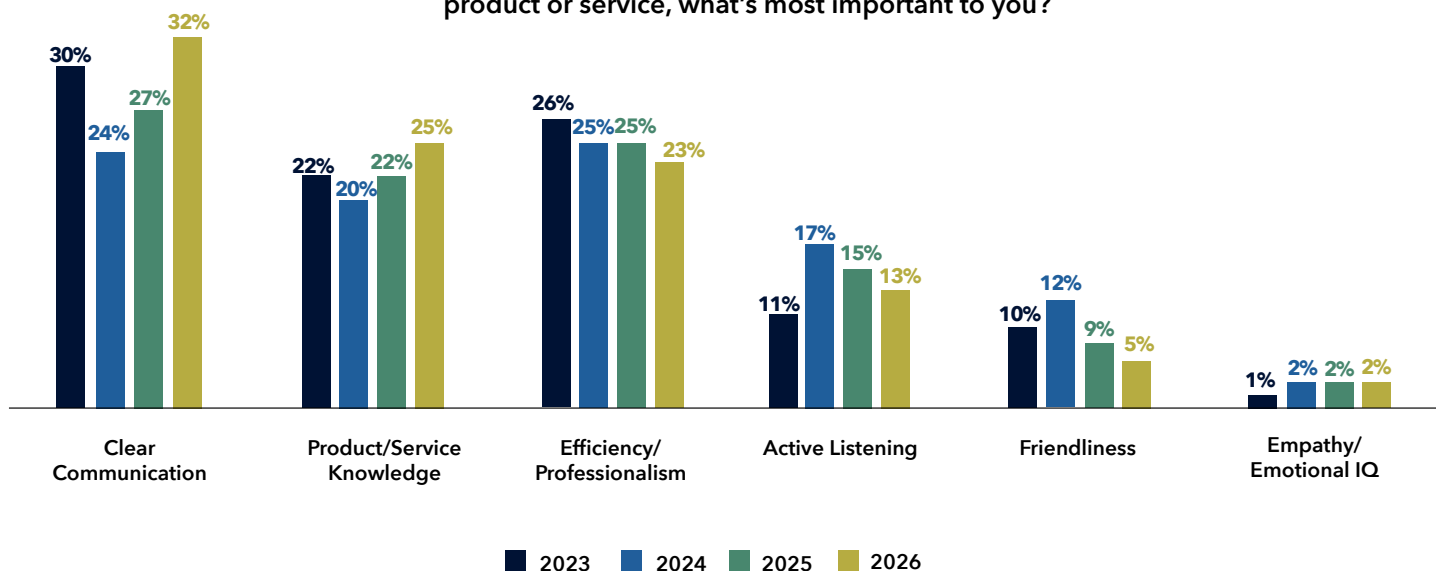


THE HUMAN ELEMENT

WHAT IS MOST IMPORTANT AND WHERE IS TRAINING NEEDED MOST

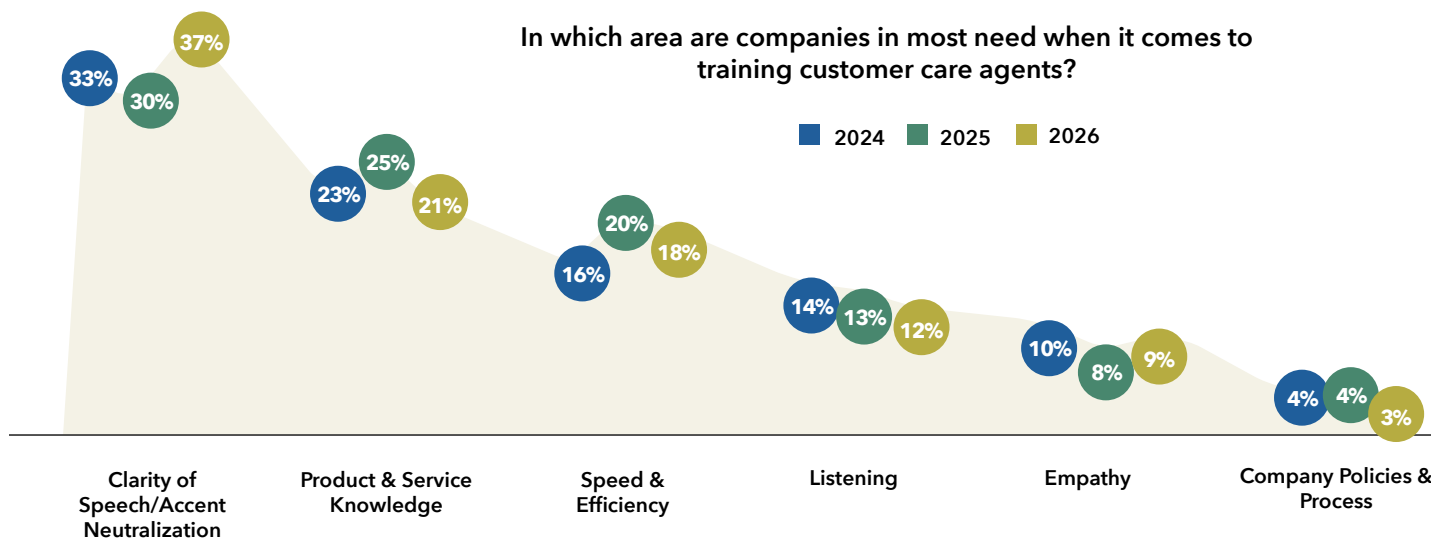
“Clear Communication” is the frontrunner in what is most important to consumers when resolving an issue, with 32% naming it the most important, followed by “Product/Service Knowledge” at 25% and “Efficiency/Professionalism” at 23%. Consumers appear to define human value increasingly through competence and clarity. That does not make empathy irrelevant (85% still say empathy matters [page 64]), but it suggests customers first need an agent who understands, explains, and resolves. As automation absorbs more routine work, CX leaders should consider preparing agents for the interactions AI cannot easily handle by strengthening communication, knowledge, judgment, empowerment, problem-solving, and ownership.

When talking to a customer care agent to resolve an issue with a product or service, what's most important to you?



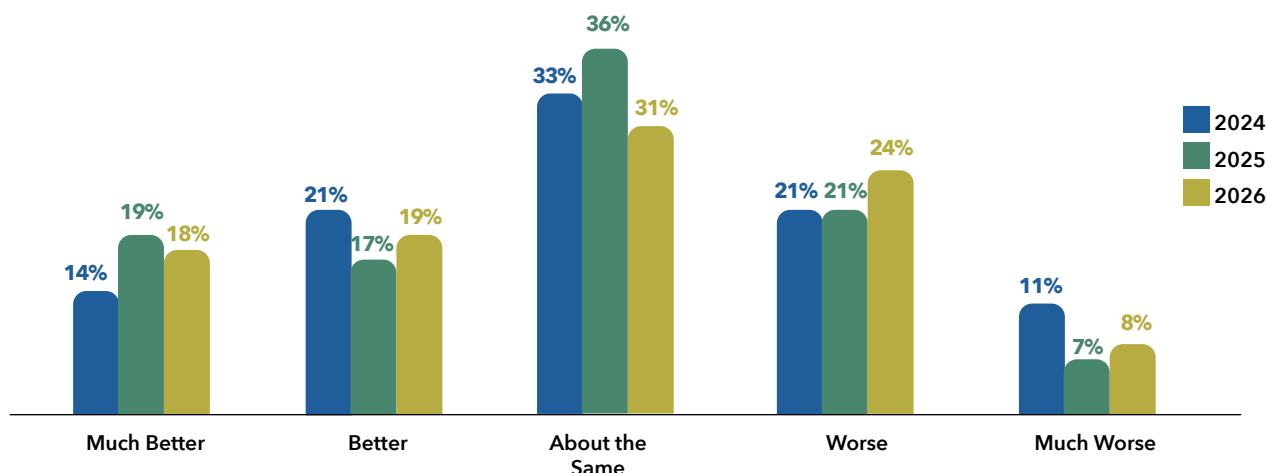
“Clarity of Speech/Accent Neutralization” (37%) is on the rise in the minds of consumers, once again topping all other areas of interest when it comes to training customer care agents. These training priorities reinforce the wider report theme that being understood and receiving clear, accurate information are central to confidence. They also connect with the findings on language fluency (page 71) and accent-related negative experiences (page 71). CX leaders should consider broadening agent development beyond product scripts. Communication coaching, knowledge access, real-time assistance, quality feedback, and tools that improve comprehension and problem solving can all increase both operational effectiveness and customer confidence.

In which area are companies in most need when it comes to training customer care agents?



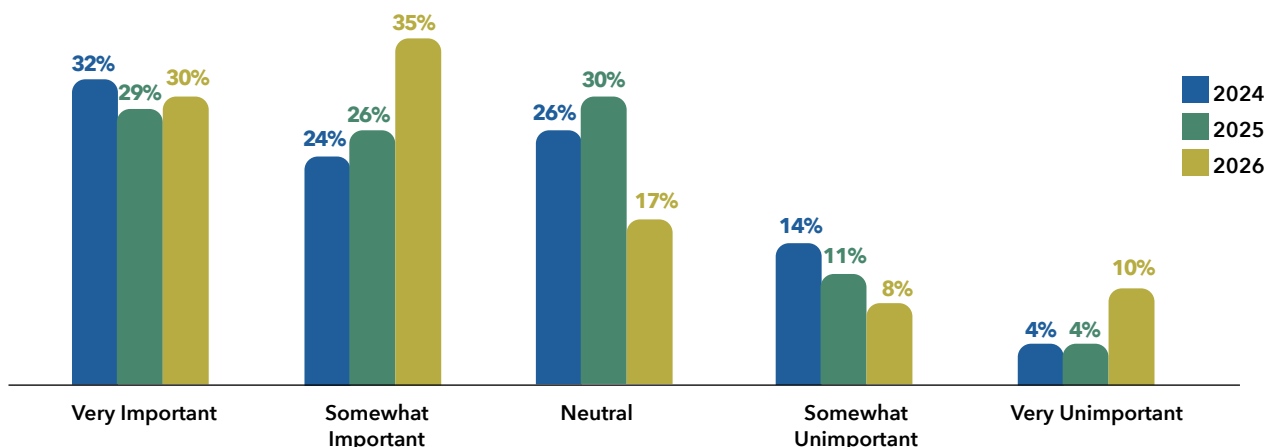
Consumer opinion of agent performance is mixed with slightly more respondents (37%) saying agents have improved versus worsened (32%) over the last three to four years, while 31% see no change. The lack of a decisive improvement suggests investments in training, tools, and enablement are producing uneven outcomes across brands. This is notable because consumers still identify agent capabilities as one of the strongest ways to make service easier, which should place training at the top of future CX investment priorities. CX leaders should consider connecting enablement investments to customer-observed outcomes such as clarity, knowledge, resolution, authority, and repetition rather than assuming new tools or training automatically translate into better experiences.

Do you think customer care agents have gotten better or worse at their jobs over the past 3-4 years?



Two-thirds of consumers (65%) say it is either “Very Important” or “Somewhat Important” to deal with the same customer care agent each time, a meaningful increase from the prior year. The preference likely reflects consumers’ desire to preserve context and avoid the effort of retelling their story at the start of each new interaction. It aligns with high frustration around repeating information (page 50) and tracks against the importance placed on agents knowing customer history (page 64). Organizations cannot always provide one-agent ownership, but they can reproduce the same benefits through better continuity across channels. CX leaders should ensure case history, prior commitments, notes, status, and attempted solutions are visible to every employee who touches the issue so the customer experiences one coherent relationship, and one seamless end-to-end journey.

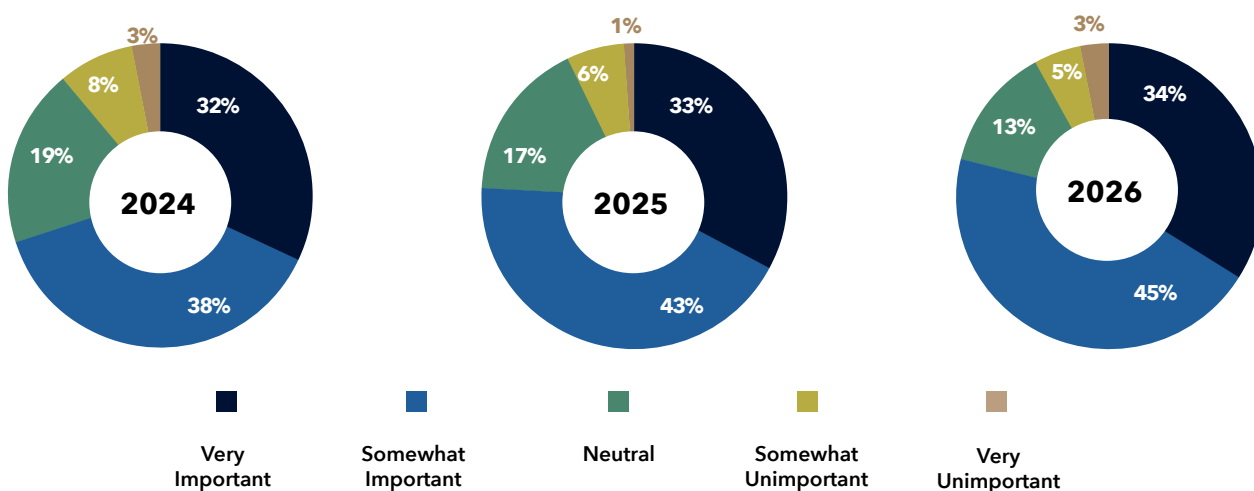
In dealing with a brand, how important is it for you to deal with the same customer care agent each time?



KNOWING THE CUSTOMER AND THE IMPORTANCE OF EMPATHY

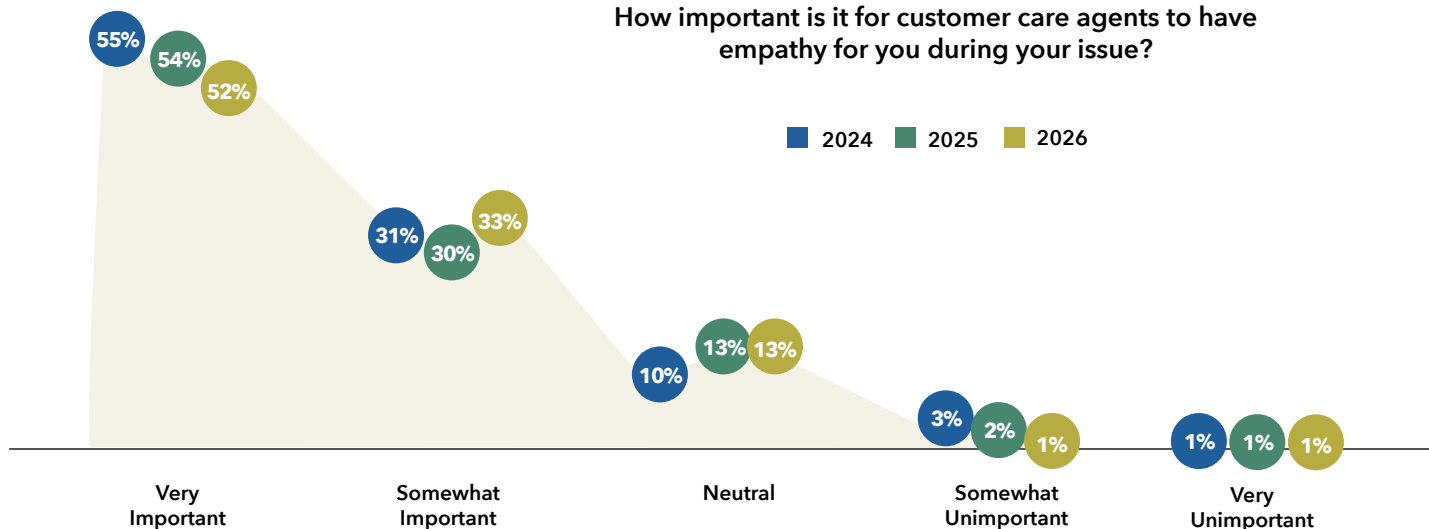
Seventy-nine percent of consumers say it is very or somewhat important for agents to know their customer history, purchase history, and details of prior interactions. Consumers are asking for context that reduces effort and demonstrates the company recognizes the relationship. This finding connects directly with personalization data, where recognition of loyalty and history is the strongest trust-building form of personalization (page 17), and with repetition as a major confidence killer (page 14). Prioritizing usable context at the point of service creates the sense that a company cares about its customers beyond a business metric. Agents and AI need concise, relevant history, current case status, and prior promises so customers don't have to serve as their own advocates.

In dealing with a brand to resolve a customer care issue, how important is it for the agent to know you, your customer history, purchase history, and the details of any prior interactions you've had?



Agent empathy remains an important consideration for consumers, with 85% saying it is "Very Important" or "Somewhat Important." This result is best understood as table stakes rather than the sole definition of great service. Customers want to feel understood, but they also expect the agent to communicate clearly, know the product, and move the issue toward resolution. CX leaders should coach empathy as part of a plan for effective problem-solving. Consumers want agents to listen, acknowledge impact, and adapt communication to the situation at hand rather than read from a script assigned to explain a specific policy or process.

How important is it for customer care agents to have empathy for you during your issue?

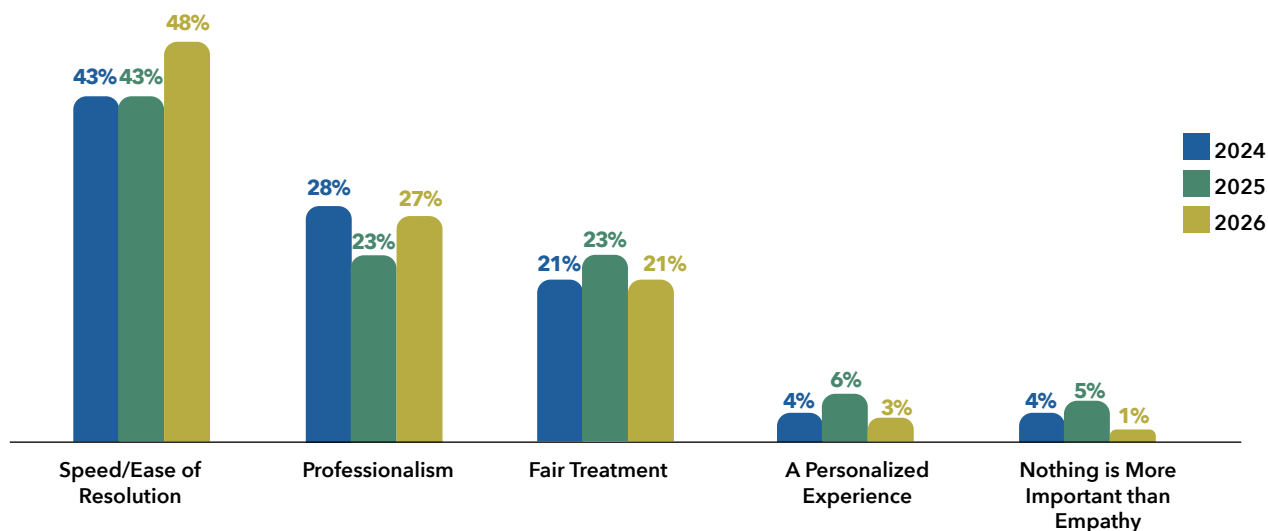


THE HUMAN ELEMENT

THE IMPORTANCE OF EMPATHY

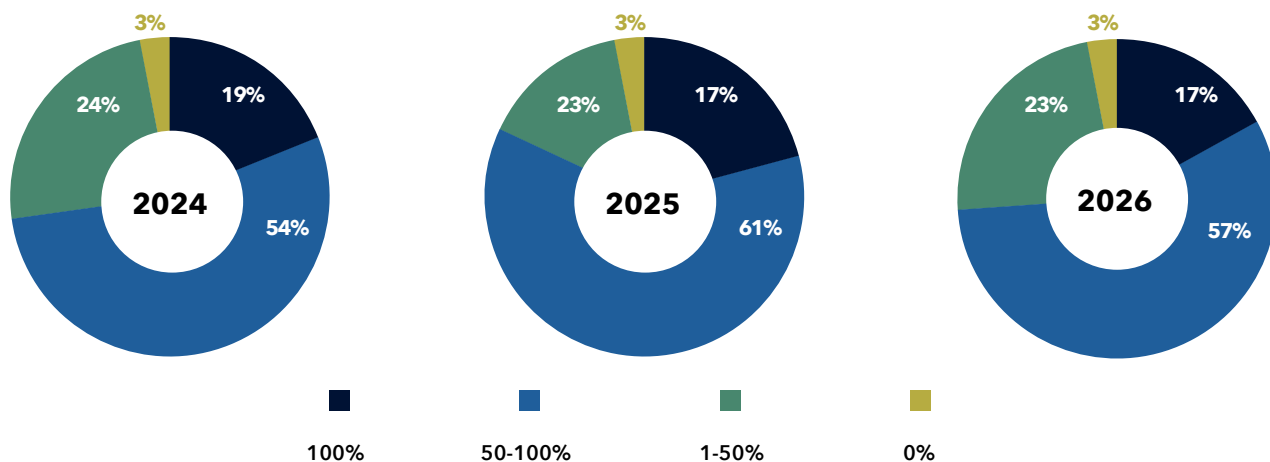
In 2026, "Speed/Ease of Resolution" is more important than empathy for 48% of consumers, followed at a distance by "Professionalism" and "Fair Treatment." Only a small minority (1%) say nothing is more important than empathy. This result provides a useful balance to the high overall importance consumers place on empathetic behavior. In many interactions, customers may appreciate empathy but judge success more heavily on whether the problem is solved efficiently and fairly. In other words, brands should avoid turning empathy into a substitute for competence. The strongest agent experiences combine understanding with action; acknowledge the customer, explain clearly, apply judgment, and deliver a fair, efficient outcome.

Which of the following is more important to you than empathy in resolving a customer care issue?



Most consumers say empathy becomes the most important agent characteristic in at least some customer service interactions, but relatively few (17%) say it is the dominant need in every interaction. This reinforces the situational nature of empathy. Routine transactional needs may reward speed and accuracy, while emotionally charged, high-stakes, or vulnerable moments demand more human understanding. CX leaders should use journey context to determine where empathy deserves greater weight. Applying the same behavioral standard to every interaction can be less effective than recognizing when the customer's emotional state or a particular issue type calls for a different, more empathetic style of care.

Compared to Speed, Ease of Resolution, Fair Treatment, etc., in what percentage of your engagements do you think empathy is the most important characteristic?

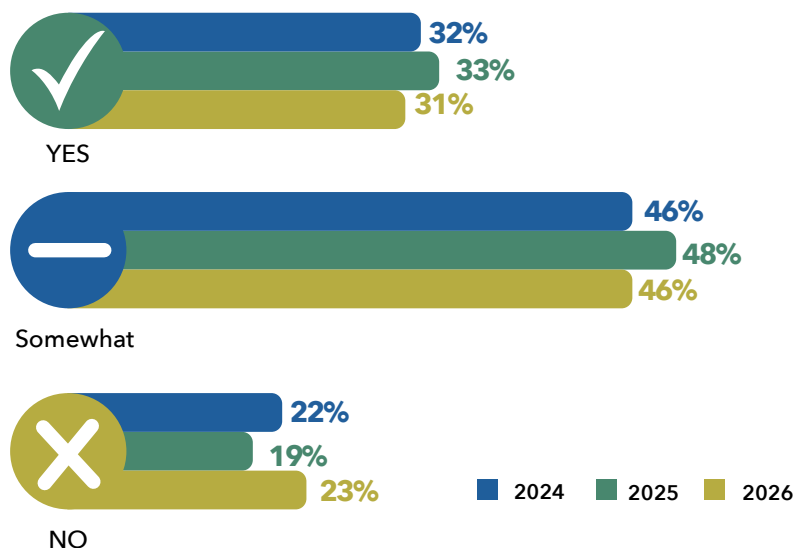




AGENT EMPOWERMENT AND BOTHERSOME CHARACTERISTICS

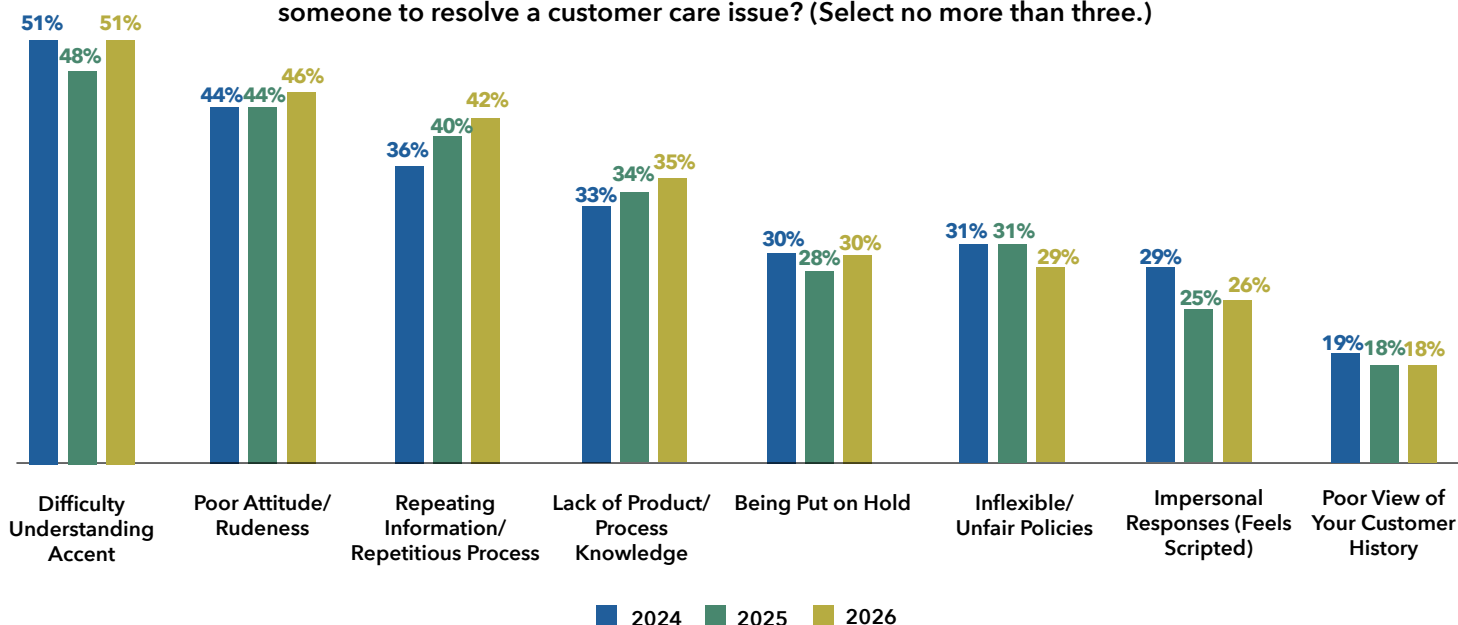
About a third of consumers feel companies do a good job empowering agents to act in ways that benefit the customer, with another 46% indicating “Somewhat.” These results suggest policy, authority, process, or system constraints still regularly limit frontline ownership. That matters because lack of accountability is a huge factor in permanently damaging trust (page 21), and fair resolution is the leading way to earn a second chance after a failure (page 21). CX leaders should review approval thresholds, policy exceptions, and goodwill assignments. Ultimately, advocacy, simplicity, and fairness are what customers seek most.

Do you feel companies generally do a good job of empowering their customer care agents to act in a way that benefits you as a customer?



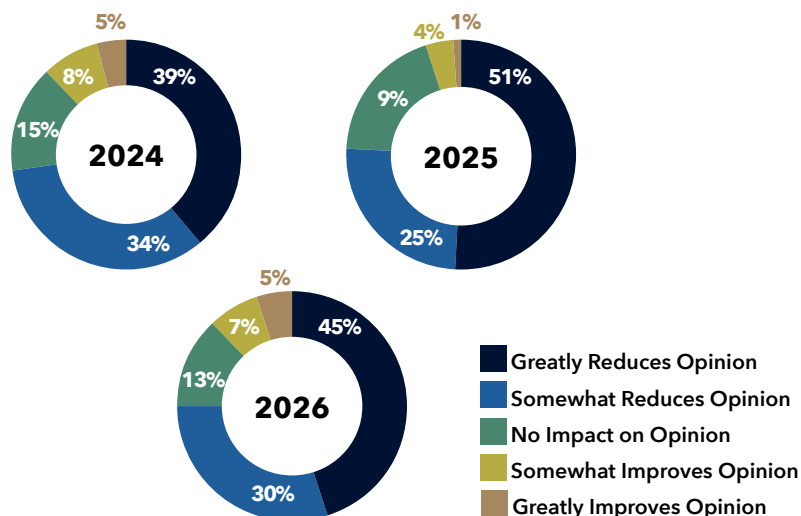
Once again, consumer difficulty in understanding accents (51%) ranks as the most common bothersome agent characteristic, followed by “Poor Attitude/Rudeness” (46%) and “Repeating Information/Repetitious Process” (42%). The wider list spans communication, behavior, knowledge, process, and technology. It reinforces why the Human Element cannot be improved through training alone. Agents need clear communication skills, usable knowledge, reasonable policies, good tools, and context. CX leaders should consider using quality monitoring and customer feedback to separate coachable behaviors from systemic causes. Fixing the environment around the agent may be as important as coaching the agent.

Which of the following characteristics do you find to be most bothersome when speaking to someone to resolve a customer care issue? (Select no more than three.)



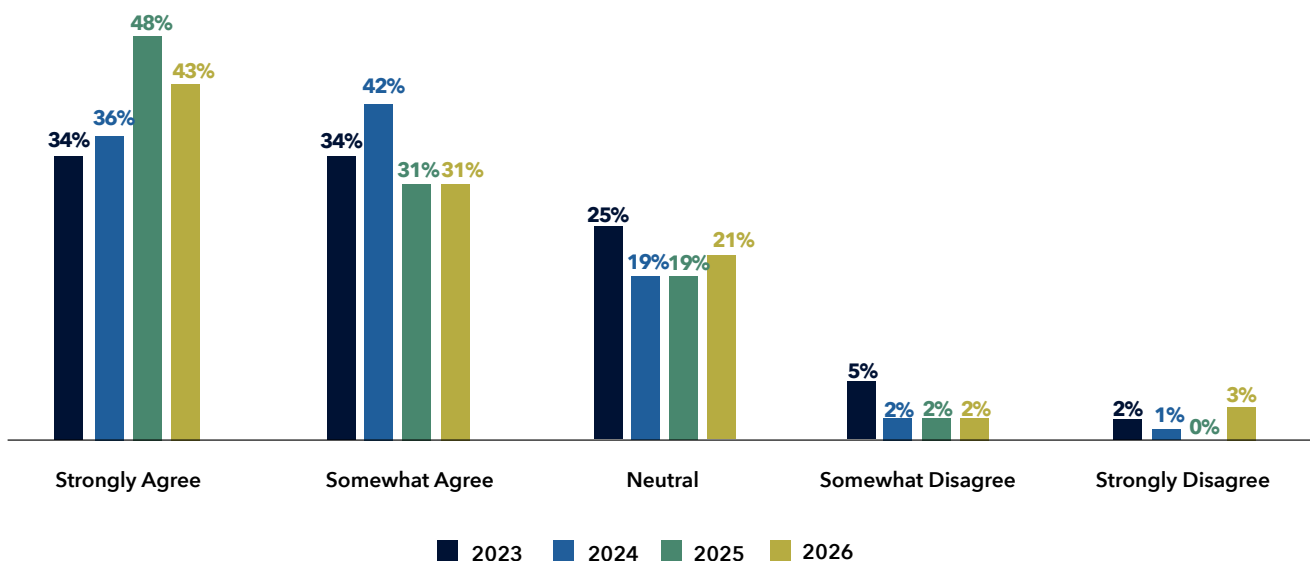
Three-quarters of consumers say their opinion of a company is reduced when technology and automation are used to deflect them away from a live agent until other options have been exhausted. This does not contradict growing acceptance of AI. In fact, it distinguishes chosen automation from forced containment. Consumers are willing to use self-help and autonomous AI when it works and when it is an option and not a mandate, but they react negatively when the technology becomes a barrier to getting the help they believe they need. Perhaps deflection should be measured from the customer's perspective. A good digital journey guides customers efficiently to resolution. A poor one traps them. Escalation should be available based on complexity, failure, emotion, or customer choice.

What impact does it have on your opinion of a company when they use technology and automation to deflect you away from a live agent until all other options have been exhausted?



A large majority of consumers (74%) agree that it is important for customer care agents to be passionate about the brands they represent, although the conviction has fluctuated over time. Consumers appear to value authenticity and engagement, but the broader Human Element results show passion alone is not enough. Clear communication, knowledge, professionalism, context, and resolution carry greater direct weight in the service interaction. A passionate agent is more valuable when that passion is paired with the knowledge, authority, and tools needed to act on that commitment and deliver a confident outcome.

How do you feel about the following statement: It is important for customer care agents to be very passionate about the brands they represent.

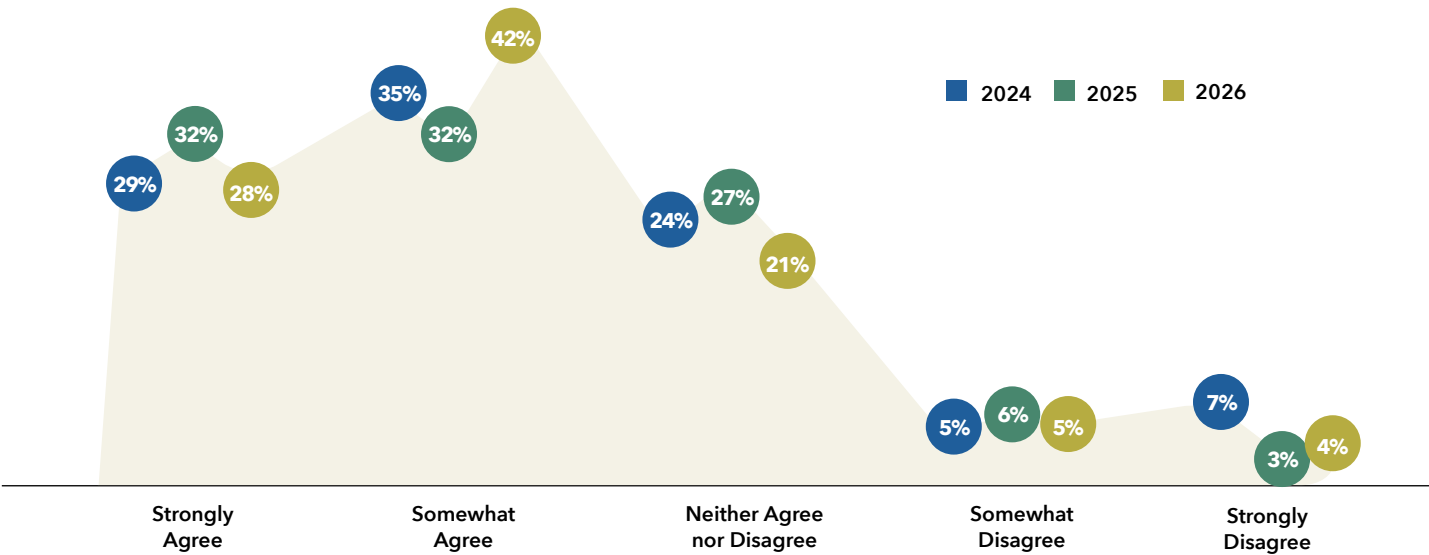




PAYING MORE FOR BETTER AGENT TREATMENT

Most consumers (70%) agree they would be willing to pay a little more for a product or service if they knew employees would be paid more and treated better, including 42% who somewhat agree and 28% who strongly agree. Stated willingness does not always translate directly into purchase behavior, but the result shows consumers make a connection between employee experience and customer experience. That connection fits the strong preference for better-trained, capable, empowered frontline employees throughout the report. CX leaders can use these insights to support investments in compensation, coaching, career development, tools, and work design as part of the customer value proposition rather than treating employee experience as an unrelated HR issue.

How do you feel about the following statement: I would be willing to pay a little more for a product/service if I knew it meant employees would be paid more and treated better?



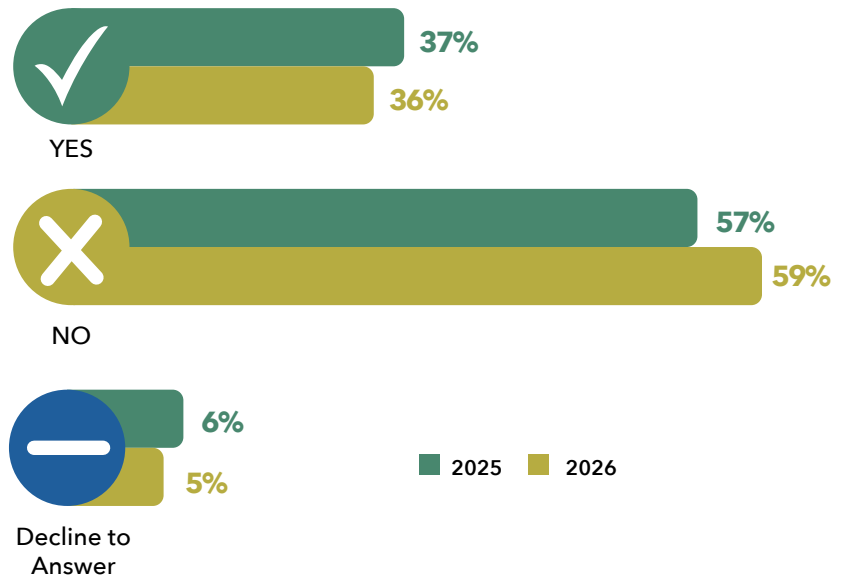


INCLUSIVE CUSTOMER EXPERIENCES

EXISTING DISABILITY AND ACCESSIBILITY

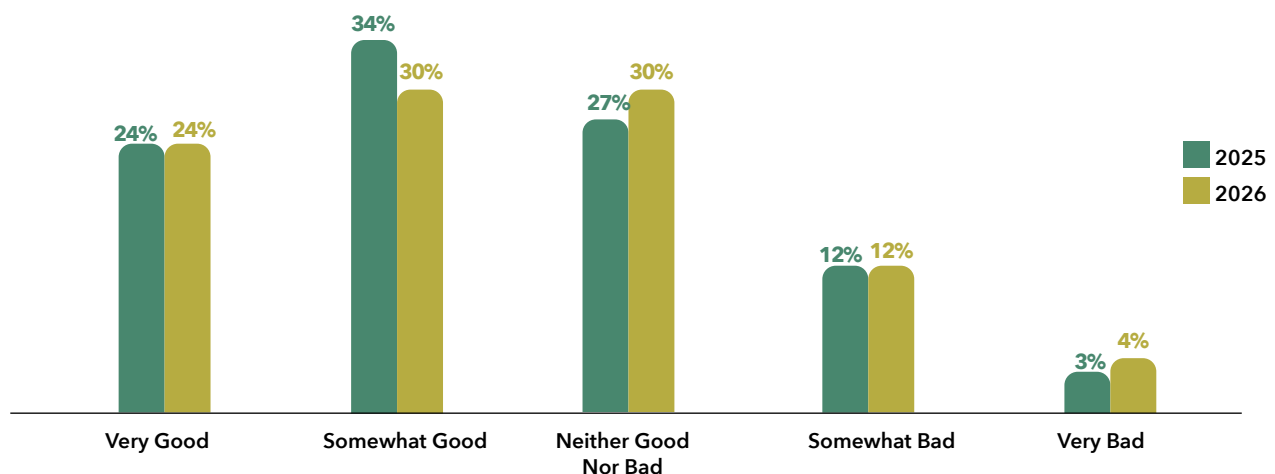
Thirty-six percent of consumers say they or someone in their household lives with a disability or other condition that might require special assistance when working with a brand to resolve a support issue. That makes accessibility a mainstream customer experience requirement rather than a narrow edge case. CX leaders should consider designing accessibility into channels, authentication, communication, and escalation processes from the beginning. Flexible formats, assistive-technology compatibility, language support, and easy access to humans can reduce friction while also improving experiences for customers both with and without disabilities.

Are you or anyone in your household living with a disability or other condition that might require special assistance when working with a brand to resolve a customer support issue?

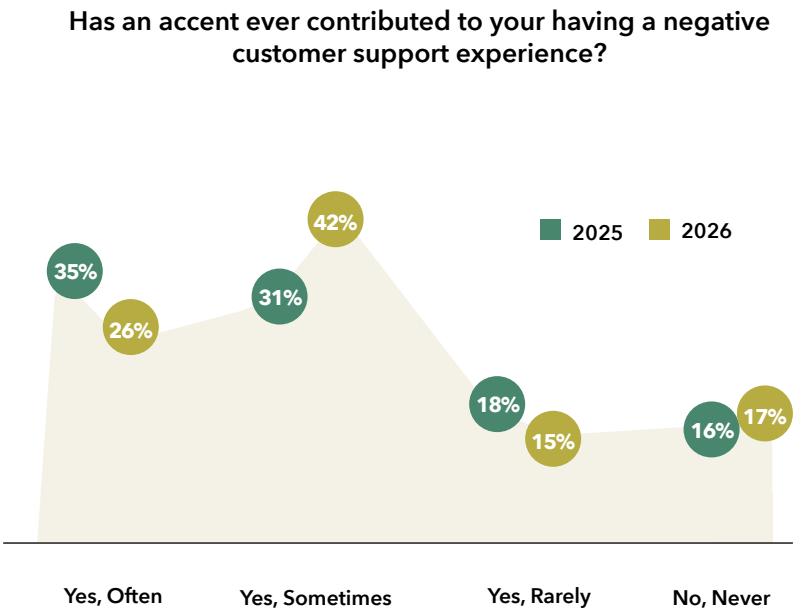


Over half of consumers (54%) rate companies as doing a “Very Good” or “Somewhat Good” job making customer support accessible and inclusive, while a meaningful minority (46%) remain neutral or rate performance poorly. The result shows progress is incomplete relative to the scale of customer need. A process that is merely inconvenient for one customer can be effectively unusable for another. CX leaders should consider evaluating accessibility by journey and channel, test with diverse users, and monitor outcomes such as abandonment, transfer, repeat contact, and resolution. Inclusive design should be treated as quality engineering, not simply a compliance checklist.

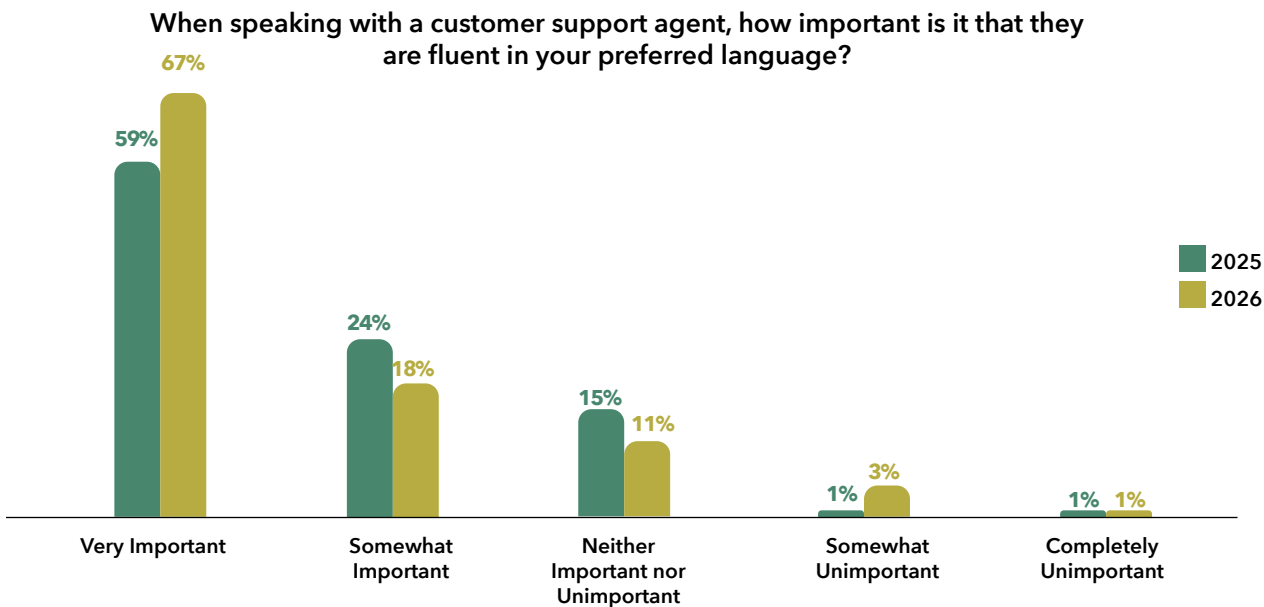
How are companies doing at making customer support accessible and inclusive for all types of people (e.g., non-English speakers, disabled customers, the elderly)?



Most consumers (68%) say an accent has contributed to a negative customer support experience at least occasionally, with 26% saying often. The issue is fundamentally about mutual understanding rather than accent elimination. It connects with clarity of speech and communication becoming the top agent training priorities (page 62) and with the report-wide importance of accurate, consistent information. CX leaders might consider focusing on communication effectiveness through language proficiency, speech-support technology, coaching, routing, and real-time assistance. The goal is to ensure customers and agents can understand one another reliably while respecting a diverse workforce. This is a useful benchmark for tracking whether future investments improve the experience customers actually feel.



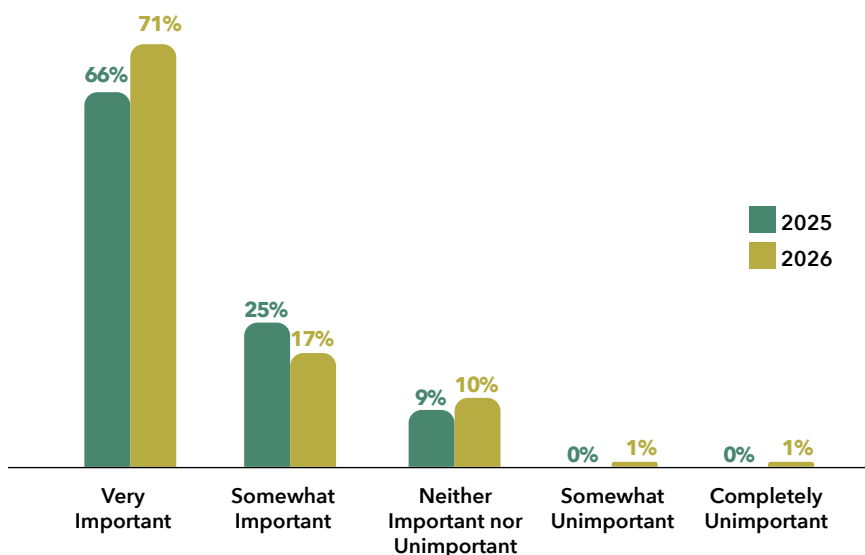
Eighty-five percent of consumers say it is “Very Important” or “Somewhat Important” for customer support agents to be fluent in the customer’s preferred language, including 67% who say “Very Important.” Language access is therefore both an inclusion issue and a core service-quality expectation. The finding aligns with the broader emphasis on clear communication as a confidence builder and with consumers’ desire to avoid repeating or re-explaining information. CX leaders should think about language demand by customer segment and journey, then combine multilingual staffing, translation technology, routing, quality assurance, and terminology standards so fluency supports accurate resolution rather than merely basic conversation. This is a useful benchmark for tracking whether future investments improve the experience customers have.



FAIR TREATMENT AND IMPACT OF EXCLUSION

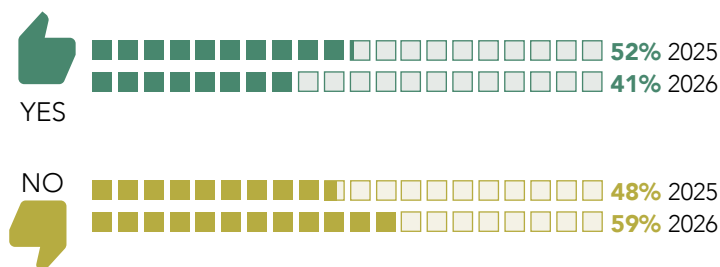
Eighty-eight percent of consumers say it is “Very Important” or “Somewhat Important” that companies treat all customers fairly regardless of background or identity. “Fair Treatment” is also a prominent customer expectation elsewhere in this report (pages 28 and 65). Consumers are therefore evaluating inclusion not only through representation or public statements but through the practical fairness of policies, decisions, and outcomes. It is important to understand whether or not all customers receive comparable access, explanations, remedies, and escalation opportunities. Fairness should be embedded in a company’s policy design, quality monitoring, AI governance, and frontline decision-making.

How important is it to you that companies treat all customers fairly, regardless of background or identity?

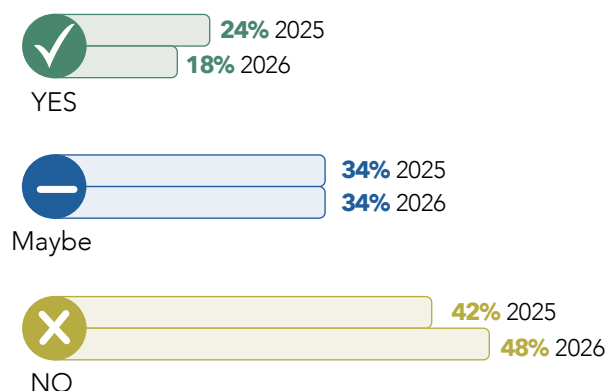


Forty-one percent of consumers say they have felt excluded, misunderstood, or mistreated by customer support based on identity (down from 52% in 2025). Although this is an encouraging improvement, there is still a substantial impact on the marketplace in this key area. The business impact is also clear with nearly half of consumers (48%) saying they would not purchase from or work with a company again after such an experience. Together, the findings position inclusive CX as both an experience and loyalty issue. Failures tied to language, disability, age, race, gender, or other identity factors can compound broader problems with access, communication, and fairness, ultimately eroding trust and retention at the individual level. Strategically, the priority should be identifying patterns by customer group, channel, journey, and outcome, then improving accessible design, inclusive training, fair policy application, and recovery when customers feel dismissed, misunderstood, or treated unfairly.

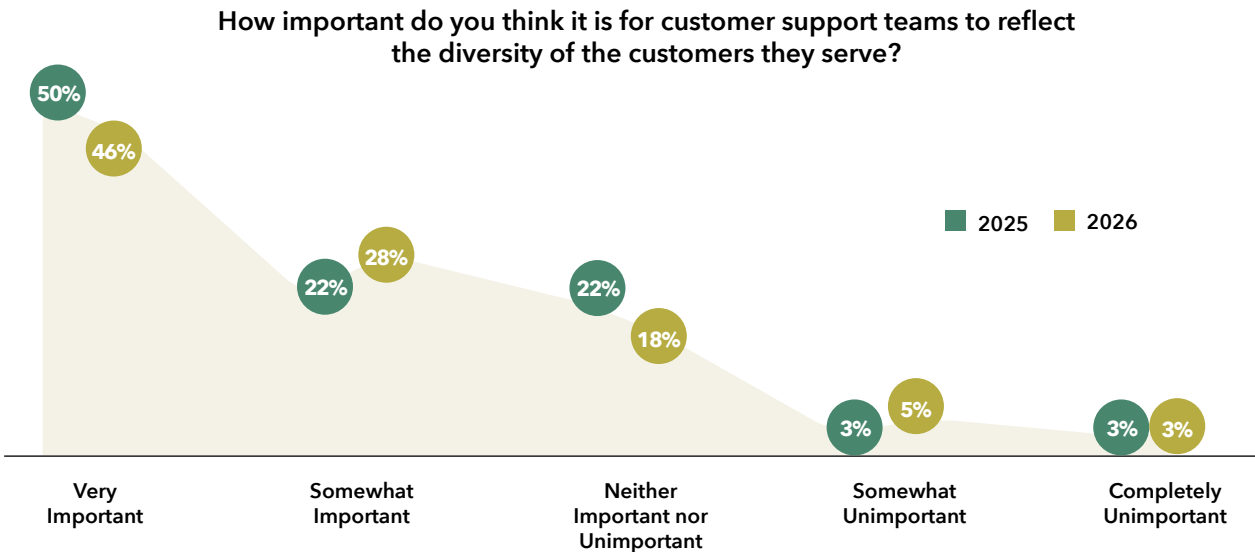
Do you feel you’ve ever been excluded, misunderstood, or mistreated by a company’s customer support operations based on your identity (e.g., race, gender, age, disability, sexual orientation, etc.)?



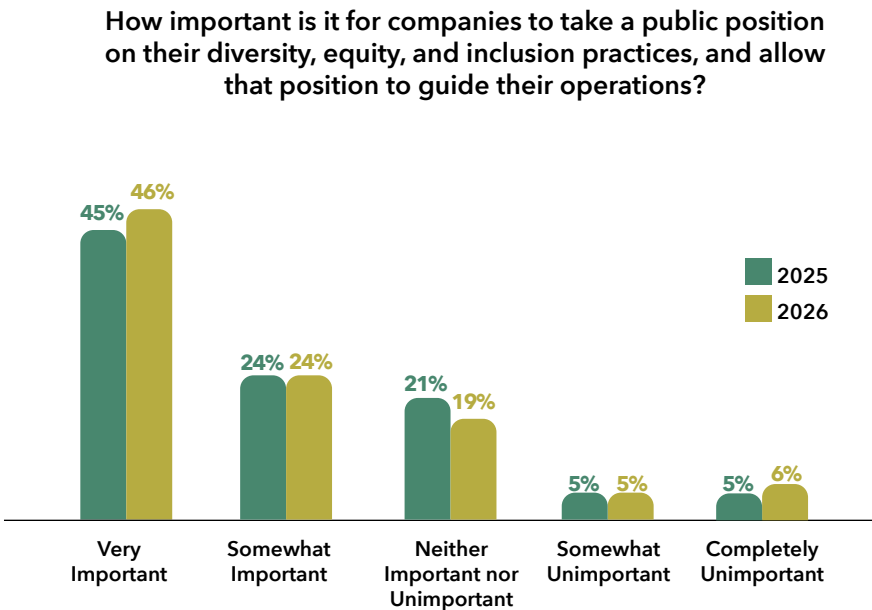
If you felt excluded, misunderstood, or mistreated by a company because of your identity, would you purchase or work with said company again?



Three-fourths (74%) of consumers say it is “Very Important” or “Somewhat Important” for customer support teams to reflect the diversity of the customers they serve. Representation matters because it signals understanding, legitimacy, and connection, but findings elsewhere in this section suggest it is only one part of inclusive experience. Language fluency, accessibility, fair treatment, and consistent outcomes ultimately determine whether customers feel included in practice. CX leaders should consider viewing workforce representation alongside inclusive hiring, coaching, accessibility, and quality processes. Diversity has the greatest customer value when it is paired with an operating environment that allows employees to understand different needs and deliver equitable service.

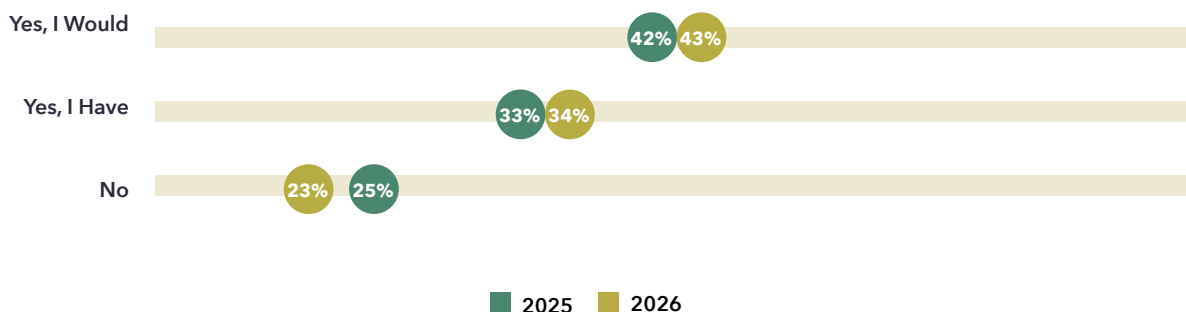


A clear majority of consumers (70%) say it is important for companies to take a public position on diversity, equity, and inclusion and allow that position to guide operations. That makes customer care one of the places where corporate commitments become tangible through language access, accessibility, representation, policy fairness, and recovery. While CX leaders may not own enterprise positioning, they can help ensure service practices are consistent with it. Misalignment between public values and customer treatment can undermine credibility and trust.



Forty-three percent of consumers say they would avoid doing business with a company because they disagreed with its position on diversity, equity, and inclusion, while 34% say they have already done so and only 23% say no. The finding demonstrates that corporate values can influence purchasing behavior, but it also highlights the complexity of serving a diverse customer base with differing beliefs. For CX leaders, perhaps the most controllable dimension is consistent treatment. Regardless of broader corporate positioning, customer-facing operations should remain respectful, accessible, fair, and aligned with published standards. Strong CX cannot eliminate value disagreements, but it can prevent service interactions from adding unnecessary exclusion or distrust.

Would you or have you ever avoided doing business with a company because you disagreed with their position on matters related to diversity, equity, and inclusion?

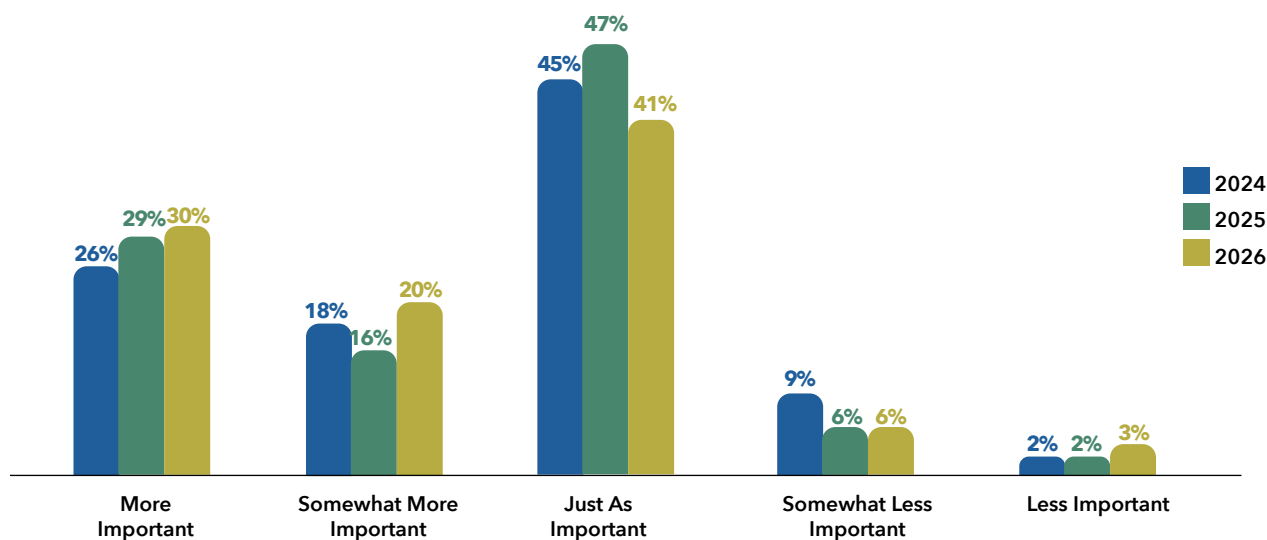




THE FUTURE OF CUSTOMER EXPERIENCES

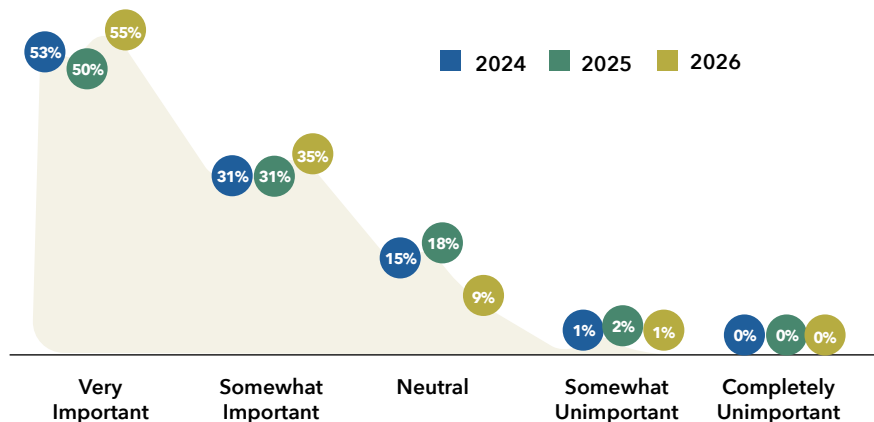
Ninety-one percent of consumers feel improving customer experience is just as or more important as other priorities such as product improvement and cost reduction, with only a small minority (9%) putting CX below other priorities. Consumers clearly view service as part of the core value proposition rather than a secondary support function. That perspective is reinforced by findings linking confidence and great care to trust, loyalty, and continued business. CX leaders can use this customer-based mandate to argue for balanced decision-making — while efficiency and product quality matter, investments that undermine access, resolution, or trust may create hidden costs in retention, brand value, and trust.

How important is it for a company to focus its resources and energies on improving the customer experience versus other priorities like product improvements and cost reductions?



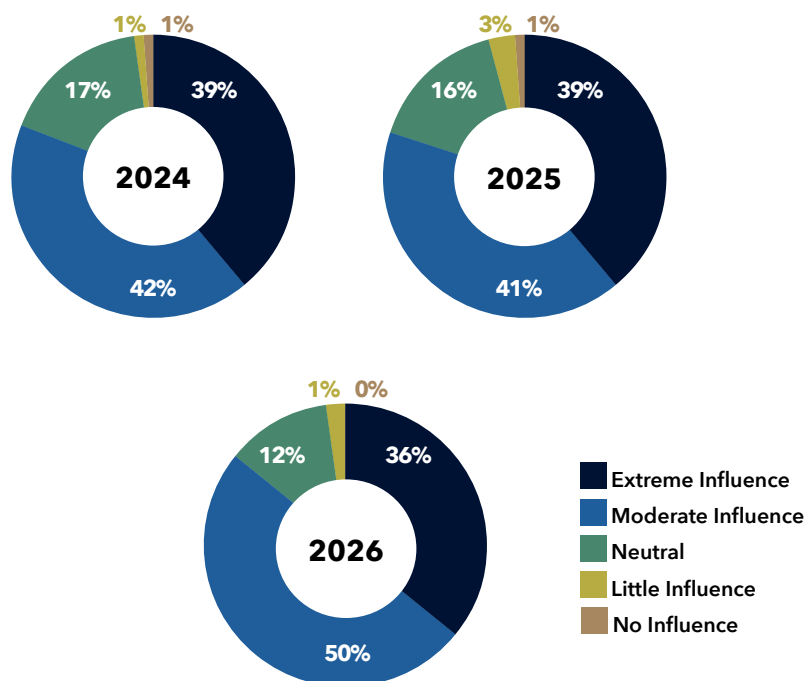
Ninety percent of consumers say it is “Very Important” or “Somewhat Important” for customer care and CX organizations to have influence within a company, up materially from 81% in 2025. Consumers appear to recognize that their experience is shaped by decisions made far beyond the contact center. Product design, billing, fulfillment, policy, technology, and operations all create the conditions that service teams must later manage. For CX leaders, this finding supports a stronger upstream role. Customer insights should inform enterprise decisions before friction is designed into the journey, not only after complaints arrive. Influence is most valuable when CX can connect cross-functional choices to customer confidence, effort, loyalty, and commercial outcomes.

How important is it for customer care and customer experience organizations to have influence within a company?



How much influence do you think customer experience and the customer care organization should have within a company?

Eighty-six percent of consumers believe customer experience and customer care should have “Moderate Influence” or “Extreme Influence” within a company, while only a small minority (1%) favor little or no influence. This complements the importance question (previous page) and turns it into a governance statement: Consumers expect CX to have a meaningful voice in how the enterprise operates. CX leaders should consider using journey evidence and consumer benchmarks to shape upstream priorities, bringing the customer perspective into product, process, policy, technology, and investment decisions rather than serving only as the downstream recovery function.



Customer care is increasingly recognized as a strategic function. How has your organization elevated the influence of CX in driving broader business decisions and priorities?

“

It's critical for all cross functional leaders to stay close to their Consumer and Customer Care Teams. The advancements we have seen in recent years with technology and analytics make it possible for both Service and Support teams to now have more influence than ever before. These groups are finding new ways to help organizations build strategies that yield bigger wins for the business as well as the end user. At Carhartt, we have used our Insights to support several cross functional collaborations that delivered both efficiencies and savings, that ultimately started with an opportunity identified within the contact center. Without the support of our peers across the organization, we would not be able to action and drive the values and outcomes that continually improve our brand experience.



Angela Bragg
VP, Consumer and Customer Care

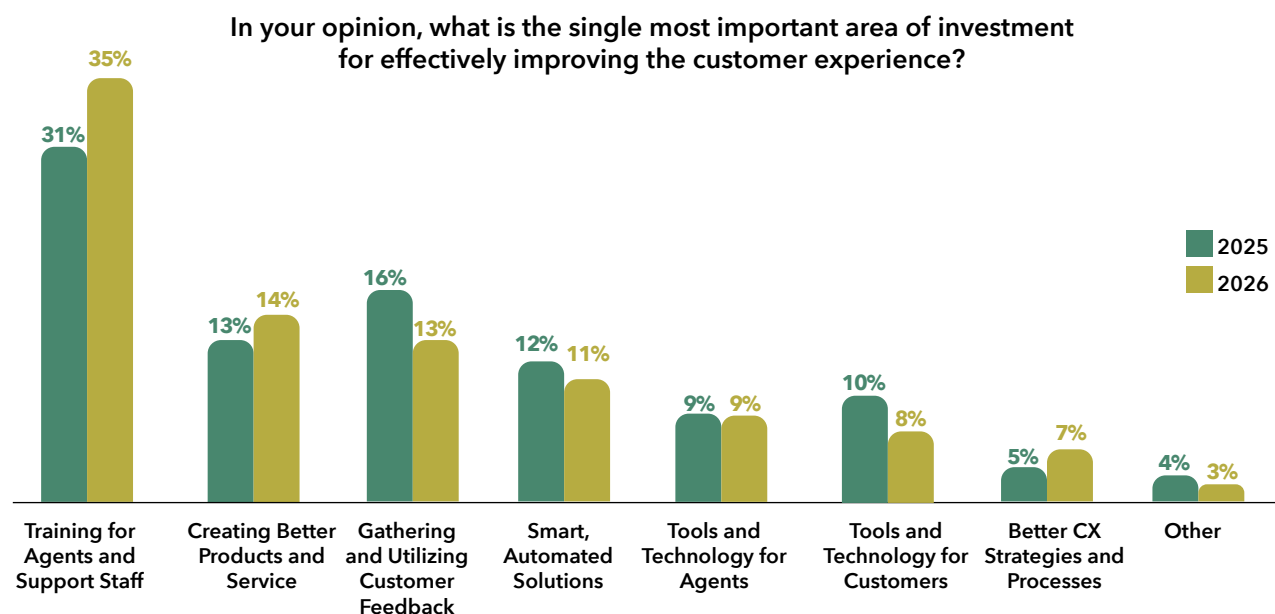
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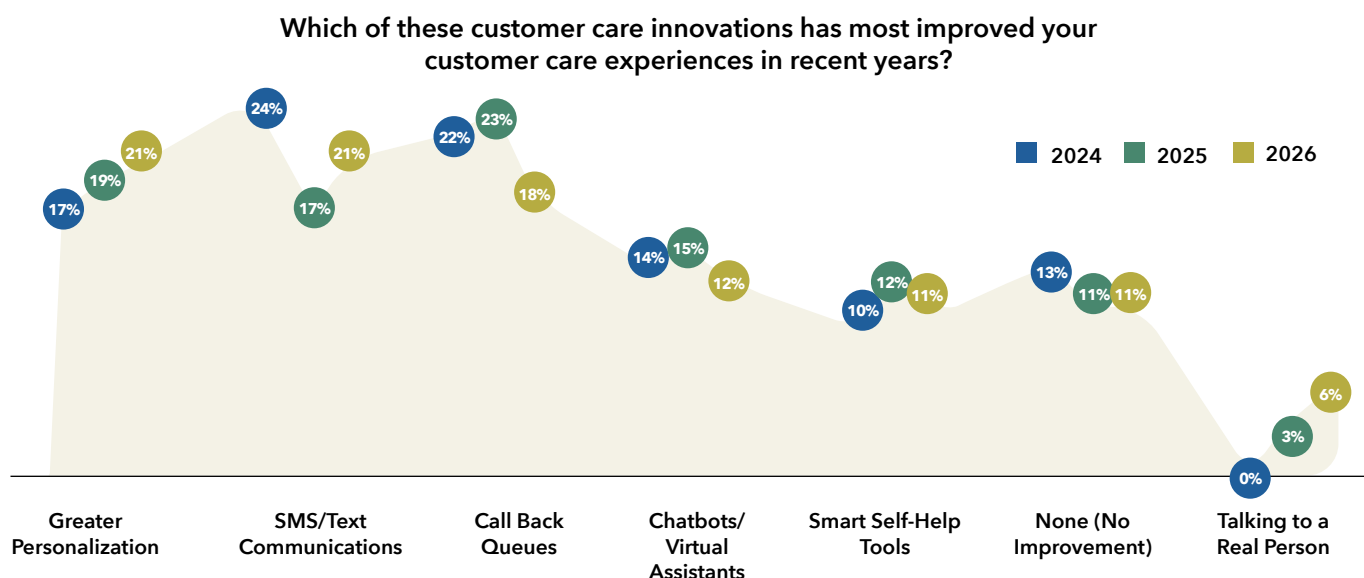
THE FUTURE OF CUSTOMER EXPERIENCES

AREAS FOR INVESTMENT AND MOST IMPACTFUL INNOVATIONS

“Training for Agents and Support Staff” is the top investment priority among consumers at 35%, well ahead of all other areas of investment. This is notable at a moment of heavy AI investment. Consumers continue to associate great service with capable people, especially as agents increasingly handle complex, high-stakes, or emotionally nuanced work that automation does not finish. This suggests that CX leaders should not treat human capability and technology as competing investments. The strongest operating models use AI, knowledge management, and context to make frontline employees more effective while investing directly in communication, judgment, product expertise, and ownership.



Greater personalization, SMS/Text communications, and callback queues are the innovations consumers most often credit with improving recent customer care experiences. This pattern favors technologies that reduce friction, preserve time, and make an interaction more relevant rather than technology for its own sake. It also fits the wider report theme: personalization builds trust when it remembers history, proactive communication reduces uncertainty, and customers value easy access to capable help. CX leaders should consider evaluating innovation by the customer problem it solves. The best investments make service easier, more contextual, more transparent, or more dependable regardless of whether the enabling technology is highly visible.



CONCLUSIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS

The findings from this year's research point toward an important evolution in CX. Consumers are embracing new technologies and new ways of getting help, but their expectations for the fundamentals of great service are not diminishing. If anything, greater choice and technological capability appear to be raising the bar. Several conclusions stand out for CX leaders:

Customer confidence has become a commercial CX metric. Great service is closely connected to brand trust, retention, and loyalty: 86% of consumers say great customer service increases brand trust (page 15), 74% say confidence in service influences continued business (page 15), and 87% have stopped or slowed business because of poor support (page 25). CX leaders should consider connecting operational measures such as resolution, access, communication, and effort to customer confidence and downstream commercial outcomes.

Resolution remains essential, but assurance matters before resolution arrives. Consumers value speedy resolution at 8.12 out of 10, but frequent updates score almost identically at 8.03 (page 20). Seventy-seven percent of consumers say proactive communication increases trust (page 18), while 78% highly value anytime access to case status (page 18). When immediate resolution is impossible, companies can preserve confidence through realistic timelines, proactive updates, visible ownership, and reliable follow-through.

Consumers are choosing channels based on confidence and circumstance — not allegiance to a channel. Multichannel use fell from 82% to 68% (page 36), while use of many individual solutions increased. Phone dominates complex issues (page 32), yet when consumers are guaranteed resolution regardless of channel, Text-Based care becomes the preferred option at 46% (page 31). The implication is to move beyond channel-expansion strategies and toward intent-, complexity-, and outcome-based orchestration.

AI acceptance is ahead of AI execution. Consumers are willing to let AI take ownership of an interaction — 67% are comfortable with fully autonomous resolution (page 60) — but only 27% believe AI is currently greatly benefitting their customer care experience (page 55). Better and more accurate AI remains the strongest adoption lever at 54% (page 57), while frustration, comprehension, capability, and graceful escalation remain key improvement areas. The next phase of AI-powered CX should therefore be measured less by deployment or deflection and more by successful resolution, lower effort, accuracy, confidence, and customer willingness to return.

Automation is increasing the importance of human capability, not eliminating it. Training for agents and support staff is consumers' top CX investment priority at 35% (page 79), while 79% value agents knowing their history and prior interactions (page 64). As automation takes on more routine work, the remaining human interactions are more likely to involve complexity, exceptions, emotion, judgment, and recovery. Organizations should equip employees with better knowledge, customer context, decision-making authority, and AI-enabled support so human expertise becomes a stronger part of the overall operating model.

The next CX battleground is orchestration and continuity. First Contact Resolution fell to 61% (page 8), frustration with repeating information rose to 73 out of 100 (with 100 being "Extremely Frustrated") (page 50), and multichannel journeys show significant movement from Self-Help toward Voice. Even when multichannel issues are ultimately resolved 85% of the time (page 39), only 64% are satisfied with the experience (page 39). The lesson is that resolution alone does not define success. Context, authentication, history, prior attempts, status, and commitments need to travel with the customer across channels so every transition feels like progress rather than a restart.

Fairness, accessibility, and inclusion are fundamental measures of experience quality. Eighty-eight percent of consumers say fair treatment, regardless of background or identity, is important (page 72). Although reports of exclusion or mistreatment declined year-over-year, 41% still say they have experienced it (page 72), and nearly half say they would not do business with a company again after such an experience (page 72). Inclusive CX should therefore be embedded into accessibility, language strategy, policies, quality management, AI governance, and recovery — not managed as a separate initiative.

CX needs influence beyond the customer care organization. Ninety-one percent of consumers view improving CX as just as important or more important than priorities such as product improvement and cost reduction (page 76), while 90% say it's important for CX to have influence within a company (page 77). Product design, billing, fulfillment, policies, technology, and operational decisions all ultimately shape the service experience. The strongest CX organizations will increasingly use customer insight upstream — helping prevent friction rather than simply managing it after it reaches the contact center.

Ultimately, this year's research points toward a fairly simple mandate: Make it easier for customers to feel confident that the company understands their needs, has ownership of the issue, and has the ability and intent to see it through. The technology may change. The channel may change. The balance between automation and human assistance will continue to change. But the organizations that consistently provide clarity, capability, continuity, fairness, and a dependable resolution will be best positioned to earn the trust and loyalty of the customers they serve.

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 bi-annual 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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