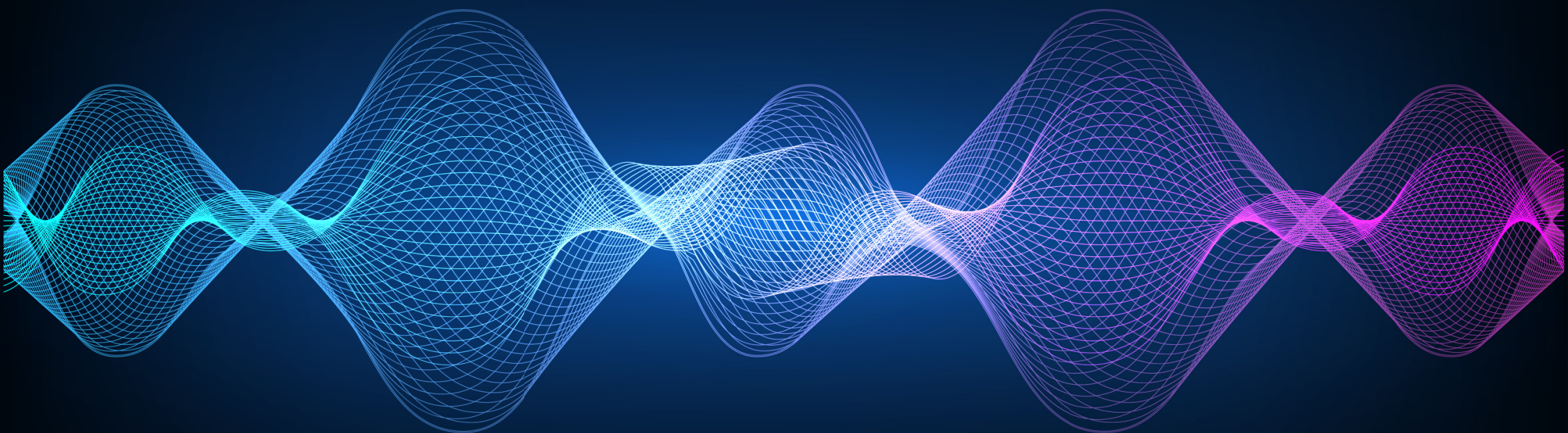# The power of real-time conversation analytics and agent guidance

What to look for in real-time conversation analytics and agent guidance technologies, the benefits they can deliver and best practices for improved outcomes

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Foreword

Customers are constantly signalling their intentions and perspectives during their conversations with brands. This provides organisations with opportunities to improve customer satisfaction, expand share of wallet and prevent customers from churning. However, the reality is that much of these opportunities go unrealised. In CX Network's recent research, struggling to uncover relevant insights, turning insights into action and democratising relevant data all appeared as common challenges faced by the study's 150 CX experts.

To utilise the massive amount of interaction data available, a growing number of organisations are looking to real-time conversation analytics, as well as real-time agent guidance. In fact, over 36 percent of the 150 CX experts in a recent CX Network study revealed they are considering real-time analytics systems so they can better personalise customer experiences.

The insights created by real-time conversation analytics provides a deeper understanding of customers, employees, and the overall status of the business. Real-time agent guidance ensures that the value of conversation analytics is fully realised by democratising helpful insights to the relevant stakeholders with practical advice.

Here, we explore common misconceptions, the benefits these systems deliver for customer experiences and best practices for improved outcomes.

DEFINITIONS:

Real-time conversation analytics: The ability to capture, analyse, and evaluate conversation data while conversations with customers are taking place across the business. Word, phrase, and topic identification, paired with sentiment analysis, provide real-time transparency on customer perspectives and contact centre issues, allowing targeted enhancements to be made. By applying artificial intelligence and machine learning to customer interactions, the technology generates cohesive and easily actioned intelligence.

Real-time agent guidance: Behavioural recommendations informed by conversation analytics. AI-driven algorithms provide notifications to agents advising them on the next best action to take while fielding live customer interactions. These helpful prompts strengthen agent effectiveness and conversation outcomes by empowering agents to take smarter, data-driven actions while customer conversations are still in-process.

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Challenges and misconceptions around real-time systems

Despite the potential of real-time conversation analytics and real-time guidance, industry adoption is held back by common misconceptions and implementation challenges around the technologies.

Challenges

Data integrity and migration: As real-time conversation analytics makes recommendations based on data, data integrity and accuracy are critical success factors to these systems. The reality is that siloed customer data and incomplete customer profiles are one of the toughest challenges faced by today's CX practitioners. In fact, Gartner research notes that poor data quality is estimated to be responsible for US$10m (GBP7.1m) in annual losses for organisations.

To realise the full potential of real-time conversation analytics and alerting, a culture of data integrity and accountability should be instilled within organisational data strategies. Data-centric hygiene projects, such as centralising repositories, mining data lakes and driving data integrity, are intensive but crucial tasks to undertake to unlock the technologies' opportunities to optimise buyer journeys and customer retention.

To expedite ROI, instead of waiting for perfection in end-to-end data architecture, businesses can start small and focus on segments of their database or channels that are robust enough to inform real-time conversation analytics systems.

Cultural shift for employees: The introduction of conversation analytics will require some employees to flex their current ways of working, which can complicate the adoption process. Pharma IQ conference speaker, Joanne North, analytics lead at Johnson & Johnson, shares that her experience has taught her to pre-empt the cultural hurdles of "encouraging employees to be more data driven in their decisions."

To do this successfully, North notes that an awareness of the current attitudes towards data and analytics must be considered in the roll-out strategy so culture management can be optimised. Executive-led drives on the power of conversation analytics and real-time guidance are helpful for driving adoption, so employees are receptive to adapting to utilising insights in their work.

CX Network contributor, Adeel Ahmad, customer experience analyst at PayPal, says real-time conversation analytics and agent guidance in customer care provide the "immensely powerful advantage" of being able to course correct while in the moment of delivering an experience.

"Technology exists to understand and interpret a customer's voice, sentiment and physical gestures during a live customer support interaction," Ahmad notes. "Imagine combining this information with other customer journey events and predicting not just the outcome of the live support call, but also the outcomes of several next steps the customer is going to take."

"This is gold for a customer service rep," he adds.

Misconceptions

Common misconceptions around the technology include that real-time conversation analytics and agent alerting are:

Too expensive and non-essential: Even though these systems may require a considerable level of investment and groundwork, real-time conversation analytics and agent guidance can bring powerful returns and revenue generating opportunities. In Opus research's 2021 State Of Automatic Speech Recognition, out of the 400 business decision makers surveyed, 85 percent said that conversation analytics is important to their future enterprise strategy. With a large portion of the respondents noting fraud detection as a key area of opportunity with these technologies.

Without up-to-date recommendations from the likes of real-time agent guidance, businesses are at risk of being overwhelmed at the vast amount of data available.

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As a result, organisations and their agents operate on outdated information, such as historical, stale data, which can create poorly targeted, frustrating customer experiences and missed opportunities to avert losses or boost customer lifetime values.

In CX Network's 2021 Contact Centres Research Report, spotting actionable insights within data repositories was flagged as one of the top-three challenges faced by the research panel of contact centre experts. Today's marketplace does feature vendors with interoperable systems that prevent the need for disruptive 'rip and replace' missions with existing tech stacks and datasets.

Lacking in credibility because fast turnaround: Some misinterpret the speed of real-time conversation analytics as an indication that the recommendations must lack credibility. However, systems exist today with the capabilities and processing power to swiftly connect with various data sources and compare current data to historical trends to ensure real-time deductions are in context and reliable.

In need of data scientists to be effective: Alongside the onboarding support of chosen vendors, it is possible for brands to utilise their existing IT teams to integrate these technologies into their business.

Once the technology is implemented, insights are democratised across the enterprise so staff members see updates as they occur. These insights are communicated via interactive dashboards and notifications that employees can interpret and share easily, so critical business decisions are never put on hold.

"Real-time analytics offers the potential to turn a negative interaction into a positive one, prevent a customer from churning, and deliver the best experience possible every time, which in turn drives loyalty and strong relationships."

Jeff Gallino
CTO and Founder of CallMiner

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Best practices for real-time agent guidance

Instead of being based on the advice of one manager or an internal committee, real-time agent guidance provides customer case recommendations that are rooted in AI. Machine learning algorithms analyse historical data connected to instances similar to the current scenario, sometimes thousands of cases, so the system can recommend based on the most effective way agents have resolved this type of scenario in the past.

Although real-time agent guidance alerts can be very powerful due to their immediacy, they can also be distracting. The goal of real-time alerts is to guide agents, not overwhelm them with information, so it is vital to balance their use before they become counterintuitive. If prompts occur too often, they can be tuned out as white noise, especially if the notifications provide incorrect information or unhelpful suggestions.

Companies should select systems that can be tailored to specific use cases and provide a defined key performance plan created by both the solutions provider and the company.

Real-time guidance alerts should adhere to four main guidelines to ensure they are a help and not a hindrance to agents:

1 Set emotional boundaries:

Companies should set limits to when and how real-time solutions alert agents. Supporting only the extremes of emotion is a good benchmark when deciding on the factors that merit a real-time alert. For example, agents talking with extremely dissatisfied customers should receive a prompt regarding escalation and messaging to help avoid customer churn. On the other hand, Jeff Gallino, CTO and Founder of CallMiner, notes: "Really happy customers present a good opportunity to prompt an agent to upsell or get a product testimonial."

2 Get the timing right:

Instant feedback helps agents address issues as they arise, so they can immediately reduce the risk of customer complaints and churn. With human error, there is always the possibility of agents forgetting critical protocols like gathering pertinent information or

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stating a disclaimer. Real-time guidance alerts allow agents to fix mistakes in the moment and instantly improve performance, which is especially important for interactions with customers at risk of churning or for ensuring compliance.

Rooms To Go depends on actionable real-time guidance to support customers that are struggling with its online experience. The U.S. independent furniture retailer, which turns over $1.5bn (GBP1.1bn) in sales annually, draws on customer journey and behaviour data to identify customer struggles in real time, especially at time sensitive touch points. If a struggle is detected, real-time alerts notify the retailer's agents so they can assist the customer through live chat.

3 Praise:

Beyond catching missed processes and service mistakes, real-time alerting can be used to praise achievements. Gamification rewards and words of encouragement via company dashboards in response to agent behaviour and decisions can help boost morale and employee job satisfaction.

4 Relevance:

Staff members will not benefit from only seeing company-wide, generic notifications, because the risks, opportunities and compliance issues will change

according to an individual's department or even the customer campaign at hand. Gallino notes: "Most good technology providers will use metadata to assign alerts based on individual customers or agents. For example, an agent working in collections will not get the same alerts as those working in sales." Real-time targeted alerts help businesses provide streamlined notifications that will help agents do their best work.

CASE STUDY: Relevance   **CallMiner**

One of the UK's largest debt purchaser looked to the power of real-time agent guidance to ensure customers in vulnerable circumstances received support from the company. As some customers can struggle to communicate their needs fully, the company's agents needed to identify when they were interacting with such customers, even when the customer did not make it clear what the issue was.

Using post-interaction conversation analytics, the company identified triggers, words and phrases associated with what it termed "vulnerability", so agents could pre-empt and understand the needs of customers in future interactions, even if the individual did not fully disclose the details of their situation.

When searching for real-time conversation analytics and agent guidance technologies, brands should ensure they select a solution that has the features to address these four factors.

By combining these "vulnerability" triggers with CallMiner's real-time conversation analytics and agent guidance, agents could receive helpful notifications that were highly relevant to a customer's needs and situation. The debt purchaser saw a 60 percent decrease in calls that failed due to the agent missing a "vulnerable" customer trigger.

The customer operations enhancement manager at the company said: "We can prove that CallMiner's platform is invaluable in improving people's lives, particularly when they are at their most vulnerable. It also provides crucial support to our agents handling these sensitive issues."

The benefits of real-time guidance for remote working

In response to the global Covid-19 pandemic, companies have adopted remote-working policies and hybrid working models to attempt to curb the spread of the virus. This may become a permanent working arrangement for many companies, with 74 percent of companies planning to have some employees work remotely for good, according to an April 2020 study. In this section we highlight how real-time agent guidance can help businesses optimise customer service quality levels with remote workforces.

Supervising at scale:

Providing apt support to remote agents is of paramount importance. Gallino says: "In the absence of an office environment where advice could be given face-to-face and teams could support each other to keep morale high while on breaks or in between calls, many organisations have relied on conversation analytics."

Conversation analytics tools gather data from voice calls to generate useful real-time insights in graphic form. With tools like this in place, Gallino notes: "Supervisors, even as they sit at their kitchen table, can connect with agents and gain visibility into their performances, just as they would in the customer service centre."

For example, Covid-19 reduced the number of individuals allowed simultaneously on site in manufacturing plants, so real-time guidance has become crucial for empowering remote supervisors with notifications on crucial issues. Discrepancies can be caught remotely so supervisors can take action by assigning rectification actions to the employees present on the production floor.

Compliance and risk mitigation:

The challenge of maintaining compliance is a key roadblock that generates scepticism around remote working. Contact centre agents typically go through rigorous training before they interact with customers. Even still, it is hard to ensure remote agents are consistently adhering to regulatory compliance, which poses costly legal risks.

Real-time conversation analytics allows businesses to address risks, in the moment, before they escalate

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into regulatory violations. When communicating with customers, agents can be alerted if important or mandatory information has been missed or incorrectly said. Gallino notes: "This not only ensures legal certainty with script adherence, but in some cases stops agents from giving incorrect or misleading advice, enabling agents to meet compliance regulations and reduce risk, cancellations and customer disputes." The real-time analytics solution itself should be vetted to ensure it is compliant with regulations and can redact sensitive information. When implemented correctly, these systems maintain records that can act as an auditable proof of compliance.

Management of call outcomes:

Real-time conversation analytics and agent guidance can improve call outcomes by analysing customer sentiment and providing recommendations on the best course of action. Gallino notes: "If the analytics identifies a customer is using terms and phrases associated with churn, agents can be alerted to change tack and offer a solution that is associated with loyalty. This can significantly increase the lifetime value of a customer and can also reduce the cost of service by eliminating the need for repeat contact."

On moving to his current company in 2011, Nick Macfarlane, VP of customer engagement at Sky Ticket, and member of the CX Network Advisory Board, was tasked with addressing the fracture points around how customers were being supported with their broadband issues.

"Back then, and remember we are talking about the state of play 10 years ago here," Macfarlane starts, "issues were encountered when Sky's customer service advisors who were mainly familiar with hosting standard support calls were faced with assisting customers with broadband issues."

This disconnect was breeding bad practices where customer service advisors would automatically send customers new routers thinking they were helping, even though this would not solve the root issue. In this case, says Macfarlane: "The customer was happy as they left the initial call, but when they plugged the new router in, they were twice as unhappy as before because the issue still was not fixed."

Instead of simply delivering this insight to departmental leaders and leaving them to action the changes, Macfarlane and the CX team worked with the relevant divisions to deploy automation systems that equipped staff with real-time assistance. These diagnosed the customers' broadband issues and advised the agent on how to best communicate with the customer in an instant and accessible way so they would understand.

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Customer-centric benefits

Customer journey optimisation

CX Network contributor, Joshua Tye, customer experience leader at Wellstar Health System, notes that as a brand uses analytics to develop a real-time presence in a customer's decision-making processes, "it creates a concierge-like atmosphere that lends itself to the customer's goals, promoting consistent quality and efficiency."

"The stronger your presence is in the decision-making process, the greater the likelihood of consumers making decisions that work in your favour," says Tye.

For businesses to optimise customer and employee experiences, they need a holistic view of the entire journey. This requires an in-depth view of updated data, so the latest insights are used to sharpen decision making. However, as Gallino notes, "too many organisations only examine a small portion of their customer interactions." This blinkered approach leads to a limited understanding of customers and flawed business decisions.

When considering conversation analytics solutions, companies should look for providers that enable listening to and learning from customer interactions regardless of the channel or time they occur. Data should be readily accessible to appropriate teams so observations can be used to drive growth.

Here we summarise three key areas that real-time conversation analytics and agent guidance alerts can assist with to enhance customer satisfaction and retention.

Swift issue resolution: First call resolution (FCR) is crucial to the success of any customer experience initiative because it improves profitability through driving customer loyalty and overall workplace efficiency. Ensuring all calls conclude on a positive note makes the experience better for both the customer and agent, and real-time agent guidance alerts and conversation analytics makes this possible. Knowledgeable prompts from these technologies can improve hold and handle times by speeding up issue resolutions so there are no unnecessary delays in customer interactions.

Personalised service: Real-time insights allow for customised client care, and as Sherif Mityas, Chief Experience Officer for TGI Fridays says, behavioural data can optimise strategies to aid conversion. For example, if a customer has a particular preference for ribs, TGI Fridays may avoid sending them digital communications about salad, as there will likely be less engagement.

Mityas, a contributor to the CX Network, adds that TGI Fridays is considering extending real-time insights capabilities to its physical restaurants, so that frontline staff can individualise the service delivered.

"Imagine a scenario where a host or hostess has a wearable device in their ear that is synchronised with our phone application," Mityas says. "If a customer has our app installed and walks into a restaurant, the server will have the data available so the host can greet the customer by name. Additionally, the server can offer their favourite drink or meal based on the specific guest's profile."

Real-time analytics models allow frontline staff to personalise their service to customers' needs and life stages, giving more opportunities to acquire new customers, solidify retention, upsell, and cross sell. This could be as simple as alerts that flag topics to connect with a customer on:

> - Information about their previous touchpoint with your company
> - A newborn baby in their family
> - The latest show they binge-watched
> - A previous purchase
> - Posts they have made on social media

Useful up-selling and cross-selling: The success of upselling and cross-selling attempts is determined by the quality of the brand's customer knowledge. Customer data analysis will reveal patterns in which customer

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segments are most likely to convert on a particular up-sell or which product bundling tactics are best for a cross-sell. Sub-par analysis can cause cross- or up-sell attempts to be badly targeted – or not capitalised upon at all – which is a direct loss to the bottom line.

Real-time analytics solutions allow businesses to provide optimised prompts for sales representatives to maximise the chances for conversion. CX Network member, Ritanbara Mundrey, global consumer and marketplace insights manager at Nestlé, notes that proactive data-led guidance is vital for agent productivity. For instance, instead of expecting sales personnel to spend time collating relevant data themselves, real-time guidance alerts instantly provide the required insight and context

so sales agents can focus on performing core sales tasks and take a targeted approach.

Complaints management: When it comes to customer complaints, time is of the essence. CX expert Jamey Iris Galias, who has worked at the likes of Disney Cruise Line and Etihad Airways, notes: "It is better and less costly to 'act now' or the 'soonest you can' to address a customer's complaint/feedback, rather than losing this customer and end up trying to gain a new one."

Real-time analytics solutions equip agents with the right information at the right time, and dissatisfied customers get better support from agents that are well informed. In its move to become more proactive with complaints

management, Microsoft utilised sentiment analysis to embed sentiment breakpoints to flag customers at risk of frustration or churn. Real-time agent guidance prompts not only provide appropriate solutions for specific concerns, but also saves records that can be used as evidence when necessary.

By empowering agents with the insights to successfully assist customers, not only will organisations improve customer loyalty but employee loyalty as well. The provision of data-driven training and real-time support helps agents and employees gain confidence and the feeling of being valued.

"It is better and less costly to 'act now' or the 'soonest you can' to address a customer's complaint/feedback, rather than losing this customer and end up trying to gain a new one."

Jamey Iris Galias
CX expert

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Integrating real-time systems into existing workflows

Integration with existing tech stack

Rather than viewing real-time conversation analytics systems as a 'rip and replace' project that will displace existing technologies in the business, Gallino notes: "It is important for organisations to work with providers who can integrate their real-time features with existing comprehensive conversation analytics solutions, like post interaction analytics and omnichannel analytics, and other existing business systems (CRM for example) to deliver an all-encompassing agent and supervisor experience."

Without this smooth integration between systems, brands will struggle to access the full potential of real-time guidance technologies. Piecemeal technology architecture has the risk of creating silos of information and resources. Stubborn legacy systems that are not interoperable appears as a common CX challenge for CX Network's membership of customer experience experts.

CX business cases

After implementing a robust real-time voice of the customer program, CX Network contributor, Jason Bradshaw, former chief customer and marketing officer for Volkswagen Group Australia, discovered that real-time conversation data was instrumental to informing CX business cases. With the data collected, Volkswagen was able to determine that 30 percent of customers were happy to buy a vehicle online. Once the automotive manufacturer launched ecommerce access to one of their models, it sold out within 12 hours.

"[With the pandemic taking hold] March 2020 was forecasted to have no vehicle sales for three to four months as a best-case scenario. We set the team to research and within days had enough data to show that customers were willing to buy online," noted Bradshaw. "Most [customers] didn't even want to do a test drive and this drove the implementation of our ecommerce platform. We combined brand experience data about what customers wanted during the pandemic and CX data from online sales to improve."

Onboarding

Onboarding workflows are a prime area for integrating real-time analytics systems. The combination of conversation analytics and real-time alerts provide targeted guidance that help new agents develop their confidence and fast-track progress. "Real-time alerting is a great tool for supporting new staff through their initial training and development," says Gallino. "It helps them put into practice what they have learned during onboarding, with the knowledge they will be notified if they miss something and given next best action guidance to help them while they are still new." This is especially useful for teams who are facilitating the onboarding process while working remotely.

Long-term performance improvement coaching

Organisations should also employ conversation analytics to ensure agents continuously grow and improve. Real-time monitoring allows supervisors to give feedback at scale and notifies them of factors that can be corrected via post-call coaching. This reduces the chances of distracting agents with an unnecessary barrage of alerts, especially if the improvements will only make a minor change to a conversation outcome.

Final remarks

As businesses shift to a hybrid way of working, the importance of data and the power it possesses becomes more apparent by the day. Companies now rely on data for almost every business aspect as the frequency of face-to-face interactions dwindle. Optimising business processes and customer experiences now becomes a challenge of having the right data and knowing how to use it.

A real-time alerting and analytics solution will help put targeted data front and centre for daily customer care – at the right time and in the right way.

To the brands that are ignoring or underestimating the power of real-time analytics, Gallino remarks: "These organisations are only reaching half of their potential when it comes to leveraging the true power of customer conversations and intelligence.

"Post-interaction analytics is important – it can help companies identify trends and uncover areas of opportunity for improvement – but it simply doesn't deliver the same impact of being able to influence outcomes as conversations are happening."

"Real-time analytics offers the potential to turn a negative interaction into a positive one, prevent a customer from churning, and deliver the best experience possible every time, which in turn drives loyalty and strong relationships."

"Organisations will never truly be customer-centric if they ignore the power of real-time analytics. It takes the combination of real-time analytics and post-conversation analytics to drive true ROI and bottom-line improvement."

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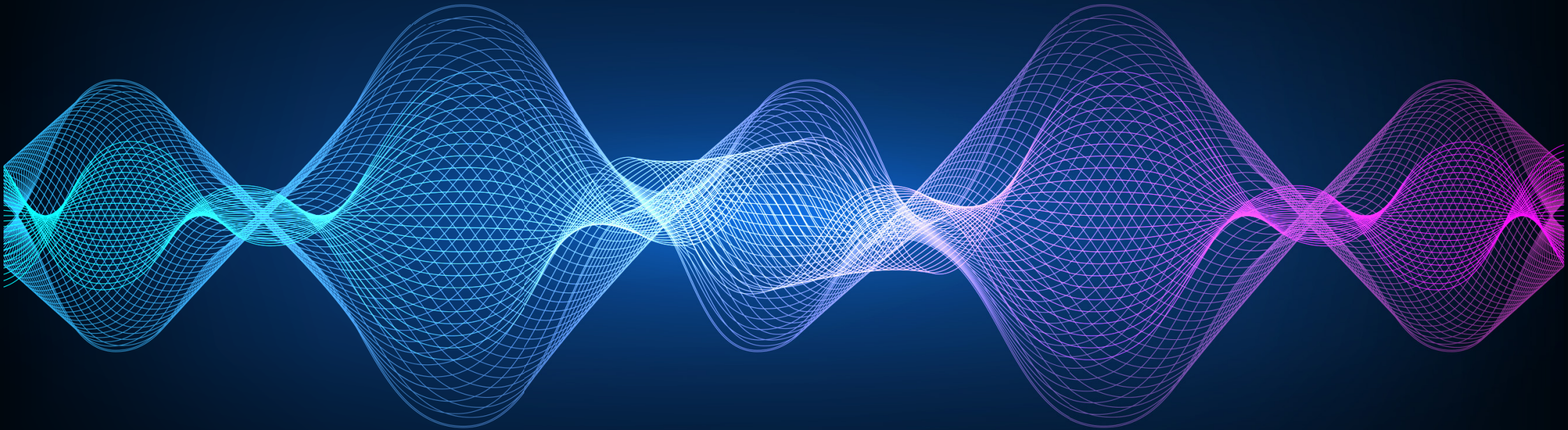
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