The Vulnerability Blueprint:
How to Identify, Support and Retain Vulnerable Customers
The Vulnerability Blueprint:
How to Identify, Support and Retain Vulnerable Customers

Customer interactions with vulnerable individuals include a host of valuable intelligence that can be leveraged to drive more empathetic engagements and transform enterprise outcomes and performance.

Organizations interact with vulnerable customers every day. What most don't realize, is how they respond has far-reaching implications on customer experience (CX), retention and reputation in the market.

While the pandemic changed everything in 2020, customers are constantly experiencing crisis and vulnerability. Every organization needs a set strategy and process for understanding vulnerability, extracting and operationalizing insights, identifying at-risk customers and equipping employees to manage customer relationships with sensitivity, flexibility and emotional intelligence.

What is Vulnerability?

A vulnerable consumer is someone who, due to their personal circumstances, is especially susceptible to detriment, according to the UK Financial Conduct Authority (FCA).

The four drivers of vulnerability are:

- Low resilience
- Low capability
- Suffering a negative life event
- Having an ongoing health condition

It's not surprising that vulnerability takes many forms. Perhaps someone lost their job and is unable to pay their bills or lost a loved one and is grieving. Or, maybe it's a working parent with young children enrolled in at-home learning. There's also the digitally vulnerable, which are the individuals who aren't capable or have chosen not to engage with the digital world and are often left behind. This is creating a digital divide – especially as the internet is increasingly used in every area of life.

“Digitally vulnerable people are at heightened disadvantage in today's climate. Without possessing the digital skills of today, research shows that it's harder for people to become employed, communicate with loved ones, online shop, quickly execute tasks with service providers and so much more,” said Frank Sherlock, VP of International, CallMiner. “Brands must not only deliver appropriate customer service to those who we consider vulnerable in the traditional sense – they must also provide the means to ensure the digitally vulnerable can receive their preferred customer experience.”

Regardless of the type or unique circumstance, vulnerability is rising. In July, the FCA reported that 24 million people in the UK displayed one or more characteristics of vulnerability (mental and physical handicaps, long-term illness, age, socio-demographic characteristics, behavioral characteristics and personal situations, among others). The FCA warns that many more people have become vulnerable as a result of the pandemic and lockdown measures.

---

Today, millions of people are dealing with the effects of physical and mental illness, bereavement and job loss:

According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics², 22.2 million jobs were lost in March and April alone – and as of September, only a little over half of jobs have been recovered.

A September 2020 poll¹ by NPR, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health found that 46% of all Americans are having “serious financial problems.”

During late June, 40% of adults reported struggling with mental health or substance abuse. The prevalence of symptoms of anxiety disorder was approximately three times those reported in the second quarter of 2019 according to Centers for Disease Control and Prevention⁴.

While many of these circumstances have been exacerbated by COVID-19, vulnerability is not unique to the pandemic. Vulnerability is universal and pervasive. If your organization doesn’t have an effective process for hearing, understanding, serving and learning from vulnerable customers, the time is now to put a program in place.

How to Identify Vulnerable Customers During Interactions

In today’s hyper-competitive environment, organizations don’t have the luxury of waiting for customers to tell them what they want. And further, few customers, especially those in vulnerable situations, are transparent and forthcoming with their personal challenges. Organizations need to listen closely, pick up on contextual clues, analyze sentiment and learn from past experiences to determine and act on customer needs.

“It’s also crucial for brands to understand how vulnerable customers want to communicate. Many don’t have the skills or tools to go online and message a chatbot, complete self-service or send a tweet. Whether it’s due to digital vulnerability, financial hardship, a health condition or simply the need to connect with another human – organizations must provide service on appropriate channels for every vulnerable customer,” said Sherlock.

Most organizations only analyze a small sample of customer interactions, which causes them to miss out on valuable insight hidden across customer interactions. This makes it difficult to recognize trends in vulnerability across the customer base, identify individuals in crisis and establish strategies for how to best serve these customers.

Instead, organizations need solutions, like interaction analytics, that help them capture, analyze and monitor 100% of customer interactions across multiple channels in a single system. Companies can follow a customer’s journey and repeat contacts regardless of what communication channel is used – from call to email and chat – and extract insight that can be leveraged to improve processes, performance and decisions.


Identifying vulnerable customers starts with listening. Here are three essential items to cover.

- Monitor for and flag specific words and phrases that insinuate vulnerability, with close attention to hardships such as job loss, illness, unemployment and abuse.
- Screen for non-compliant language such as harassing statements, raised voices and other risky behavior that depicts emotional instability.
- Look for signs of stress and agitation in consumer and employee voices to help confirm vulnerability using best judgement.

Next, benchmark the common elements that signal vulnerability so you can more quickly and accurately identify vulnerable customers in the future. Once you can listen and identify vulnerability, deploy a real-time alerting system that automatically informs employees when they are dealing with a vulnerable customer.

**How to Equip Employees to Manage Vulnerability**

Once you can identify vulnerable customers and sensitive situations, it's critical to equip agents and employees with the information and tools needed to respond effectively.

Vulnerable situations require a careful approach and sensitive language – and few people are properly trained to manage these situations appropriately. Employees are only human and will likely struggle when working with a vulnerable customer.

To improve outcomes, organizations should equip customer service teams with:

- Background information on the customer, such as previous touchpoints, issues, personal info and more.
- Real-time alerts and in-the-moment guidance on how to communicate with vulnerable customers.
- Direction to ensure agents stay compliant, as well as recorded, objective documentation to respond to audits and complaints.
- Meaningful and fair feedback on their performance during the customer engagement to power improvement and learning.
- Post-interaction training to support and drive better customer outcomes in future interactions.

**Utilizing Sentiment Analysis and Understanding Emotion:**

Interaction analytics equips organizations to automatically monitor and analyze the context and emotion of communication in addition to the content.

Interaction analytics performs advanced acoustical analysis that measures the overall intensity of a feeling through stress levels, voice volume, speed of speech and other variables to understand emotion, and can score agents on the empathy and agitation they express.

Paired with insight from sentiment analysis that depicts how the customer feels about something, the criteria can be used to build up a more complete picture of vulnerable customers, including sentiment and intensity levels.
The most important factors for success are the ability to execute in real time and analyze 100% of interactions.

By analyzing all customer engagements – chat, phone, social, SMS, email and more – organizational leadership can more confidently identify criteria associated with vulnerability. These criteria can then be assigned a category and tagged for future automated analysis. Once categories are established, AI-enabled tools can automatically identify when they occur during an interaction.

Organizations should equip their customer-facing teams with applications that monitor interactions in real time and offer script compliance, emotion detection, next-best-action guidance, event alerting and context-driven workflow initiation. It’s important to reassure agents that they are asking the right questions and providing the correct guidance and support.

Industry Showcase: Financial Service Firms & The Surge in Vulnerability

The financial service industry is particularly impacted by consumer vulnerability. Companies across insurance, mortgage, collections and other financial specialties are faced with the difficult task of directly communicating with consumers about money, a sensitive subject for many vulnerable customers.

At the end of July, the FCA published its most recent draft guidance on vulnerable customers for financial services firms and financial markets. The guidance consultation – GC20/3 – puts pressure on brands to implement practical changes to improve vulnerable people experience outcomes that are just as good as other consumers’ outcomes. For many organizations, particularly those in the UK, this is more than just a guidance. It’s a critical part of ensuring they meet specific compliance requirements geared toward protecting vulnerable customers. The recommendations had two actionable takeaways for financial firms:

The value of sympathy

FCA case studies show vulnerable customers respond positively to sympathy. Specifically:

- Vulnerable customers are already concerned about how their circumstances would affect the outcome of the interaction. It helped where frontline employees acknowledged this.
- Where the interaction was a direct result of the customer having health issues, employees built positive rapport by demonstrating understanding and showing genuine concern.

The importance of empowered and knowledgeable staff

FCA case studies show that when employees are empowered to respond flexibly during an interaction, the risk of further distress was reduced.

- When employees were able to guide vulnerable customers toward the best options for them, it had a significant impact on the interaction.
- Even where an ‘ideal’ solution for the customer could not be reached, customers felt that alternatives offered helped them avoid harm.
Insights that Deliver Beyond the Contact Center

Insights from identifying vulnerable customers deliver value beyond the contact center. When brands are able to understand the state of their customers’ wellbeing and preferences, every department of an organization can leverage the insights and improve operations from sales and marketing to product development and beyond. Elevating these insights to key stakeholders in other departments is critical to driving business improvements. For example, Chief Compliance Officers are highly aware that taking the wrong approach with vulnerable customers doesn’t only hurt brand reputation and customer loyalty – it’s also a costly compliance mistake. There are regulatory requirements to measure and manage vulnerable customers in a compliant manner for many industries across the world, and failure to do so can result in damaging fines.

For Chief Marketing Officers, being able to identify how digitally vulnerable customers prefer to get in touch with a brand means they can make more informed decisions – such as digital and mailed customer correspondences that provide a clear customer service number, alongside other channels like the website or social media. This means customers feel empowered to connect with an organization however works best for them. By delivering key insights to stakeholders in context, interaction analytics and identifying vulnerability customers has enterprise-wide impact.

Improving CX with the Vulnerability Blueprint

According to the CallMiner 2020 Churn Index⁵, when consumers were asked about their needs before a call to a call center, the top response by almost half of consumers (46%) is that they just want someone to listen to them.

“This is truer than ever as the world continues to battle the COVID-19 pandemic. Vulnerable customers are experiencing isolation and loneliness at higher rates due to lockdowns, the inability to gather with family and friends and more. At the end of the day, most are looking to connect and be listened to – and brands have the opportunity to deliver that in the customer experience,” said Sherlock. Other key findings from the research include:

• **Emotion is key to retention.** While price remains the number one driver of churn, it declined in importance by 8% from 2018. Emotional factors – like loyalty and fair treatment – increased in importance and made up three of the top four reasons for switching brands.

• **Super-agents shape customer emotions.** Nearly 50% of customers had their emotional state change from negative to positive following their last brand interaction; nearly one in five reported having their emotional state shift because of poor agent behavior.

People don’t forget who was there for them during a time of need. For customer-led organizations, it’s not just critical that they recognize this, but also proactively adjust service levels, improve business processes and increase flexibility for managing vulnerable situations. Interaction analytics – which helps identify vulnerable customers and enable agents to perform with knowledge, sensitivity and skill, in real time – drives bottom-line impact, increases brand loyalty and helps leadership extract insights to transform and improve business outcomes.

Learn more about interaction analytics and how CallMiner can help your brand better serve vulnerable customers [here](https://learn.callminer.com/home/callminer-churn-index-2020).

---