



The Inner Circle Guide to Outbound

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“The Inner Circle Guide to Outbound – 2nd edition (US edition)

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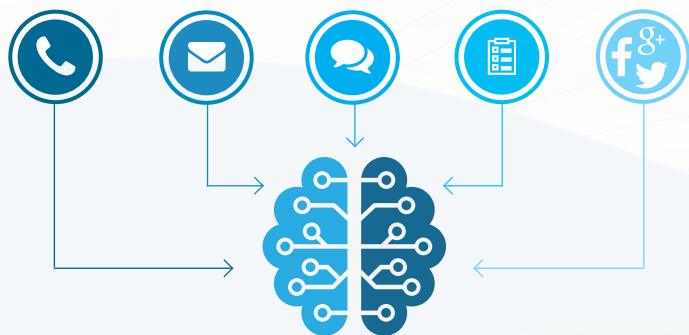
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INTRODUCTION

The Inner Circle Guides are a series of analyst reports investigating key customer contact solutions. The Guides aim to give a detailed and definitive view of the reality of the implementing and using these technologies, an appraisal of the vendors and products available and a view of what the future holds.

The Inner Circle Guides are free of charge to readers. Research and analysis costs are borne by sponsors – solution providers in the specific area of study – whose advertisements, case studies and thought leadership pieces are included within these Guides.

The following Inner Circle Guides are available:

- AI, Chatbots & Machine Learning
- AI-Enabled Self-Service
- Cloud-based Contact Center Solutions
- Contact Center Remote Working Solutions
- First-Contact Resolution
- Fraud Reduction & PCI DSS Compliance
- Interaction Analytics
- Omnichannel
- Omnichannel Workforce Optimization
- Outbound.

These can be downloaded free of charge from www.contactbabel.com.

Solutions providers have **not** had influence over editorial content or analyst opinion, and readers can be assured of objectivity throughout. Any vendor views are clearly marked as such within the report.

As well as explaining these solutions to the readers, we have also asked the potential users of these solutions whether they have any questions or comments to put directly to the report's sponsors, and we have selected some of the most popular to ask. These branded Q&A elements are distributed throughout the report and give interesting insight into real-life issues.

Please note that statistics within this report refer to the US industry, unless stated otherwise. There is a version of this report available for download from www.contactbabel.com with equivalent UK statistics and findings.

THE ROLE OF OUTBOUND

Not only are contact centers under pressure to reduce their costs, but many – either directly or indirectly – are also major revenue-generators for their businesses.

The constant need to maximize profitability has made many businesses look at whether their contact centers can add more to the bottom-line. Although much responsibility for revenue generation lies with senior management, production and sales divisions, the contact center also has an important part to play in maximizing revenues through selling the right product to the right customer at the right time (aided by a CRM system or similar), through proactive and efficient outbound sales selling and through providing high quality service to produce long-term customer loyalty.

The traditional outbound call was simply about selling more products to new and existing customers. However, legislation and customer pressure have severely impacted on cold calling, and recent years have seen a major growth in calls and other contacts being made to existing customers to deliver customer care, including informing them proactively about events and circumstances which affect them.

Outbound calling is fundamentally different from inbound, and – facing significant and growing cultural and legislative issues – must be managed sensitively:

- outbound calling is often by its nature intrusive, unasked-for and unexpected. It has usually been driven by the requirements of the business rather than the customer, although this is far less the case for call-back requests and proactive outbound service
- as such, customers are more likely to be defensive and wary of the purpose of the call. Trust needs to be built very quickly in order to overcome this negative start point: having the right information about the customer to hand will improve the experience and outcome for both agent and customer
- outbound work can be very difficult for agents: few people actively welcome most outbound calls, and persistent refusal, lack of interest and rudeness can be very wearing for agents. While technology such as dialers might be thought to be putting added pressure on agents, having to make numerous manual calls that do not get answered or that go to voicemail is much more morale-sapping. Management should consider ways of alleviating agent stress through sensible scheduling and call blending, judicious use of dialing technology, gamification and agent engagement strategies, focused training and improved working environments
- especially where the technology exists to do so, it can be tempting to treat outbound calling campaigns as an exercise in maximizing call volumes and (theoretically) revenues. However, this can result in brand damage and high staff attrition rates through over-pressured and exhausted agents delivering poorer quality interactions, not to mention the very real risk of becoming non-compliant with regulations and opening the business to punitive fines
- tough legislation has emerged which has reduced the amount of cold calling which businesses can do. Cold calling is illegal in Germany, and the Do-Not-Call register in the US and the Telephone Preference Scheme (TPS) in the UK allow customers to opt out of receiving any sales calls at all.

Sales to both new and existing customers are obviously still key reasons why companies carry out outbound calls. However, businesses must be careful not to pester customers or abuse the relationship they have built up by making over-frequent calls about products and services that are not tailored to the customer.

Additionally, turning an inbound service call into a cross-selling or upselling opportunity has become a widely-used tactic and is seen a good way of making a sales pitch when the customer is engaged and positive about the company.

The idea of outbound calling being beneficial for the customer experience goes against the old-fashioned view of outbound contact being all about making cold calls to sell home improvements or encourage PPI or litigation claims.

In fact, the following section on outbound activity shows that proactive outbound service – keeping customers informed – has grown very strongly over the past few years. Increasing volumes of outbound calls are being made at the request of the customer, whether through a website ‘call-me’ button; as a result of a callback request being made while within the inbound telephony queue; as the agent could not fully resolve the customer’s issue in the original inbound call; or simply because having this information will benefit the customer.

These forms of outbound communication are positive for the customer experience and when aligned with a judicious mix of non-voice outbound communication such as email or SMS, go a long way to improving the customer experience while deflecting significant volumes of inbound calls from otherwise-frustrated customers.

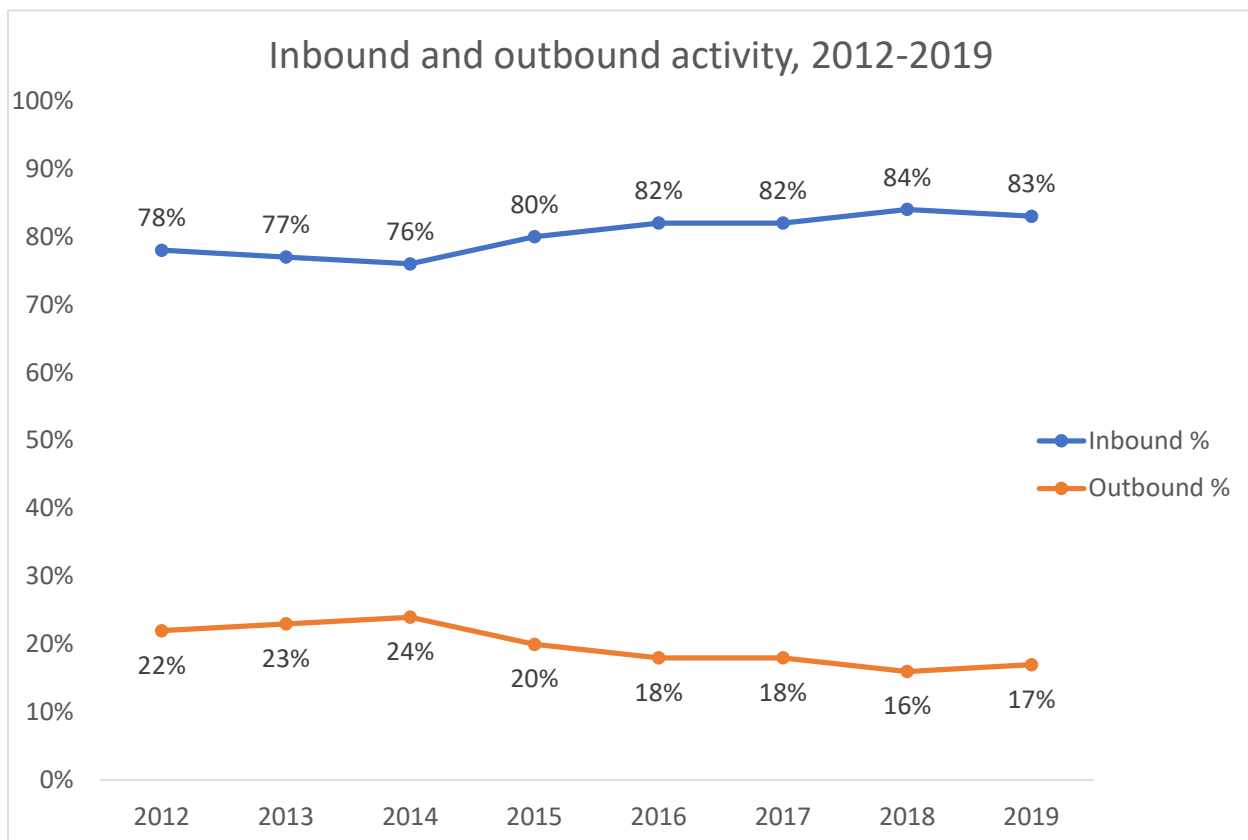
OUTBOUND ACTIVITY

Since reaching a 2014 zenith where 24% of customer interactions were outbound, the inbound/outbound proportion has skewed the other way. 2019's outbound proportion of 17% is the second-lowest on record.

However, this should be viewed in context:

- the number of all types of interaction has increased considerably since 2014, so the actual number of outbound calls have actually increased
- these figures are simply for voice calls: they do not include any SMS or email, both of which are very important ways of contacting customers.

Figure 1: Inbound and outbound activity, 2012-2019



In past years, there had been a strong positive correlation between the size of the contact center and the proportion of outbound activity, with larger contact centers carrying out a higher proportion of outbound activity than smaller ones. It may have been the case that larger operations had more scope and investment to have dedicated outbound sales teams and to be able to afford the outbound automation technology which makes this so much more efficient.

In more recent years, the greater availability of affordable automation for smaller operations, added to the wider use of digital outbound marketing, the effect of legislation, the impact of offshoring and the general negative cultural attitude towards cold calling has meant that massive outbound cold-calling ‘factories’ are much less prevalent than had been the case, and any correlation between size and outbound activity seems to be slightly negative, with smaller operations now carrying out a greater proportion of outbound calls.

Of course, these figures do not include outbound calls made from offshore locations, nor do they include automated ‘robo-calls’ / broadcasts. NB: the term “outbound agent positions (equivalent)” describes the number of exclusively-outbound, full-time agents required. In practice, not all outbound work is done by outbound-only agents, hence the need for “outbound agent equivalents”.

Figure 2: Inbound and outbound activity by contact center size, 2019

Agent positions	% of inbound activity	% of outbound activity
11-24 agent positions	81%	19%
25-50 agent positions	80%	20%
51-100 agent positions	83%	17%
101-250 agent positions	84%	16%
251-1,000 agent positions	86%	14%
1,001+ agent positions	86%	14%
Mean average	83%	17%

NB: the term “outbound agent positions (equivalent)” describes the number of exclusively-outbound, full-time agents required. In practice, not all outbound work is done by outbound-only agents, hence the need for “outbound agent equivalents”.

Figure 3: Outbound agent positions (equivalent), by contact center size, end-2019

Size band (agent positions)	Outbound agent positions (equivalent)
11-24 agent positions	56,050
25-50 agent positions	87,500
51-100 agent positions	82,875
101-250 agent positions	126,400
251-1,000 agent positions	149,100
1,001+ agent positions	81,548
Total	583,473

The **outsourcing and telemarketing** sector is a key part of the US’s outbound activity and is the largest exponent of outbound calling, with campaign-based outbound for sectors such as communications, retail and utilities still very important. It also does a significant amount of client satisfaction checking and market research, all of which are outbound activities.

The **finance and insurance** vertical markets have large numbers of outbound agents, involved in debt collection, renewals, persuading customers to change financial products (e.g. credit cards) and increasingly, cross-selling and up-selling to existing customers. Businesses are aware that one of the key moves towards increased profitability is to get customers purchasing multiple products, e.g. a personal loan, a current account, a credit card and insurance from the same provider. However, the sector is seeing an increased use of cross-selling on inbound calls, as well as direct mail and web-based marketing, rather than an increase in outbound telephony.

The **services** and **communications** sectors carry out a considerable amount of outbound activity, especially around sales and proactive outbound service.

The **retail & distribution** sector uses outbound as a sales tool, calling existing customers, as well as providing information about deliveries. However, the proportion of activity that is outbound is below the industry average.

There is a low level of outbound calling in **public services**, as many of these operations are non-sales, reactive helpdesk environments, which answer the public’s queries. As such, live proactive outbound campaigns are needed less than in most commercial environments.

Figure 4: Outbound agent positions (equivalent), by vertical market, 2019

Vertical market	Proportion of outbound activity	Outbound agent positions (equivalent)
Outsourcing and Telemarketing	25%	123,750
Services	35%	120,750
Communications	14%	58,800
Finance	10%	52,250
Retail and Distribution	14%	51,625
IT	12%	35,400
Transport and Travel	18%	29,160
Healthcare	15%	26,775
Manufacturing	15%	24,000
Utilities	15%	22,875
Insurance	9%	22,613
Public Services	5%	15,475
Total	17%	583,473

In the past, there has been a large number of smaller contact centers which performed market research and outsourced telemarketing activities on behalf of other clients. (Large outsourcing companies are likely to be heavily involved in inbound client care as well as outbound campaigns). The past few years have put great pressure on the profit margins of these types of 'commodity' contact centers, with the result that a significant proportion have ceased trading, or at least, reduced their headcount considerably. Furthermore, the effects of the [National Do Not Call Register](#) which allows individuals to opt out of receiving telemarketing calls has put pressure on the outbound sector.

As take-up of the service has grown, businesses which use cold-call telemarketing were left with two decisions: to continue their existing call-per-prospect activity (thus reducing the overall number of calls they make, as more people opt-out), or to make more calls per prospect, keeping the overall volume up. The latter option may well alienate more people through pestering them with too many calls, driving up the numbers registering on the DNC Register and making the pool of available prospects even smaller.

TYPES OF OUTBOUND CALLING

The single most popular outbound activity is where agents call customers back about an ongoing issue, with call-backs requested by the customer instead of waiting in an inbound queue also important.

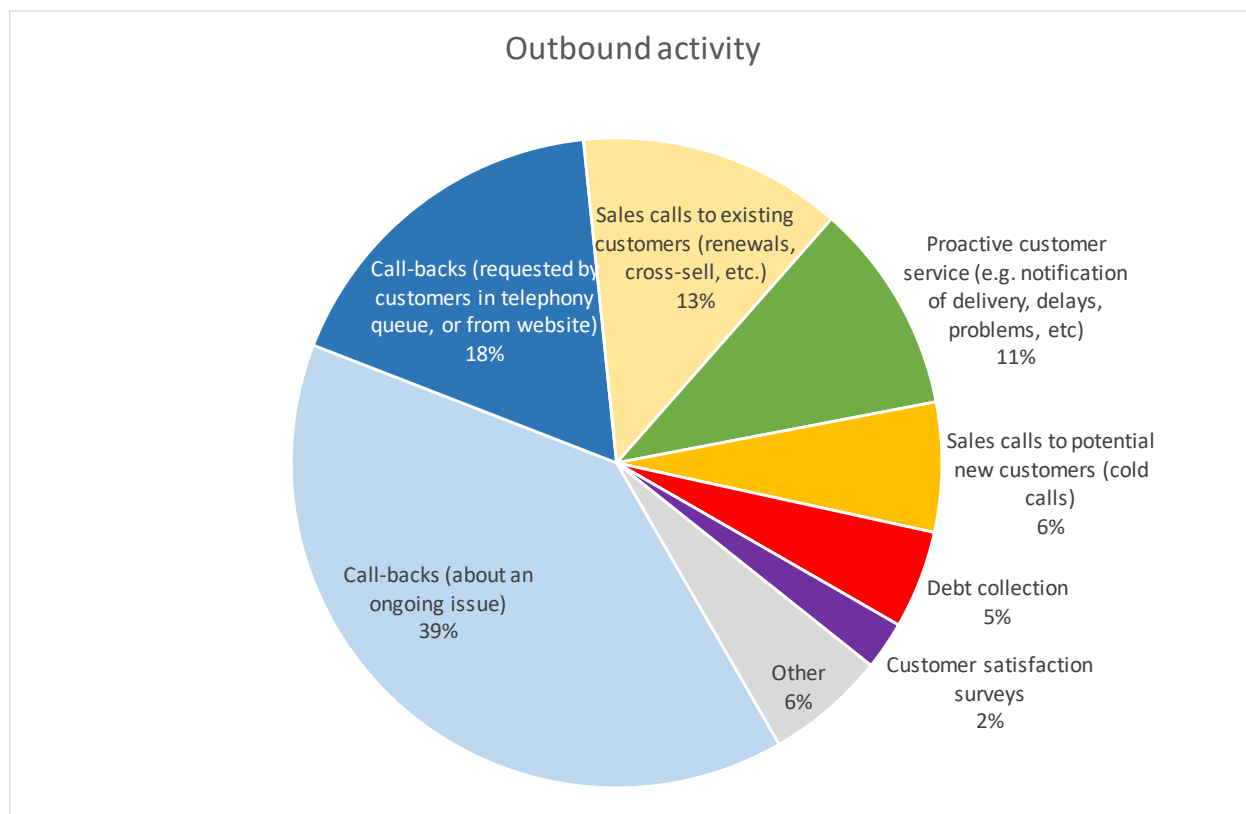
Proactive customer service – calling the customer about an issue without being asked to first – is a strong brand builder as well as an effective call avoidance tactic.

The overall proportion of sales calls declines once again to 19% this year, with cold calling especially low this year.

Cross-selling/upselling continues to be an important outbound activity (and bear in mind that this figure does not include those many inbound service calls that are turned into cross-selling opportunities), with 13% of outbound calls being made for this purpose.

Debt collection accounts for 5% of respondents' calls. Customer satisfaction surveys remain very low, with automated processes increasingly preferred.

Figure 5: Outbound activity



The 'Other' segment accounts for a significant part of the outbound mix, and includes:

- Case management and ongoing customer care
- Chasing contractors and suppliers
- Fraud investigations
- Gathering missing order information
- Responding to complex customer questions sent via other channels
- Return calls where the agent was unable to answer the question on the first call
- Saving customers that have cancelled, or are at risk of canceling contracts
- Seeking authorization from clients
- Updating complaint status.

78% of respondents carry out some form of outbound calling, with the insurance, services and outsourcing & telemarketing sectors leading the way.

As usual, the public sector is one of the sectors that falls behind the rest of the contact center industry in terms of its outbound activity, although a majority of even these respondents carry out some outbound work. Relatively few of this year's finance or manufacturing respondents carry out any outbound work.

Figure 6: Use of outbound calling, by vertical market

Vertical market	Proportion of respondents using outbound calling
Insurance	92%
Outsourcing	89%
Services	89%
Medical	82%
TMT	79%
Transport & Travel	75%
Retail & Distribution	73%
Public Sector	69%
Finance	56%
Manufacturing	56%
Average	78%

Vertical market patterns of outbound activity are very different from each other, and there is not even a great deal of homogeneity within sectors, so these figures should be treated with some caution. However, there are some interesting findings to bring out.

The outsourcing and retail sectors carry out significant amounts of proactive customer service, advising of status, delays and deliveries.

Insurance respondents report cross-selling and upselling being a very significant part of their outbound activity as do services and retail respondents. TMT respondents carry out high levels of cold calling.

The public sector respondents report significant outbound activity connected to debt collection.

Figure 7: Outbound activity by vertical market

Outbound activity	FS	INS	MN	MD	OS	PS	RD	SVC	TMT	TT	Avg
Call-backs (about an ongoing issue)	40%	36%	85%	69%	41%	32%	37%	28%	14%	19%	39%
Call-backs (requested by customers in telephony queue, or from website)	25%	17%	0%	12%	3%	11%	19%	13%	22%	75%	17%
Sales calls to existing customers (renewals, cross-sell, etc.)	17%	33%	0%	0%	13%	0%	22%	28%	8%	0%	13%
Proactive customer service (e.g. notification of delivery, delays, problems, etc.)	6%	0%	15%	14%	25%	0%	17%	14%	1%	6%	11%
Sales calls to potential new customers (cold calls)	1%	6%	0%	0%	6%	0%	1%	15%	27%	0%	6%
Debt collection	0%	0%	0%	1%	7%	37%	5%	0%	0%	0%	5%
Customer satisfaction surveys	11%	6%	0%	1%	2%	2%	0%	3%	1%	0%	2%
Other	0%	1%	0%	4%	3%	18%	1%	0%	27%	0%	6%

NB: "0%" refers to a number lower than 0.5%, rather than necessarily a zero value.

Care should be taken when considering vertical market statistics, as the research sample size may be small. Use only as an indication of relative importance.

In recent years, there has been little real pattern between contact center size and the propensity to make outbound calls.

In the further past, large contact centers were more likely to carry out outbound work: this pattern reappeared in 2017 and is still the case this year.

Figure 8: Use of outbound calling, by contact center size

Contact center size	Proportion of respondents using outbound calling
Small	73%
Medium	80%
Large	84%
Average	78%

PROACTIVE OUTBOUND CONTACT

While some forms of outbound interaction can seem intrusive to customers, proactive customer contact is often viewed in a positive light as it seems to the customer as though the business is particularly looking out for them, informing them of important information and anticipating their needs.

Outbound telemarketing has evolved from pure cold calling into something more subtle and personalized, proactively using live voice as well as lower-cost channels such as recorded voice, SMS, email and social media to build strong ongoing relationships with customers and increasing the number of touch points to potential buyers.

Proactive outbound customer contact offers businesses the opportunity to:

- reduce contact costs through deflecting avoidable inbound calls, and through shorter and more targeted interactions
- reduce cost through using automation and non-live channels used rather than human agents
- provide a superior customer experience and reduce stress and effort throughout the customer base
- personalize interactions, strengthening customer loyalty and leading to future revenue-generating opportunities
- protect service levels in terms of emergency or other one-off events through immediate notifications and ongoing service updates.

Figure 9: Reasons for proactive outbound contact, by vertical market

Vertical market	Proactive outbound contact opportunity
Finance	Unexpected account activity/possible fraud; notification of negative balance; reminder / confirmation of credit card bill
Housing	Reminder of maintenance visit; rental payment reminders
Insurance	Option to renew annual insurance
Retail & Distribution	Product recalls; delivery updates
Technology, Media & Telecoms	Status of mobile data allowance; bill reminders; notification of service outages
Transport & Travel	Transport updates; changes to timetable
Utilities	Bill reminders; meter readings; appointment reminders; notification of outages / emergency work updates

At a non-vertical market level, proactive outbound can be used for

- customer onboarding and welcoming
- telemarketing
- confirmations and reminders
- announcements notifications
- order and delivery status
- account-based notifications
- fraud checking and notification
- customer surveys
- debt collections
- renewals and upgrades.

Successfully running proactive outbound communication requires specific elements of data capture and process definition:

- collect accurate customer information including mobile phone numbers and email addresses
- request and understand a customer's preference for receiving communications, e.g. channel, time of day, circumstances in which the message will be welcomed
- define the business process trigger for sending proactive communication, e.g. overdraft notification SMS if balance goes below predefined amount
- understand the outcomes by customer type and channel: which reminders or notifications were acted upon most successfully, and which then required a human agent to handle any follow-up requests
- analyze the reasons for any suboptimal outcomes, amend scripts and business processes, and monitor any future change in outcomes.

Proactive outbound can be strengthened through customer profiling – where customers are grouped according to specific characteristics, such as age, income, lifetime value or products purchased –which can be used to assist with the analysis of the issues that these types of customer will tend to call about.

This profiling can help with skills-based routing, and also with proactive outbound customer service which may provide customers with the answers to their questions before they even realize that they need to call the business. This analysis can also be done at a product level, where an understanding of the likely call topics can be used to provide agents with possible solutions on the desktop in real-time, and also may be used proactively to communicate with the customer.

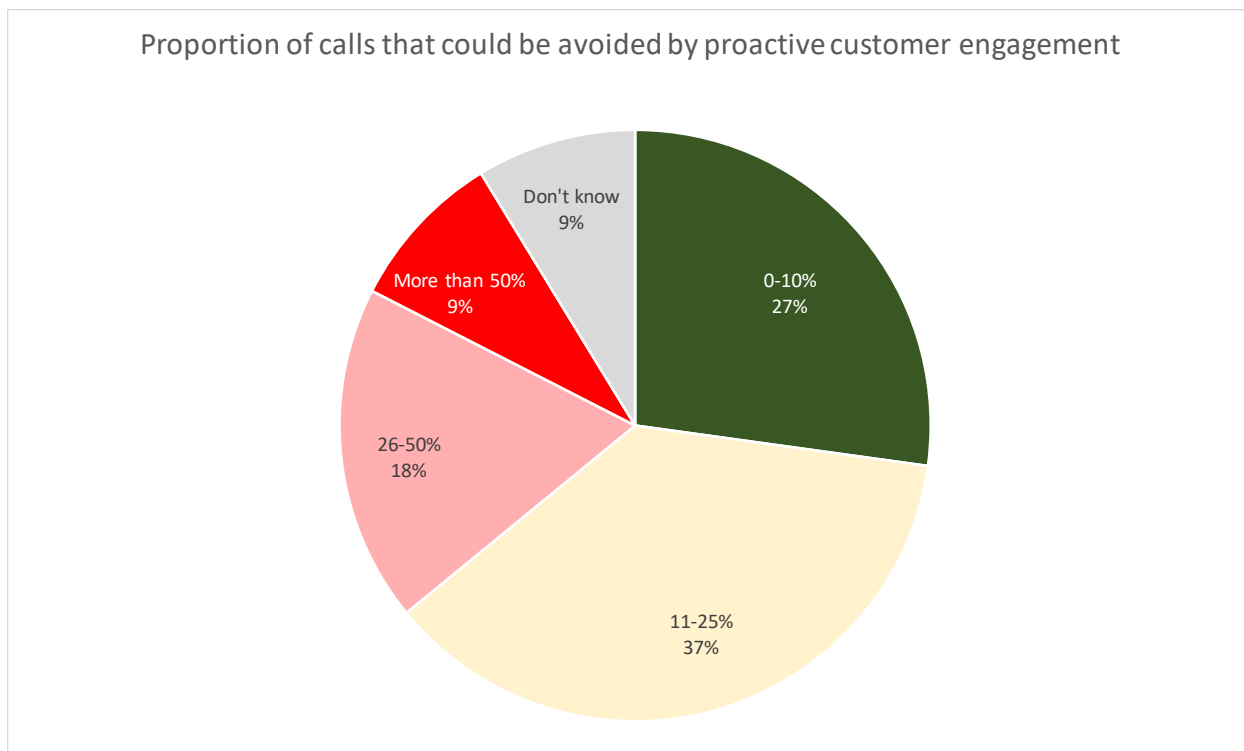
It's also possible to look at the types of call (and repeat calls) being received, and seeing if any of these call groups have a high preponderance of a certain type of customer: for example, if a high proportion of those calling in about the setup of a complex product are in a certain demographic group, then these customers will benefit from being routed to agents with particular technical or communication skills, or receiving targeted outbound communications showing them the solution or how to access the correct self-service application.

Survey respondents were asked what proportion of inbound calls could be avoided by engaging the customer before they felt the need to call the business.

27% of contact centers reported that more than a quarter of their inbound calls could be avoided if more proactivity was used, which would make a huge difference to costs (especially through automated outbound communication), as well as having a positive effect on customer experience.

Businesses should be encouraged to analyze the type of interactions that they receive into their contact center, and to see if there is a cost-effective way of proactively handling these. The opportunity is certainly there for the industry as a whole to manage the inbound demand more effectively than is being done so at the moment.

Figure 10: Proportion of calls that could be avoided by proactive customer engagement



END-USER QUESTION: OUR CONTACT CENTER IS MAINLY INBOUND BUT WE'RE CONSIDERING BEING MORE PROACTIVELY OUTBOUND TO AVOID UNNECESSARY CALLS. WHAT OPTIONS ARE THERE FOR US?



The notion of proactive outbound intervention to address detectable patterns of inbound call issues has long been a use case for contact center organizations. Businesses who have deployed speech analytics have long since known that by having the ability to quickly ascertain the nature of all calls, their drivers and true call dispositions provides them the actionable insights needed to determine where a pre-emptive outbound call could reduce the number or types of certain inbound calls. For instance, a parcel service where delivery of certain types of packages require a signature receipt dealt with an influx of inbound calls from intended recipients who were not at home and missed the deliveries. Speech Analytics quickly identifies those scenarios and illustrated the need for the business to initiate an outbound campaign to confirm recipient availability. Having the ability to rapidly understand the nature of those calls allowed the business to not only improve the customer experience but reduce the overhead associated with fielding those calls and the fuel/labor to make a second delivery attempt.

CALL-BACKS AND 'CALL-ME' REQUESTS

A significant proportion of outbound activity is carried out at the customer's direct request, whether initiated in a telephony queue or on a website, as part of the queue management toolset.

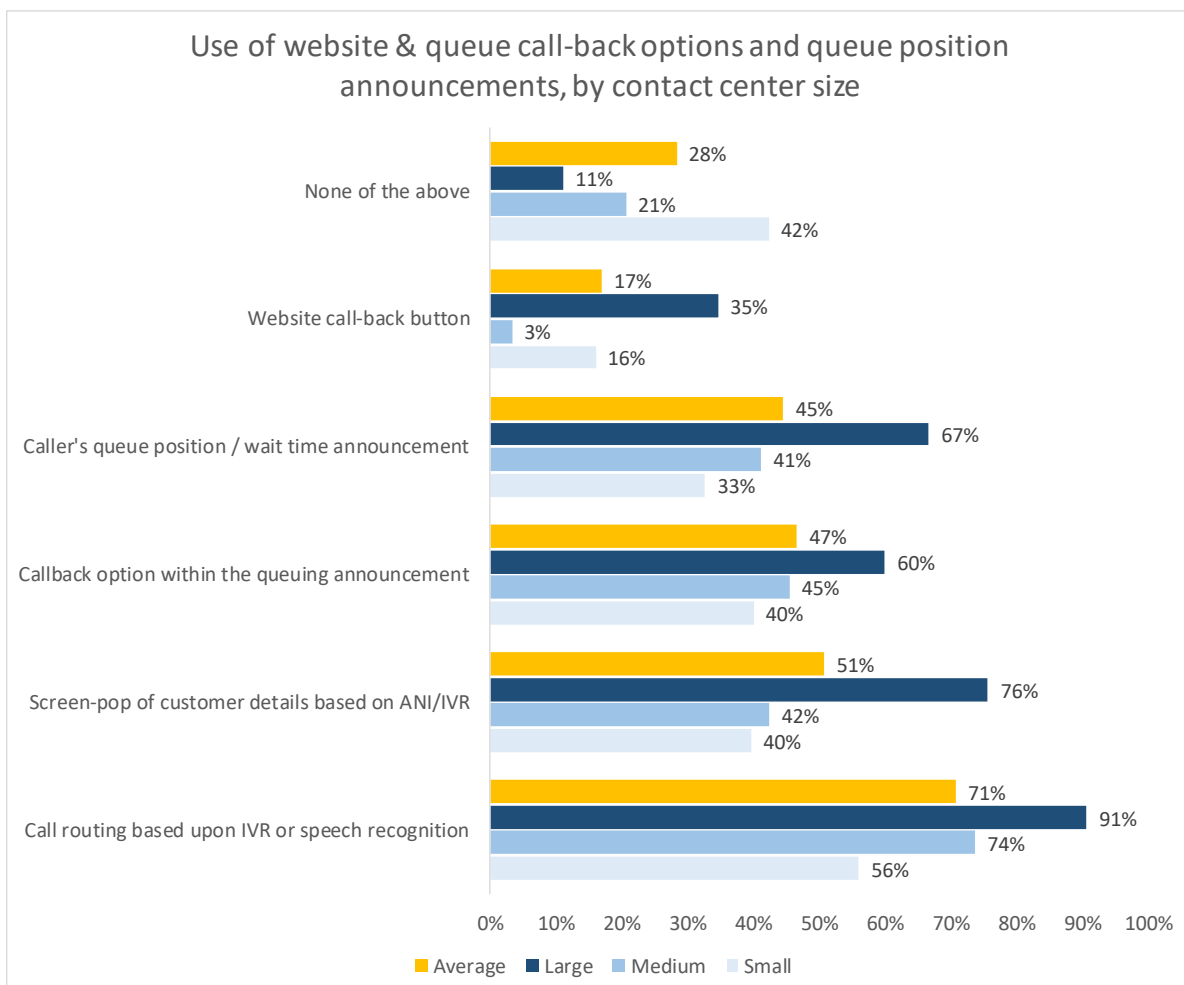
QUEUE MANAGEMENT SOLUTIONS

The use of a website 'call-me' button (which initiates an outbound call at a time specified by the recipient) is weighted towards operations that carry out significant sales, but is present only in the case of 17% of this year's respondents. This has increased significantly recently, and may play an important part in providing customer support via mobile / smartphone channels.

47% of respondents offer a telephony queue call-back option, spread fairly evenly across size bands, and the proportion of respondents announcing the position of the call in the queue has increased to 45%.

51% of respondents use screen-popping, putting information about the caller and possibly their requirements on the agent desktop as the call is delivered, with larger operations more likely to do so.

Figure 11: Use of website and queue call-back options and queue position announcements, by contact center size



CALL-BACK

For calls which have been held in an inbound queue for a specific amount of time, an automated message can be played that will provide customers with the option to select a callback at a later time. If the customer selects this, their phone numbers are then dropped into an outbound call queue and handled the same way as any other outbound call.

There are several different varieties of virtual queuing systems: the "First-In, First-Out" (FIFO) system keeps the customer's place in line by monitoring queue conditions until the estimated wait time hits a set target, at which point it intercepts incoming calls before they enter the queue, informing customers of the likely wait time and offering the option of receiving an outbound call in the same amount of time as if they had personally waited on hold.

At this point, customers choosing to remain on hold go directly into a queue. Customers who opt for a call-back are prompted to enter their telephone number and possibly some extra details that can be used for agent selection and skills-based routing, and are then asked to hang up. Virtual placeholders keep the customers' places in line and the virtual queuing system launches an outbound call to the customer at the agreed time. When the call-back is answered by the customer, the system checks the right person is on the line and ready to talk. If this is the case, the call is routed to the next available suitable agent, who handles it as a normal inbound call.

By replacing real hold time with this virtual version, customers are free to do other things, thus removing four of the five problems that they have with queues: unknown queue times, hold music, the inability to do anything else and repetitive announcements.

Scheduled call-back options differ from a FIFO experience, in that customers do not keep their place in queue, but are called back at some time in the future that is more convenient for them (for example, when they know they will be back at their desk and available to take a call).

There are several types of scheduled virtual queuing:

- Datebook-type scheduling systems allow customers to schedule appointments for days in the future, with times blocked-out that are unavailable for scheduling, and limiting the number of call-backs available. This system also allows customers that reach a contact center out-of-hours to schedule a call-back during normal working hours
- Timer scheduling systems promise a call-back after a specific amount of time, regardless of queue conditions. While this ensures an on-time call-back for the customer, a surge in call volume or staff reduction due to a shift change can create problems for the contact center's queue, lengthening wait times for other callers
- Forecast-based scheduling systems offer appointments during times that are expected to have low call volumes. These times may not be convenient for the customer, and the contact center runs the risk that their scheduling may be inaccurate.

Respondents offering a telephony call-back option were asked to state which types of call-back were presented to callers.

The majority of respondents that offered call-back functionality allowed callers to request a FIFO call-back (i.e. acting as a placeholder in the queue), with a minority allowing customers to specify a scheduled time.

Figure 12: Types of telephony call-back offered to customers

Type of call-back	Proportion of respondents offering call-back that use this
FIFO (first-in, first-out) - holds the caller's place in the queue, then calls once they are at the front	60%
Datebook (caller can specify a day to be called back on)	15%
Timed (called back at or before a specific time, regardless of queue conditions)	20%
Forecast-based (called back at a time to suit the contact center)	15%

More than half of respondents who offered call-back reported that FIFO placeholder call-backs were far more requested than one of the delayed call-back types. On analyzing the contact center activity type (i.e. sales or service), those callers making sales enquiries were more likely to want a placeholder-type of call-back. This could possibly be explained by the differing states of mind of customers calling to purchase something, or to make a query or payment. The former is more likely to have chosen to call the contact center to make a purchase that they are enthusiastic about, and/or which is time-sensitive, and as such want to speak to the business as soon as possible.

Respondents indicate that telephony call-back tends not to be universally available to callers, with businesses only offering it after a certain period of wait time or once the queue becomes so long that it triggers the functionality to be offered.

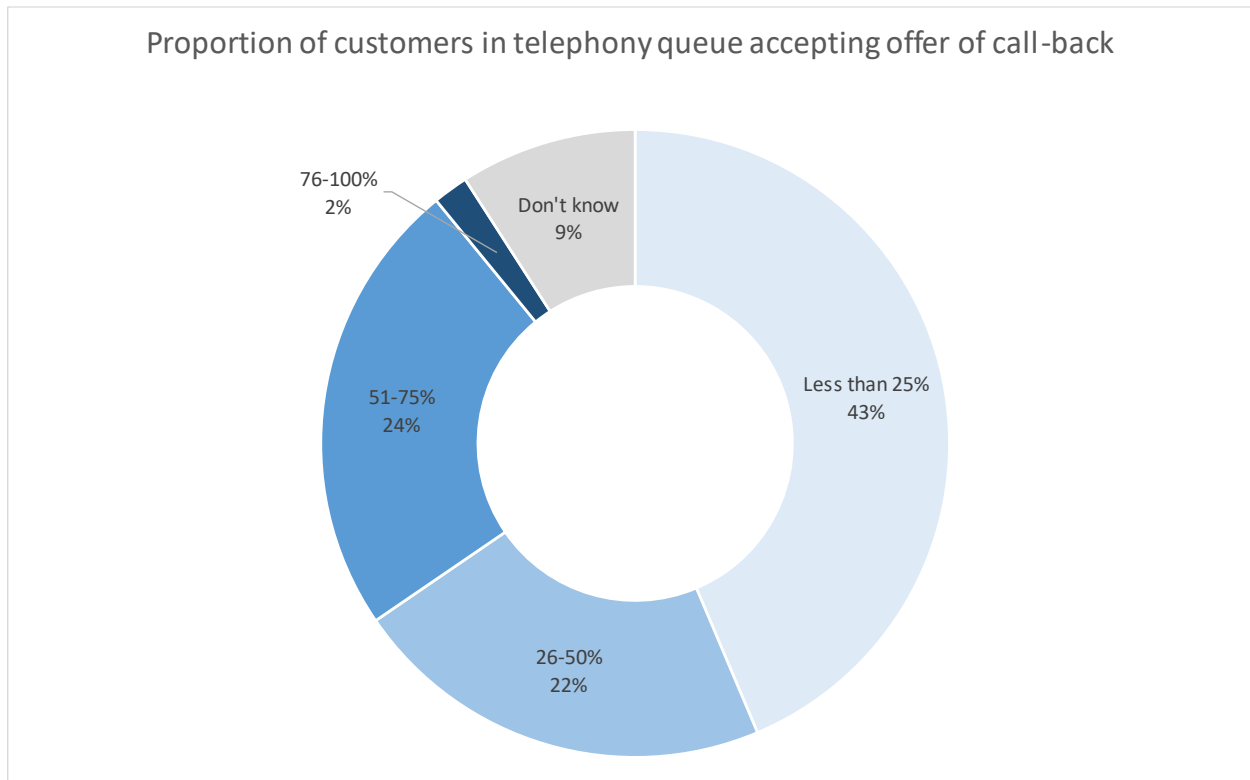
Half of respondents trigger call-back functionality based on the actual time that the customer has spent waiting, with around 30% looking at the estimated wait time based on ACD statistics. The remainder of respondents use a mixture of actual and expected queue time.

Two-thirds of contact centers using call-back state that it is offered after the caller has spent up to two minutes in the queue, although 10% say that it takes longer than five minutes before call-back is offered, at which point many customers have already given up.

Of those who are offered a call-back, 43% of respondents report that fewer than a quarter of callers chose this option. This may be because customers lack confidence that the business will call back when they say they will, are relatively unfamiliar with the technology and/or do not have the call-back option offered to them early enough and so have already abandoned the call.

It should be noted that the proportion of customers accepting call-back is increasing each year.

Figure 13: Proportion of customers in telephony queue accepting offer of call-back



The previous finding is concerning, as call-back has great potential for both customers and businesses: virtual queuing and call-back – when explained properly to customers – can be a win-win for both business and customer by:

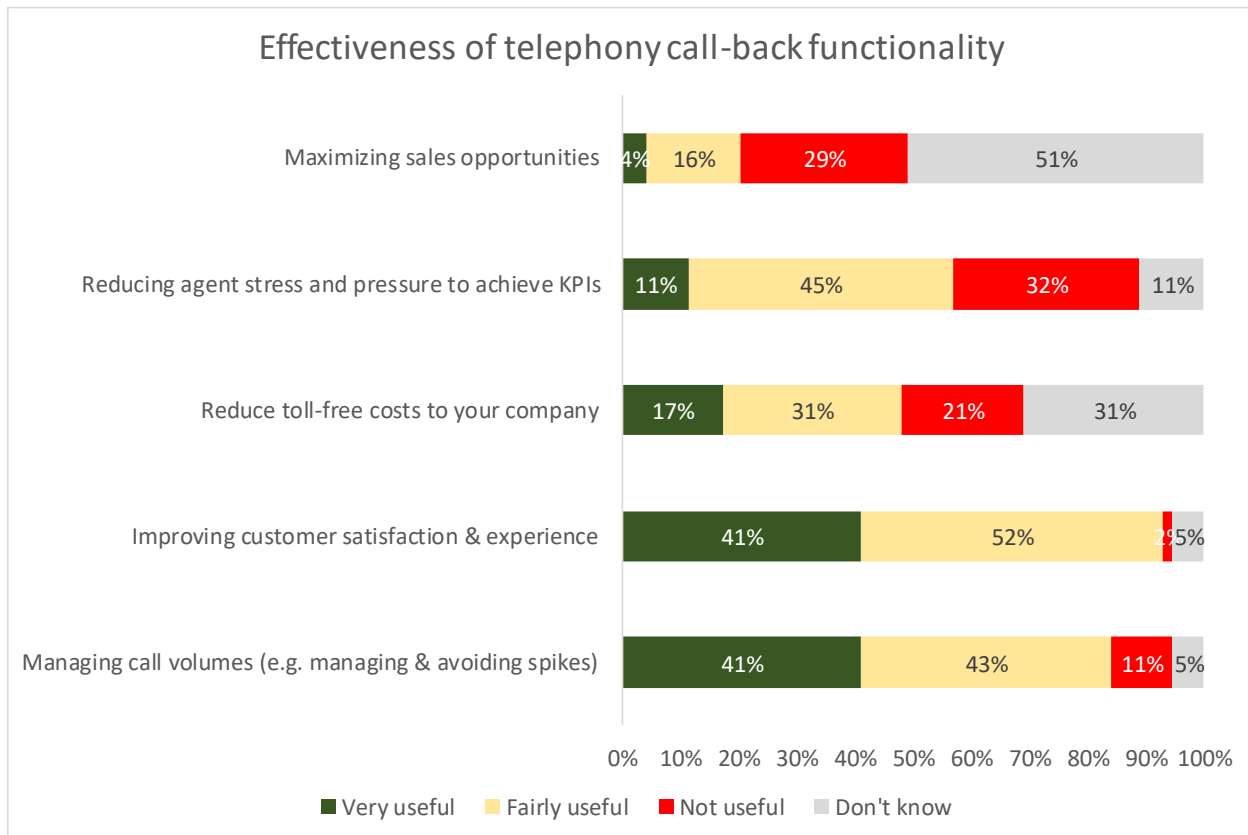
- Increasing customer satisfaction and experience by being called back by an agent who already understands the customer’s context and identity
- Reducing average speed to answer and call abandonment rates
- Reducing call lengths as customers should spend less time complaining and adding-on unnecessary queries "while they're on...", pressuring agents trying to meet targets
- Reducing toll-free/freephone costs, as virtual queuing time does not incur telephone charges borne by the business.

Respondents offering telephony call-back functionality stated clearly that it was most useful for managing call volumes and spikes in busy periods, thus improving customer satisfaction and experience. Being able to spread calls out over the day and allow callers to keep their place in the queue – without actually having to queue – is seen by users as being of great use to both company and customer.

Telephony call-back is not seen by businesses as having a particularly positive effect upon reducing agent stress and pressure to achieve key metrics, and it is definitely not viewed as maximizing sales opportunities from customers who would otherwise go elsewhere.

Few respondents considered it particularly useful in reducing their freephone costs from customers who were queueing at the businesses' expense from considerable amount of time. It is not to say that telephony call-back does not provide these benefits, only that respondents do not use call-back with these in mind.

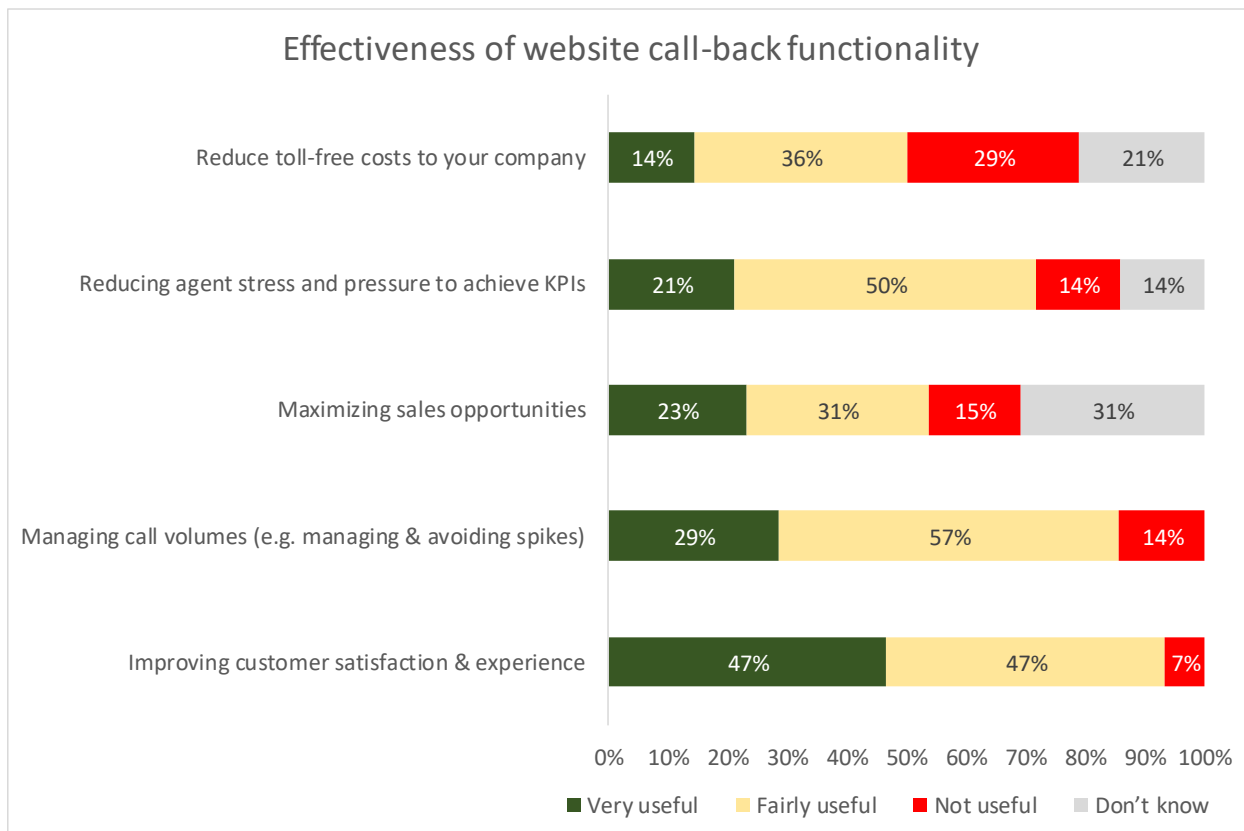
Figure 14: Effectiveness of telephony call-back functionality



Looking at the perceived effectiveness of website call-back functionality, it is worth noting that respondents believed web call-back was less beneficial than telephony call-back for providing relief from call-spikes, although around the same proportion believed that it improved the customer experience.

However, there was much more positivity that website call-back was useful in maximizing sales opportunities, allowing the customer to be contacted at the point of purchase.

Figure 15: Effectiveness of website call-back functionality



Queue management and call abandonment rates

Offering an in-queue call-back option seems to have a positive effect on call abandonment rates, with those doing so having an abandoned call rate around 20% lower than those who do not offer this option.

However, announcing the position of the caller in the queue seems to have much less of a positive outcome, with very similar call abandonment rates.

A tentative conclusion can be drawn that call abandonment rates can be reduced best through actual actions that benefit customers, such as calling them back. Simply providing them with more information about the queue situation (which may be negative) could encourage customers to abandon the call and ring back later.

However, having this knowledge and actively being able to choose what to do may well make the customer think more positively about the company (in that they haven't had to waste any great amount of time) but without a call-back option the customer will not have managed to do what they set out to.

THE USE OF AUTOMATED OUTBOUND COMMUNICATION

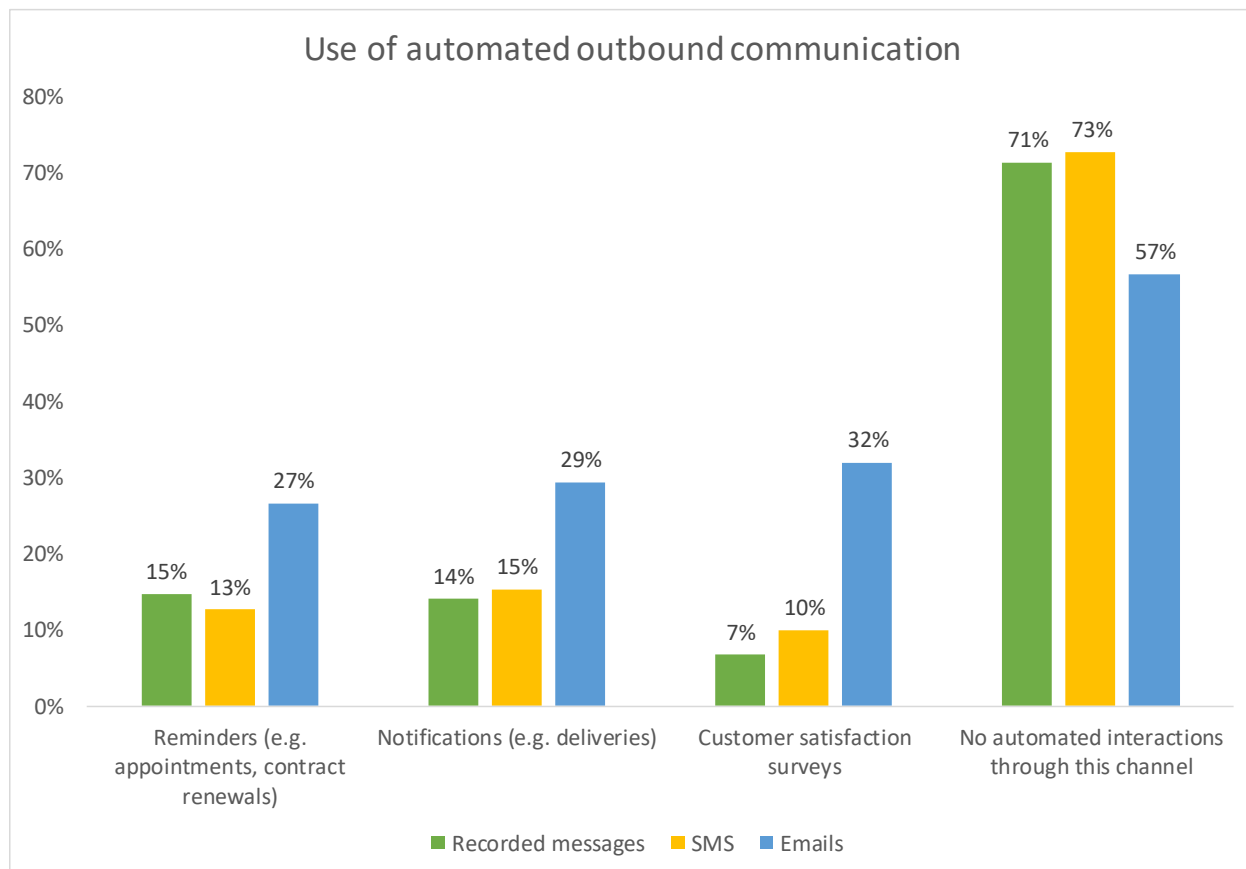
While the majority of targeted outbound contact has previously been carried out by agents, automated outbound service has expanded greatly in recent years.

Sending reminders and notifications to customers through an automated process significantly reduces the cost to the business while improving the overall customer experience. Many customers will choose to seek clarification or a status update at some point in the buying process through making an inbound interaction, and by sending a pre-emptive outbound message, the business is proactively assisting the customer to manage their interaction as well as avoiding a low-value call.

Automated SMS messages are used by around 15% of US contact centers this year, mainly for notifications and reminders, which is similar to how recorded messages are used. Automated email is more widely used across the board, particularly for outbound customer satisfaction surveys.

Respondents using recorded messages will usually often an optional IVR session to capture customer input and route calls. The next section on interactive voice messaging (IVM) considers this in more detail.

Figure 16: Use of automated outbound communication



It should be noted that the “Recorded messages” figures in the previous chart include not only IVM, but also broadcast (robo-call) messages as well: calls made with the sole purpose of making a recorded announcement, rather than to connect a consumer to a live agent immediately. Examples include a recorded sales or marketing message, or recorded information which is not an ‘Agent Unavailable’ message of the type left after an abandoned outbound call through a predictive dialer.

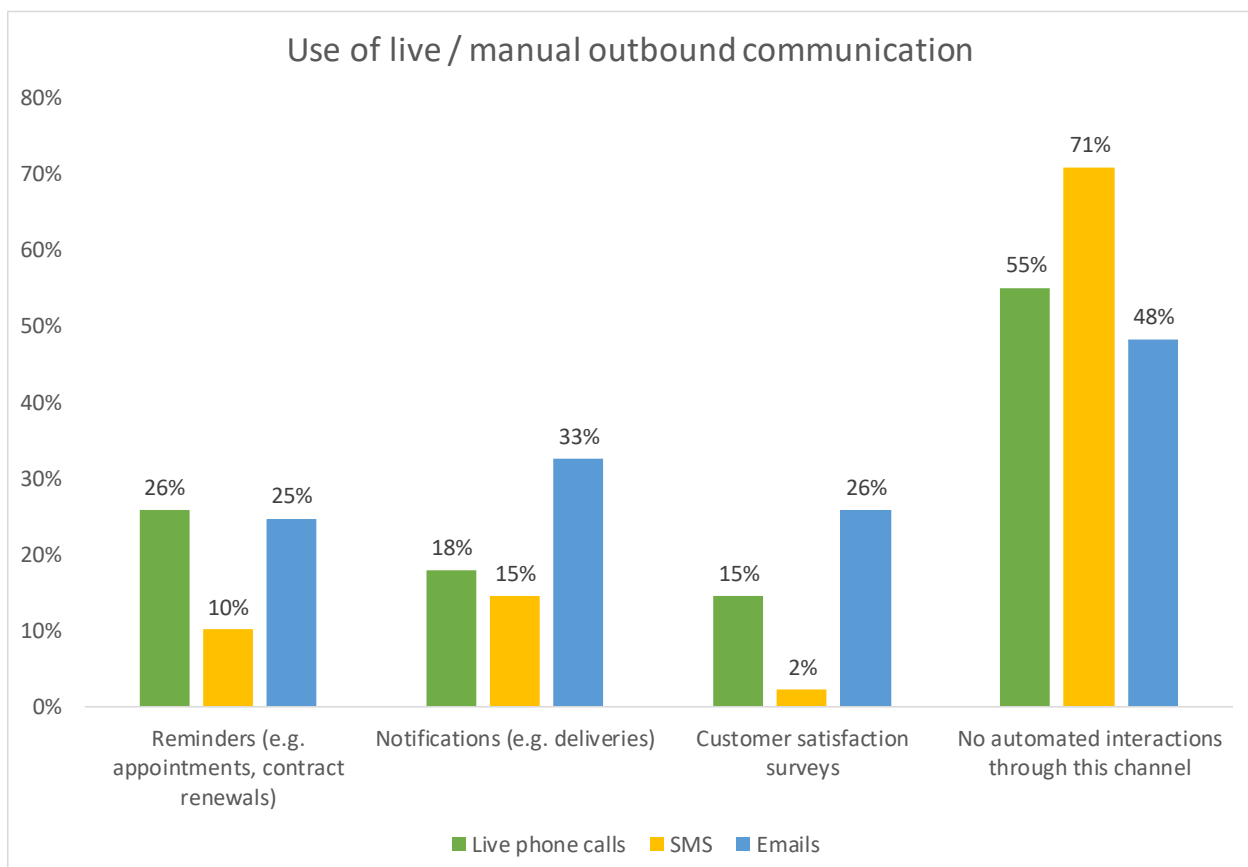
These recorded messages – whether broadcast or IVM – are carried out by far more of the large operations than small, with over 30% of large US outbound operations using broadcast, compared to only 5% of the sub-50 seat category.

Debt collection operations respondents in particular stated that they use broadcast messaging to drive inbound call volumes, as it is seen as another approach to take with customers who are difficult to contact directly.

The following chart compares automated contacts with live contacts. Live outbound calls are more widely used than recorded messages, although fewer respondents allow agents to notify customers manually via SMS.

Manual email is used in around 30% of cases as well, mainly for notifications.

Figure 17: Use of live / manual outbound communication



OMNICHANNEL OUTBOUND

Outbound customer communication is no longer simply about agents making calls. There has been a significant rise in the use of alternative channels, including messaging, emails and recorded announcements which are far more cost-effective and may be welcomed by customers as being less obtrusive than live phone calls.

INTERACTIVE VOICE MESSAGING (IVM)

Interactive Voice Messaging (IVM) is often used alongside live outbound calling, with an automated message inviting the recipient to enter into conversation, either now or at a later time. It is effectively an outbound recorded message which gives the option for the customer to speak with an agent or self-service application if required.

IVM can be used for:

- automated customer surveys
- automating appointment reminders that allow customers to confirm or reschedule
- account alerts and security messages
- delivery reminders, providing an option to reschedule or leave the delivery in a safe place
- notification of unusual payment card activity with the option to cancel the card if required
- balance updates and payment requests
- IVM can be used to manage staff resource: in an emergency situation, IVM can notify key staff that they are required, and also provide a feedback mechanism whereby they can confirm their attendance
- debt reminders with immediate option to pay.

IVM is a relatively inexpensive channel for businesses to use, and can be very positive for the customer experience. Reminders about overdue balances mean that financial penalties can be avoided and that utilities and telecoms services can continue to be provided rather than automatically cut off, with all of the issues and stress that reconnecting the services can involve.

IVM activity can be triggered based on particular business rules (for example, anyone who has just gone overdrawn), or for a wider customer group (for example, anyone in postcodes that will be affected by a utilities outage).

IVM is seen as less intrusive than live outbound dialing. It can be personalized, and the customer can choose to interact with the company at that time, advise a better time to contact or simply hang up. For the debt collection industry, a significant proportion of customers that enter collections are able to make a payment to bring their account up to date, exiting the collections process within the same month. IVM enables companies to automate outbound interactions with this segment of customers and thus enable live call center resources to focus on speaking to customers with more serious financial difficulties or more complex arrears queries, which is beneficial to both customer and company.

IVM is less expensive than employing agents and can be particularly useful in small teams where predictive dialing is not possible due to the risk of high call abandonment rates. IVM is also effective at cleaning data, for example, when attempting a phone number for the first time, IVM helps cleanse the database of bad or dead numbers and provides an instant 'opt-out' process for removal of Do Not Contact numbers.

It also allows customers to know who the organization is that's trying to contact them, and to press 1 to speak to them which is especially useful in the case of false AMD detection. IVM can also be used to assist with fraud prevention and credit card checking, as it is a timely and rapid method of informing the customer that there is a potential problem.

Sending an IVM which gives the option for the customer to contact an agent can be used at times of low inbound activity to manage traffic more effectively. The resulting inbound calls will be able to be handled without needing to increase staff numbers, and using CTI software means that screen pops can be used to improve the effectiveness and personalization of the resultant inbound calls.

Those in the debt collection industry are most likely to use IVM. Respondents within the sector state that they use this in order to give as many people as possible the chance to be connected to an agent before the downstream collections process takes over: unlike calls to new customers (cold sales) for example, there is a limited time period for a debt to be settled at a specific stage before it is escalated. It is also seen as a way to clean lists and collect the easiest debts before the respondent switches their dialing mode to predictive.

By far the most prevalent use of IVM is where a recorded message is played that asks specifically by name for a particular customer, asking them to press 1 if it is them in order to be transferred to an agent. If no key presses are detected, a message will be left with the caller's name and telephone number, asking them to call back. This may be looped to avoid partial recordings being made. Businesses will ask the customer to identify themselves through their date of birth or account number before any information is shared with them.

Some contact centers state that they will make sure an agent is available to take the call if a button on the phone is pressed; others that any IVM returns that are abandoned will not be called for another 72 hours at which point a live agent will be made available.

If a customer receiving an IVM call indicates they wish to speak to an agent, survey responses show that **target** connection times are substantially shorter than the usual 20-30 second targets employed in most 'standard' inbound environments, with a mean of 15 seconds and a median of only 8 seconds. The **actual** average time per call that inbound IVM-prompted customers are on hold is a mean of 9 seconds, and a median of 8 seconds, so companies tend to exceed their target.

It is reported that 27% of IVM calls were answered by a customer, and 73% by an answerphone. Conjecturally, this may be because IVM is more likely to be used in situations where an answering machine is more likely to pick up, or the consumer is less likely to answer the call (e.g. debt collection).

EMAIL

Email can be a powerful relationship builder, with many opportunities to continue re-engaging prospects over time. Email also provides the capability of directing customers further into the business, through linking to videos or webpages, and a potentially serious customer can receive a phone call from the sales team at a point where they are actually a qualified prospect rather than just another name on the list to be called.

Apart from marketing, email is often used for confirmation of an order or for notification, and is particularly well-suited to longer, more complex messages where no two-way communication is required.

SMS

Many companies use this low cost channel in order to provide customers with information proactively, as well as strengthening relationships unobtrusively.

While it is certainly useful for a customer to know that they have gone overdrawn or that their insurance is about to expire, there is clearly also benefit to businesses in terms of long-term revenue generation and avoiding unnecessary and low-value customer contact. Over time, customers become used to receiving text messages from trusted suppliers, and are more likely to prove amenable to marketing messages through this medium.

Generating SMS requires a campaign management tool similar to that used for outbound calling. It should provide:

- options for personalization (i.e. using placeholders for any individual data such as name, account details, amount owing, etc.)
- sender identification options e.g. a mobile number and/or the company's name
- integration options: while some messaging will be sent directly from a CSV or other flat data file, you may wish to integrate with your CRM system, altering the customer record accordingly depending on the outcome of the SMS
- a campaign management area that allows the creation of the SMS text and also any business rules that should be applied, such as limiting the hours at which messages are sent (sending early in the morning or late at night should only be done in emergency situations)
- in many cases (e.g. surveys, change of delivery date, collection of debts), the business will want to offer two-way communication with the customer, rather than just broadcasting the SMS one-way, and the application should support escalation to live agents as well as routing responses through to a self-service application.

Due to data regulations, SMS is more suitable for communications to existing customers. Consent to receive any direct marketing should have been given explicitly, although this is not necessary where individuals are already customers of the business, the product or service is similar to what they have already purchased and they are given a clear opt-out option. In such cases, a soft opt-in applies, although businesses should be wary of abusing this activity as mobile phone numbers are seen by many customers as being something very personal to them. If the SMS is about an administrative matter – i.e. there is no element of promotion or direct marketing at all – it is not necessary to collect consent.

SMS is also useful for getting the customer used to receiving outbound communication from the business, being far less intrusive than getting an outbound call from a number that they don't recognize. Text messaging also has a far superior read rate to most other channels, and unlike emails they will tend to be read within 30 seconds of delivery. This makes SMS particularly suitable for rapid response situations such as utilities or broadband outages, where a significant spike in inbound call volumes would otherwise be expected.

Increasingly, businesses are using SMS to assist with their two-factor authentication process in order to improve security. There is also the option within an SMS to add a link to a secure payment page, meaning that PCI compliance becomes far easier, and messaging is commonly used in the financial services industry to notify customers of activity on their account.

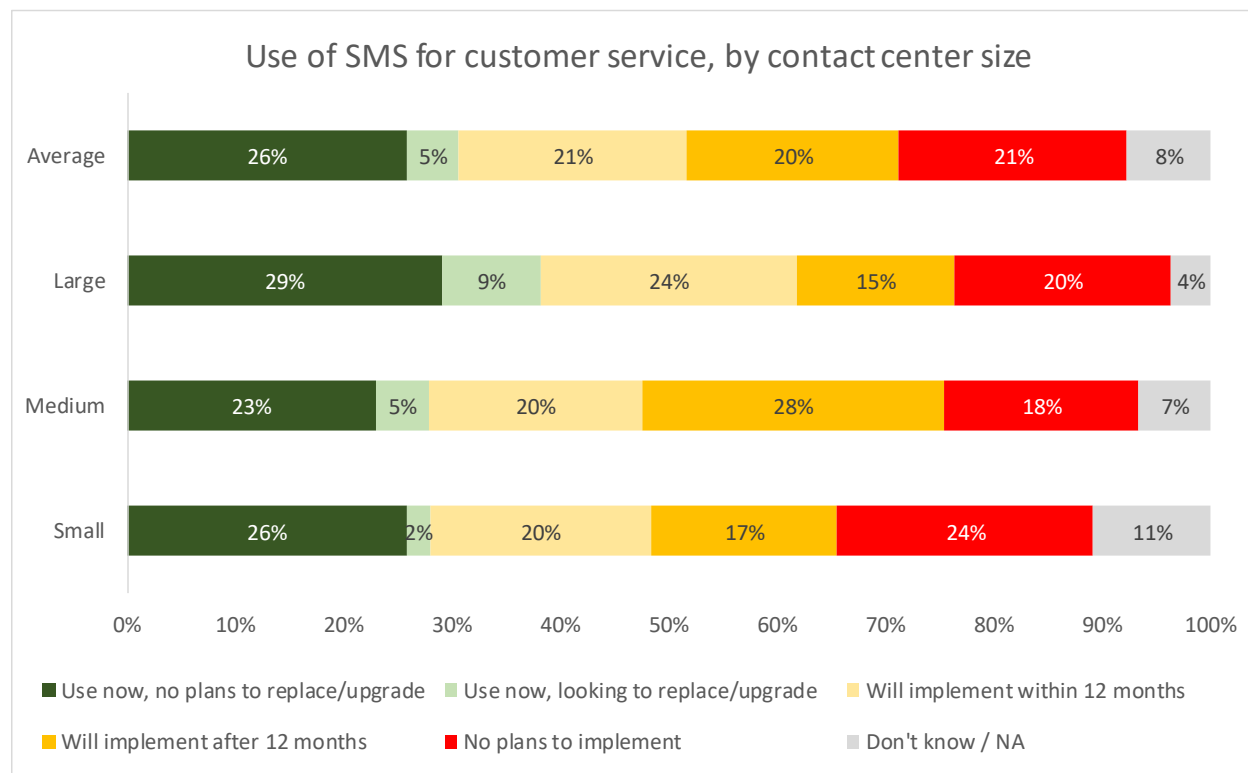
The cost of implementing an outbound SMS system should take into account the initial one-off setup payment (often around \$1,500 or more), as well as the ongoing costs of sending each message: cost per SMS can be less than 1c if bought in bulk. Some cloud solution providers may include SMS as part of their outbound package.

Depending on what the business wishes to do, it may also be necessary to consider the cost of integrating the SMS platform into existing CRM and other business applications. If businesses want to use short codes rather than long telephone numbers for marketing campaigns, these numbers are considerably more expensive (\$600 - \$1,200 to set up in the US and around \$3,000 in Canada, with similar additional ongoing monthly fees).

SMS is growing in importance as a customer service tool, particularly for reminders, notifications and for customer surveys.

There is little pattern across contact center sizes, as SMS solutions do not have to be expensive, and their use are more a factor of business use rather than investment capability, although larger contact centers do seem to be slightly more likely to use SMS in this year's survey. There is considerable interest in implementing SMS in the short-term, especially in larger operations.

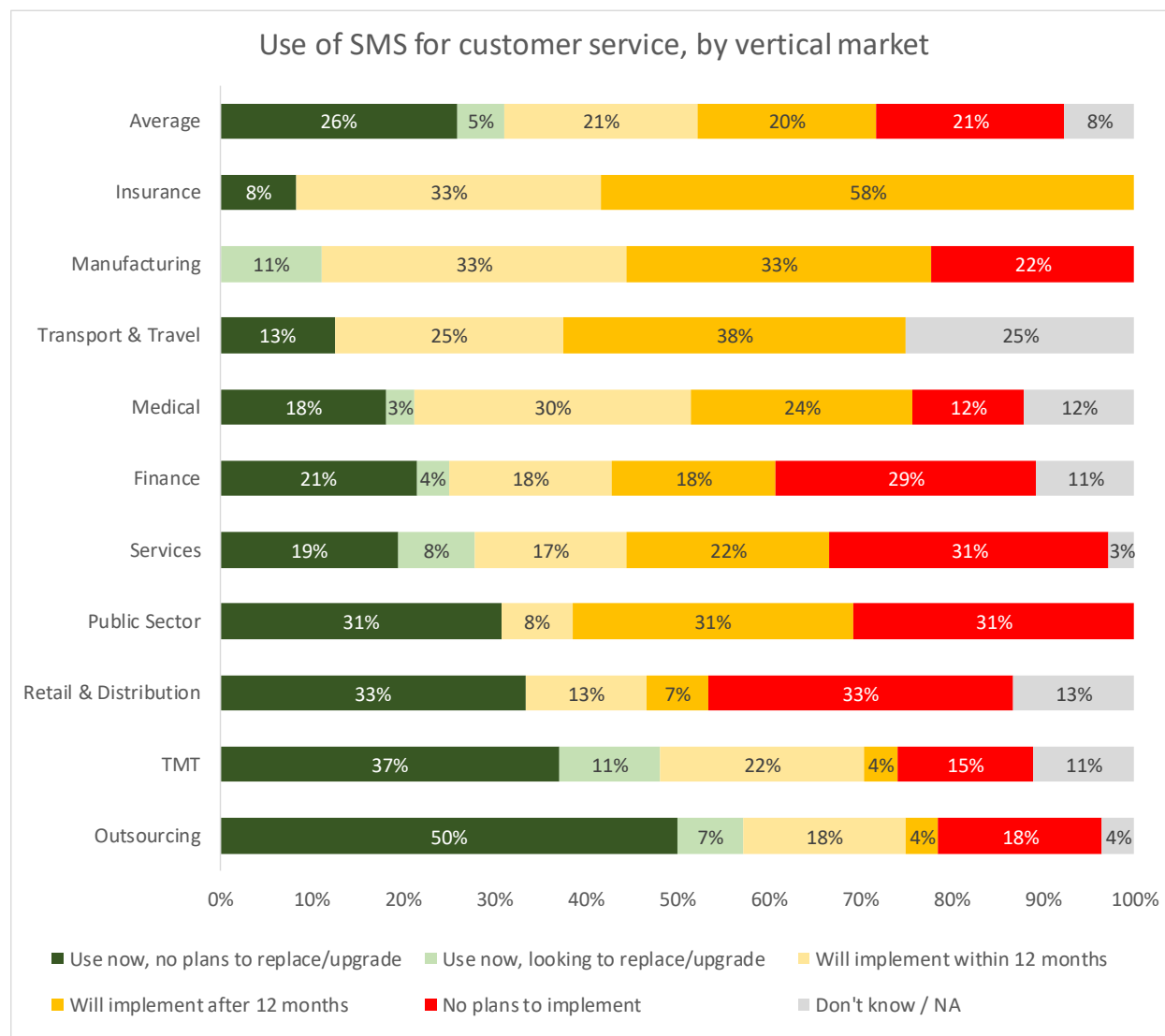
Figure 18: Use of SMS for customer service, by contact center size



Retailers (for delivery notifications), outsourcers (for customer surveys) and the TMT sectors are the larger users of SMS for customer service.

Even where current use is low, such as in insurance and manufacturing, there is interest being shown in implementing this solution.

Figure 19: Use of SMS for customer service, by vertical market



OUTBOUND SURVEYS AND THE VOICE OF THE CUSTOMER

Customer surveys have been an integral part of most businesses for decades. Recently, there has been a great increase in the number of organizations implementing “Voice of the Customer” programs, sometimes based around large-scale analysis of call recordings, but the more traditional, direct methods of understanding customer experience and requirements are still very much present.

Outbound automated surveys are becoming more prevalent, with more than 10m outbound IVR survey calls estimated to be made each year in the UK. After the call has been concluded, the caller's number may be put into an outbound dialer's queue, which calls them and offers an IVR survey.

The speed with which this call-back is made is crucial to the take-up rate of the survey, with up to 70% acceptance rate if the call-back is in minutes, but perhaps only 10% if the call is made over 48 hours later.

Alternatively, with the customer's permission, the IVR session is offered immediately after the agent has left the call.

Outbound live voice: frequently, the contact details of a proportion of incoming callers will be passed to a dedicated outbound team, who will call the customer back (often within 24 hours) to ascertain the customer's level of satisfaction with the original call. Sometimes customers will find this intrusive, while others will welcome the chance to provide feedback.

Additionally, certain companies employ outside agencies to survey customers regularly, which may be useful in benchmarking exercises, since they will apply a more formalized and structured approach to data gathering and presentation. The automated IVM option as mentioned previously could also be considered as an option.

SMS: Text messaging has the advantage of immediacy of sending and also of reporting on the results. It is a cheap way of carrying out surveys, and can be linked to a specific agent, allowing the contact center to use this information for agent performance as well as satisfaction with the business.

However, SMS does not allow detailed or multiple questions and businesses will have to collect mobile numbers if they do not already have them. It should be noted that take-up rates are better than many other forms of feedback (at around 25-35% on average), and younger and more time-poor customers are more likely to respond, providing a wider universe of responses across demographics.

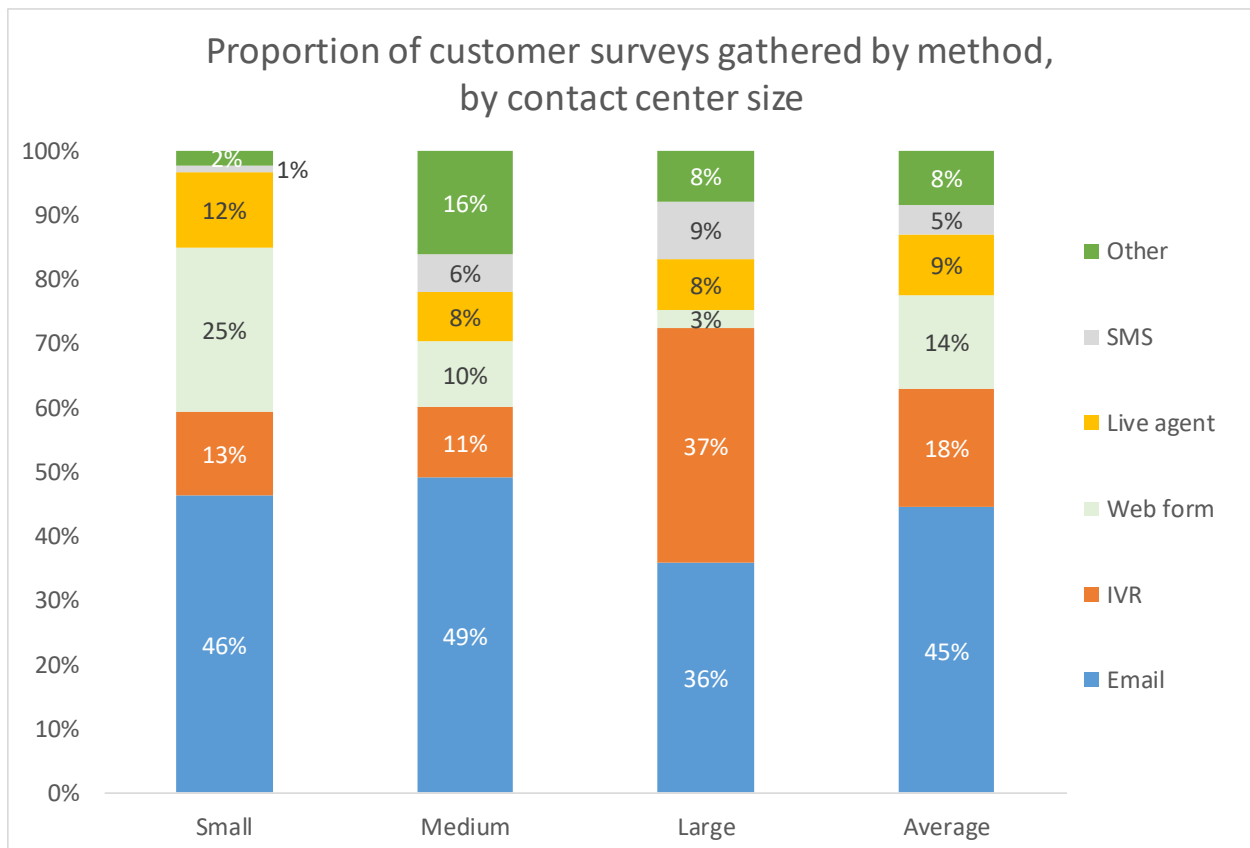
This form of survey can allow the contact center to identify very unhappy customers quickly and to schedule an outbound call to deal with the problem.

By far the most popular way of collecting customer surveys is via email, with almost half of surveys being collected in this way. Email allows a mixture of quantitative numerical data to be collected, along with qualitative comments which may highlight issues that would otherwise be unknown. It also has the advantage of immediacy and can be fully automated, requiring little or no additional input from the business. Web forms also allow this mix of numerical and written data to be collected, but the timing of offering the surveys during a web browsing session can be difficult to get right.

Despite the cost, outbound survey calls carried out by live agents are used in 9% of cases, which allow a depth of qualitative information to be collected from which insights can be drawn.

Both SMS and IVR are more positioned towards gathering quantitative information, often aligned to NPS.

Figure 20: Proportion of customer surveys gathered by method, by contact center size



CALL BLENDING

Call blending, the process by which agents are switched between inbound and outbound queues depending upon the operational requirements of the contact center, offers businesses the opportunity to deploy their resources flexibly to meet service levels. Call blending has had to fight against the conventional wisdom of the traditional contact center industry, which implies that the more one can segregate the contact center into a series of production lines, the better-run the operation will be.

Call blending gives the ability to deliver both inbound and outbound calls seamlessly to the agent, regulating outbound call volume based on inbound traffic. When inbound traffic is low, outbound calls are automatically generated for a specified campaign. When inbound traffic picks up, the dialer dynamically slows the number of outgoing calls to meet the inbound service level. Results can include increased agent productivity, streamlined staffing, and improved customer service. However, this process needs to be understood and managed carefully, as not all agents are adept at dealing with both inbound and outbound calls.

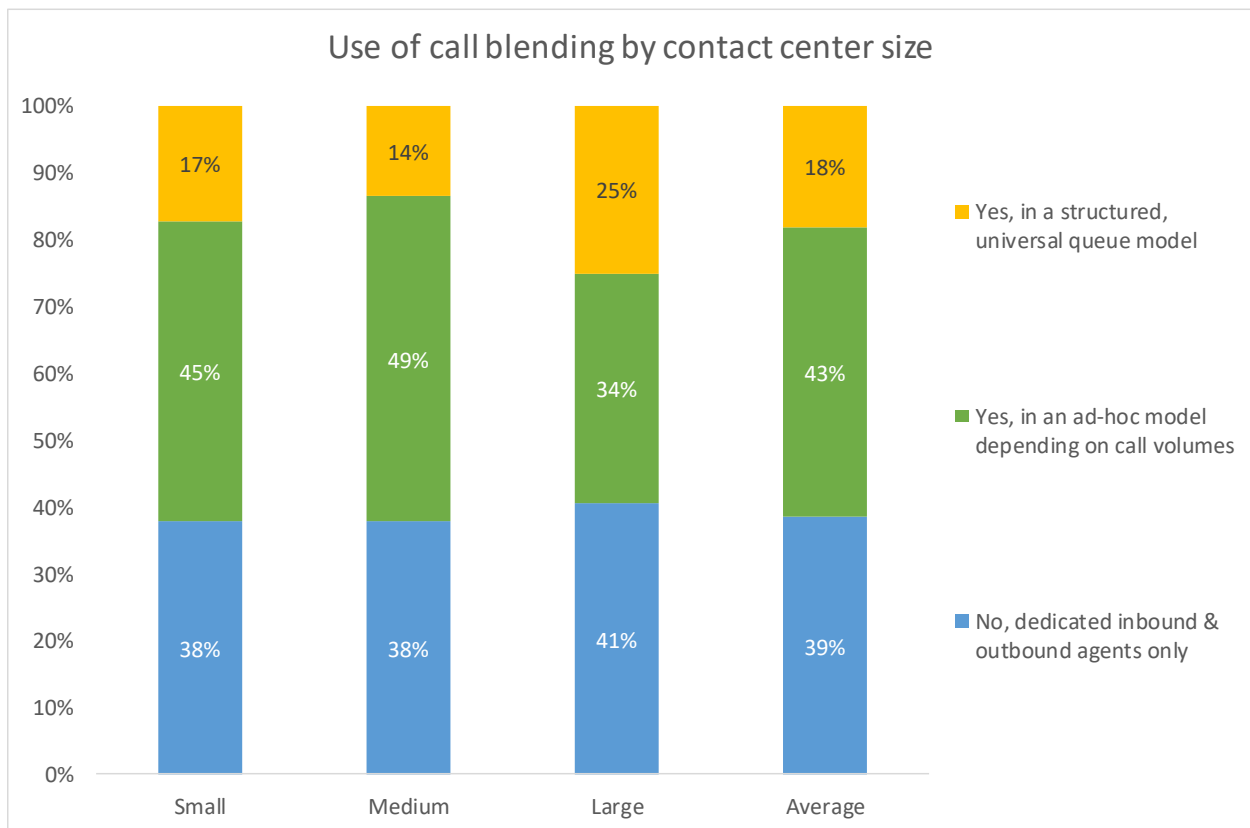
A contact center handling different processes involving customer service, sales orders, and outbound telemarketing will have different groups of agents with specific skills for these areas. Some agents are more capable and adaptable than others, and can be used as blended agents. For example, these agents may have a primary responsibility to handle inbound calls, but when the inbound call volume drops, the dialer will send a message to these agents indicating that they have been switched to outbound mode and start offering outbound calls to them. Where relevant, systems will prompt a script for the outbound calls to run on the agent desktop and depending on the call volume in the inbound queue, the agents will be switched automatically, improving productivity. However, if there is a constant switching from inbound to outbound and back again, the agent may lose concentration and the productivity may go down.

Blending capability can be enhanced by automatically providing the relevant customer data to the agent desktop – whether in inbound or outbound mode – reducing the need for manual searches of information, reducing handle time and maximizing productivity.

A structured blended environment, where agents are moved seamlessly and dynamically between inbound and outbound, is used in only 18% of US contact center operations. Larger contact centers are somewhat more likely than smaller operations to use this type of approach.

A substantial proportion of respondents across all size bands use dedicated teams to handle only either outbound or inbound, with small and medium operations more likely to move agents between inbound and outbound on an ad-hoc basis.

Figure 21: Use of call blending by contact center size



Over many years of research, ContactBabel has analyzed key performance metrics in operations that use blended agents or dedicated outbound, and has found that there is often a direct correlation between superior KPIs and a blended environment.

Looking at the effect on productivity, it is interesting to put the use and type of call blending against key contact center inbound performance and operational metrics, such as average speed to answer, which is as usual somewhat lower in formal, blended environments than in dedicated and more ad-hoc environments, as agents are moved between tasks quickly and seamlessly.

Figure 22: Average speed to answer, by call blending environment type

Call blending environment	Average speed to answer (seconds)
Blending used in a formal and structured way	26
Blending used in an informal, ad-hoc way	40
Dedicated and separate inbound and outbound agents	38

From an outbound perspective, blending can certainly improve agent productivity as they are no longer simply waiting for calls, but it's also important to consider the time of day: it makes sense that the greatest chance of having calls answered is at that time of day when most inbound calls are happening, which will mean that the number of agents available for blended outbound is less. An answer may be to segment the calling list along demographic lines: retired people are more likely to be in during the day, for example. Additionally, using outbound messaging with a call to action in quiet inbound times can drive up inbound sales call volumes at a time when agents are available to take inbound calls.

As well as improving key performance metrics, call blending seems to have a positive impact on agent attrition rates, and it can be hypothesized that a greater variety of work can improve agent engagement and thus reduce staff attrition. It should also be noted that the outbound sector has experienced a significant and ongoing drop in agent attrition rates over the past few years, and this may be linked to a reduction in repetitive, highly scripted calls in favor of more personalized customer service and sales calls.

In terms of the impact on workforce management, real-time adherence and intraday functionality will mean that the dynamic nature of blending need not impact upon the accuracy of management information systems, being able to track and allocate resource to the necessary activity without requiring significant amounts of manual reallocation.

TECHNOLOGY

THE USE OF OUTBOUND DIALERS

Automated dialing solutions reduce the time delay between the agent making live contacts through eliminating the need for manual dialing, the time spent waiting for the customer to answer the call and eliminating calls taken by answer phones.

By removing the tedious elements of manual dialing and the failure to speak with customers, outbound automation can improve the agent experience by providing more live contacts and thus more opportunities to make sales or otherwise reach performance targets. Of course, overly aggressive use of predictive dialing for long periods can exhaust agents which will quickly have a very negative effect on job satisfaction.

It is interesting to note that industry statistics on dialing mode efficiency suggest the following to be reasonable estimates, if the list quality and time of day that calls are made were the same in each instance:

- manual dialing: 12 minutes of talk time per hour (20%)
- preview dialing: 18 minutes of talk time per hour (30%)
- progressive dialing: 25 to 35 minutes of talk time per hour (42% - 58%)
- predictive dialing: 35 to 45 minutes of talk time per hour (58% - 75%).

In reality, each dialing mode will be used in different circumstances, making direct comparison very difficult. The following section on the usage of dialer modes gives information about the advantages and disadvantages of each, and how they are typically used.

Automated outbound dialers are most often found in large operations which carry out reasonable amounts of outbound work, as the efficiencies over manual dialing are so considerable that the extra expense will often make commercial sense.

Figure 23: Current technology usage and short-term investment plans - automated outbound dialing by contact center size, end-2019

Contact center size	Use, no plans	Use, replace	<12 months	>12 months	No plans	Don't know	USING NOW
Small (<50 seats)	15%	1%	9%	1%	66%	8%	17%
Medium (50-200 seats)	28%	9%	12%	6%	43%	2%	37%
Large (200+ seats)	36%	13%	12%	2%	31%	7%	49%
Average	25%	7%	10%	3%	50%	6%	31%

Figure 24: Current technology usage and short-term investment plans – automated outbound dialing by vertical market, end-2019

Vertical market	Use, no plans	Use, replace	<12 months	>12 months	No plans	Don't know	USING NOW
Finance	10%	3%	9%	1%	64%	13%	14%
Insurance	46%	5%	14%	1%	33%	1%	51%
Manufacturing	3%	5%	13%	0%	73%	7%	7%
Medical	13%	2%	7%	7%	71%	0%	14%
Outsourcing	31%	4%	9%	0%	50%	6%	35%
Public Sector	6%	0%	33%	16%	45%	0%	6%
Retail & Distribution	18%	3%	9%	0%	66%	3%	21%
Services	31%	13%	12%	0%	36%	9%	43%
TMT	45%	12%	6%	2%	29%	5%	58%
Average	25%	7%	10%	3%	50%	6%	31%

Key to titles: Use today, no plans to replace; Use today, looking to replace or upgrade; Likely to implement within 12 months; Likely to implement after 12 months; No plans to implement; Don't know; Total proportion using the technology today (regardless of replacement intention).

Figure 25: Technology penetration rate estimates: automated outbound dialing by contact center size, end-2023

Size	2019	2023	CAGR 19-23
Small (<50 seats)	17%	19%	4%
Medium (50-200 seats)	37%	40%	2%
Large (200+ seats)	49%	54%	2%
Average	31%	37%	4%

Outbound automation in the cloud is becoming increasingly widely used, and this means the barriers to usage are even less, with smaller operations also showing increased interest. A majority of respondents using automated dialing solutions state that they do so within the cloud, and further information can be found in the “Cloud” section of this report.

Dialer usage in survey respondents from small contact centers is currently 17%. Many suppliers of this technology are able to offer low-cost, scalable functionality in the cloud, and we would expect this figure to increase in the next couple of years, along with some growth in the mid-sized sector.

Figure 26: Technology penetration rate estimates: automated outbound dialing by vertical market, end-2023

Vertical market	2019	2023	CAGR 19-23
Finance	14%	19%	8%
Insurance	51%	61%	5%
Manufacturing	7%	15%	20%
Medical	14%	24%	14%
Outsourcing	35%	44%	6%
Public Sector	6%	12%	20%
Retail & Distribution	21%	27%	6%
Services	43%	53%	5%
TMT	58%	66%	3%
Average	31%	37%	4%

Apart from supporting various types of dialing mode (e.g. progressive, predictive, preview), the dialing engine may also support automated messaging (broadcast or interactive voice messaging), SMS and email.

Some of the features that a dialing solution can offer may include:

- management reporting
- pacing algorithms to make sure that agents aren't underutilized and that the right number of calls are being placed without requiring the constant attention of a dialer manager
- smart algorithms ensure that contact centers keep within the legislation, and – for campaigns over a longer time period – can analyze patterns and set callbacks for times when customers have been shown to be more likely to answer
- the capability to gather customer data from a number of sources in order to fulfil a callback request
- while the majority of outbound activity may come from a campaign list, the dialer must have capabilities to blend diarized callbacks from various sources (e.g. agents, website, email)
- recording and playback of inbound and outbound calls
- management supervision tools, including silent monitoring, silent whisper, barge-in
- import and validation of lists
- the definition of business processes and data flows
- the targeting of specific customer profiles or segments
- scheduling callbacks
- screen pop of the customer information
- scripting
- recording and analytics
- real-time/historical reporting capabilities.

An outbound dialer does not have to work in isolation to the rest of the contact center applications: integrating the dialer and CRM through an API means that client records could be updated automatically once they have been called; agents would have fully up-to-date information about customers; and further business processes such as follow-up or the altering of multiple databases can be carried out automatically.

MODES OF DIALING

The following definitions of automated dialing are provided as guidance, although there is an acknowledgement that some in the industry may refer to these modes differently.

Preview dialing: once an agent has indicated that they are ready for a call, information about the call is presented to them. The number is then automatically dialed after a predefined period and the agent given time to preview the customer details before the call is launched. Calls where agents need to be familiar with the context of the call or the customer history, or where the call may be of a more complex and personalized nature are particularly suitable for the preview dialing mode.

Progressive dialing: once an agent has indicated that they are ready for a call, information about the call is presented to them and the number is then dialed immediately. Call progress is monitored by the dialer technology. Calls that do not result in 'ringing' are automatically and immediately disconnected, whilst 'no answers' are disconnected after a predefined number of seconds. This dialing mode enables contact centers to avoid abandoned calls, and may be used in conjunction with predictive dialing in order to keep abandoned call rates down.

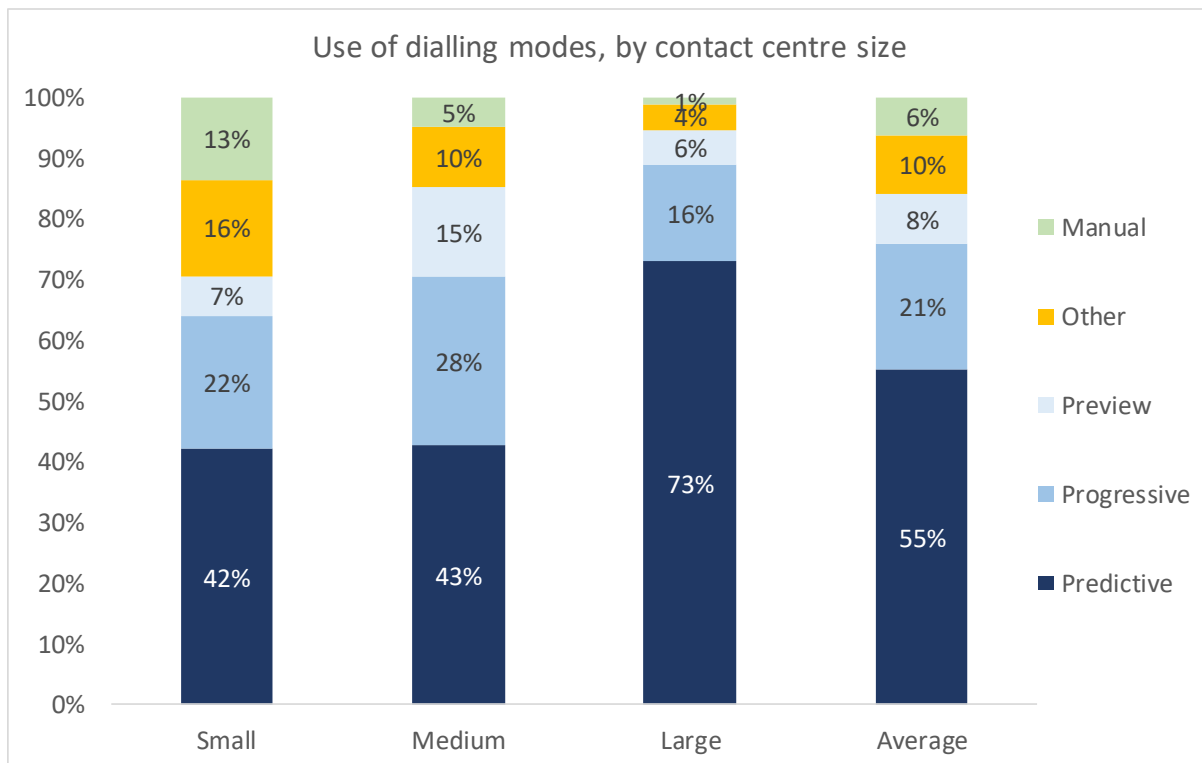
Predictive dialing: a predictive dialer launches calls at a rate such that the system connects to live callers as soon as an agent completes the previous transaction, meaning that agents do not need to listen to calls ringing, engaged tones or answer machines. The dialing rate for each campaign is controlled by a pacing algorithm, which automatically monitors activity and calculates when the next contact should be dialed. The dialing rate is automatically adjusted to maintain a contact rate that is theoretically synchronized with operator availability. The accuracy of predictive dialers improves as more agents are using the system, as it means there are more data from which to estimate average call length. As such, the best results are often seen in larger contact center operations where efficiency and cost per live call are of key importance to profitability.

NB: the following section on dialing modes is based on a survey of UK-based outbound contact centers. There is no US equivalent survey, and has been included here in case it is of interest to the readership as the two industries have many similarities.

The chart below shows that in surveys carried out with UK-based outbound contact center operations¹, it was found that larger operations (200+ seats) are more likely to be using full predictive mode (73% of their outbound activity), as they will tend to have the agent and data pools deep enough to make better use of this.

However, the gap between small and large operations' use of predictive is not as wide as might be thought, and is perhaps more dependent on the type of calling being made. (It should be noted that these figures apply to the outbound sector of the industry, not the entire contact center industry).

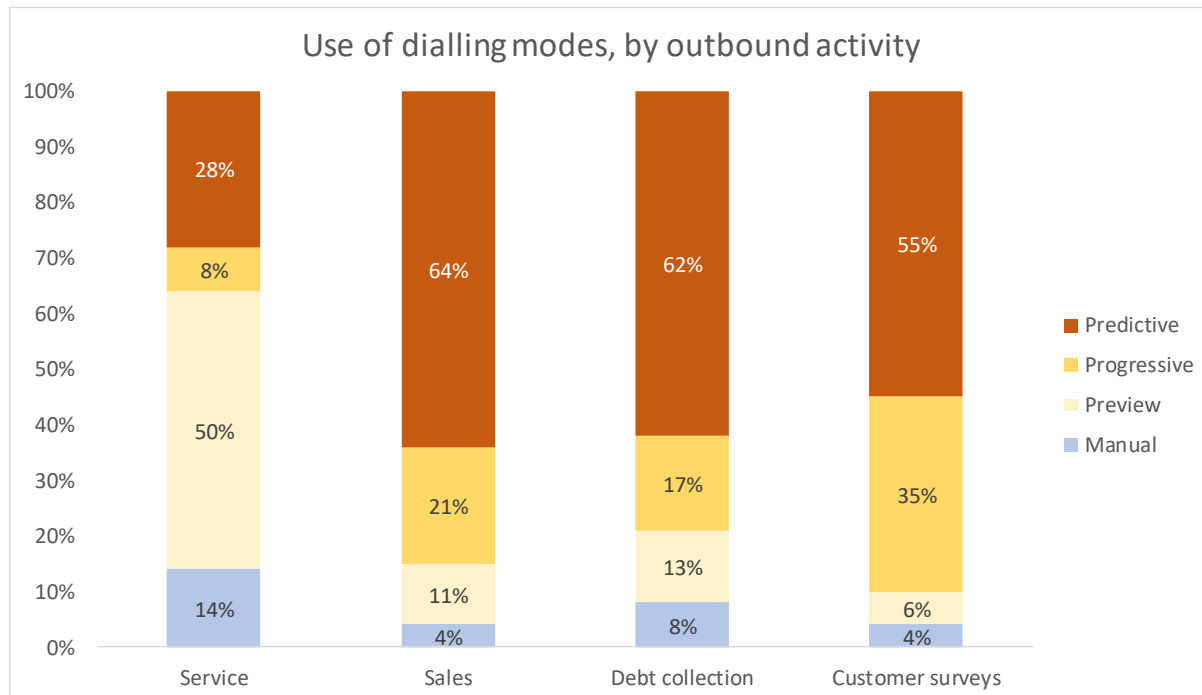
Figure 27: Use of dialing modes, by contact center size (outbound operations only)



¹ ContactBabel research on behalf of Ofcom

When considering dialing mode by activity type, warm sales and debt collection calls are somewhat more likely to be made predictively, with customer surveys and especially service being less so.

Figure 28: Use of dialing modes, by outbound activity (outbound operations only)



In interviews with outbound contact centers, respondents were asked why they used particular modes of outbound dialing.

Preview dialing was stated to be chosen in cases where:

- there was a danger of breaching regulations through imperfect use of predictive dialing
- campaigns were small and/or where data was of high worth
- activity involved handling callback requests, where the customer and their requirements could be checked before the call was placed.

Progressive dialing was more often used where:

- there is a blended environment which may need rapid changes between inbound and outbound work, and which thus risk high spikes of abandonment as agents move between inbound and outbound more quickly than a predictive dialer can handle
- campaigns are smaller than those which typically use predictive dialing, but management still wish to gain efficiencies.

Predictive dialing is said to be chosen where:

- there are very high volumes of data in the campaign
- the campaign or data is in a late stage and is the most efficient way to contact hard-to-reach customers
- where data quality is low, so it screens out unusable numbers
- where there is a pressing need to speak with customers quickly (for example, to stop them falling down the debt chain), where non-predictive calling would not support this.

Other automated dialing:

- 'ratio' dialing² is used by a small number of respondents, when calls are very short and predictive dialing will slow things up especially at the start of the day when contact rates are the best. This method is said to allow a quicker response to increases in call drop rate.

Productivity is not simply about maximizing live contacts: the effectiveness of the results is of course of the utmost importance. Sophisticated automated outbound solutions allow the business to analyze the most effective times of day to call customer segments, to tailor their scripts in order to increase positive outcomes, and even to ascertain whether voice, text or email is the correct channel for the specific customer or campaign.

This management information also identifies the agents' effectiveness, identifying training requirements for underperforming agents, and providing opportunities to share best practice from the top performers.

² Ratio dialing: a ratio of lines-to-agent is set, i.e. for each agent, the dialer will have been told to place a number of calls, so a 3:2 ratio will have 3 calls placed for 2 agents. This is a simple method of automated dialing as it does not need a pacing algorithm, but needs close monitoring by the dialer manager as the ratio will not alter unless it is manually changed and risks making abandoned calls if it is not regularly updated.

ANSWER MACHINE DETECTION (AMD) & ABANDONED CALLS

Answer Machine Detection (AMD) is a type of technology that allows dialers in predictive mode to recognize calls that are picked up by an answer machine, and stop the outbound agent taking that call, so as to keep them free to speak with actual customers. The purpose of this was simply to present agents with the greatest number of live contacts. However, the negative experience of the customers answering the phone that were incorrectly identified as being answer machines and then hung up on ('false positives') was rarely considered by businesses.

Most AMD solutions usually work by the cadence method:

- Detecting a long string of words in one burst such as "Hello, we're not available, please leave a message after the tone ...", deducing from the patterns of noise and silence on the line whether an automated message is being played when a call is connected.
- Identifying a live caller who may answer by saying "Hello?" and then waiting for a reply.

AMD is by no means 100% accurate as it has to 'decide' within two seconds whether it is a live customer or answerphone which has answered the call, which can cause problems:

- There will be a pause or delay while the system tries to connect an agent, which may lead to the called party hanging up
- the AMD solution may incorrectly flag a live person as being an answering machine, hanging up the call. The effect of this 'false positive' is that the customer will effectively get a silent call which can be frustrating and worrying for the majority of the public who are unaware of how outbound technology works.

Cadence AMD – analyzing from the patterns of noise and silence on the call whether an answer phone message is being played – relies upon an accurate assessment of whether a call has been answered by a human or answer machine within the two-second window currently allowed by the FTC, which does not give enough time to both detect 100% of answer machines and exclude all live contacts, leading to silent and abandoned calls. In order to remain compliant (and prove it), there is also a great deal of management and reporting to be carried out, reducing the productivity benefits.

An alternative solution is to extend the detection period past the two second barrier by having an agent record a number of short phrases that would then be played in the relevant silence after a customer or answer machine has spoken. If the recorded voice is played to a live customer, it will sound as though the agent is actually present on the call; the system will continue to listen while this recording is being played, and if it detects that the customer / answerphone is speaking over the top of the recorded agent, it would make it very likely that this is an answerphone, but a clarification message could be played to make sure. If no voice over-talk is detected, it is very likely that this is a live customer listening to the recorded 'agent' and the call will immediately be passed to a live agent.

Other solution providers have focused upon trying to reduce the number of times a record is called without a right party connection at the end of it through gathering multichannel information from all areas of the contact center and customers' records, and then analyzing the best time to call this type of customer. Using an omnichannel approach (e.g. sending an SMS first to ask if it's a good time to call) can also increase contact rates.

Respondents to a ContactBabel survey of UK outbound contact center operations estimated that 0.4% of calls answered by consumers were believed by outbound operations to be AMD false positives (where the dialer incorrectly guesses a real person is an answer machine and hangs up the call, producing a 'silent call'), although this was from a relatively small sample size and should be treated with caution.

The rate of silent calls – where AMD falsely detects that an answer machine is present – can by its nature only be estimated, otherwise the calls would not have been abandoned. This requires companies to test their systems and analyze recordings to estimate the rate of silent calls. The majority of UK outbound contact centers test AMD accuracy by comparing agent or supervisor experience with what the dialer is telling them. For example, a dialer manager may listen to a substantial number of calls each month or quarter, and analyze how many are AMD false positives compared to what the system is stating. In this way, a more accurate view of the accuracy answer machine detection is given. Other respondents switch AMD on, but still pass all calls through to agents for a specific period. The agent marks each call as answer machine or not, and this is then compared to the AMD statistics to see if they match up.

AMD and IVM (interactive voice messaging) can be used in tandem to minimize false AMD abandonment. A respondent to ContactBabel's survey of outbound contact centers explains:

"If we place an outbound call and within two seconds of line activation we believe it to be a machine we will play an IVM message to ask the recipient to confirm they are the person we are required to speak to, before giving the option to press one and enter the call center. If the recipient does not press 1, then they are played the same information as an abandoned call so that the company name and identity has been provided."

In this way, there is a two-step process to determining whether there is a consumer or answer machine at the end of the line, and by giving the consumer the option to speak to an agent, AMD false positives should be reduced.

As part of this survey, respondents were asked what their experience had been when they had restricted or switched AMD off and on to see what the impact upon productivity and compliance had been. It was generally felt that there was a significant improvement in live contact rates when AMD was in place, and that agent morale and performance dropped considerably when AMD had been turned off, due to a large increase in the instance of answer phones presented to agents. Some respondents noted that they used AMD only at specific times during the day, and when the data that they were calling on was of questionable quality. However, there was a general acknowledgement that the nature of most AMD solutions being used today will produce some false positives, and that requiring recorded messages and/or an IVR option to speak to an agent would assist the customer experience without damaging productivity and maintaining compliance.

OUTBOUND IN THE CLOUD

While the pay-as-you-go, or monthly rental model which was one of the main attractions of cloud / managed services is still an attractive proposition, it is far less important today than has been. Solution providers point out that CPE deployments can now often be paid for in an Opex model, and that the movement to cloud is more about the functionality, agility and scalability that this model offers.

One of the main differences to have occurred in the past few years is that cloud is now seen as a genuine alternative to CPE for most organizations, whether the largest of enterprises or smaller operations. Some solution providers have stated that they originally focused their product and marketing efforts on the small and medium contact center sectors, but have been surprised by the interest shown by those with many hundreds (if not thousands) of agents, and have changed their functionality, strategy and marketing approaches appropriately.

Solution providers note that there has been considerable growth in cloud solutions that support outbound sales activity, where the Opex and Pay-as-you-go models allow outsourcers to have some control over their profit margins depending on the amount of work that they have, as well as benefiting from the immediate use of added functionality that cloud-based solutions provide.

It is common for cloud providers to integrate tightly with CRM and contact management packages, and adding dialing functionality supports the consultative style of selling, giving agents the opportunity to be informed about customers before the call is placed. This is not just the case for traditional contact centers, but also for other organizations which carry out large amounts of sales communication with customers and prospects, albeit in perhaps a less structured environment.

Cloud-based solutions offer such enterprises the benefit and efficiency of the contact center world, without the high levels of sunk cost and operational and technical expertise that a CPE solution would demand.

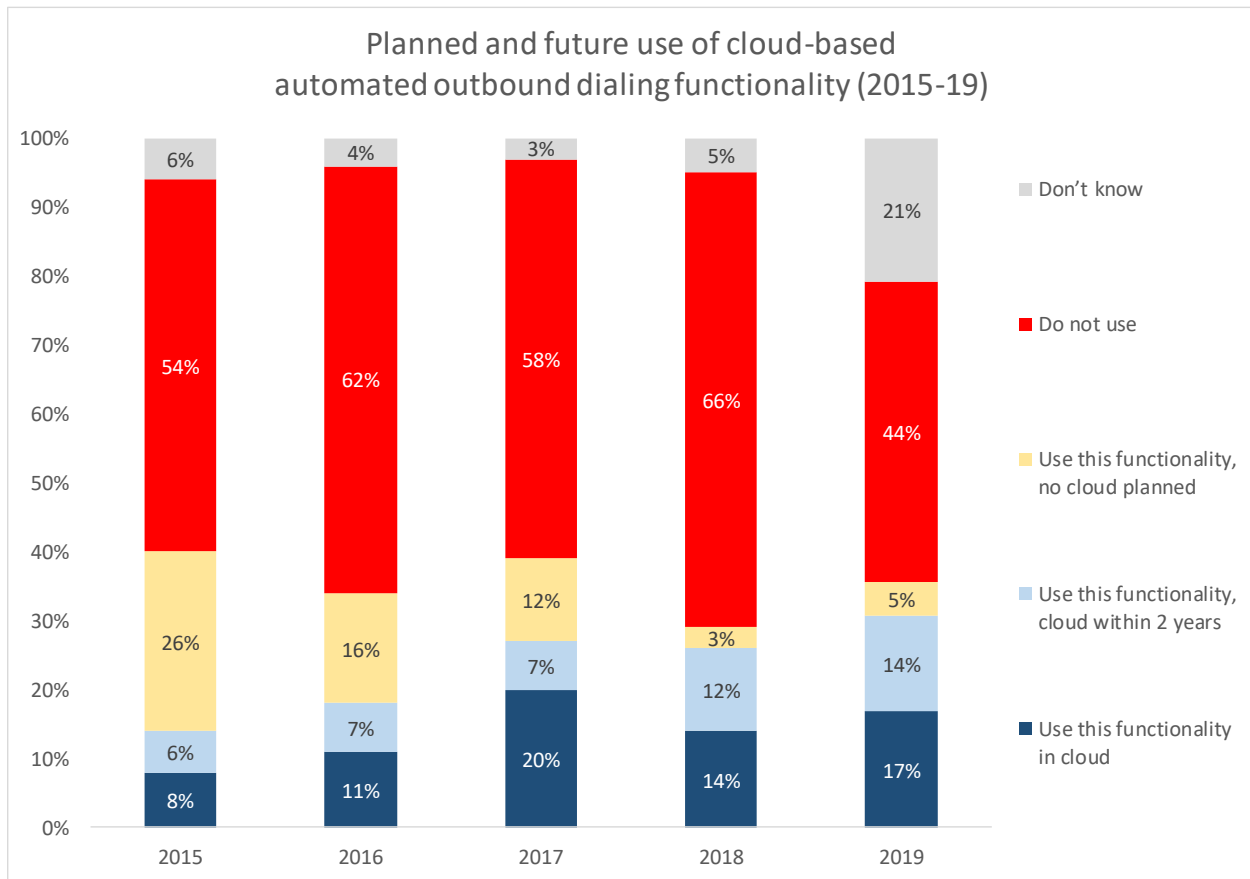
CLOUD-BASED AUTOMATED DIALING SOLUTIONS

The use of automated dialing has always been restricted to a minority of survey respondents, with the range of respondents using this technology being between 28% and 35% over the five-year time period.

It is noticeable that although the use of automated dialing has not grown over the time period, the movement to cloud has been significant (more than trebling), and the interest in moving to cloud within the next two years is still significant.

By the end of 2021, survey respondents expect that 88% of deployments of automated dialers will be cloud-based.

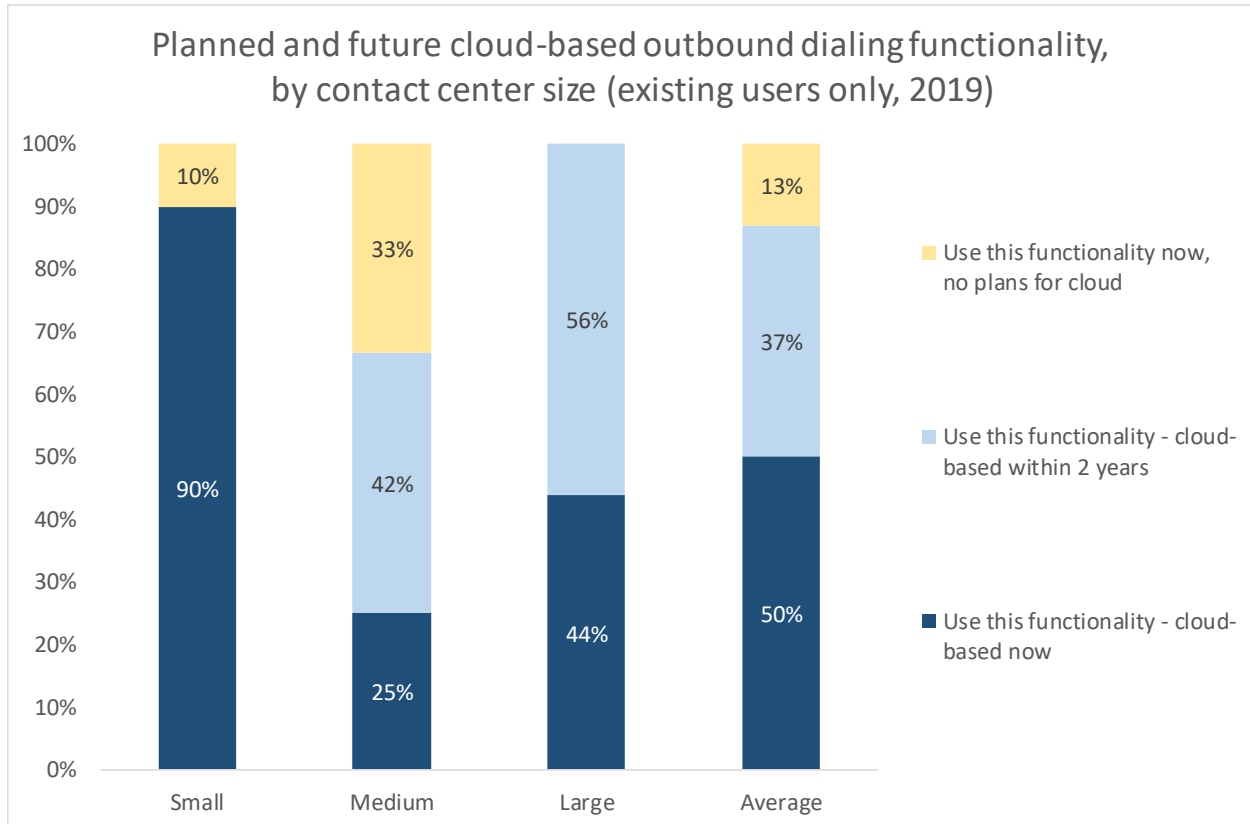
Figure 29: Planned and future cloud-based automated outbound dialing functionality (2015-19)



As expected, the use of automated outbound dialing is more prevalent in larger operations (although there are a surprising number of “Don’t know’s” in this cohort of this year’s survey).

All of the respondents from sub-50 seat contact centers that use automated dialing do so within a cloud-based deployment, whereas 55% of those in larger operations report that they still do so within a CPE setup, although these are likely to move to the cloud shortly.

Figure 30: Planned and future cloud-based automated outbound dialing functionality, by contact center size (existing users only, 2019)



Contact center size	Use functionality now, in cloud	Use functionality now, cloud within 2 years	Use functionality now, no plans for cloud	Do not use functionality	Don't know / NA
Small (<50 seats)	19%	0%	2%	53%	26%
Medium (51-200 seats)	9%	16%	13%	47%	16%
Large (200+ seats)	24%	31%	0%	24%	21%
Average	18%	13%	5%	44%	21%

NB: table shows full data; chart above shows only those respondents which use the functionality in 2019

ANALYTICS

Customer contact analytics has a provable ROI even for smaller businesses that carry out a lot of outbound, revenue-focused work, such as sales or debt collection. Quite apart from any regulatory need for script compliance, analysis of the sales techniques and terminology used by those identified as the most successful agents can be shared amongst the agent population, with either real-time monitoring or post-call analysis ensuring ongoing compliance.

In an outbound setting, interaction analytics can be used to look at the kinds of words and phrases that are used by the most effective outbound agents in order to train other agents on best practice and achieving successful outcomes.

It is possible to discover the reasons for the different sales conversion rates between agents by analyzing many more calls than would be possible in a purely manual process. Sales conversion may be as much a matter of correctly identifying a sales opportunity as it is about being an effective and persuasive sales person, and analysis of 100% of calls allows managers to understand where their agents' strengths and weaknesses are, and to deliver the correct training or feedback.

When considering the productivity and effectiveness of agents, there may be various reasons that some agents' performance is considerably worse than others. Using call recording and analytics can help to give a concrete insight into why this is, for example:

- an agent spending too long talking on the phone may have been undertrained on a product or pitch, leading to a significant number of pauses within the conversation
- a very high proportion of short calls may mean that the agent is failing to engage the customer with the initial pitch, perhaps as they have become bored or tired with saying the same thing, and scripts may need to be freshened
- a large number of cancellations and returns connected with an agent may mean that they are setting false expectations within the sale
- a low level of calls and high level of idle time may simply mean that the agent is not engaged with this job
- on the opposite side, analyzing what an agent with superior performance does within a call can offer learning points for the whole team.

Analytics can also be used to identify those customers who are most at risk from churn or contract cancellation, based on historical analysis of calls with similar customers linked with metadata including customer segmentation.

Real-time analytics can also be used, linking with a company's own CRM systems to allow agents to be provided with up-to-the-second advice on how to handle customers identified as being at risk of churn, including linking what the customer is saying on the call back to the transactional model in order to update the best offer available for that customer. Some businesses use customer contact analytics to identify phrases or behaviors that have been shown to indicate likely cancellations, but protect their profit margins by making sure that agents are only offering incentives such as money-off coupons at appropriate points within the conversation and only to those customers that are at risk of churning.

Integrating speech analytics with desktop analytics allows CRM information such as the value of the customer to be added to the decisioning engine, providing extra accuracy and confidence that any offer made will be the right one. It is also possible to use AI in order to analyze customer and agent behaviors and characteristics so that agents can be paired with customers with a similar communication style.



Artificial Intelligence and the Outbound Contact Center: A Marriage Made Though Automation

One of the reasons AI is making significant improvements to outbound calling performance for many organizations is because it complements the contact center technologies and processes already in place. This enables organizations to get more value from the data and best practices they have developed over time. Conversations with customers and prospects go from being seat-of-the-pants reactive to next-best-action proactive when the predictive power of AI is introduced to contact center operations.

Artificial intelligence is an additional layer of insight that can be applied within speech or engagement analytics platform. It allows analysis to be performed on greater volumes of conversations and other unstructured data sources. AI takes analytics from merely being a way for contact center managers to extract data and create a database to search and analyze, to something that will also automatically review the collected information and offer solutions.

By teaching the software to make decisions that typically require human interaction, businesses set themselves apart from their competition. For example, one company used AI to very accurately predict which of its agents would leave their jobs. Using that predictive insight, the company developed appropriate workforce development strategies for different types of agent.

Call center audio recordings are the most valuable source of data to be leveraged for improving outbound contact performance. This data has been historically ignored by only manually listening to a small percentage of calls, but AI makes it efficiently reasonable for organizations to mine insights from it. For example, AI has been applied to analyze past calls, compare them with customer or prospect history records, and create models that can accurately predict a customer's likelihood of making a payment, or a prospect's likelihood of becoming a customer. That predictive analysis can be used to guide interactions with customers or prospects in real time – during the call – to improve call outcomes and drive revenue creation.

AI has also been used to create highly accurate categorizations of customers or prospects who are likely to call back or otherwise reengage the company based on the outcome of the initial contact. These categorizations are based on the words used in the call, sentiment, metadata and more. By anticipating reengagement, companies can proactively reach out to the customer or prospect with an appropriate message or content, such as sending more information, a special offer or troubleshooting tips.

The value that artificial intelligence can produce for a contact center depends heavily on the processes to which it is applied. AI by itself does not improve agent productivity or revenue creation. Rather, it streamlines processes and gives organizations the insight to create new ones that deliver these and other benefits. For example, AI can be used to find a cause-effect relationship between what transpires during a contact (the words used, emotions expressed, questions asked and more) and the action the customer or prospect ultimately took. AI can help identify and isolate many variables to provide better insight into cause and effect. These insights can inform process improvements, such as developing new scripts or pathways to guide contacts to the desired action.

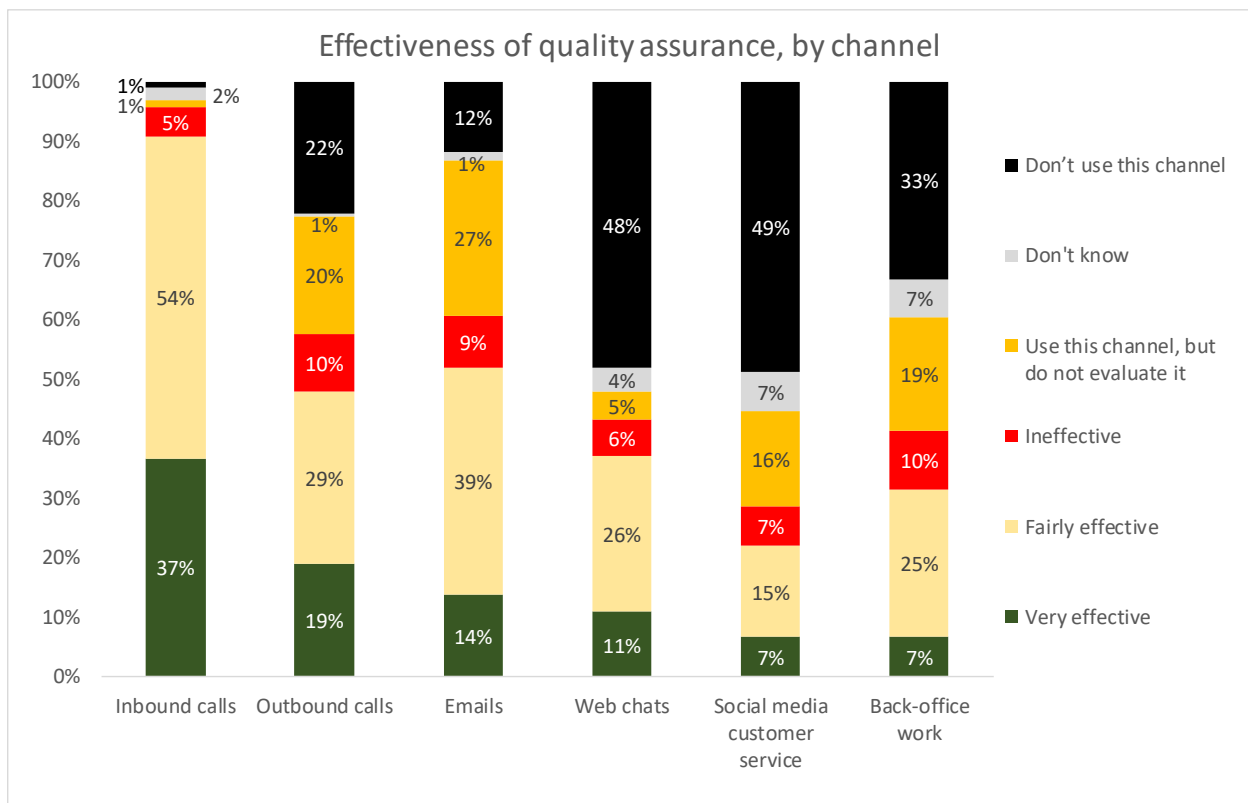
CALL RECORDING AND QUALITY ASSURANCE

Companies have taken the view that call recording in an outbound environment is right for them. Compliance is a major reason for this: for example, outbound debt collection agencies may have to identify themselves and the purpose of the call clearly or else be found to be in breach of regulations. In such cases, using recording to be able to prove that 100% of calls are compliant is a popular option, and recording is also widely used for the quality assurance process.

Survey respondents were asked their opinion on how effective they felt their quality evaluation was for specific contact center activities, including inbound and outbound activity, and digital work. As might be expected from the activity that has been around the longest, inbound telephony was judged to have the most effective quality evaluation, although only 37% of respondents stated that it was very effective. Evaluation of outbound calling was less positive, with 10% of respondents feeling that it was ineffective and 19% very effective.

Digital channel quality evaluation still has some way to go to reach the standard of telephony QA. Only 23% of respondents that evaluated email quality said that it was very effective, and 15% believed it ineffective. For a channel that has been offered to customers for well over a decade by most businesses, this is not very impressive: neither of the newer channels of social media and web chat had much better results.

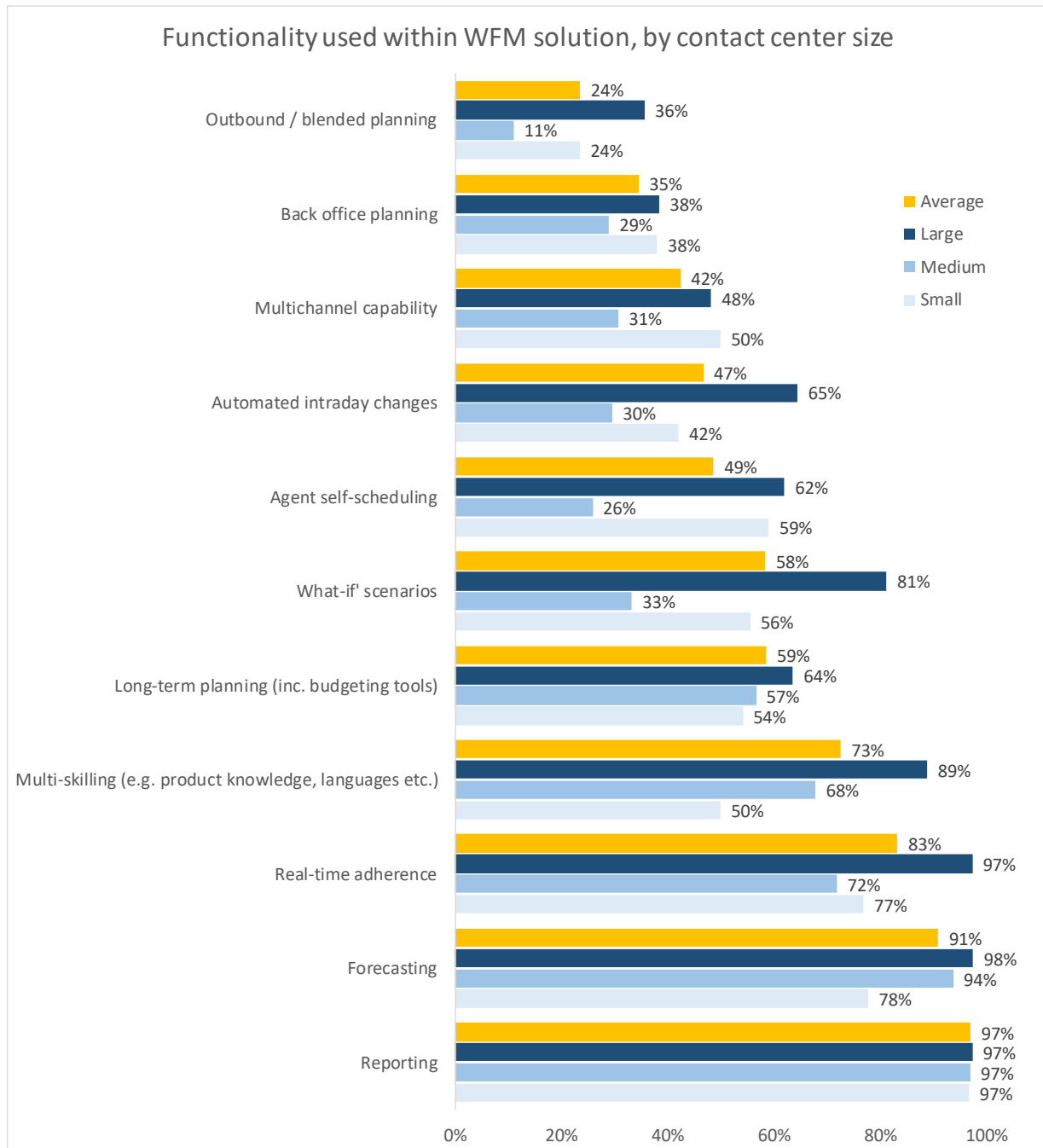
Figure 31: Effectiveness of quality assurance, by channel



WORKFORCE MANAGEMENT

Respondents to a survey of over 200 US contact centers who said that they used workforce management solutions were asked which functionality they **actually used** (as opposed to what was bundled in with the solution, but which was not used). Scheduling was used in 100% of cases.

Figure 32: Functionality used within WFM solution, by contact center size



As would be expected, forecasting and reporting scored very highly, with real-time adherence to schedule and agent self-scheduling also seen as being very useful in larger contact centers: functionality which can be seen as a potential win-win for both agent and scheduler, in that it provides a more realistic schedule as well as giving the agent an element of control over when they wish to work.

Somewhat less than half of respondents used workforce management solutions for more strategic aims including 'what if' scenario planning and longer term forecasting. Only a minority used more recent forms of functionality such as multichannel scheduling and automated intraday changes, and only 1 in 7 respondents use workforce management for outbound / blended planning.

As would be expected, forecasting and reporting scored very highly, with real-time adherence to schedule and multiskilled forecasting/scheduling also seen as being very useful, especially in larger contact centers.

Over half of respondents used workforce management solutions for more strategic aims including 'what if' scenario planning and longer term forecasting, figures which have risen noticeably in recent years.

Almost half of respondents used agent self-scheduling, functionality which can be seen as a potential win-win for both agent and scheduler, in that it provides a more realistic schedule as well as giving the agent an element of control over when they wish to work. Again, this is a figure which has risen substantially.

Similar proportions used more recent forms of functionality such as multichannel scheduling and automated intraday changes. Large operations are much more likely to be using WFM for intraday.

Back-office scheduling has grown greatly in recent times, functionality which supports businesses to deliver what the front office has promised.

While outbound / blended planning is relatively less used, almost 1 in 4 of respondents are using WFM for this purpose.

Scheduling can get particularly complicated in an omnichannel environment which usually has agents with multiple media-handling skills (e.g. voice, email, web chat etc.) and multiple business abilities (e.g. sales, service, product knowledge, languages etc.), and which may well be operating within a blended inbound/outbound environment, possibly spread across various locations.

Having agents who are skilled on multiple channels can mean that they are able to follow the interaction through regardless of channel, which is positive for customer experience and first-contact resolution. Agents can be empowered to choose the most appropriate channel, for example a complex email may be better handled by replying with an outbound call. Multiskilling also increases the flexibility and depth of the agent pool, allowing resource to be reallocated to a channel as and when necessary.

SCRIPTING

Rightly or wrongly, scripting has a mixed reputation in the contact center industry, with inflexible outbound sales scripts being particularly disliked. However, a dynamic scripting environment, sometimes referred to as a workflow – where the help provided on the agent's screen changes depending on who the customer is and how the conversation is going – can be beneficial to agent and customer alike, supporting complex interactions where multiple systems and media are required.

Applications that define each step of the call interaction flow and present the relevant data to the agent allow agents to take advantage of pull-down menus, on-screen buttons, pop-up windows, inheritance mechanisms, and fill-in-the-blank parameters. Workflows guide agents dynamically through dialogues with customers which change as required, while managing contacts, controlling interactions, and updating databases. Sophisticated scripting solutions integrate with the dialer and allow end-users to adjust processes or wording mid-campaign without the need for vendor support or dedicated IT resource.

Scripting is much more than a series of dialogue prompts, as it is now more about designing the customer experience and journey for a particular type of interaction – for example, making an insurance claim – using design sessions fitting together workflow, data sources and dialogue. People with less experience of modern-day scripting often think the robotic ‘scripted conversation’ experience is what scripting creates, and indeed, many contact centers believe that there are too many variables to anticipate within a conversation and that letting agents make the best decision about the conversation is really the only way to handle things. However, real-time decision engines are an example where online resources can be leveraged to work within the contact center as well: real-time responsiveness is achieved through automated decision-making built on a set of business rules which identify pre-defined customer profiles and the solutions, products and data that are suitable for presentation to the customer.

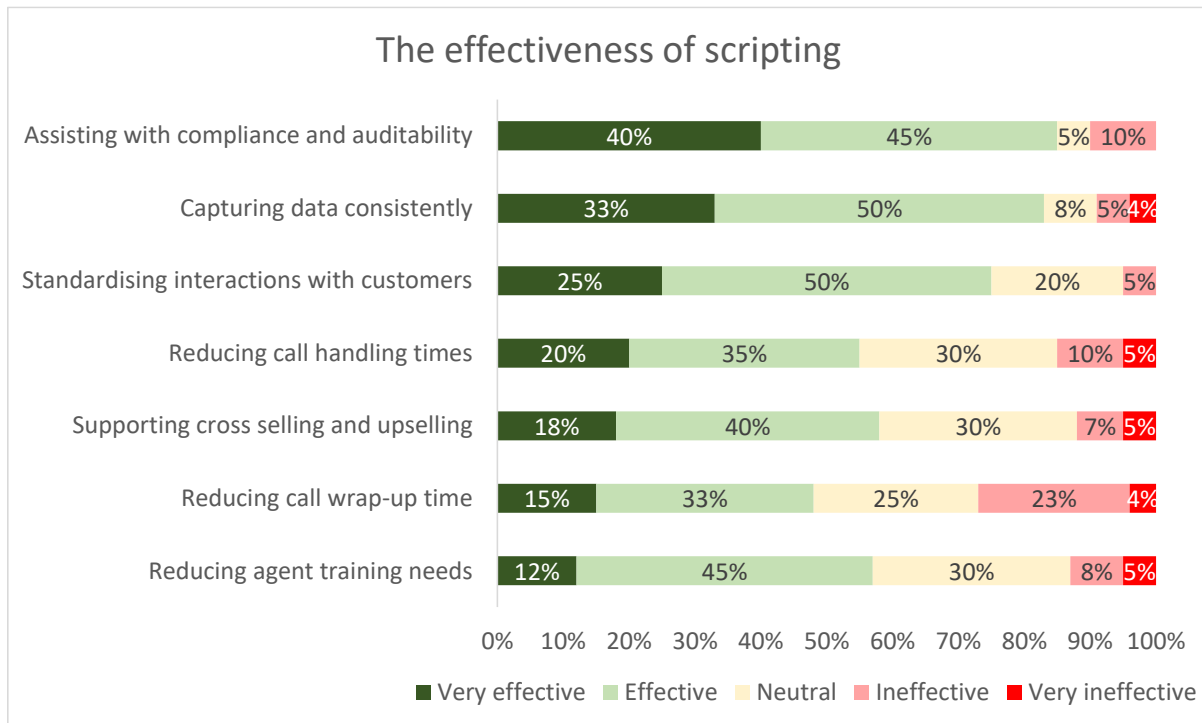
The design environment that new scripting solutions provides can use existing back-end resources without further development, so scripts no longer have to anticipate every possible alternative. Data gathered during conversations, combined with customer profiling, trigger appropriate responses which can be immediately presented to the customer, which is beneficial for customer and agent alike. As such, dynamic scripting can be considered as one part of a group of solutions aimed at reducing the complexity of the agent's desktop while improving the quality of the interaction.

In a large operation, there may be distinct groups of agents (e.g. a large dedicated sales outbound team) that use some form of scripting whereas inbound agents may not. Large contact centers, by their nature and also because of generally higher attrition rates, may have more requirements to help new agents learn the ropes, and scripting can help with this.

For industries such as financial services where it is vital that exactly the right wording is read to new customers for compliance purposes, businesses may consider playing a recorded speech module rather than using agents to read out what may be a very long script.

Those who use scripting are generally enthusiastic about the benefits. In particular, the assistance with compliance was particularly well thought of, as was the consistency of data capture (as the same information is collected each time, with no short-cuts or missed questions). 75% of respondents found that scripting was effective or very effective at standardizing interactions with customers: of course, this only helps quality of the 'average' interaction is high to begin with.

Figure 33: The effectiveness of scripting

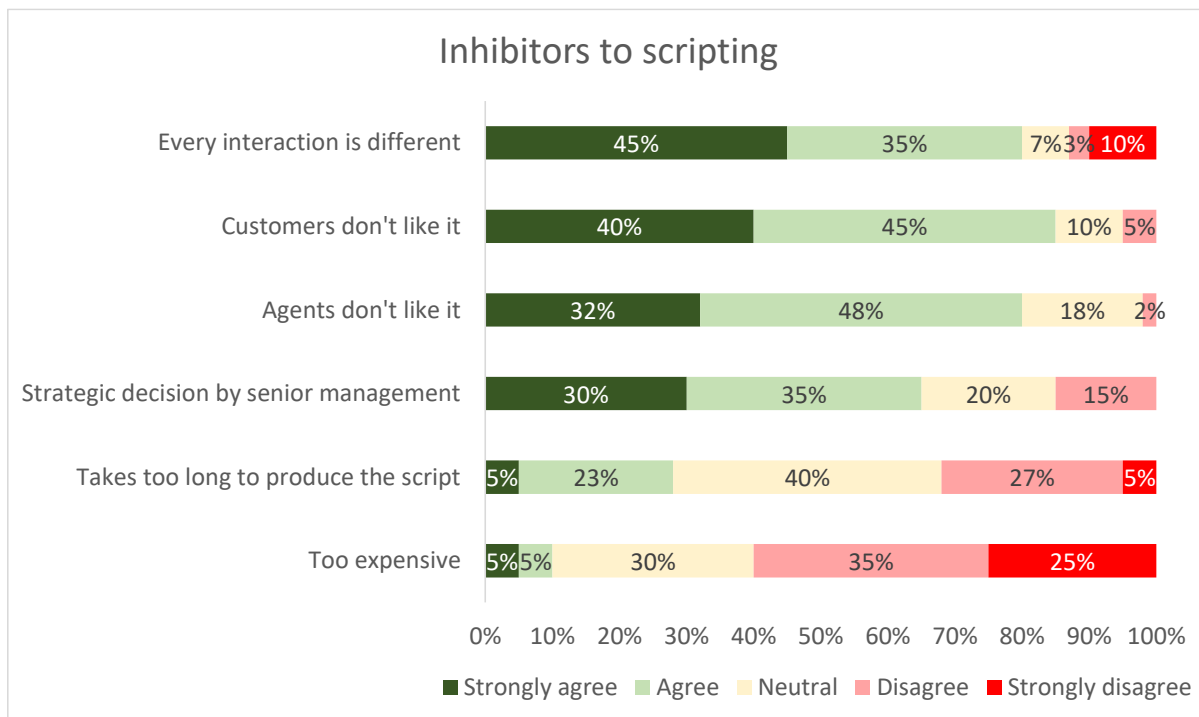


Secondary benefits around reducing call handling times (through a structured call flow) and particularly as an agent training tool were also reported, with 58% of respondents also saying that scripting was an effective tool for assisting with cross-selling and up-selling. Using scripting to facilitate call wrap-up was still a net positive, but is seen as being less useful than other factors.

It seems fair to say from looking at these results that, while overly scripted conversations are frustrating for both caller and agent, a dynamic script or prompt which guides an agent through a conversation and provides relevant information and suggestions is certainly worth considering and tends to yield positive results, particularly if the level of 'hand-holding' that the script provides can be tailored to the experience of the agent.

Despite these positive responses from users, scripting is not for everyone. Part of this problem is that the agent can sound robotic after delivering the same script dozens of times, but perhaps as important, there is also the fact that outbound sales calls are generally not well received by customers, so anything that is associated with them (be it scripting, offshore agents, silent calls, etc.) will have a negative connotation to overcome in any case.

Figure 34: Inhibitors to scripting



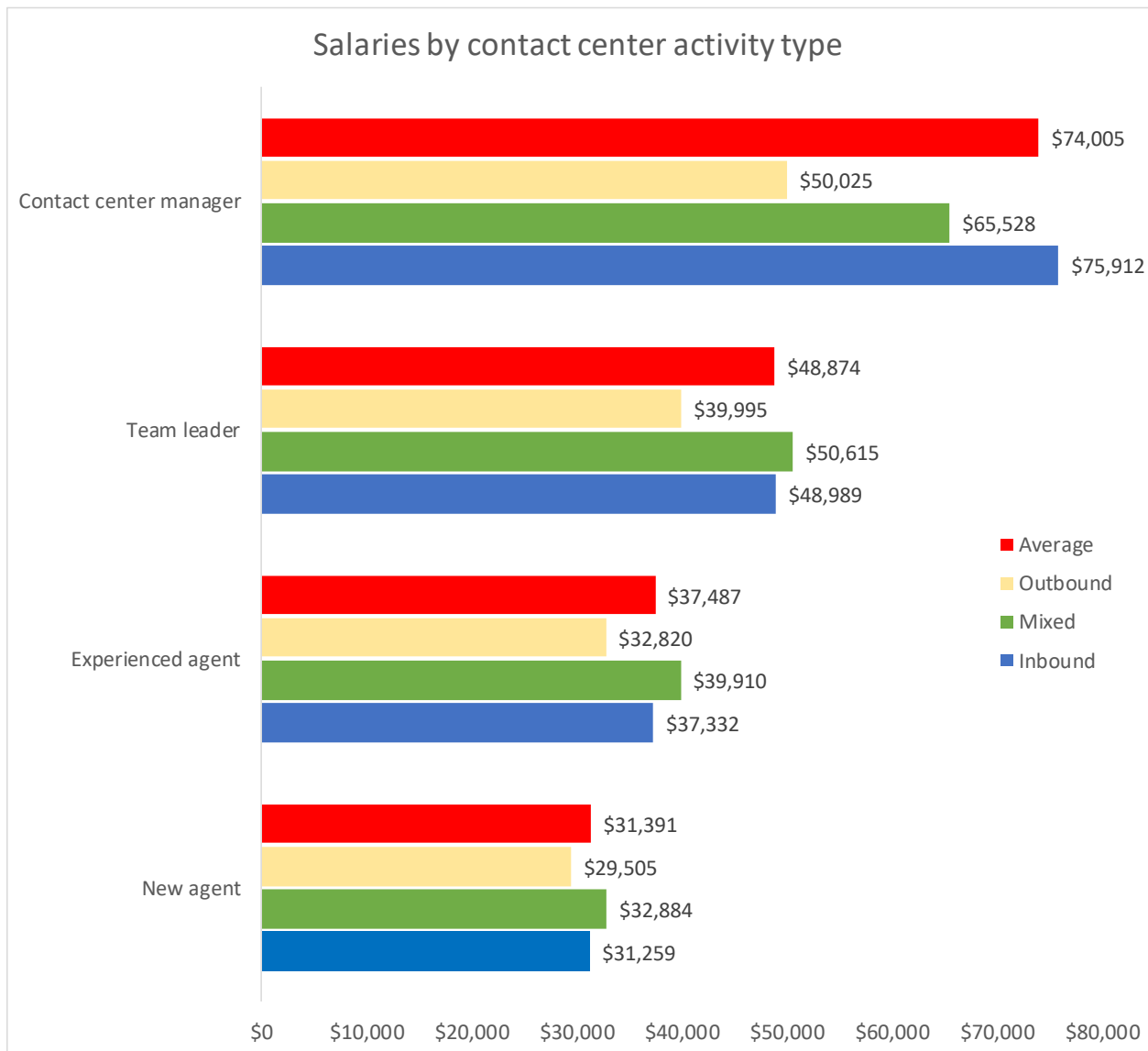
One of the biggest objections to scripting is that every conversation is different. While this is certainly true, readers should be aware that contemporary solutions offer a whole spectrum of scripting, from tight to loose, with the latter simply offering checkpoints within the conversation: much of the negativity around scripting comes from familiarity only with the tight, constrained version.

THE HUMAN ELEMENT TO OUTBOUND

SALARIES AND BONUSES

Outbound contact center employees tend to get paid relatively less than their inbound equivalents, mainly because the former will tend to receive a much higher performance-related bonus, especially in management positions. Inbound-only agents tend to be paid more than those in mixed environments as well.

Figure 35: Salaries by contact center activity type



65% of respondents offers bonuses to sales-focused agents this year, and 50% of respondents do so to their service-focused agents.

The mean average sales-related commission is 13% (equating to around \$4,500 p.a.), but this varies greatly. Service agents generally receive much lower performance-related bonuses (an average of less than \$2,000).

Figure 36: Annual bonus for service and sales agents

	Bonus/commission for sales agent	Performance-related bonus for service agent
1st quartile	18%	8%
Median	10%	5%
3rd quartile	0%	0%
Mean	13%	5%

For salaried employees, their job is to sell, so businesses need to be wary about setting excessive levels of commission on top of this as this may change the behavior and practices of the agent. Businesses may consider including the cancellation rate in the structure of the commission, so that agents do not mis-sell unnecessary and incorrect products and services to customers which are then returned, or which receive complaints.

Businesses may want to consider mixing up a number of incentive and bonus programs that will appeal to the majority of agents, using a mix of short- and long-term rewards including:

- daily prizes or other recognition
- weekly/monthly rewards for achieving target, which can include “Employee of the Month” awards
- long-term quarterly or annual individual and team commissions.

Gamification can also be used to incentivize and motivate agents, and is considered in a later section of this report.

AGENT ATTRITION

Most outbound customer contact is a very difficult, high-pressure job, which leads to stress and burnout, and thus high levels of attrition. Statistics from these studies used to bear this theory out, but recent years' findings have found a significant reduction in the difference between exclusively inbound and outbound operations.

Since 2007, when this figure started to be tracked, outbound operations have seen higher levels of attrition, and the gap between inbound and outbound contact center attrition rates was significant for many years. 2013/2014 figures – indicating little difference between inbound and outbound operations' attrition rates – seemed possibly to signal something more structural and long-term. 2015's and 2016's outbound figure were considerably higher than the inbound attrition rates (especially the latter), weakening the evidence for a permanent change. However, since 2017, virtual parity between inbound and outbound attrition again suggests that the gap has narrowed and that this may well actually be a structural change.

Figure 37: Mean and median agent attrition by contact center activity type

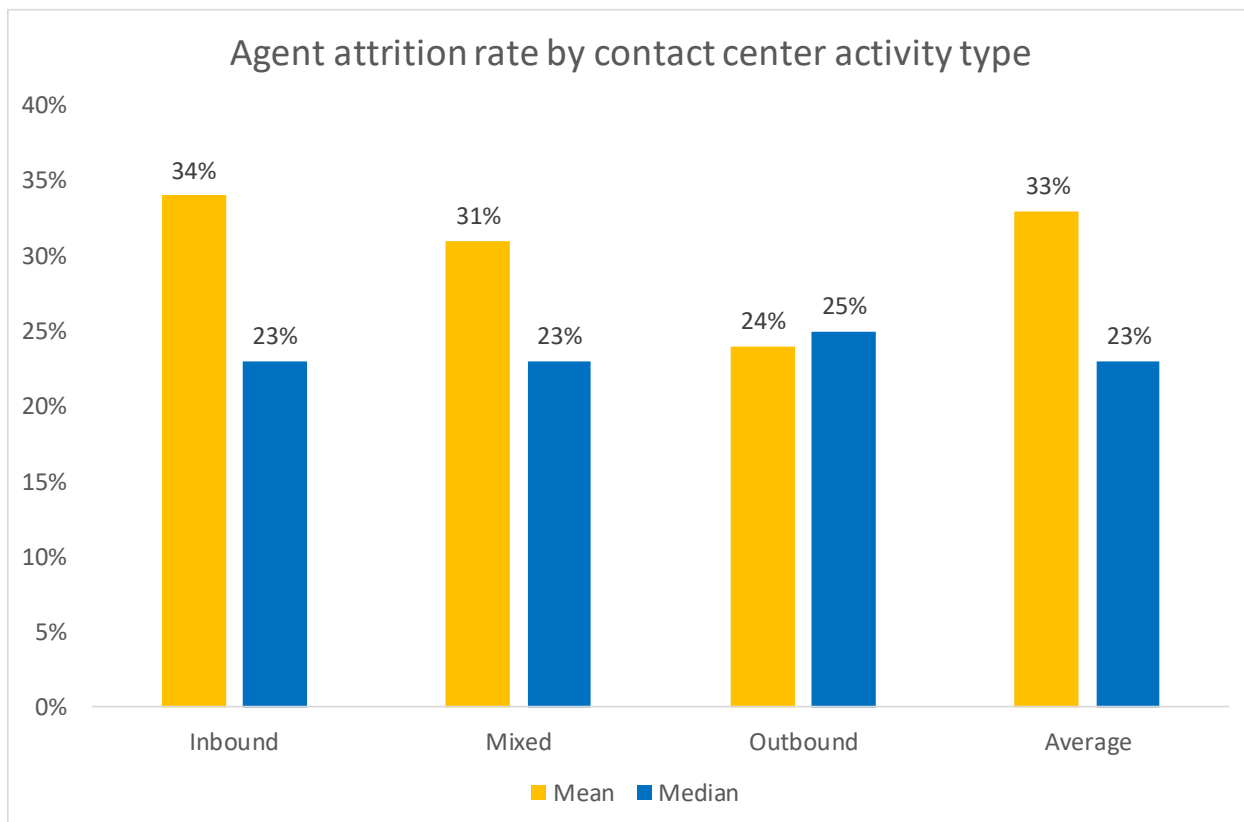


Figure 38: Historical mean agent attrition by contact center activity type (with 2022 projection)

Contact center activity type	Q2 2007	Q3 2008	Q4 2009	Q3 2010	Q1 2012	Q1 2013	Q1 2014	Q1 2015	Q2 2016	Q2 2017	Q3 2018	Q3 2019	Q2 2022
Inbound	31%	32%	30%	20%	23%	25%	24%	28%	27%	28%	30%	34%	30%
Mixed	29%	42%	23%	45%	24%	32%	38%	30%	39%	42%	35%	31%	34%
Outbound	44%	87%	62%	56%	49%	28%	21%	40%	45%	30%	32%	24%	30%
Mean	33%	42%	34%	32%	27%	27%	27%	29%	29%	30%	31%	33%	31%
Median	27%	30%	24%	20%	16%	21%	19%	18%	20%	20%	23%	23%	24%

AGENT ABSENCE

Conventional wisdom would expect to find that those in high-pressure outbound jobs would have higher unauthorized absence rates. This has been the case in the past (i.e. the typical outbound contact center would see higher rates of absence than inbound), but since 2017, the figures no longer support this hypothesis.

It may be the case that outbound agents are heavily incentivized through bonuses, and not being at work will make a greater difference to their overall salary compared to inbound staff. In any case, 2017 data onwards reports that outbound agents have considerably lower absence rates than either those working in either inbound or mixed environments.

Figure 39: Short-term absence by contact center activity type

Contact center activity type	Agent absence rate (mean)	Agent absence rate (median)
Inbound	9.5%	8.0%
Mixed	5.5%	5.0%
Outbound	4.4%	5.0%
Average	8.5%	6.0%

Figure 40: Historical mean agent absence by contact center activity type (with 2022 projection)

Contact center activity type	Q2 2007	Q3 2008	Q4 2009	Q3 2010	Q1 2012	Q1 2013	Q1 2014	Q1 2015	Q2 2016	Q2 2017	Q3 2018	Q3 2019	Q2 2022
Inbound	6.3%	8.7%	7.5%	5.7%	6.0%	7.7%	9.8%	9.6%	9.4%	9.3%	9.0%	9.5%	8.9%
Mixed	9.5%	9.5%	5.5%	6.6%	7.3%	6.5%	12.4%	6.8%	7.7%	9.7%	8.0%	5.5%	8.0%
Outbound	8.7%	10.3%	12.7%	7.6%	7.5%	12.1%	10.6%	9.8%	10.0%	6.0%	4.5%	4.4%	6.7%
Mean	7.0%	8.9%	8.2%	5.6%	6.4%	7.9%	10.4%	8.9%	9.0%	9.0%	8.5%	8.5%	8.6%
Median	-	-	-	-	-	5.2%	7.0%	5.5%	5.9%	8.1%	6.5%	6.0%	6.0%

Sales environments have lower staff absence rates than service or mixed contact centers, which may be a result of target-based bonuses being more difficult to achieve if the agent is absent.

Figure 41: Short-term absence by contact center activity

Contact center activity	Agent absence rate (mean)	Agent absence rate (median)
Service	8.4%	6.0%
Mixed	10.3%	10.0%
Sales	7.7%	5.0%
Average	8.5%	6.0%

Figure 42: Historical mean agent absence by contact center activity (with 2022 projection)

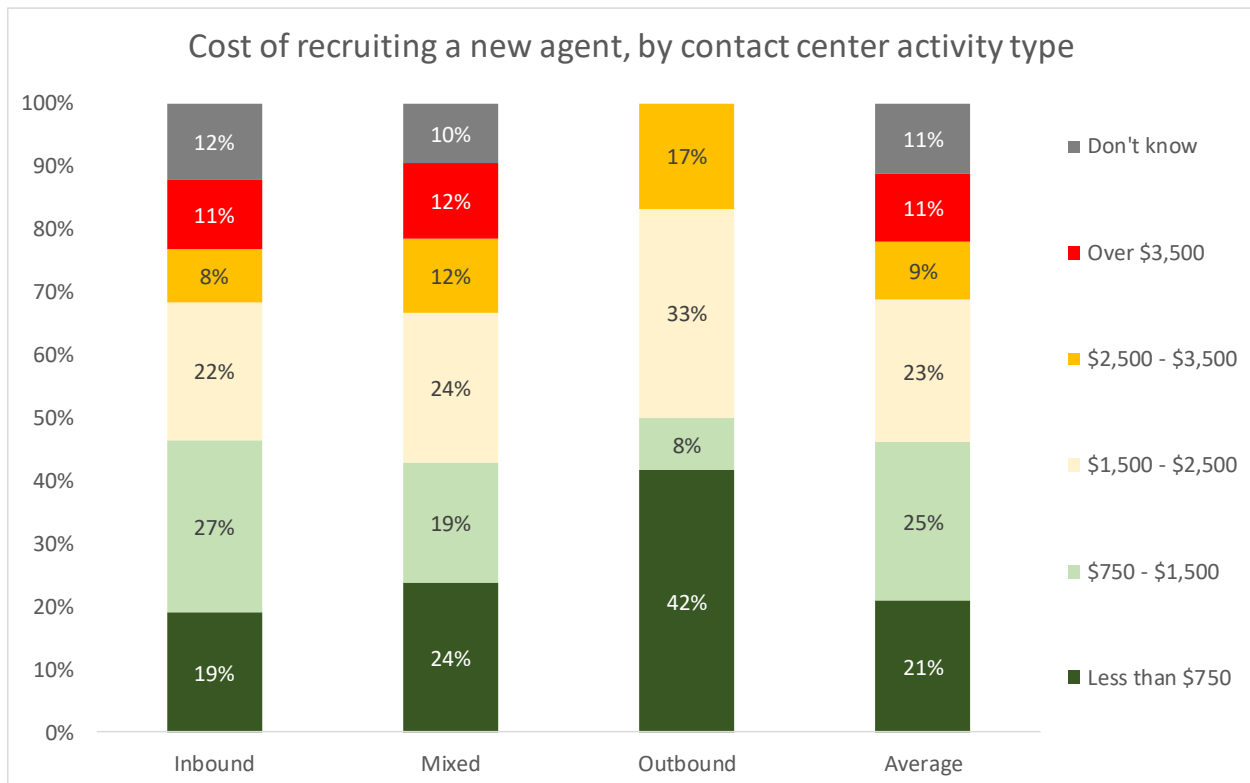
Contact center activity	Q2 2007	Q3 2008	Q4 2009	Q3 2010	Q1 2012	Q1 2013	Q1 2014	Q1 2015	Q2 2016	Q2 2017	Q3 2018	Q3 2019	Q2 2022
Service	-	-	-	-	6.1%	7.5%	10.2%	8.0%	8.9%	8.8%	9.0%	8.4%	8.5%
Mixed	-	-	-	-	7.9%	9.5%	10.0%	11.9%	8.4%	10.3%	8.8%	10.3%	9.5%
Sales	-	-	-	-	6.0%	7.2%	11.4%	9.1%	11.4%	8.9%	6.3%	7.7%	7.9%
Mean	7.0%	8.9%	8.2%	5.6%	6.4%	7.9%	10.4%	8.9%	9.0%	9.0%	8.5%	8.5%	8.6%
Median	-	-	-	-	-	5.2%	7.0%	5.5%	5.9%	8.1%	6.5%	6.0%	6.0%

AGENT RECRUITMENT COSTS

When looking at contact center activity type – inbound, mixed, or outbound – a pattern begins to emerge, with outbound operations tending to spend far less on recruitment than inbound or mixed respondents.

Greater attention should be paid to median averages than mean, due to a small number of extremely high costs being quoted.

Figure 43: Recruitment costs by contact center activity



AGENT ENGAGEMENT AND GAMIFICATION

Generally speaking, contact center agents tend to work in stressful environments for relatively low pay, doing work which may sometimes be repetitive. Depending on the nature of the calls, they may be dealing substantially with customers who have negative experiences of the company which is unlikely to make the agent happier about representing the enterprise. For many outbound agents, there is also the pressure to hit sales targets.

The new agent, while often feeling uncertain about their competence to do tasks, is often willing to learn and is engaged in their work. As time goes on, their competence will increase but they are more likely to become bored and cynical, which may in the longer term lead to high levels of agent attrition and correspondingly lower levels of operation-wide competence. As such, there is a twofold problem: lack of engagement at agent level leading to lower quality and productivity, and the corresponding costs associated with avoidable agent attrition.

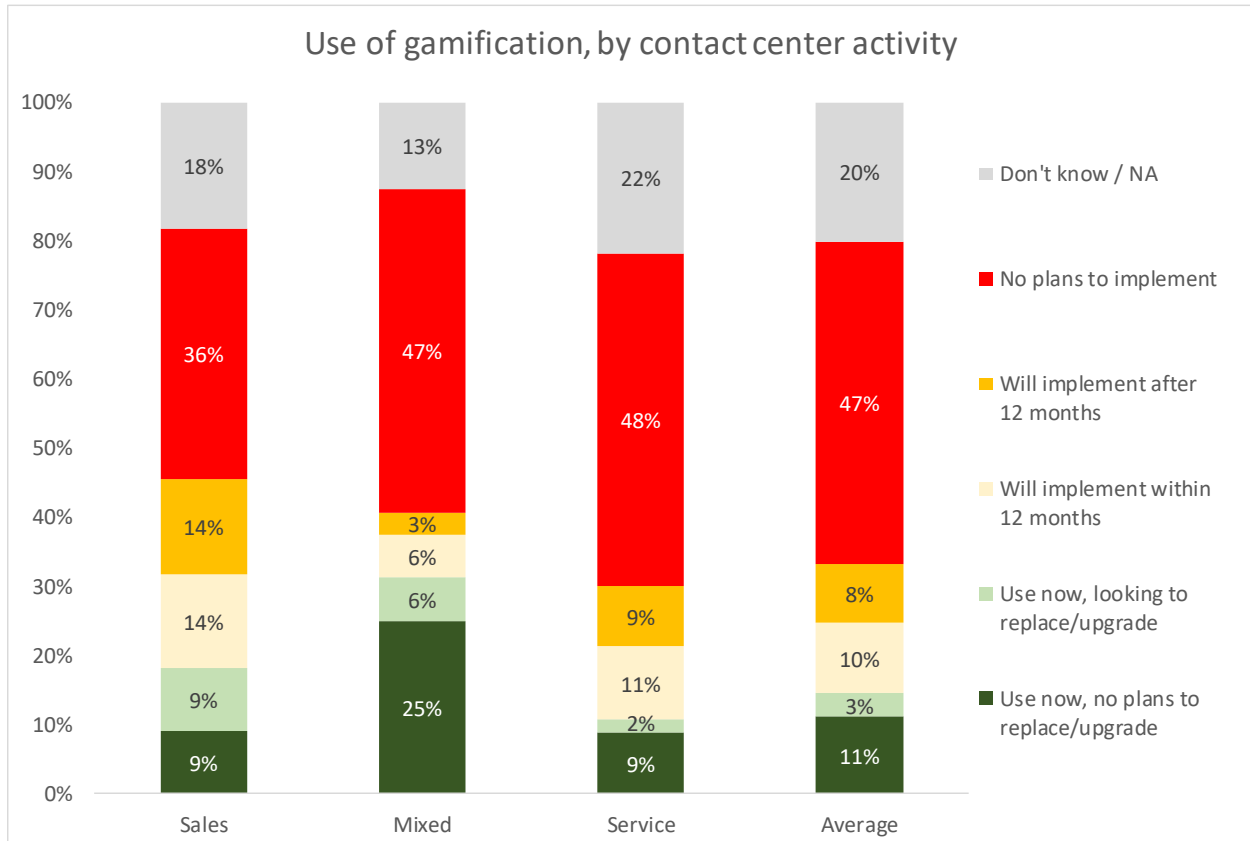
Gamification looks to meet these twin challenges with two solutions of its own: making work a more fun place to be, while encouraging the behaviors, competencies and characteristics that most closely align with the enterprise's own requirements through giving agents real-time feedback about their performance, the opportunities to improve themselves and to be seen positively by peers and managers with the attendant social and material rewards.

It is also important to note that gamification – while providing feedback and rewards to agents on an individual level – should be used as part of a team or community experience, encouraging high performing agents to share their best practice and for all agents to be continually challenged and pushed to learn new skills and improve their own performance.

Contact centers that use gamification frequently report that most agents go beyond the required training schedule, completing extra units and developing skills further in order to accumulate more points and badges. In a heavily incentivized outbound sales environment, encouraging agents to take time off revenue-generating activity to take training can be difficult, and this is a potential solution.

Looking at the activity type of respondents, those with some sales activity – which are already culturally used to the public, competitive practice of sharing sales targets and achievements – are more likely to be using gamification today, although the relatively small sample size of pure sales operations involved in this survey should be considered. However, as this pattern is also found in UK contact centers, it may well be the case that this is accurate.

Figure 44: Use of gamification, by contact center activity



COMPLIANCE

While the following commentary gives our best understanding of rules applying to outbound customer contact, we recommend that readers study the exact text of the regulations rather than rely on third-party opinion when making their business decisions.

FTC

The Telemarketing Sales Rule can be found here, and details the regulations that outbound calling in the US must follow: <https://www.ftc.gov/enforcement/rules/rulemaking-regulatory-reform-proceedings/telemarketing-sales-rule>

The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) states that sales robo-calls (broadcast voice messages) are illegal unless the customer has agreed to receive them. Businesses may send robo-calls without permission if they are:

- purely informational, e.g. about a flight being cancelled, reminding the customer about an appointment, or letting them know about a delayed school opening fall into this category, as long as the caller doesn't also try to sell something
- Debt collection calls. A business collecting a debt can use robocalls to reach customers. But robocalls that try to sell services to reduce the debt are illegal
- Political calls
- Calls from some health care providers. This includes a robocall from a pharmacy reminding customers to refill a prescription
- Messages from charities. Charities can make these calls themselves. But if a charity hires someone to make robocalls on its behalf, the robocalls can only go to members of the charity or prior donors. They also must include an automated option to stop future calls if required.

Full information can be found here:

<https://www.consumer.ftc.gov/articles/0259-robocalls>

Businesses taking card payments through outbound calls will need to be compliant with **PCI DSS** regulations. This is too large a subject to be covered in this report, and readers may wish to download "[The Inner Circle Guide to Card Fraud Reduction and PCI Compliance](#)".

END-USER QUESTION: HOW CAN WE BEST MAXIMISE EFFICIENCY AND EFFECTIVENESS WHILE STAYING WITHIN THE LAW?



Interestingly enough, the notions of efficiency, effectiveness and compliance are often seen as mutually exclusive when customer contact centers only use manual QA and or outcome/disposition

data to determine these three critical KPI's. In contrast users and practitioners of speech analytics will tell you that by applying metadata and analysis to all of their contact center interactions they can recognize the patterns and components (categories) that make up the most successful contact outcomes, the least successful and all the stages in between. Leveraging speech analytics gives organizations the opportunity to clearly understand the correlation between what was said, when it was said, how it was said, over what channel or channels the interactions took place in and the outcomes of the calls. A good example comes from a speech analytics user in the Performance Management space who discovered that agent sales calls that scored high for compliance and disclosure language with the consumer at key points in the call realized a higher close ratio and a lower post call order cancellation rate. This illustrates how by analyzing all calls, businesses can understand the semantic structure of the ideal outcome calls and model their sales script strategy or approach to optimize their probability of success.

REASONS FOR NON-COMPLIANCE

Outbound contact centers were asked to give their opinions of the reasons for non-compliance with regulations, and what they considered to be the main drivers of nuisance calls (i.e. silent and abandoned calls).

A top-level categorization of drivers is shown below (placed in order of frequency):

- poor dialer management
- rogue operators
- agent behavior
- targets and KPIs
- poor data.

Poor dialer management

Outbound contact centers note that abandoning calls can happen as a result of dialer pacing being too aggressive, or agents spending too long in unavailable time, in conjunction with too little monitoring and slow dialer readjustment. It is recommended that the dialer is warmed up in preview mode before moving to full predictive mode, to avoid causing dropped calls at the start of the shift due to the mass logging-in of the resource pool. This should ensure that dropped calls are low from the outset, and abandonment rate will be under the threshold throughout the shift rather than having to try to recover this in a suboptimal way towards the end of a shift.

Overdial settings should only be used where dialer managers are confident that the creation of high connect rates can be sustained by agents. Where an outbound-only campaign is taking place, agent levels can be fairly well predicted, but in a blended inbound/outbound environment, the necessity to balance the outbound abandonment rate while reacting to inbound call spikes requires very careful management, and the introduction of minimum agent volumes for the outbound campaigns can assist with this process.

It is also important to have a sound understanding of the data that is being called, and wherever possible analyze the correct calling periods for this. Understanding the customer prospect list to optimize the contact preferences and availability times if possible can greatly assist with contact rates. Moving between pools of variable data quality can very quickly increase call abandonment rates, so extra management time at these threshold points is crucial.

Rogue operators

It is an unfortunate fact that some companies blatantly ignore regulations, withholding CLI in order to obviate complaints from consumers. Proposed regulations around the accuracy and ubiquity of CLI aim to reduce these issues, although rogue operators calling from offshore are unlikely to be deterred by this. The planting of monitored /seeded telephone numbers and the aggressive tracing and investigation of any contact center calls that have failed to present a valid CLI will assist in identifying the rogue operators who are responsible for considerable proportion of nuisance calls.

Agent behavior

An increase in abandoned calls can be in part attributable to agent activity, for example not adhering to correct procedures when logging out for breaks (closing the application rather than requesting the dialer to log the agent off means that the dialer algorithm is working off incorrect assumptions). This can be exacerbated by the lack of constant monitoring, and unfocused dialer and line management.

Targets and KPIs

Judging the success or otherwise of cold calling or marketing campaigns through assessing volumes or call attempts per day can lead to overly aggressive dialer management, which is likely to push up the abandonment rate considerably. There can be pressure put on operational and dialer management if an outsourcer is rewarded solely through results rather than agent hours billed, for example: the risk is that the focus changes to call throughput rather than call outcome. This is a particular risk in organizations which are calling large volumes of untargeted data, for example generalized PPI or personal injury campaigns. Low contact rates can also occur if there has been a long period of time since customer consent was given, or if consent was assumed rather than stated explicitly.

Many outbound solution providers offer their customers a set of tools to offset risk and ensure compliancy. Detection tools can apply different outbound strategies automatically depending on whether a landline or mobile number is being called, the time of day, day of week and any public holidays.

Some countries specify the maximum number of attempts that can be made to reach a customer in a specific timescale, and any dialer solution should have this functionality. A multichannel solution can identify and deliver campaigns based on the customer's original opt-in information and observing behaviors such as a consumer replying to SMS messages but not to mobile calls.

It is also necessary to be able to screen against national Do Not Call databases, data expiration dates and to comply with state and regional dialing rules. The increased use of mobile and smart phones means that it is possible to reduce or eliminate the number of calls made to a device that is any different time zone, for example when the customer is on holiday and the mobile phone has a roaming status.

BEST PRACTICE AND OUTCOMES

OUTBOUND OUTCOMES

NB: the following section on outcomes, call attempts and ring time is based on a large survey of UK-based outbound contact centers. There is no US equivalent survey, and has been included here in case it is of interest to the readership as the two industries have many similarities.

A series of questions was asked to respondents from outbound contact centers about the typical results that they had from their ongoing outbound activity and/or campaign.

Slightly over half of calls made were answered – either by an answer phone or by a person – with those carrying out debt collection activities having the lowest answer rate and those carrying out customer service activities the highest.

Figure 45: Proportion of calls answered, by outbound activity type

Outbound activity type	% of calls answered
Customer service	68%
Customer surveys	65%
Warm sales	60%
Cold sales	59%
Debt collection	44%
Other	62%
Average	53%

Large operations were less likely to have their calls answered, perhaps because they are more likely to call for longer hours rather than just the peak hours.

Figure 46: Proportion of calls answered, by size

Contact center size	% of calls answered
Small	60%
Medium	51%
Large	47%
Undisclosed	51%
Average	53%

Of calls answered, responses showed that 49% were answered by a person and 51% by an answer machine / voicemail.

Figure 47: Of the calls that were answered, how many were by a consumer? (by outbound activity type)

Outbound activity type	% of calls answered, that were answered by a consumer
Customer surveys	85%
Customer service	64%
Cold sales	57%
Debt collection	41%
Warm sales	38%
Other	65%
Average	49%

Figure 48: Of the calls that were answered, how many were by a consumer? (by contact center size)

Contact center size	% of calls answered, that were answered by a consumer
Small	51%
Medium	53%
Large	45%
Average	49%

1 in 8 of the calls that were answered by a consumer were then hung up by that consumer, rejecting the call. This is far higher in those carrying out debt collection and cold sales activities.

Figure 49: Of the calls that were answered by a consumer, how many were hung up by the consumer when an agent was available? (by outbound activity type)

Outbound activity type	% of calls answered by a consumer, that were hung-up by a consumer when an agent was available
Debt collection	22%
Cold sales	10%
Warm sales	2%
Customer surveys	1%
Customer service	0%
Other	3%
Average	12%

In 1.1% of cases where the call was answered by the consumer, a recorded message was played as no agent was available, with this figure being the highest in the heavily predictive worlds of debt collection and cold sales.

Figure 50: Of the calls that were answered by a consumer, how many had a recorded message is played as no agent was available (by outbound activity type)

Outbound activity type	% of calls that were answered by a consumer, and an agent is not available, where recorded message is played
Debt collection	1.7%
Cold sales	0.9%
Warm sales	0.8%
Customer surveys	0.3%
Customer service	0.0%
Other	0.3%
Average	1.1%

15% of calls answered by an answer machine ended in a recorded message being left on the answer machine. Those carrying out debt collection and warm calling activities appear to be the only activity types doing this of the survey respondents.

Figure 51: Of the calls that were answered by an answerphone, where a recorded message is played, by outbound activity type

Outbound activity type	% of calls that were answered by an answerphone, where a recorded message is played
Debt collection	25%
Warm sales	17%
Cold sales	0%
Customer service	0%
Customer surveys	0%
Other	0%
Average	15%

It is interesting to note that 85% of respondents answering this question did not play a recorded message to an answerphone. The majority stated that they did not use AMD and therefore the call will be passed through to an agent who would either leave a message or hang-up depending on the business requirements.

DIALING ACTIVITY: MAXIMUM NUMBER OF ATTEMPTS

As might be expected, the maximum number of attempts made to contact a customer or prospect differs significantly depending upon the activity being carried out. Sufficient data on three outbound activities - debt collection, warm calling (sales to existing customers) and cold calling (sales to new prospects) were available to allow detailed analysis of call attempts and the time left between calls.

Those involved in debt collection, as we might expect, are determined to speak to specific individuals, and almost half of them make multiple calls on the same day (with a few making as many as six calls per day to the same individual). In the main, they will wait a minimum of four hours between calls, although several mention that if an engaged signal is received, they will ring back within 15-30 minutes as the chances of successful connection is higher. There are instances of respondents making up to 100 calls per month to a specific number, although on average, making two or three calls per week is much more common.

Several respondents pointed out that if a message is left or a call dropped, they would not call back within 72 hours.

Figure 52: Call attempts by activity type (debt collection)

	Maximum calls per consumer per day	Length of campaign / live data (days)	Maximum calls in total campaign time	Time left between calls (if engaged tone) - hours	Time left between calls (if no engaged tone) - hours
1 st quartile	3	28	20	2.25	72
Median	2	21	10	0.5	4
3 rd quartile	1	7	6	0.38	4
Mean	2.2	21	18	1.3	24
High	6	90	90	4	72
Low	1	2	3	0.25	2

Those respondents involved in calling existing customers, for example in order to cross-sell, upsell or renew contracts, are less likely than debt collectors to call as many times, although they have a higher average attempt per customer per day figure (although the research base for this was only 6 respondents, so should be treated with caution).

Typically, calls will be placed every two or three days for a three- or four-week period, with around 8 calls over this period being average. Having said that, some respondents do indicate that they call more frequently, although none make more than 12 calls in total.

Figure 53: Call attempts by activity type (warm calling – sales calls to existing customers)

	Maximum calls per consumer per day	Length of campaign / live data (days)	Maximum calls in total campaign time	Time left between calls (if engaged tone) - hours	Time left between calls (if no engaged tone) - hours
1 st quartile	3	28	10	n/a	14
Median	3	28	8	0.5	4
3 rd quartile	3	18	8	n/a	4
Mean	3.5	22	8	0.5	9
High	8	35	12	0.5	24
Low	1	3	3	0.5	3

Respondents carrying out sales calls to new prospects will call multiple times in a week - around three or four being average - with a couple of respondents carrying out very significant focused calling, with around 10-15 calls being placed to the same potential customer.

Figure 54: Call attempts by activity type (cold calling – sales calls to new prospects)

	Maximum calls per consumer per day	Length of campaign / live data (days)	Maximum calls in total campaign time	Time left between calls (if engaged tone) - hours	Time left between calls (if no engaged tone) - hours
1 st quartile	3	32	18	n/a	n/a
Median	3	28	10	0.38	4
3 rd quartile	2	11	3	n/a	n/a
Mean	3	25	18	0.38	3.4
High	3	56	100	0.5	4
Low	2	5	3	0.25	2

RING TIME AND CONNECTION TIME

The survey showed that the mean average ring time industry-wide is 22 seconds, with cold selling tending to ring the longest and 'other' the shortest. Median averages have been included as well for greater clarity. It seems fair to note that those involved in sales to new customers (i.e. cold calling) are more likely than other sectors to let calls ring longer.

Figure 55: Minimum mean and median ring time before call termination, by outbound activity type

Outbound activity type	Mean minimum ring time before call termination (seconds)	Median minimum ring time before call termination (seconds)
Cold sales	26	25
Customer surveys	23	15
Debt collection	22	24
Customer service	21	20
Warm sales	20	21
Other	17	18
Average	21.9	20.0

The majority of respondents who stated why they set a particular minimum amount of time before call termination explained that there was a sweet spot around 18 - 20 seconds: they referred to Ofcom's policy on calls ringing for a minimum of 15 seconds (which mirrors that of the [FTC](#)), and many answer machines kick in after 21 seconds. It was also noted that studying historical maximum wait times indicated that ringing for longer than 20 seconds rarely results in much improvement, and increasing answer machine rates would also 'lock out' the record with regard to redial rules.

CALLER LINE IDENTITY (CLI)

Under the Truth in Caller ID Act, FCC rules prohibit anyone from transmitting misleading or inaccurate caller ID information with the intent to defraud, cause harm or wrongly obtain anything of value.

Anyone who is illegally spoofing can face penalties of up to \$10,000 for each violation. However, spoofing is not always illegal. There are legitimate, legal uses for spoofing, like when a doctor calls a patient from her personal mobile phone and displays the office number rather than the personal phone number or a business displays its toll-free call-back number.

FCC rules specifically require that a telemarketer:

- Transmit or display its telephone number or the telephone number on whose behalf the call is being made, and, if possible, its name or the name of the company for which it is selling products or services.
- Display a telephone number the customer can call during regular business hours to ask to no longer be called. This rule applies even to companies that already have an established business relationship with the customer.

Some survey respondents, often from the debt collection sector, mentioned that localized CLI (i.e. those that appear to have originated from the same town or city as the called party) tend to have improved answer rates, and that calls clearly originating from US operations are also likely to have improved results.

CENTRALIZED OR REMOTE WORKING

Remote working promises contact centers significant benefits, but has not always been right for every agent or contact center. Amongst the potential advantages are:

- the environmental benefits of working at home, reducing carbon emissions and decreasing congestion on the roads
- offshore contact centers can be unpopular with customers, so businesses are looking at alternative ways to cut costs without damaging customer experience
- increased flexibility in working hours means rapid response and reduced idle time, as well as the opportunity to extend working hours
- increasing costs of recruiting and retaining staff allow agents outside the commutable distance to be employed at times that suit them and the business.

The pandemic crisis meant that remote working has become vital to the business continuity plans of many contact center operations. After the crisis has passed, businesses may well find that reverting to the previous centralized contact center model is no longer optimal and that remote working can bring greater flexibility and performance, augmenting the traditional way of operating. However, some businesses may feel that outbound agents need the buzz of being in a physical team environment.

Figure 56: Homeworking in US contact centers, 2007-April 2020



END-USER QUESTION: WE'RE UNSURE THAT OUTBOUND CAN BE EFFECTIVE IN A REMOTE WORKING ENVIRONMENT, ESPECIALLY FOR SALES AGENTS WHERE CLOSE MANAGEMENT AND MOTIVATION IS CRITICAL. DO YOU AGREE?



Quite the contrary. To illustrate the exact opposite can be true one customer in particular, a marketing services and customer experience solution provider serves as a great example that you should expect the same or even better performance from your remote agent population. This forward thinking organization is notable since it had made the strategic decision to migrate its agent workforce to remote "Work from home" long in advance of the Covid 19 crisis. They went "all remote" back in 2017 and initiated an aggressive ongoing quality improvement process utilizing speech analytics throughout their agent workforce to increase close rates, decrease training time, and create better customer and agent experiences.

One of the client's they support, a major automotive OEM engaged this organization to sell its extended vehicle maintenance service plans. The remote team supporting this client had its agents averaging 80 contracts sold per month and had a 22% close rate. They made the decision to utilize learnings from speech analytics to see what made up the most and least successful calls since without analytics it would be hard to measure as they make 7,000 calls a month, lasting up to 15 minutes each.

They used the insights derived from the most successful call outcomes and identified and defined the nine components that made up those contacts. By altering their call strategies based on those learnings the team was able to realize measurable and sustained improvements including the following:

- Raised the sales closing rate by 3% from its 22% baseline
- Achieved a 3% reduction in customers that agree to the service by phone but do not activate their accounts (and therefore do not complete the sale)
- Realized a 20% improvement in average monthly contracts sold by agent from 80 to 100.

AGENT UTILIZATION AND PRODUCTIVITY

The majority of survey respondents calculate agent utilization rate as a proportion of the time spent talking to end-users, divided by the amount of time available to talk. For example, if an agent spends 30 minutes in the hour talking, and they are logged in to the system for 50 minutes (with a 10 minute break), then the majority of contact centers calculate this to be a 60% utilization rate (30/50).

Most survey respondents do not include spending time before the call looking at contact data, or adding wrap-up notes after the call to be a part of agent utilization, stating that utilization rates are only calculated based on the % of time spent in a 'talk' state on the dialer as a % of the total time the agent was working, and does not include any time updating customer records or waiting for calls.

However, most of the higher (70%+) results in the chart below also include wrap-up time (e.g. Talk + Wrap, as a % of Talk + Wrap + Idle). For most respondents that split out wrap-up time from call time, wrap is usually between 15-20% of the call time.

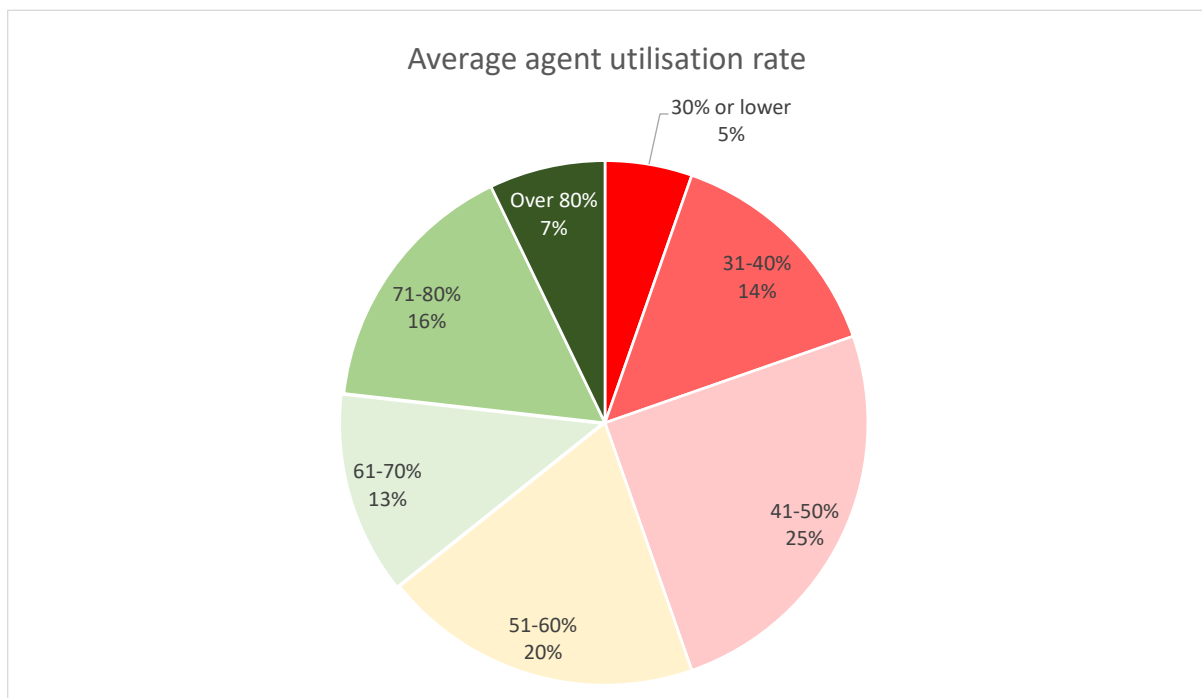


Figure 57: Average outbound agent utilization rates

Agent utilization rates	
1 st quartile	70%
Median	56%
3 rd quartile	42%
Mean	57%

While agent utilization is a useful outbound metric, it does not entirely reflect the number of genuine sales opportunities for agents. Businesses should also look at “right party connect” (RPC) statistics, which change depending not only on the number of contact attempts made but also the time that the call is being placed. Analyzing this information is likely to show the most effective times of the day and days of the week to get a higher proportion of successful RPCs.

AGENT UTILIZATION RATES AND DIALING MODES

Analysis of agent utilization rates were carried out against the main dialer mode employed by respondents, in order to investigate whether any dialing mode has a correlation with agent utilization. For example, as predictive dialing is a highly automated process, it might be expected that this mode would clearly yield the highest utilization rates.

However, there are more variables than just dialer mode that will affect utilization rates, and which themselves may encourage an outbound operation to use one mode over another. For example, respondents state that predictive dialers are more likely to be used than other modes in cases where data quality is low, and there have already been multiple attempts made to contact a customer. Different businesses will have their own views on the balance between efficiency and quality, and the amount of wrap-up time that may be required by various business activities will be different, and will affect utilization as well (if included in the utilization calculation).

The overall agent utilization rate (i.e. all responses, regardless of dialing mode and method of calculation) is 57%, or 34.2 minutes per hour.

- When considering **only** those respondents who consider talk-time, but not wrap-up in their calculations, this figure is 51% (30.6 minutes per hour)
- For respondents who include **both** talk time and wrap-up in their calculations, the utilization rate is 68% (40.8 minutes per hour).

In order to see whether and by how much dialing mode can be said to affect agent utilization, the utilization rates were calculated for respondents using particular dialing modes. It was found that amongst contact centers which calculated utilization through only talk-time and which used mainly predictive dialing had an average utilization rate of 62% (37.2 minutes per hour), compared to the respondent base as a whole, who had a 51% utilization rate. This implies a clear increase in agent utilization time through predictive dialing.

It is interesting to note that industry statistics on dialing mode efficiency suggest the following to be reasonable estimates³, *ceteris paribus*:

- manual dialing: 12 minutes of talk time per hour (20%)
- preview dialing: 18 minutes of talk time per hour (30%)
- progressive dialing: 25 to 35 minutes of talk time per hour (42% - 58%)
- predictive dialing: 35 to 45 minutes of talk time per hour (58% - 75%)

It should also be noted that many respondents stated that predictive dialing is very likely to be used for more difficult 'end of project' calls where customers have been called many times already, with the initial attempts made using IVM, and high quality data being originally called in preview or progressive modes. As the quality and age of the data is different depending on the mode used, the fact that there are numerous variables changing should strike an even greater note of caution.

It is not just the productivity of the agent that needs to be considered: it is vital to understand the cost per seat (how much the agent costs the business) compared to the profitability of each sale that they make: an unprofitable agent working at 80% productivity is still ineffective.

Tips on improving productivity include:

- Agent confidence is not simply about the character of the employee but also how secure they are talking about a product or service and its benefits to the customer. This will not only require in-depth knowledge of the subject, but also a firm understanding of the benefits that it could provide to this specific customer type.
- 'Script fatigue' can lead to robotic-sounding agents, which are a turnoff for customers. Consider altering scripts or allowing agents to follow them more flexibly to maintain levels of engagement and interest.
- Agents can feel under pressure to get through all of their script rather than engage in a true two-way conversation with the customer. Allowing them to spend as long as they need on the sales call (within reason) will allow them to listen to what the customer is saying, leading to the successful outcomes that come from a consultative sales approach.
- Most induction training is focused upon process and compliance, with a relatively small amount of sales training added. Consider increasing this and also recruiting the types of agent who may be comfortable carrying out sales calls as well as receiving service calls.

³ ContactBabel estimates, based on a mix of secondary research with dialer manufacturers and primary ContactBabel research

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- Desktop automation can assist successful cross-selling and upselling through reducing the amount that an agent needs to remember about offers and customer history, as all of the information relevant to that customer is already in front of them. This allows them to focus on building rapport with the customer by making sure that there are fewer awkward pauses or fillers (e.g. “umm”, “er”) and that the call flows more easily.
 - Make sure that agents are provided with high-quality noise-canceling headsets allow them to concentrate on the conversation rather than a noisy working environment, which may also distract the customer from the conversation.
 - Outbound contact is no longer just about telephony: if customers or prospects have abandoned a shopping cart and you have managed to capture an email or mobile phone number early in the interaction, contacting them immediately to see how the sale can be rescued can be very successful.

END-USER QUESTION: DO YOU HAVE ANY TIPS ON HOW WE CAN WE MANAGE PRODUCTIVITY WITHOUT AGENT BURNOUT?



This is a great question, especially in our current times where the vast majority of contact center agents are now working remotely and may remain so as a more permanent workforce scenario. A key to achieving and maintaining solid workforce productivity stems around two issues:

- Consistent, unbiased feedback to your agents on their own performances.
- Understanding what are the motivators that sustain high productivity among your agents. Recognize too that those “inspirations” will vary among your personnel based on age, workspace (likely home) environment and the incentives in place to spur high productivity.

Many contact centers are employing speech analytics applied to all agent interactions to measure and share back with the agent their own “scorecard” of cumulative performance. Coupling steady balanced agent feedback and aligning KPI’s to their individual profile enticements (extrinsic or intrinsic motivations) is allowing organizations to consistently produce the highest degree of agent engagement and desirable business outcomes.

WHAT TIME IS BEST TO MAKE OUTBOUND CALLS?

Analyzing the time of day that customers have previously called your business means that they may well be likely to be available to receive an outbound call at a similar time. Additionally, taking into account their demographics and any other information that you have about them (e.g. whether they have children of school age) will give further clues about the best time to contact them: for example, during the school run might not be ideal.

It can also be helpful to understand the demographics of the people being called: elderly people can take longer to get the phone and need a longer ring time, whereas mobile numbers are generally answered more quickly so that ring times can be shorter.

People not in traditional paid employment (e.g. the unemployed, retired and stay-at-home parents) are more likely to be at home between 9am – 5pm, and those working in large cities are generally more likely than those living elsewhere to arrive home later in the evening. As seaside towns will tend to have a higher proportion of retired people, it may make more sense to call these numbers during the working day, whereas for those businesses trying to contact employed people, it may make sense for them to call during the lunch hour. The more data that business has about a customer, more likely it is that they will be able to segment their calling list effectively.

For B2B calls, Monday mornings and Friday afternoons will tend to be less effective than other days (this also applies to email open rates), so it may be worth considering scheduling training or team meetings for these times.

When looking at peak calling hours, this differs somewhat depending on the type of calling being carried out:

- **Debt collection** respondents state that they have an outbound calling peak in the early evening, between 5.30pm and 8pm, with many operations also stating that there are peaks in the morning as well, particularly between 10am and 12 noon.
- Amongst respondents that carry out **sales to existing customers** (for example contract renewals, cross selling and upselling), an evening peak is even more noticeable. Many respondents report the period between 4.30pm and 7.30pm has more volume, with very few reporting significant sales call volumes before 12 noon.
- For respondents carrying out **cold calls**, there were less obvious peaks, with calls spread out across the day, perhaps as for these types of sales campaign / outbound activity, there are likely to be more targets to aim for.

Different segments of the contact list are likely to be available at different times: at the simplest level, retired people are likely to be available all day, and people of working age during lunchtime and the evening. Of course, for anything remotely associated with B2B, evenings and weekends should not be considered. Published research⁴ suggests that the best time for B2B cold calls is the early morning (before 9 am) and towards the end of the working day (4-5pm), outside of core meeting hours.

It is important to take into account external events, such as sporting events within a city (for example, calling specific demographics during an important football match is unlikely to yield anything positive), and if at all possible, getting the customer to state their preference early in the business relationship in terms of availability and preferred channel will be positive for all concerned. 'Warming them up' through an earlier SMS message is also a tactic to be considered.

To make the customer segmentation strategy really work requires considerable amounts of data on customer demographics, purchasing history and preferred channels and contact times, and businesses should look to extract such information from their sales intelligence application and match it with outbound calling outcomes and if possible, the elements of dynamic scripting that tend to work best with such customers.

This is not to say that there is a single best calling profile to follow. Specific sales campaigns may well have entirely different customer profiles which can show when peaks and troughs occur during the day.

Some businesses create specific customer personas that can be allocated to each of the people being called, which may include their age, location, employment status, parental responsibilities, etc., so businesses and agents have a good idea of who they're calling and when they're likely to be there to answer the call.

It is also worth considering that calling somebody at the same time of day as yesterday is likely to get a similar response, as most people have a daily routine.

⁴ Sung Hyun Kwan Business School in association with Kellogg School of Management

THE ROLE OF MOBILE

The majority of mobile users have access to a smartphone, meaning a large proportion of customers will want to contact businesses through these devices, whether via the telephony element of the device, or via the company's website or mobile app. Taking into account the use of tablet computers to access the Internet, the mobile channel may actually be the first port-of-call for many customers, especially those in the younger demographics.

Gathering, understanding and using the contextual data that can surround the mobile consumer will be key to pushing the uptake and functionality of this channel forward. The plethora of channels immediately available to the mobile consumer – including voice, web browsing, SMS, social media, and web chat – encourages the customer to act immediately for all their service or information requirements, rather than waiting until they are in front of a desktop computer.

Although it is more expensive to call a mobile than a landline, the former's ubiquity and responsiveness has a great advantage over landline phones and even emails, as the business is far more likely to be able to reach the customer by calling their mobile number, although there is no guarantee of an answer, which is why SMS is often used as part of the outbound mix.

Over half of calls made by survey respondents are placed to mobile phones, which while they are more expensive, are more likely to be answered by the correct person regardless of time of day.

The ubiquity and massive increase in the use of smartphones also means that the mobile channel has become a crucial part of the customer contact mix, and businesses should look to engage with mobile customers, not worrying too much about cost differentials. Besides, increasing the use of SMS as a channel to the customer would reduce many of the costs associated with mobile communication (including agent time, as well as transmission costs), while keeping the advantages of contacting a customer's mobile number.

Businesses should also consider screening mobile numbers in order to improve connection rates: a very significant proportion of mobile phones will either be turned off or otherwise unavailable (e.g. roaming outside the home country), and screening for the status of mobile numbers at network level means that the connect rate can be very significantly increased.

THE FUTURE OF OUTBOUND

While predicting the future with any sort of accuracy is by its nature impossible, there are various business drivers that seem to point the outbound industry in a specific direction:

- Driven by consumer complaints, the focus on regulation reducing or eliminating abandoned calls and enforcing accurate CLI/CLID means that businesses will take even greater care to manage prospect and customer data effectively and to use only technology that can support a compliant environment
- While regulations currently permit cold calling to individuals, the continuing drop in this type of activity suggests that this is not a particularly profitable or effective way of reaching customers or prospects. Proactive contact and relationship nurturing seems to be the way forward for much of future outbound activity
- The boundary between inbound and outbound is likely to merge even further, with outbound (including email, SMS, social media and messaging, as well as telephony) becoming an integral part of customer care
- Outbound has already moved a long way away from the traditional cold calling model, and increased knowledge of customer preferences and personalization will be vital to outbound's rehabilitation with customers. While the majority of businesses currently use some form of contact list segmentation (for example, looking at gender, age and customer status), increasing amounts of customer data and the AI-enabled analysis of call outcomes means that customer segmentation techniques will become far more sophisticated and effective, providing insights at an individual level as well as for customer personas and contact reasons
- Although for many businesses it can be enough of a challenge simply to pair a live agent with a live contact, we would expect to see leading-edge adopters consider personality-matching techniques. Solutions exist where the personality profiles of customers and agents can be identified, and the resulting customer and agent segmentation can allow the business to have certain types of agent calling customers with the same personality type, increasing empathy, customer satisfaction and revenue. We would also expect to see a greater increase in personalized service by pairing agents and customers who have spoken together before
- As more people use a smartphone as their primary means of communication, businesses must continue to re-evaluate the best means of communicating with customers based upon the individual requirements and activities. An omnichannel approach, which can detect the time and method by which the customer has contacted the business previously, can analyze and predict the most successful ways of doing so in the future. It is likely that a multiple channel approach will become popular, such as sending an email or SMS first, seeing whether the customer interacts with it, and then placing an outbound call appropriately

- There is likely to be a greater emphasis placed upon the scientific analysis of outbound contact, going towards a better understanding of the right time and method to communicate with customers
- The analysis of big data and the attendant timely recognition of potential opportunities and triggers means that outbound communications can become welcomed as adding to the customer experience: in effect, the business provides the customer with information or an opportunity to communicate before they realize they even need it. This proactive approach will be driven by a more sophisticated understanding of the customer's thought processes and closer analysis of customer preferences and the results that similar groups of customers have experienced through this method before. Analysts talk about "the moment of opportunity", and although identifying and acting upon this with the right resource will be a difficult journey for organizations to fulfil, it leads to potentially great benefits for both customer and business
- The inbound contact center world has changed greatly, with the former focus on call duration having been moved very firmly into the background, replaced by customer satisfaction and first contact resolution. Many low value calls are being shifted to self-service (whether via phone or web), leaving the more complex, high-value, high opportunity calls. A similar pattern will develop within the outbound industry: not only are there far more personalized customer service calls being made, but also the opportunity now exists to make personalized outbound sales calls as well. The wealth of information potentially available about the customer, their likely intentions and even their type of personality gives salespeople greater opportunity to engage successfully and make a sale. In tandem with sophisticated customer profiling and solutions that optimize calling, the opportunity exists for outbound calling to be less of a scattergun, high-intensity approach, and more about delivering relevant services and offers to the customer at the correct time. Conjecturally, this may already be happening, as it is noticeable that the agent attrition rate in outbound contact centers (historically extremely high), has seen a considerable decrease in both the UK and US over recent years, suggesting that the nature of the work has changed
- There are great opportunities to improve the dynamism of scripting depending upon the direction of the conversation and the customer profile. Static scripts should perhaps now be used only for the most inexperienced of agents, and the success or otherwise of specific dynamic scripts should be assessed and fed back into the system, allowing a greater understanding of what works, to whom, and when. A single unified desktop environment means that agents will be able to focus on listening to the prospect or customer without having to concentrate on screen navigation or finding the right information
- There will be greater sophistication in the monetization and quantification of proactive customer contact. Not only does the proactive engagement of the customer or prospect reduce inbound call volumes and costs, but it also has a positive effect on revenue and customer loyalty. At the moment, this can be difficult to quantify but we expect large organizations to be able to analyze and justify in terms of profitability what can be a considerable expenditure.

END-USER QUESTION: HOW HAS THE NATURE OF OUTBOUND CONTACT BEEN CHANGING AND HOW DO YOUR SOLUTIONS ADDRESS THIS? WHAT CAN WE EXPECT IN THE FUTURE FROM OUTBOUND CUSTOMER CONTACT?



Digitalization has created more competition, since e-commerce, mobile marketing and other technology programs often put your customers one click away from your competitors. However,

digitalization has also created tremendous opportunities to improve sales effectiveness. There are more customer data points and engagement channels available to businesses than ever before. The businesses that can harness that data to give customers what they want are increasing sales and building a sustainable competitive advantage.

Interaction analytics is a powerful tool that gives companies insight into customer preferences and sales practices, and provides guidance for how to act on that insight to improve sales.

With interaction analytics outbound contact centers can:

- Hear the voice of your customer and see how customer preferences differ by segment and engagement channel
- Structure offers and sales presentations that are optimized to customer preferences
- Objectively assess how well your contact center agents perform at every step of the customer engagement and conversion process
- Get the comprehensive, objective data you need to improve agent training, coaching and performance
- Design and deliver a better customer experience that reduces friction, raises customer satisfaction and increases sales.

With research showing that newer communications channels (i.e., live chat, social media, etc.) are increasingly being used by customers, it should come as no surprise that companies that can communicate across channels are coming out ahead. Due to the explosion of digital and mobile channels, customers expect to be able to be reached by companies anytime – and from anywhere.

So what does this mean for companies? Multi-channel customer communication is here to stay – and will remain critical in the years to come. Multichannel speech analytics software can help call centers forecast and schedule properly for each different channel by identifying broken processes and improve agent performance across channels. By monitoring and analyzing customer interactions across various channels, these solutions work to identify what customers want, which can ultimately improve the customer experience.

ABOUT CONTACTBABEL

ContactBabel is the contact center industry expert. If you have a question about how the industry works, or where it's heading, the chances are we have the answer.

The coverage provided by our massive and ongoing primary research projects is matched by our experience analyzing the contact center industry. We understand how technology, people and process best fit together, and how they will work collectively in the future.

We help the biggest and most successful vendors develop their contact center strategies and talk to the right prospects. We have shown the UK government how the global contact center industry will develop and change. We help contact centers compare themselves to their closest competitors so they can understand what they are doing well and what needs to improve.

If you have a question about your company's place in the contact center industry, perhaps we can help you.

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