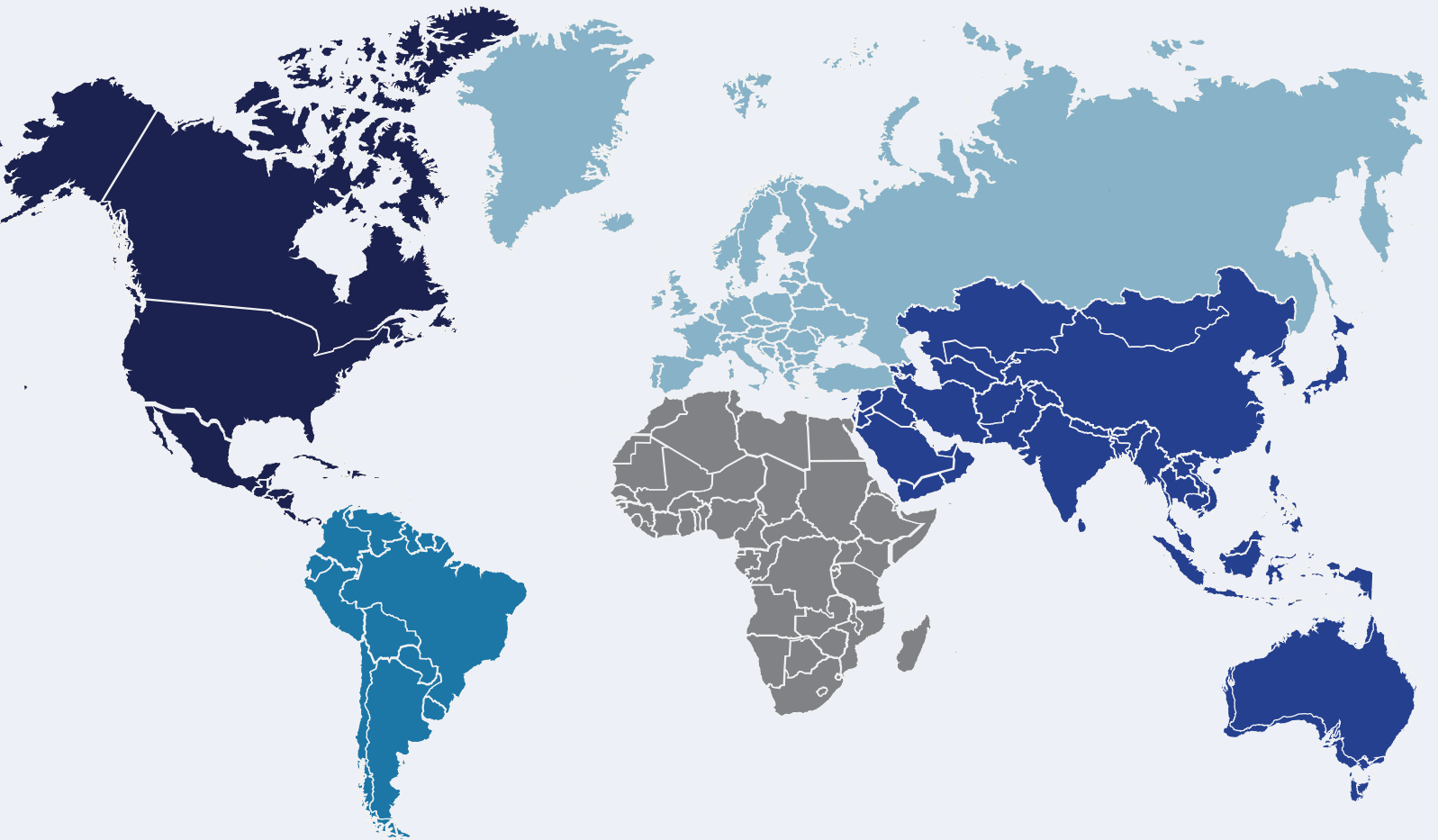


CCW Executive Report

CONTACT CENTER PRIORITIES FOR 2018

What do contact centers want to achieve, and why do these goals matter?



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INTRODUCTION/FOREWORD

When it comes to the customer contact function, the idea of an annual “executive priorities” investigation may seem silly.

Some customer experience trends, challenges and opportunities emerge – and vanish – within a few months. They start deep into the year, and they fade before it is over.

Others remain relevant for several years. They are not “new” at the turn of the calendar year.

Can a business truly account for these fleeting and persistent trends when declaring its annual priorities? Given the importance of the customer experience, *should* a business profess its annual priorities when it does not know exactly how the landscape will change throughout the year?

Yes and yes.

An organization cannot account for all of the opportunities that may emerge in a year, and it cannot precisely predict when it will get to declare “mission accomplished” with regard to a customer experience initiative.

It can, however, set fundamental goals. It can identify specific focuses that will remain important no matter which specific technologies or customer demands emerge within a given year.

The “executive priorities” investigation helps identify these fundamental goals. It, essentially, represents an exploration into what a contact center wants to achieve, and why those goals matter.

This report is predicated on determining the “why.”

It reveals the key goals organizations hope to pursue (or continue pursuing) in 2018. It evaluates specific focuses like the agent experience and digital transformation from a high-level, strategic perspective. It highlights the key investment *categories* organizations want to pursue in 2018. It also establishes the definition of a customer-centric brand; a label for which all customer contact functions aspire.

Fueled by data and guided by CCW Digital’s team of analysts, it is not a shopping list written in ink. It is roadmap ready to be refined by the expected and unexpected realities of 2018.

DEMOGRAPHICS & METHODOLOGIES

To collect data for the [Winter Executive Report](#), CCW Digital surveyed customer experience, contact center, marketing, customer care, IT, and operations professionals in August, September and October 2017.

Example respondent job titles include customer experience manager, customer service director, CEO, AVP and business support officer, SVP and phone banking center manager, chief customer experience officer, VP of global sales, senior customer experience management analyst, SVP of global customer care, group manager of omnichannel, head of insights, director of learning technology, call center VP and call center manager.

77% of those surveyed directly influence their organizations' customer experience budgets, while 45% either sit in or directly report to the C-suite.

The respondent pool encompasses a wide range of organizations, including a substantial number of large enterprises. 49% of respondent organizations generate over \$1 billion in annual revenue, and 72% have multiple contact center sites. For 56% of organizations, the average contact center site seats over 50 agents.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Brian Cantor is the principal analyst for the IQPC Customer Management Practice. In his role, Brian leads all customer experience, contact center, technology and employee engagement research initiatives. Citing this proprietary research, Brian authors CMP's series of reports.

Brian additionally serves as managing editor and director for CCW Digital, which is the global online community and research hub for customer contact professionals. CCW Digital's articles, special reports, commentaries, infographics, executive interviews, webinars and online events reach a community of over 140,000.

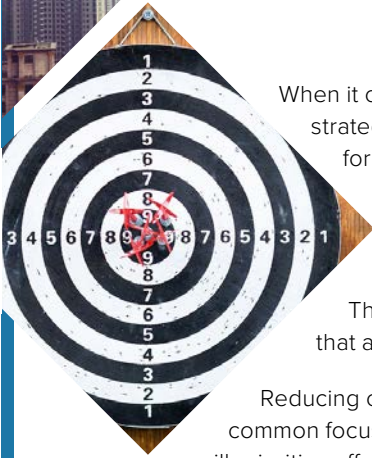
A passionate advocate for customer centricity, Brian regularly speaks on major CX conference agendas. He also advises organizations on customer experience and business development strategies.



KEY FINDINGS

- The “frictionless revolution” will continue in 2018. Reducing customer effort ranks as the #1 customer experience priority for the coming year.
- Organizations are not merely marveling at the idea of chatbots – they are prepared to implement the technology. Leveraging automated engagement tools is the #2 priority for 2018.
- Other key priorities include improving voice of the customer strategy, mapping customer journeys and elevating the agent experience.
- Businesses believe tools and training play crucial roles in driving the agent experience. Coaching is the #1 agent experience focus for 2018; efforts to improve various systems are also high on the list.
- Improving compensation and the workplace community are comparatively less popular agent experience priorities.
- The “digital transformation” is rooted in customer centricity. Reducing customer effort, gaining customer insights and honoring channel preference are the most popular reasons for embracing self-service and low-touch channels.
- Coaching, training and quality monitoring are the most urgent workforce empowerment investment priorities.
- Customer satisfaction and loyalty measurement tools, customer experience management solutions and social media monitoring are the most urgent customer relationship investment priorities.
- Voice, email and live chat are the most urgent channel-oriented investment priorities.

TOP GOALS FOR 2018



When it comes to customer contact strategy, there is no *universal priority* for 2018. There is, in fact, no singular objective that even ranks as a top priority for the majority of businesses.

There are, however, certain focuses that are more widespread than others.

Reducing customer friction ranks as the most common focus. A healthy 39% of organizations will prioritize effort reduction in 2018.

A focus for 37% of businesses, customer experience automation in an engagement context ranks as 2018's #2 customer contact priority.

Other comparatively high-ranking focuses include improving voice of the customer strategy (#3, 34%), improving customer journey mapping (#4t, 33%) and improving the agent experience (#4t, 33%).

In recent years, thought leaders have begun to advocate vociferously for the “frictionless experience.”

In declaring reducing customer friction the #1 priority for 2018, businesses are clearly on board with that notion. They, above all, want to make the experience *easier* for customers.

The desire to reduce customer friction also explains the emphasis on customer experience automation. By optimizing the self-service experience, automated technology empowers customers to more readily – and more quickly – solve transactional issues. Customers will neither have to wait for support from a live agent nor endure the difficulty of navigating unintuitive, unintelligent self-service platforms. They can connect, quickly receive the information or resolution they desire, and move on with their lives.

Elevating the customer experience hinges on developing a firm understanding of the customer base. That reality explains why a comparatively substantial percentage of businesses aim to improve their voice of the customer strategies in 2018.

These organizations want to ensure that the customer experiences they are designing (and the associated investments they are making) are aligned with what their audiences are actually demanding.

Two phenomena explain the comparatively significant emphasis on customer journey mapping.

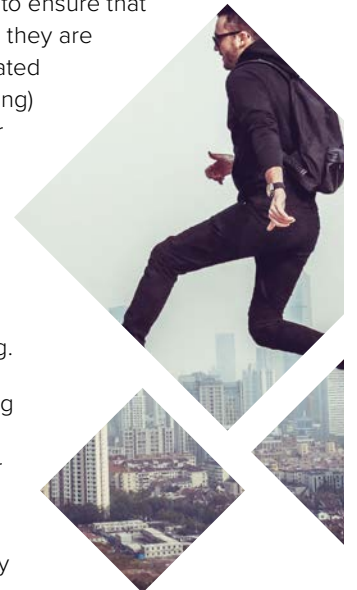
One concerns the ongoing shift from a *transactional* approach to the customer experience to a relationship-driven one. As businesses increasingly recognize the customer experience as a “journey,” they will naturally want to understand what that journey entails for customers.

Customer journey mapping also ties into the goal of reducing friction. Journey mapping helps an organization understand when, where and why customers endure “pain points.” By identifying, analyzing and remedying these pain points, businesses can create an easier, more valuable experience for their customers.

Happy agents yield happy customers, so says the cliché. By improving the agent experience, businesses will cultivate these happy agents who, in turn, yield satisfied and loyal customers.

Not simply about fleeting happiness, efforts to improve the agent experience are also connected to increased productivity and increased longevity. When their day-to-day experiences are better, agents perform better. They are also more likely to stick around for the long haul.

These more productive, more committed employees will deliver the optimal experience for customers.



Comparatively unpopular focuses include increasing interfacing from the C-level (11%), increasing “poignant personalization” (13%), growing the contact center (14%), adding channels (16%) and improving data security (16%).

The notion of “securing executive buy-in” has long been a talking point for customer contact professionals, but it has obviously fallen off the radar for many businesses.

There are three potential explanations.

Some contact center functions may feel as if they have already won the desired degree of support from the executive rank. The customer experience does, after all, rank as a universal *business* focus. Given that reality, it is reasonable to conclude that executive teams increasingly see the contact center as a “value center” rather than “cost center.”

Other customer contact teams may possess a contrasting perspective. They may feel as if they will *never* achieve complete support from the C-level. Having come to terms with the glass half-empty reality, they have no interest in making “buy-in” a focus for 2018.

Another group of customer contact teams may instead be opting for a “walk the walk” perspective. Instead of actively courting the C-level, they are simply hoping to earn executive buy-in through strong performance.

As simple, frictionless experiences become the gold standard, “poignant personalization” is fading from the limelight. Few companies are actively looking to engage customers in deep, intimate conversations.

Businesses, it is important to note, are specifically lukewarm on poignant personalization. They are not downplaying the overarching notion of personalization.

Productive personalization – using customer data to create lower-effort, more effective engagement – is a comparatively high-ranking priority (#6, 31%).

Personalization, these businesses are arguing, should not necessarily be done for “personalization’s sake.” It is not an end-goal.

It, instead, is a strategy for optimizing the customer experience.

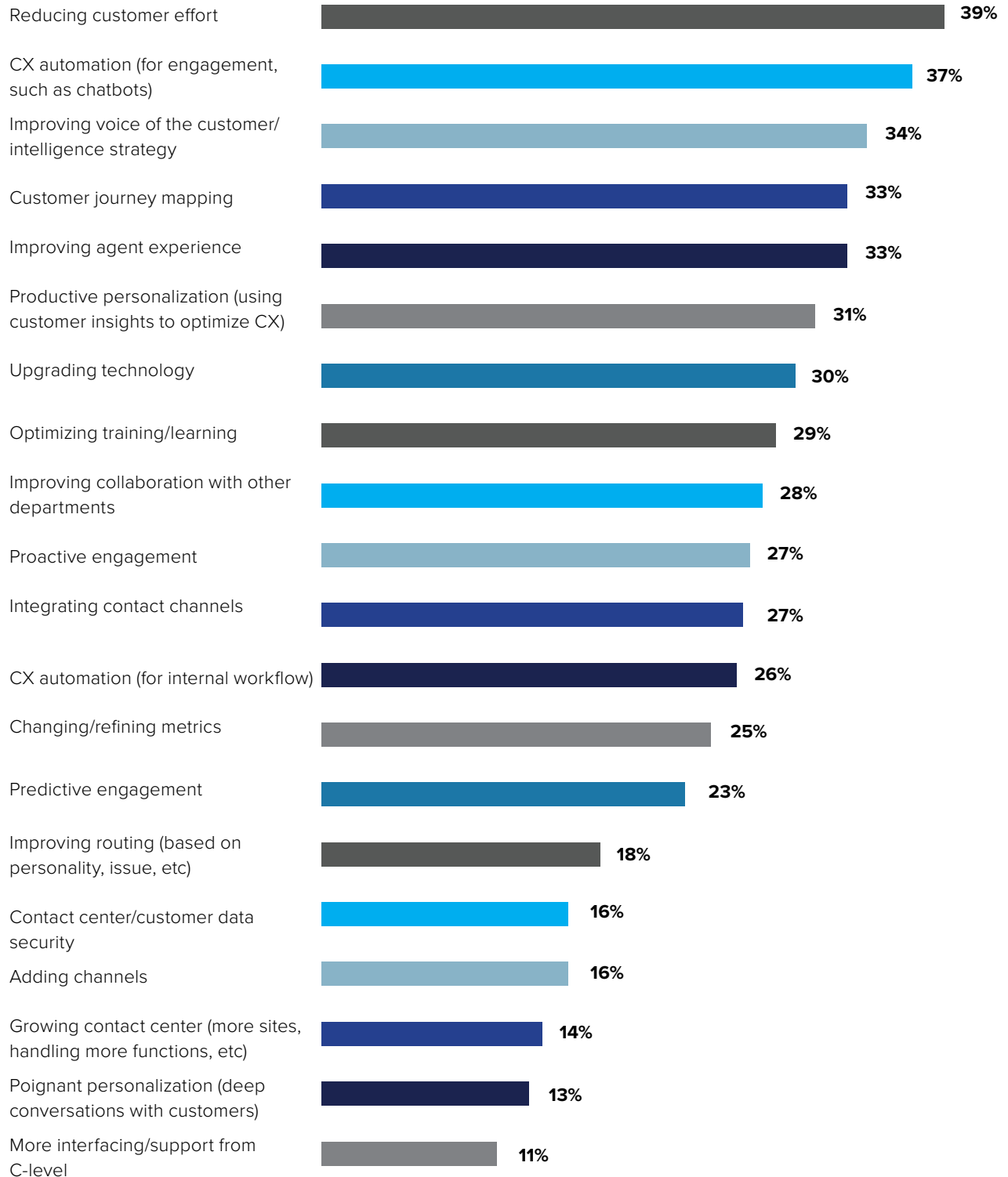
The comparatively light support for growing the contact center and adding channels reveals that businesses are more interested transforming the *engagement experience* than the mechanisms that deliver that experience. What the business does while engaging with customers matters far more than whether the engagement occurs in a new channel or is handled by an expanded contact center.

Cybersecurity stories often make headlines; a massive data breach affecting consumer credit agency Equifax garnered considerable attention in mid-2017. Increasing customer data security is not, however, a widespread customer contact priority for 2018.

Most organizations, it would appear, are already confident in their security initiatives.



WHICH OF THESE COUNT AS PRIORITIES FOR 2018?



SPOTLIGHT: THE AGENT EXPERIENCE

Agents are, in many ways, the heart of the customer contact operation.

They are the ones directly interfacing with customers, and their happiness is directly correlated with customer happiness.

They are the ones ultimately executing the business' customer experience strategy, and their performance markedly impacts the health of the operation.

Agents, quite simply, are the gateway to a productive, customer-centric experience.

Mindful of that importance, businesses view "improving the agent experience" as one of the top customer contact priorities for 2018.

But what exactly does that mean?

Goals like "utilizing CX automation technology" and "improving voice of the customer strategy" may not be easy to *achieve*, but they are simple to understand.

"Improving the agent experience," on the other hand, is a broader, more nebulous initiative.

There are different ways to define the "agent experience," and there are different factors that contribute to each of those definitions.

In order to understand how customer contact functions are preparing for 2018, it is important to establish this context. It is important to gain a more granular sense of how businesses perceive – and plan to improve – the agent experience.

Empowerment is the Key to the Agent Experience

A great learning program cultivates talented, engaged agents. Does it also yield a great agent experience?

Many organizations answer in the affirmative.

A priority for 48% of businesses, improving training and coaching is the #1 agent experience strategy for 2018.

Improving the quality of the knowledgebase, which is top-of-mind for 45% of organizations, represents the #2 agent experience initiative.

Other comparatively high-ranking initiatives include making systems easier to use (42%), making metrics clearer and more transparent (41%) and integrating channels (40%).

Collectively, the top five agent priorities confirm a clear reality: businesses believe empowerment is the key to a great agent experience.

The priorities each help agents better perform their jobs. They provide them with the knowledge, skills, insight and tools needed to best represent their organizations and best represent customers.

Training and coaching provide agents with the skills needed to best engage with customers. They also confirm the organization's commitment to *supporting* its agents now – and in the future.

Businesses believe agents who are confident in their abilities (and in the support they will receive when their abilities fall short) are more satisfied.

Agents, no matter how thoroughly trained and prepared, are not encyclopedias. They will need to consult the knowledgebase to support certain customers.

Navigating the knowledgebase is a fundamental part of the agent's day-to-day role. By creating a more intuitive, efficient, effective knowledge process, organizations believe they can markedly impact the overall agent experience.

Complicated knowledge bases are not the only "pain points" facing contact center agents. All systems – from CRM systems, to case management tools, to queue solutions – can create undue hassle for agents. They can substantially slow agents down, resulting in high levels of frustration and lower levels of performance.

By simplifying those systems, organizations eliminate a major hassle from agents' jobs. They make it *easier* for agents to perform *better*. Confident that both factors matter to agents, organizations naturally believe simplifying systems will yield a better agent experience.

Performance is a fundamental – if not the most fundamental – part of the work experience. Unclear, unintuitive, unjustified metrics hinder that part of the experience. Businesses believe that when agents do not know how they are performing or why they are expected to perform a certain way, their experience suffers.

To mitigate this concern, many organizations are focused on optimizing their metrics. They want to offer agents a clear, real-time window into their strengths, weaknesses and contribution to the organization.

With this window, agents will have motivation to increase performance, the ability to self-diagnose development needs and full respect for the process by which they are measured, judged, promoted and compensated.

Organizations believe these tenets reflect a great agent experience.

Disparate channels represent a major problem for customers *and* agents. Customers hate having to repeat themselves as they move between channels, and agents hate struggling to gather relevant information as they engage with new customers.

By improving channel integration, businesses eliminate these sources of frustration. Agents will have the data they need to perform, and the customers with whom they connect will be in a happier, more friendly emotional state.

Comparatively unimportant agent experience concerns include improving the workspace environment (7%), increasing bonuses and perks (9%), increasing salaries (9%), improving the workplace community (11%), and improving the desktop experience (21%).

A comparison between the low-ranking priorities and high-ranking priorities reveals a clear theme: organizations believe *what* agents do (and how they do it) matters more to the experience than the environment in which they work.

Atmospheric solutions – new furniture, upgraded hardware, bright light – are very much sold as agent experience drivers, but it is clear businesses disagree. They believe agents are more likely to appreciate a streamlined *job* experience than a welcoming work *environment*.

“Culture” is a popular point of discussion among customer contact center thought leaders. Citing the “happy agents = happy customers” adage, these leaders stress the connection between a fun, community-oriented environment and customer satisfaction.

Businesses, on the whole, are unconvinced. Organizations do not necessarily believe agents are looking for parties and excitement. They are far more confident in the value of tools and training – factors that directly *empower* performance.

There may be some eye-rolling at the comparative disinterest in increasing salaries and bonuses. *Of course* contact center leaders oppose these options; they are not realistically going to increase salaries.

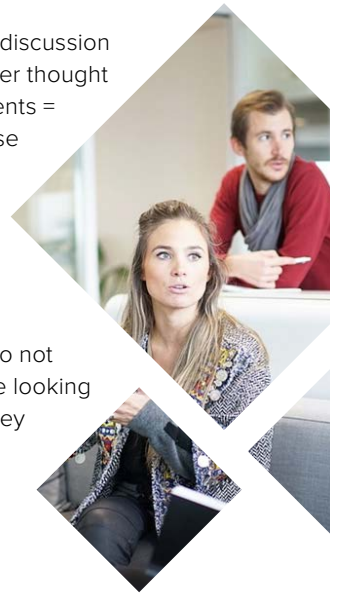
There is, however, some objective merit to this opposition. Compensation is obviously important to agents, but it is unrelated to the actual work experience.

It may impact how much agents are willing to endure on the job, but it does not directly affect the job itself.

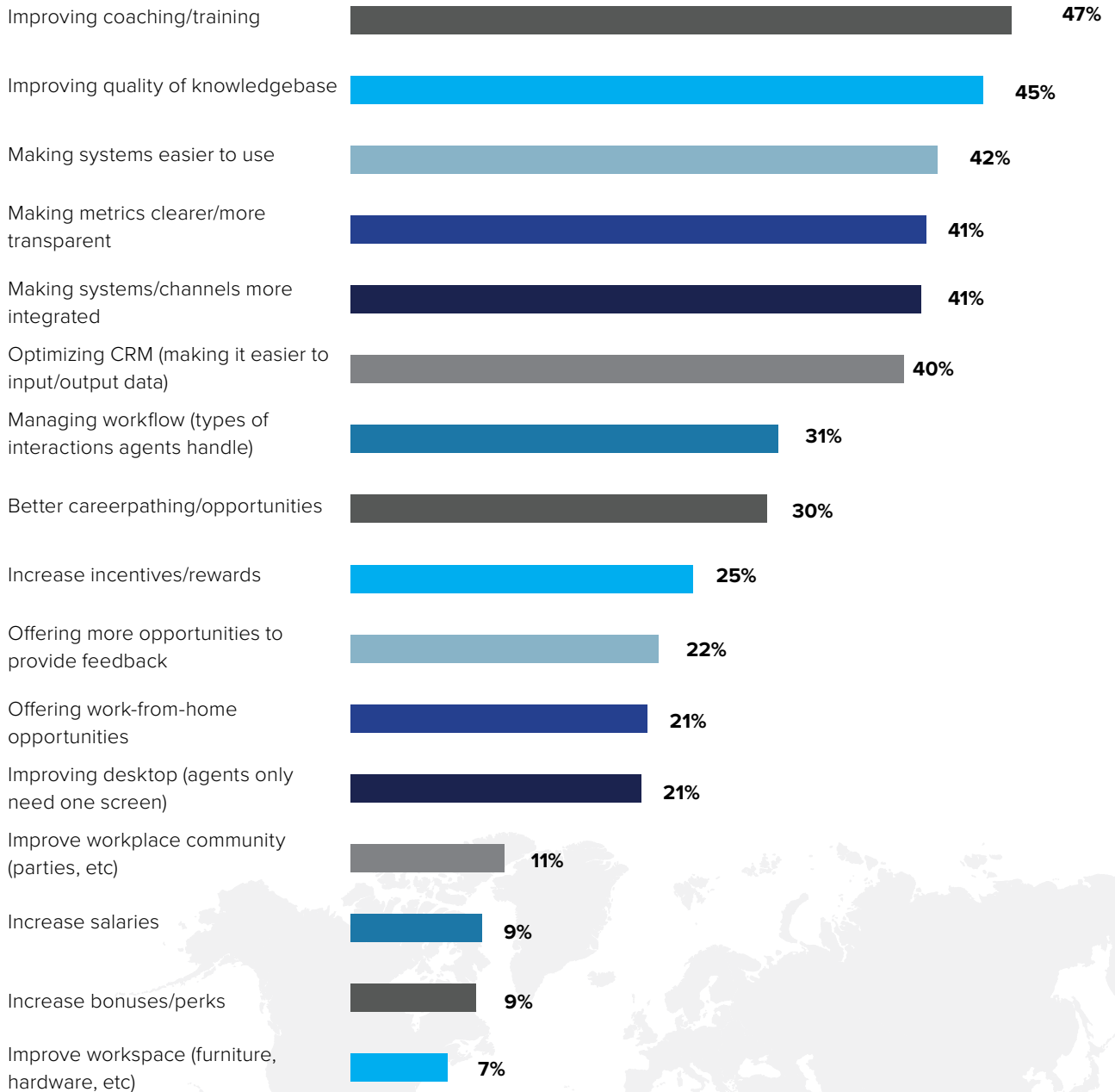
Comparatively disinterest in improving desktops may seem unintuitive. Some of the top-ranking priorities, after all, concern optimizing systems.

The likely explanation is that complaints about convoluted desktops are minimal in comparison to issues with knowledge bases or CRM solutions.

Businesses clearly believe better systems yield better agent experiences, but desktops may not be the systems they choose to address first.



WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING ARE PRIORITIES FOR IMPROVING YOUR “AGENT EXPERIENCE”?



DRIVING THE DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

The “digital transformation” has been a centerpiece of customer contact strategy over the past decade, and it will continue into 2018. Businesses will continue expanding their web, social and mobile engagement offerings. They will also leverage technology like chatbots to revolutionize the customer experience.

The “Jones Effect” surely deserves some credit for this “digital transformation.” Upon encountering hype from thought leaders, industry vendors and their own competitors, they naturally considered making their own investments into digital engagement options.

By the same token, the customer contact function notoriously faces budgetary scrutiny. Few contact center options are given leeway to invest just for the sake of investing. Their interest in the digital transformation clearly has *tangible* motivation.

What factors produce that tangible motivation?

The answer(s) to that question will determine the specific initiatives organizations undertake with regard to digital transformation.

Those initiatives will consequently determine the extent to which digital becomes a viable – if not preferable – engagement opportunity for customers.

Digital Transformation: A Victory For Customer Centricity

When organizations consider digital engagement options, they are thinking most prominently about the customer experience.

With a score of 4.22 on a score of 0-5 (0 = unimportant, 5 = extremely important), “reducing customer effort for informational/transactional matters” is the biggest focus for digital investments.

Gaining customer insights from digital touchpoints ranks as the #2 focus. Organizations score its importance at 3.94/5.

Other rankings include 3.78/5 for honoring customer channel preference, 3.77/5 for reducing cost per interaction, 3.63/5 better qualifying customers

before they reach a live agent, 3.47/5 for improving agent productivity and 3.18/5 for reducing live agent call volume.

The aforementioned hierarchy confirms that businesses are putting the customer first. The strategy should help them avoid the pitfall that earned the IVR its bad reputation.

The IVR is not an inherently problematic tool; it actually offers tremendous potential value for customers. The problem is that organizations approached it from the wrong perspective. Instead of designing and implementing IVR solutions with customers in mind, businesses focused solely on the operational, cost-oriented benefits. They looked at the IVR as a plug-and-play option for deflecting (or at least stalling) customers who wanted to reach live agents.

They, unfortunately, did not focus on the user experience. The IVR thus became a source of strife – rather than a source of value for customers. Worse, since customers were not getting what they needed out of the IVR, they still needed help from live agents. Businesses, therefore, did not even achieve the cost and call volume benefits they so desperately wanted.

By identifying reducing customer effort, gaining customer insights and honoring customer channel preference as their key goals, organizations reveal that they are using digital technology to create value for customers. They want to create better, easier, more tailored experiences for customers.

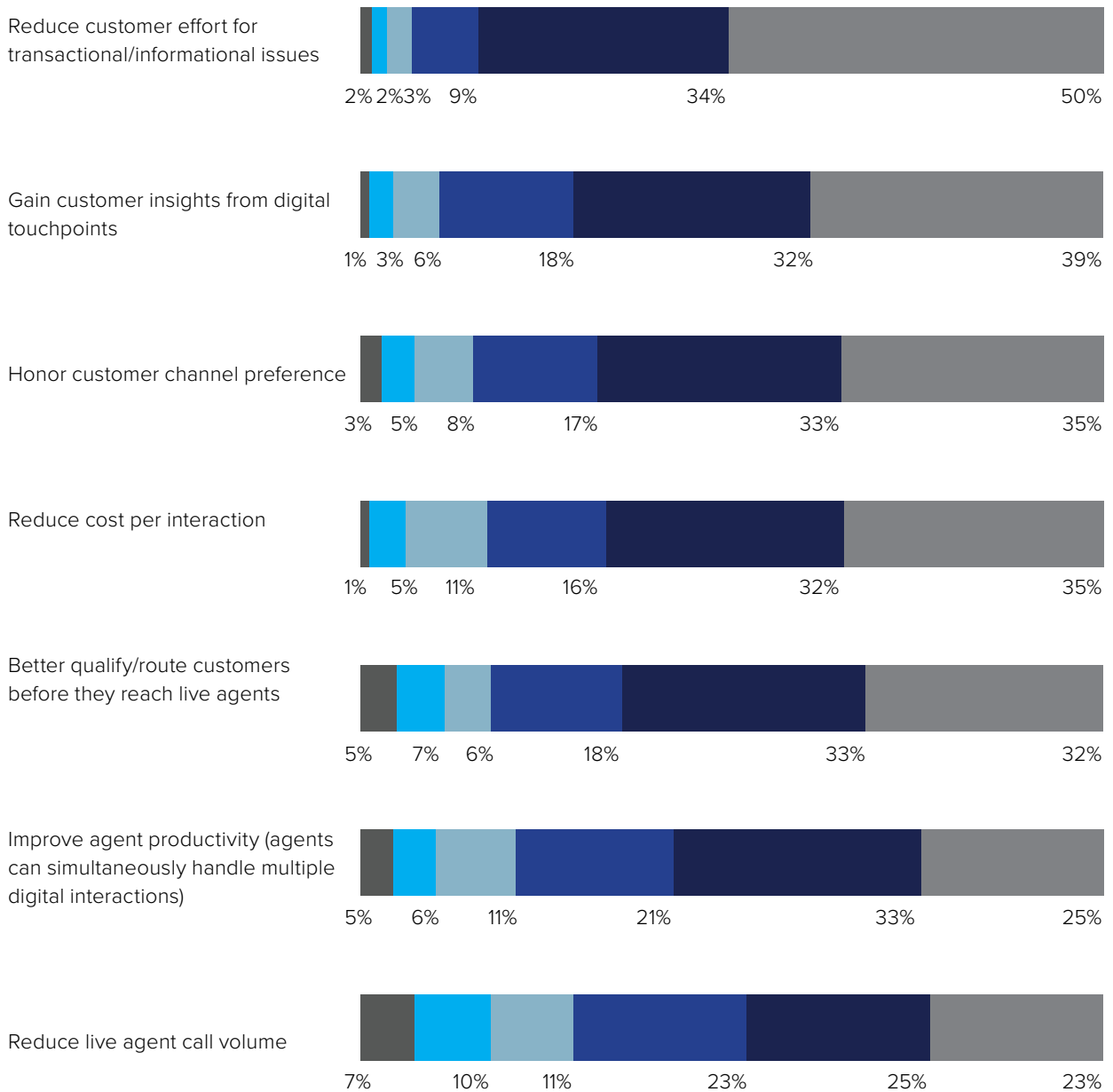
In doing so, they will create self-service, low-touch options that actually work. This, in turn, will allow them to experience the operational benefits.

“Improving agent productivity” and “reducing live agent call volume” may have low ratings, but it is utterly absurd to think businesses do not care about these outcomes.

They do care, but they know that the best way to actually achieve these ends is to focus most prominently on the needs of their customers.

WHEN CONSIDERING DIGITAL/LOW-TOUCH CHANNELS (SELF-SERVICE, BOTS, SOCIAL, ETC), HOW IMPORTANT ARE THE FOLLOWING:

(0 = not at all, 5 = extremely)



INVESTMENT PRIORITIES: MONEY TALKS

An investigation into customer contact priorities for 2018 must consider investment plans.

Rhetoric reflects philosophy, but financial investments confirm reality. They reveal whether a business is *truly* serious about particular outcomes.

Not simply a barometer for measuring commitment, investment plans impact success. The specific initiatives an organization supports – and the extent to which it supports them – determine whether the organization will actually achieve its objectives.

Investment plans, moreover, account for the “unavoidable inevitabilities” of customer contact management.

Goals, ideas and objectives are primarily aspirational. They reflect what the business wants to implement and achieve.

Investment plans, however, account for the fundamental tasks an organization *must* achieve. These tasks may not be exciting or inspirational, but they are utterly essential to the present operation. As a result, they will continue to command time, energy and resources – often at the expense of more innovative, ambitious endeavors.

Ultimately, investment plans reveal which “executive priorities” can be perceived as promises and which should be dismissed as pure talk.

Workforce Empowerment Investments

Organizations believe the best way to improve the agent experience is to help employees better perform their jobs.

Insofar as agent experience is a key strategic focus for organizations, workforce empowerment initiatives naturally represent top investment priorities.

In 2018, coaching will be the biggest workforce empowerment focus. A whopping 61% of organizations view coaching as an investment priority for 2018.

Training, the #2 priority, is a 2018 investment priority for 57% of businesses. Other leading investment areas include quality monitoring and management (54%), dashboards (53%) and scheduling and forecasting (50%).

The aforementioned priorities fall into two buckets: solutions that improve agent performance, and solutions that help monitor, measure and communicate that performance.

Coaching and training collectively yield better agents. The former helps the organization accentuate the strengths and overcome the weaknesses of individual agents, while the latter provides agents with requisite knowledge of systems, products and processes.

Quality monitoring helps the organization assess the consistency, reliability and accuracy of experiences. In doing so, it can identify specific agents that are struggling, as well as specific systems, processes or issues that are causing agents to underperform. Leveraging this information, the business can remedy the associated pain points, boost agent engagement, and increase customer satisfaction.

Dashboards provide organizations with the *insight* needed to perform. They provide agents with visibility into the overall customer journey, thus helping them understand the key needs and opportunities.

They also help an agent better understand – and self-diagnose – issues with performance. Agents can be more productive and targeted in changing their own habits or seeking guidance from trainers, supervisors and peers.

Transparency is a pivotal agent experience focus; dashboards help transform it from valuable concept to beneficial reality.

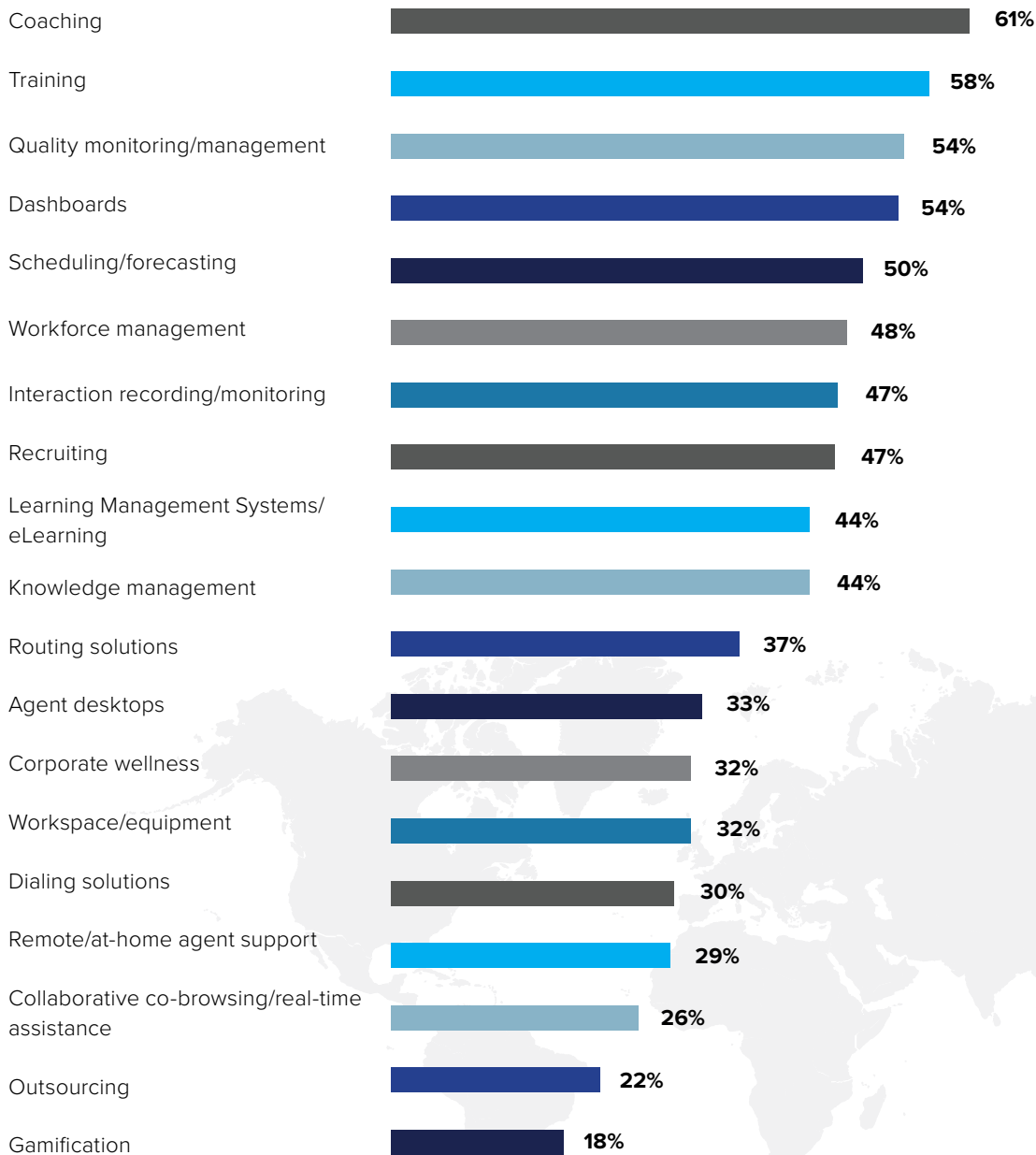
Scheduling and forecasting may not be the “sexiest” contact center topics, but they continue to play a pivotal role in optimizing workflow. Factors like “wait time” continue to frustrate customers on the front end, and unplanned agent “down time” bothers

stakeholders on the backend. Elevated scheduling strategies and solutions minimize these problematic phenomena.

Scheduling and forecasting, moreover, have renewed importance amid changes in the contact center dynamic.

Thanks to the omnichannel revolution, organizations will need to plan for volume in non-voice channels. Thanks to the rise of concepts like “flexible scheduling” and “work from home,” staffing has become increasingly complex.

WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING WORKFORCE EMPOWERMENT CATEGORIES WILL BE INVESTMENT PRIORITIES THIS YEAR?



Customer Intelligence/Relationship Investments

Increasing voice of the customer strategy represents the #3 contact center priority for the coming year.

Customer intelligence plans thus carry considerable importance as 2018 arrives.

In their effort to better understand customers, organizations are most notably focused on *measurement*.

Solutions that measure customer satisfaction and loyalty are investment priorities for 65% of businesses.

It may be an old tool, but the customer feedback survey remains a centerpiece of voice of the customer strategy. The feedback survey is the #2 customer intelligence investment focus for 2018; 63% of businesses call it a priority.

Other key priorities include customer experience management tools (55%), customer service management tools (50%) and social media monitoring (50%).

The customer contact function exists in a business world governed by numbers. The emphasis on measurement tools is therefore rather predictable. Businesses require tangible insight into how their strategies are impacting customer sentiment, as well as how that sentiment is impacting core business metrics.

Thought leaders often tout the importance of understanding the *why* in addition to the *what*. Surveys persist as a priority because they offer that capability. They empower a business to understand the emotional and psychological factors that impact metrics and customer behavior.

Surveys can help a business understand whether a repeat customer is *loyal* or merely complacent. They can also help a business understand the true reason for a particular customer request, which in turn enables the business to deliver the optimal response.

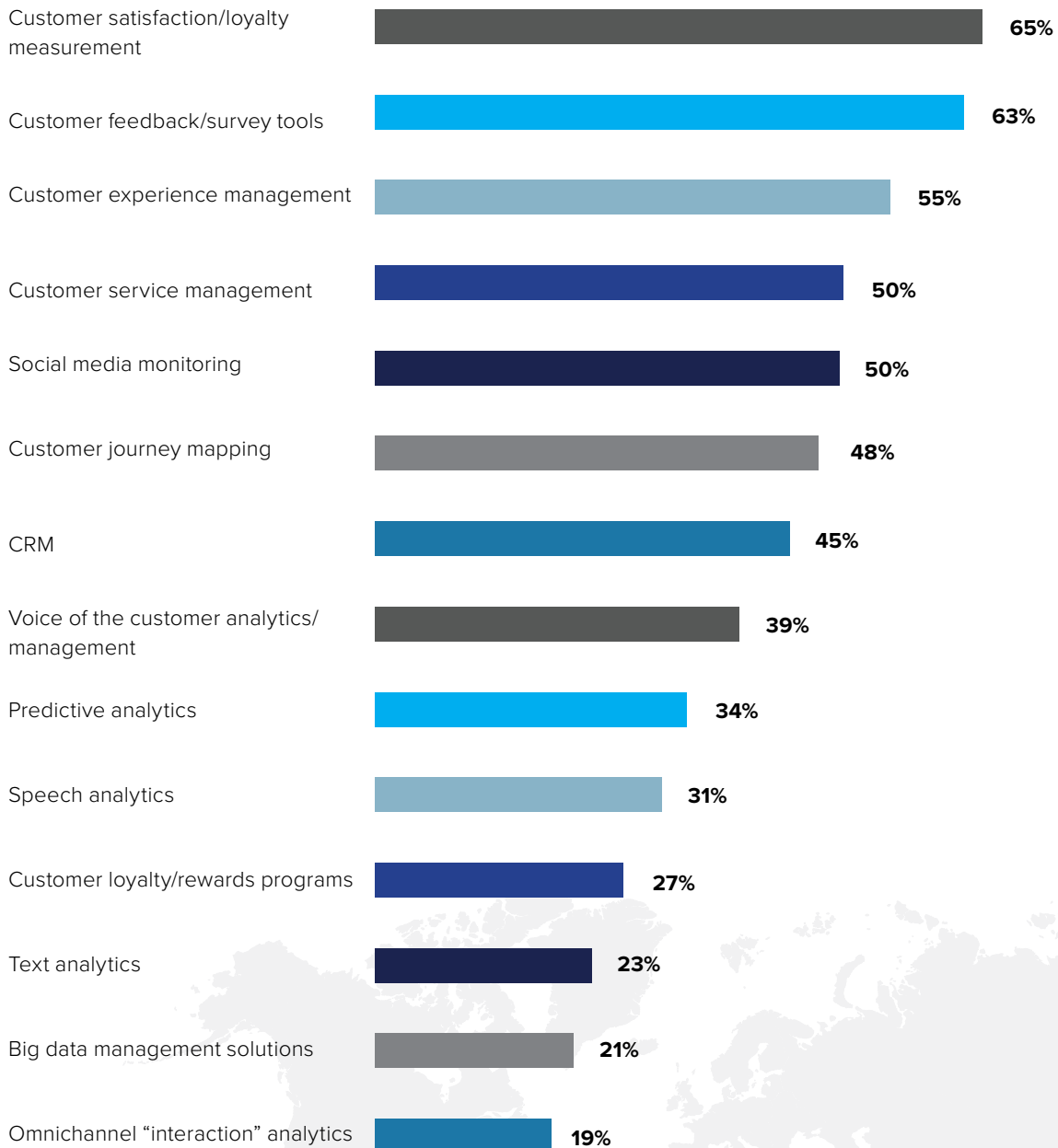
Standalone speech and text analytics tools represent low-ranking priorities, but businesses are *very* committed to focusing on analytics. They are simply devoting their attention to customer experience and customer service management tools.

These tools offer analytics capabilities alongside other valuable features.

In planning investment around these suites, organizations are confirming that there are no silver bullets for customer intelligence. Customer intelligence is about considering every possible source of insights about behavior, sentiment and demands.

“Indirect social commentary” is one such source of intelligence. Organizations, fittingly, are planning to shine the spotlight on social monitoring solutions.

WILL THE FOLLOWING CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIP/INTELLIGENCE CATEGORIES BE INVESTMENT PRIORITIES THIS YEAR?



Omnichannel Investments

The customer contact center may be witnessing the so-called “digital transformation,” but the voice channel is definitely not dead.

Voice, in fact, represents the #1 channel investment focus for 2018. Over 62% of businesses view live agent telephony as a priority for 2018.

Email, another “traditional” channel, will also command a significant amount of attention. It represents an investment priority for a healthy 54% of businesses.

Other comparatively high-ranking channel investments include live chat (48%), social media engagement (45%) and SMS-based mobile engagement (37%).

The prelude to this section identifies the existence of “unavoidable inevitabilities” in the customer contact space.

Voice may, at least in some organizations, epitomize that concept.

In identifying voice as their top channel focus, businesses are not *necessarily* confirming enthusiasm for phone communication. They may simply be acknowledging the reality of customer engagement: voice is still the *default* channel in many cases.

As long as it represents the standard, businesses have no choice but to continue investing into the category. Voice engagement is the customer experience for many customers; businesses must ensure it is a good one.

The same logic applies to email. It may not generate much excitement from innovators or thought leaders, but as long as it remains a communication staple, it will continue to elicit considerable investment.

Granted, it is important not to be *too* cynical and dismissive of these “traditional” channels. While some organizations are surely investing in voice and email out of obligation, others may believe wholeheartedly in these channels moving forward.

New technology may be robust, but it cannot completely replicate all facets of voice and email communication (particularly the former). If organizations believe those facets are important to their brands and to their customers, they will keep investing in “traditional” channels, support from “thought leaders” or not.

Ongoing support for voice and email is not, however, preventing organizations from investing in newer engagement channels. Live chat may be the best bridge between digital-text and “voice” communication, while mobile and social solutions bring the service experience into media customers prefer in their everyday lives.

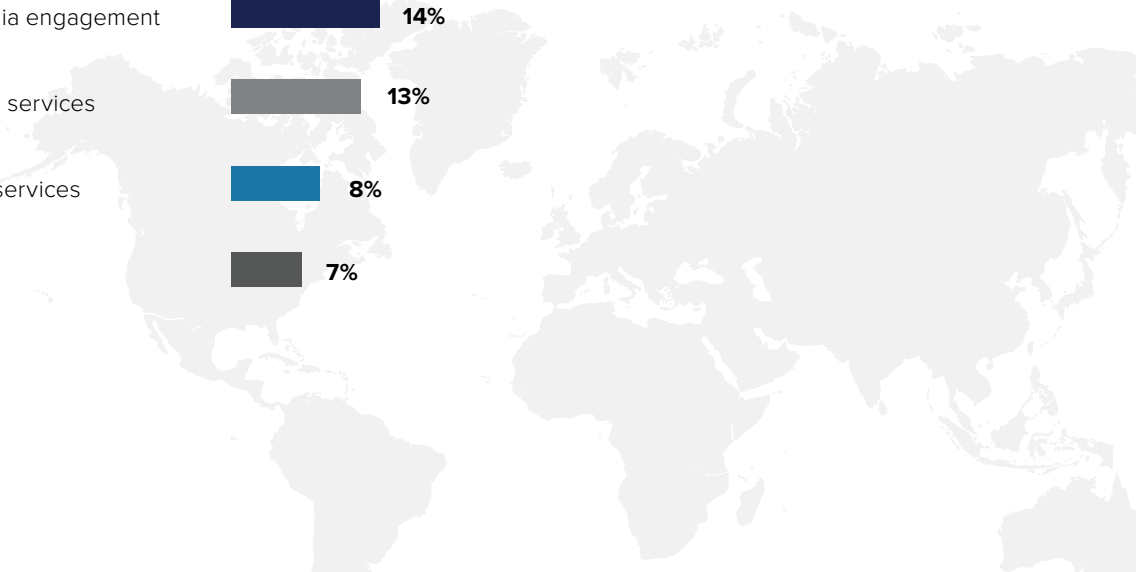
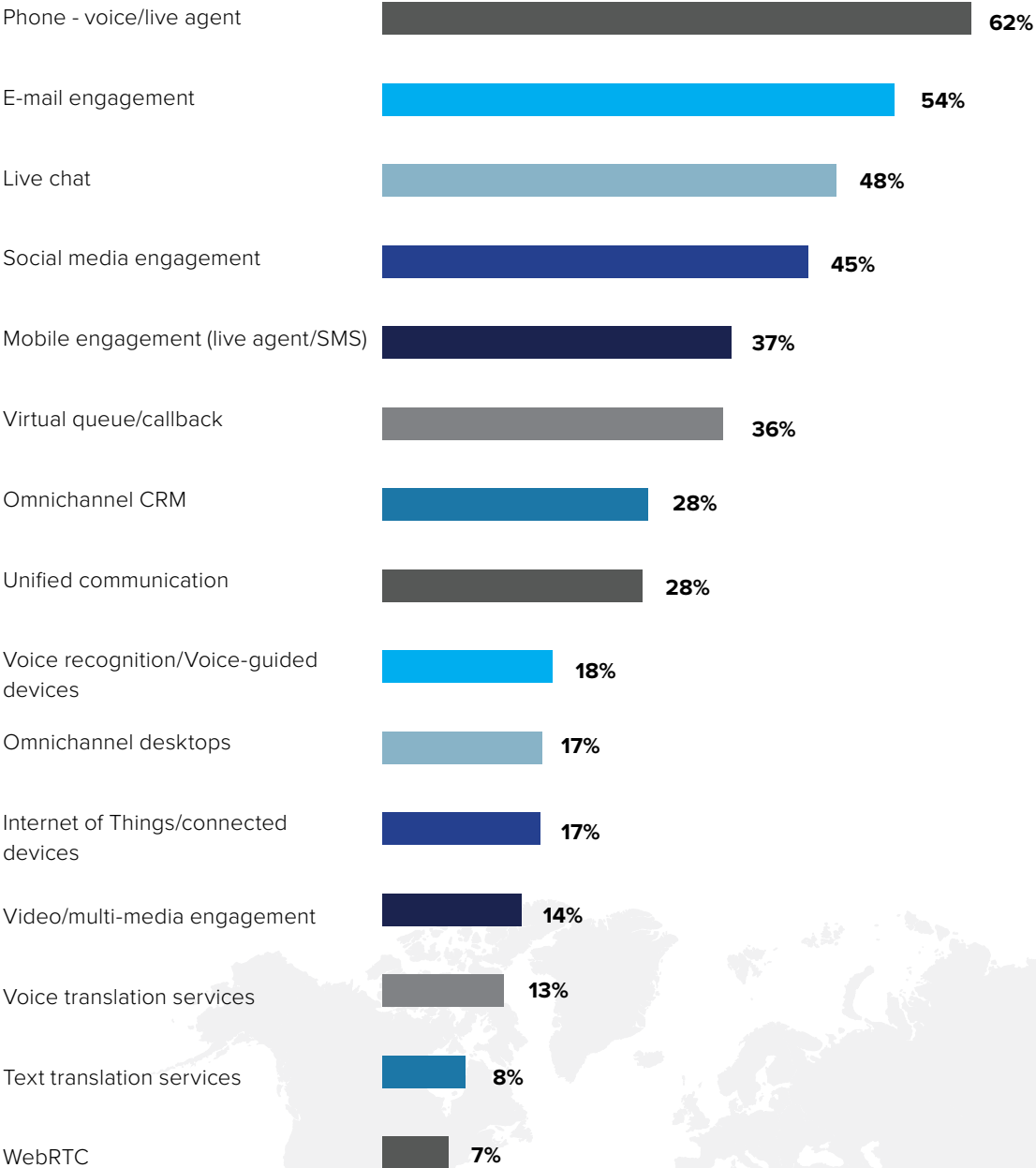
With 5 distinct channels representing widespread investment priorities, the real takeaway is that businesses know they cannot be narrow. They must strive to deliver robust engagement experiences in all key channels.

By doing so, they guarantee their ability to create a seamless, effective experience wherever their customers choose to connect.

They guarantee their ability to deliver an omnichannel experience.



WILL THE FOLLOWING OMNICHANNEL CATEGORIES BE INVESTMENT PRIORITIES THIS YEAR?



THE GOLD STANDARD OF CUSTOMER CENTRICITY

Those in the basketball community have long aspired to “Be Like Mike.”

Which brand represents the gold standard in the customer contact space?

Brands like Amazon, Zappos, Nordstrom, Disney and Apple may initially come to mind. These organizations have garnered reputations for being iconic, customer-centric brands. Their strategies and initiatives routinely serve as course material for customer experience workshops.

It is fair to say that the typical customer contact leader *admires* some or all of these brands. Admiring a brand does not, however, mean one necessarily wants to emulate that brand.

Basketball is a straightforward game, and there are clear guidelines for distinguishing winners from losers and great players from bad ones. Fans and players can confidently say they want to “Be Like Mike” because he is statistically one of the best players to ever play that particular game.

Brands are not, however, all playing the same game. They offer different products. They interact with different customers who have different expectations. They possess different operational missions and adhere to different visions of success.

It is consequently impossible to identify a *singular* brand all organizations should aim to emulate.

All organizations may, however, see value in emulating specific *qualities* of the world’s foremost customer service brands.

Specifically, they may want to demonstrate the same commitment to customer centricity.

As organizations establish their customer contact priorities for 2018 and beyond, it makes sense to establish a gold standard of success.

That gold standard is not, however, represented by a specific brand. It is instead represented by the qualities that best reflect customer centricity – regardless of industry.

Qualities of a Customer-Centric Brand

The brands that warrant the most admiration possess many qualities worthy of emulation.

A commitment to personalization is the most important of those qualities.

Sixty-six percent of organizations believe personalized experiences define customer-centric brands.

Personalization should not, however, come at the expense of simplicity. A healthy 62% of organizations associate frictionless experiences with customer-centric brands, making it the #2 quality.

Other comparatively high-ranking qualities include memorable experiences (50%), creative customer engagement options (41%) and the use of technology in the customer experience (39%).

In touting the importance of personalization, organizations confirm that being customer-centric is markedly different from being customer-friendly.

Customer-friendly organizations think about creating great experiences for customers. They believe engagement should represent a source of value rather than pain. They believe it should lead to delight rather than frustration.

Customer-centric organizations, however, focus on tailoring experiences to their *specific* customers. They are not simply looking to deliver a generally great experience; they want to deliver the *right* experience for each given customer at each given moment.

When a customer wants to be wowed, these organizations work to wow. When a customer wants to receive a quick resolution, these organizations work to streamline the support process.

Customer-centric organizations wholeheartedly embrace the notion that customers are individual people rather than numbers.

Thought leaders often position “frictionless” and “memorable” experiences as distinct concepts. Organizations can either strive for a “get in, get out” model or a “get in, be dazzled, leave after a while” approach.

In identifying *both* as cornerstones of customer-centric brands, businesses reject that notion. They believe the concepts can work in synergy.

For starters, low-effort experiences may wow customers by the simple virtue of being frictionless.

Customers are used to encountering hardships and challenges in pursuit of resolutions; brands that eliminate those pain points may win legitimate enthusiasm and passion from customers.

“Unforgettable,” moreover, is by no means a synonym for “complicated” or “lengthy.” A frictionless experience that begins with a special greeting or ends with a special “reward” may be very memorable for customers.

Nordstrom’s decision to refund a customer for tires purchased elsewhere is certainly “unforgettable.” Morton’s Steakhouse delivering a Porterhouse to an airline passenger is certainly “unforgettable.”

An organization does not have to mirror those precise gestures. It can deliver memorable experiences on a smaller, more practical scale. It can deliver memorable experiences without requiring much effort from customers.

Customer-centric brands, most importantly, pay attention to context. They strive for personalization, after all. They recognize that some situations are best served by simple, frictionless experiences. Others may require a more elaborate, in-depth approach.

If a business is truly thinking about what is best for its individual customers, it will need to master the delivery of frictionless *and* unforgettable engagement.

Many businesses believe it takes more than cognizance of customers to earn the “customer-centric” label. The organization must also demonstrate

creativity and innovation.

“Customer-centric” is a term of high praise, and businesses have no desire to use it loosely. They are not impressed by organizations that competently engage customers in traditional channels; they want to see Mayday buttons, chabots and proactive messaging services. They want to see a business that leverages technology not simply to handle back-office tasks but to make life more valuable for customers on the front end.

They do not, however, care about all forms of experiential “enhancements.” They also care more notably about how a business *performs* than how it works to communicate its performance.

Businesses do not believe special perks (14%), strong social media presences (19%), high-quality/unique product offerings (27%) or customer loyalty campaigns (29%) are essential for the “customer-centric” label.

These practices may have value – it is hard to imagine customer contact professionals *penalizing* a brand for showering customers with perks – but they are ultimately perceived as bonuses rather than foundational tenets.

“Perks” can be cherries on the top of a great customer experience, but they do not independently define a great experience. Throwing in free fries with a sandwich cannot compensate for a brand that subjects customers to an arduous ordering process.

A social media presence helps to give a brand personality, but it is not directly related to the actual engagement experience. Customers will not celebrate a brand’s funny Tweets if their deliveries show up three days late.

The comparatively light emphasis on product quality reflects the extent to which service defines great brands. Many organizations can manufacture great products. Far fewer build a great experience around those products.

Loyalty campaigns are similar to “perks.” They enhance – but do not define – a customer-centric experience.

WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING QUALITIES DEFINE A “CUSTOMER-CENTRIC BRAND”?





NO SHORTCUTS TO A GREAT CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE

Through their ideals, priorities and investment plans, organizations confirm acceptance of a clear reality: there are no shortcuts to a great customer experience. There are no singular ideas or “quick fixes” that can achieve immensely more productive operations and considerably more satisfied customers.

There is no “binary” definition of a great experience. The value of an experience hinges on the customer, the context of their issue and their position in the overall journey.

Given this variance, a brand cannot afford to focus *only* on frictionless experiences or only on digital engagement. It needs to ensure it can deliver whatever experience makes sense – wherever it makes sense.

The “agent experience” may seem like a cultural concept, but it is rooted firmly in the health of the overall operation. If the business does not provide its agents with the tools and training to do their jobs easily and successfully, parties, new furniture and bright coats of paint will be meaningless.

Earning a label of customer centricity – an ambition for most, if not all, customer-facing brands – requires attention to *numerous* factors. It requires a savvy balance of creativity and consistency, all of which are predicated on being able to adapt to specific needs and specific times.

Adaptation is the product of preparation, and preparation is the product of covering all bases.

It makes sense, therefore, to refrain from celebrating “micro trends” for 2018. The year will not be defined by chatbots, automating the learning process or worshipping the “frictionless experience.”

It will be about recognizing that a great customer experience is the sum of many parts. It will be pursuing all initiatives that yield a better understanding of what customers want, a group of agents capable of meeting those demands and systems and processes that allow those agents to actually perform.



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