

Improving The Agent Experience Moves The Needle On Customer Satisfaction

Introduction

Today, the gap between customers' expectations and the service they receive is huge. Customers are increasingly knowledgeable about the products they use and demand value-added, personalized service in real time.

Businesses know that good service is important — 90% of customer service decision-makers tell Forrester that delivering good service is critical to their company's success; 63% think its importance has risen.¹ Yet businesses today are battling ongoing economic pressures of a prolonged global recession. Most companies are solely focused on cost-control measures and struggle to offer a service experience that differentiates their brand in a world of commoditized products and services.

Businesses must be pragmatic about engaging in initiatives that will deliver service in-line with customer expectations, yet at a cost that makes sense to the business. One successful way to help move the needle on an improved customer service experience, yet in a way that is cognizant of business cost parameters, is by focusing on the customer service agent experience (agent experience). This is because a good agent experience yields many advantages to a customer service organization. It allows the organization to increase its overall productivity, deliver service in a consistent manner across supported communication channels, and to minimize agent training time and to reduce agent turnover. Businesses that fail to focus on their agent experience are at a risk of being left at a competitive disadvantage.

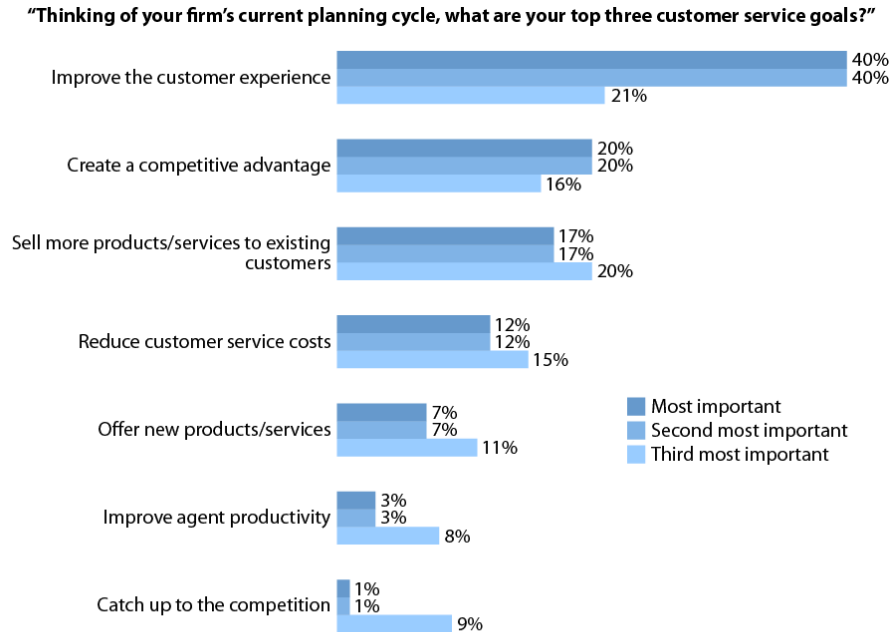
Focusing On The Customer Experience Is Good For Business

Because of the decline of the economy, and the commoditization of products and services, businesses want to use the customer service experience as a differentiator to stand out from the crowd. In fact, data from a recent survey shows that focusing on an improved customer experience is the current top goal of customer service organizations: 40% of respondents identified this as their top goal, 40% identified it as their second most important goal, and another 21% identified it as the third most important goal (see Figure 1).²



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Figure 1**Customer Service Organizations Focus On The Customer Experience**

75 survey respondents familiar with their organization’s customer service capabilities

Source: Forrester/CustomerThink May 2011 Global Customer Service TechRadar Online survey

Forrester also reports that a good customer experience correlates to loyalty and increased lifetime wallet share size, as measured in three classic categories: willingness to consider the company for another purchase, likelihood to switch business to a competitor, and likelihood to recommend to a friend or colleague.³ It is important to note that the link between a good customer experience and positive business value is the strongest for TV and Internet service providers.

Few Companies Deliver A Successful Customer Experience

Even though businesses know that they can reap quantifiable business results by focusing on the customer service experience, few businesses deliver good service. In 2011, Forrester reported that only 35% of companies earned an “excellent” or a “good” customer experience index rating — an index that measures the ease, usefulness, and enjoyment of doing business with a company. Almost two-thirds of brands were rated as delivering an “ok” to “very poor” customer experience, with most telecommunications companies delivering a “poor” to “very poor” experience. Internet service providers surveyed had the biggest gap between their top scores and lowest scores, which points to the quantifiable business opportunities in this segment.⁴

Customer Service Organizations Struggle To Provide Service That Meets Expectations

It’s evident that delivering good service is hard to do. Today’s world is increasingly complex. Customer service organizations need to assist customers with more and more complex products and services and are forced to do so with limited resources. As a result, first call resolutions and satisfaction metrics decrease.

Specifically, customer service decision-makers struggle to:

- **Provide a consistent customer service experience across all touchpoints.** Customers want to use an increasing number of touchpoints when receiving customer service. In the last 12 months, 69% used the phone, 55% used email, 55% used help or FAQs, 26% used a touch-tone IVR, and 19% used chat.⁵ Customer service agents supporting these touchpoints need access to the same data and information to ensure that customers get a consistent service experience.
- **Offer a call center experience on par with an in-store experience.** Consumers report lower satisfaction rates for phone interactions with call center agents than they do for interactions in a branch or store. In addition, agent phone interactions rank lower than website interactions. What's worse, satisfaction rates have been on the decline since 2007.⁶
- **Empower agents with a full view of customer interactions.** Ninety percent of companies surveyed do not have their communication channels, such as voice, email, chat, and web self-service, integrated with one another.⁷ This means that these communication channels, and the agents supporting them, are siloed from one another. Agents do not have a full view of prior customer interactions across all supported communication channels, which means that they are unable to personalize and contextualize an answer to a customer request.
- **Communicate relevant answers to customers.** Customer service agents do not have access to customer or product data. They also must use a number of disconnected applications when servicing their customers, and they struggle to find the right and relevant answer to a customer's request.

Improving The Agent Experience Is A Good Place To Start

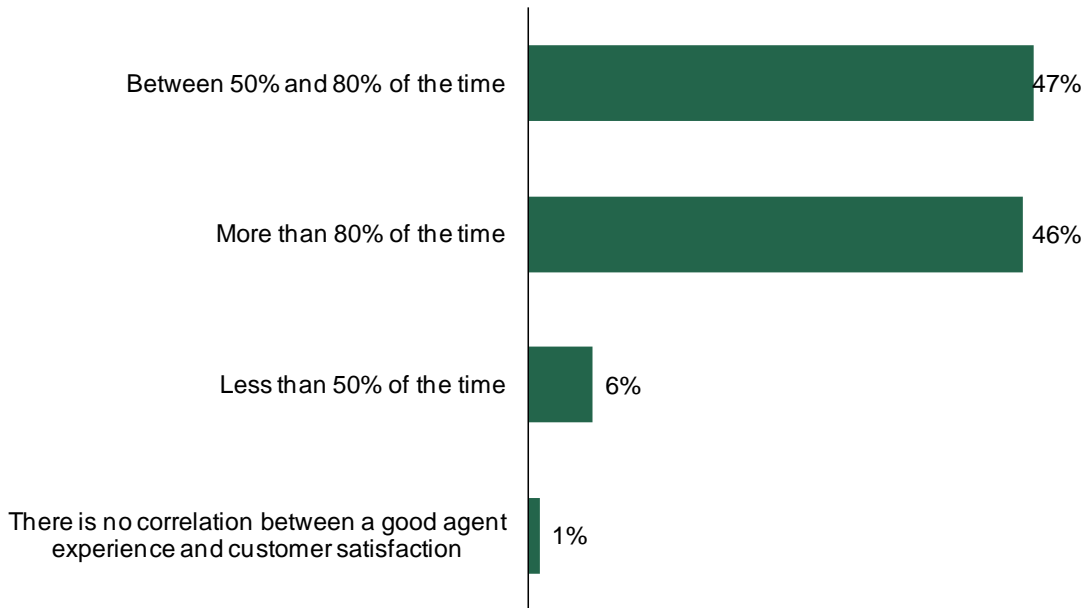
A good web user experience yields quantifiable business results, as measured by the ability to deliver contextual content to the user, to provide better navigation, and to present the content in a more usable manner.⁸ There are hundreds examples of companies that achieved significant results by improving the usefulness and usability of their sites. Two examples drive this point home: Macromedia's redesigned site with better navigation, streamlined content, and more efficient page layout led to an 11% drop in home page abandonment, a 67% increase in items sold per visit, and a 297% increase in store conversion rate; Intercontinental Hotel's small change of adding the prices for available hotel rooms to the search results page improved its look-to-book ratios so much that it led to an estimated \$45 million to \$60 million in additional revenue per year.⁹

It is logical to assume that usability improvements for internal applications should also correlate to improved business outcomes. We tested this correlation using a Forrester survey commissioned by Amdocs.¹⁰ Results showed that improving the customer service agent experience has a direct result on the service outcome: 46% of respondents said that this correlation held true more than 80% of the time, and 47% said that this correlation held true between 50% and 80% of the time. Only 1% said that there was no correlation between a good agent experience and service outcome (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

The Correlation Of A Good Agent Experience To Increased Customer Satisfaction

Choose which statement best describes your ability to correlate an improved agent experience to better customer satisfaction? We can correlate a good agent experience to good customer satisfaction ratings:



Base: 68 global telecommunication provider executives

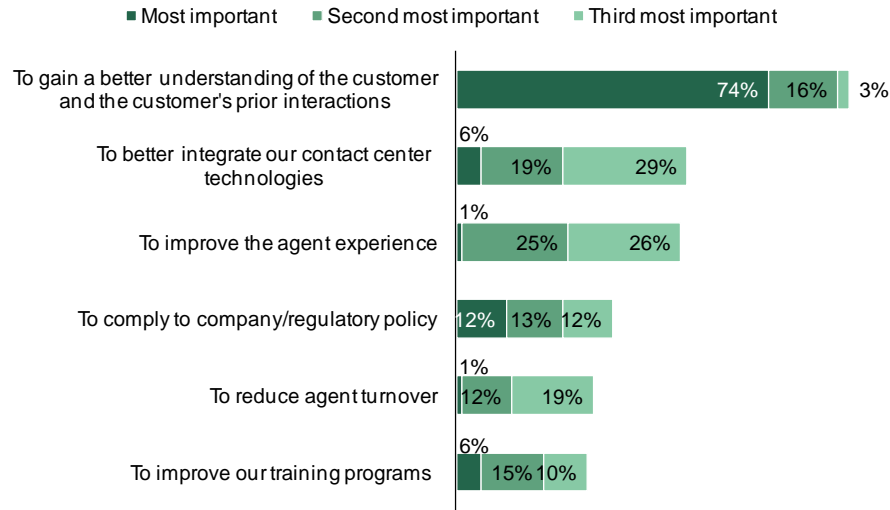
Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of Amdocs, November 2011

This correlation is important and drives quantifiable business results that explain why companies are focusing on improving the agent experience as one of their top goals for contact centers to move the needle on the overall customer experience. In the same recent survey, 25% of respondents identified improving the agent experience as their second most important goal, and 26% identified it as their third most important goal (see Figure 3).

Figure 3

Focusing On The Agent Experience Is One Of The Top Three Goals To Improve Customer Satisfaction

**“What are your three most important goals to increase customer satisfaction scores for your contact center?
Please pick and rank your top three goals where 1 = most important to 3 = third most important”**



Base: 68 global telecommunication provider executives

Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of Amdocs, November 2011

There are few, but poignant, examples of companies that have focused on improving the agent or employee experience and have seen a parallel improvement in customer experience. A case in point is Nicor, which measured its employee and customer loyalty index over two dimensions: the likelihood to recommend and overall satisfaction with the company, and saw parallel movement in its customer and employee loyalty index, as tracked from November 2009 to March 2010.¹¹

Addressing The Agent Experience Takes An Outside-In Approach

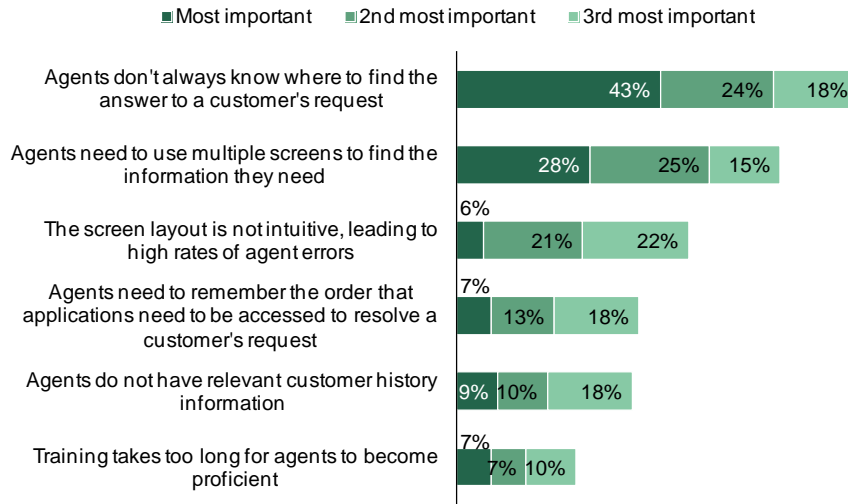
The work environment of a customer service agent is suboptimal. Agents use a set of disconnected tools and technologies to find answers to customer requests. Their tools lack intuitive navigation, lack data communications between different parts of the application, have cluttered screens that contain too much information, and have overly complex process flows that rely too heavily on agents to navigate.

Recent Forrester survey data supports these statements: 43% of survey respondents said that the main challenge that their contact center faces is that their agents don't always know where to find the answer to a customer's request; 28% said that agents need to use multiple screens to find the information they need. Furthermore, 7% said that agents need to remember the order that applications need to be accessed in to resolve a customer's request, and 6% said that the agent screens are not intuitive, leading to high rates of agent errors (see Figure 4).

Figure 4

Top Challenges That Contact Center Agents Face

Thinking about your contact center software, what are the 3 most important challenges that your contact center agents face? (please pick and rank your top 3 challenges from 1(most important) to 3 (third most important))



Base: 68 global telecommunication provider executives

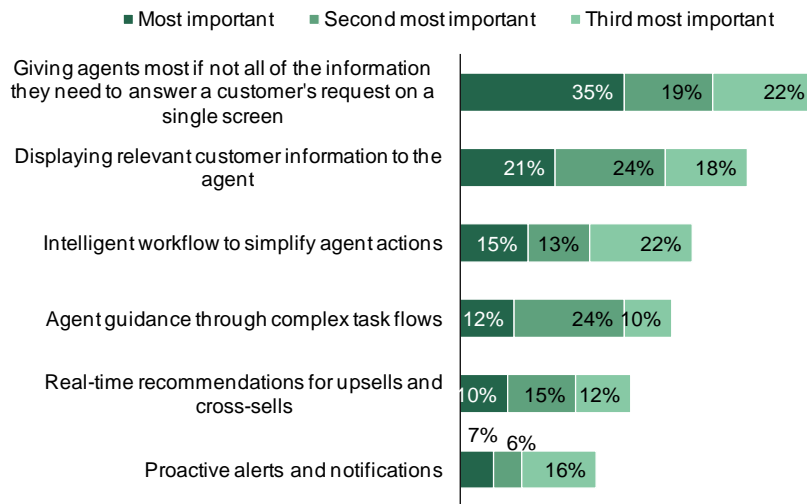
Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of Amdocs, November 2011

Actionable Recommendations To Improve The Agent Experience

So how can service organizations do better? When asked what steps they would take to improve the agent experience, 35% of survey respondents said that their top priority would be to give the agents most, if not all, of the information they need to answer a customer's request on a single screen; 21% said that their top priority would be to display the relevant customer information to the agent; and 15% said their top priority was to provide intelligent workflows to simplify agent actions when answering customer requests (see Figure 5).

Figure 5**Top Priorities For Improving The Agent Experience**

“Thinking about your priorities for improving the agent experience, what are the three most important priorities? Please pick and rank your top three goals where 1 = most important to 3 = three most important.”



Base: 68 global telecommunication provider executives

Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of Amdocs, November 2011

These priorities can be mapped to actionable steps that service organizations can take to improve the agent tool set. These are:

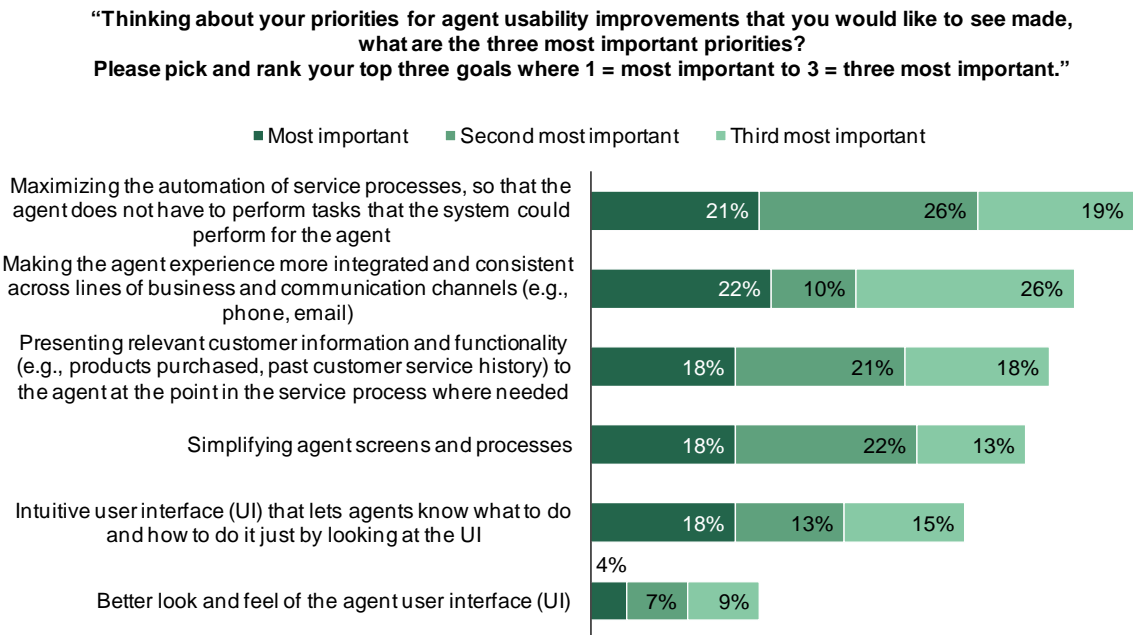
- **Make the agent tool set customer-centric.** The agent tool set should be crafted with the customers' needs in mind. It should be easy to answer their most common requests. Customer data, such as their status, past purchase history, and prior service interactions, should be available to agents so that they can contextualize and personalize interactions.
- **Make the agent tool set action-driven.** Agents should be able to easily and intuitively support the most common customer requests without any need for training or using the tool set's help function. It should be easy for the agents to know where they are in a process, where they came from, the actions that they can take on a particular screen, and how these actions are accomplished.
- **Make the agent tool set simple and intelligent.** Design your agent screens with the “what you see is what you need” paradigm in mind. Focus on the data and information elements that are on each screen that an agent uses, and more importantly, focus on removing extraneous elements.

Five Steps To Design The Right Agent Experience

When asked what their top priorities were for agent usability improvements, respondents could not pick a clear winner. For 22%, making the agent experience more integrated and consistent across lines of business and communication channels was their top priority; for 21%, it was maximizing the automation of service processes; for

18%, it was presenting relevant customer information; for another 18%, it was simplifying agent screens and processes; and for yet another 18%, it was making agent screens intuitive (see Figure 6).

Figure 6
Top Priorities For Agent Usability Improvements



Base: 68 global telecommunication provider executives

Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of Amdocs, November 2011

There is no question that the optimal agent experience includes all of the usability priorities shown in Figure 6. Here is a quick guide on how to achieve the right agent experience in five tactical steps:

1. Perform site visits to observe agents in their typical operating environment.
2. Obtain inbound call statistics such as call types, call frequency, handle time, speed to answer, for customer requests that are answered by agents.
3. Map the most frequent call types, for example, billing, account questions, usage questions, and equipment questions, to the common customer-centric task flows that must be supported.
4. Identify the actions that an agent needs to take to answer each common request.
5. Design screens that allow agents to perform these tasks with the least effort. Pay attention to the following design elements:
 - Visual enhancements such as fonts used, buttons, and simplified controls
 - Structural enhancements; group customer requests into simple agent actions that reflect main customer requests

- Navigational elements
- Desktop consolidation. Surface only the information that an agent needs at a particular step in the process. Include all pertinent information about the customer such as their product and plan information.

Measuring The Success Of Agent Experience Improvements

Businesses derive quantifiable benefits from focusing on agent experience improvements. The rule of thumb in many usability-aware organizations is that the cost-benefit ratio for usability is \$1:\$10-\$100. This means that for every dollar spent on improving usability, the organization will realize a benefit between \$10 and \$100.¹² But many organizations should perform their own usability cost-benefit analyses. Methods used to measure the success of agent experience improvements include:

- **Using subjective usability surveys.** These are industry-standard, 10-question surveys that ask agents to subjectively rate the usability of their applications. Agent feedback includes answering questions like rating how difficult an application was to use, indicating whether they would need assistance to learn how to use an application, how consistent the experience was that the agent had with the application, or how confident the agent felt when using the application.
- **Completing a before-and-after analysis of task flow.** This includes an analysis of user actions, system displays, and system actions which comprise a task flow that is used to resolve a customer request. The before-and-after data is used for a quantitative ROI calculation that measures efficiency improvements, and includes an inventory of the number of task flow steps, the number of systems traversed, and the number of screens and pop-ups displayed.

Don't Forget The People Factor

Focusing on the technology to improve the agent experience is a necessary step in moving the needle on customer satisfaction.

But becoming customer-centric is not only about technology; it also involves shifting your culture to be focused on your customer's satisfaction. Don't forget to empower your people to do the right thing for the customer. They are, after all, your most important asset.

Methodology

This Technology Adoption Profile was commissioned by Amdocs. Forrester Consulting used Forrester's survey data from multiple sources, as referenced in this report. Forrester supplemented the analysis with custom questions to 68 leaders of global telecommunication companies who had direct knowledge of the contact center agent tool set and who also had customer service organizations of more than 250 customer service agents.

Forrester fielded a survey to telecom service providers, commissioned by Amdocs in November 2011. The United States comprised 59% of respondents, 31% were from the UK, 3% from Australia, 3% from Canada, 3% from Spain, and 1% were from other countries. Respondents identified themselves as being part of the following industries: telecom service providers (41%), communications service providers (29%), cable and/or TV providers (24%), and Internet service providers (6%). Respondents came from the following sizes of companies: 20,000 or more employees (54%), 5,000 to 19,000 employees (25%), 1,000 to 4,999 employees (12%), and 500 to 999 employees (9%). All companies had call centers with 250 or more customer service agents. All respondents had direct knowledge of the agent desktop and agent tools. Fifty percent of respondents identified themselves as customer service managers, 28% identified themselves as supervisors, 19% identified themselves as directors, and 3% were vice presidents.

Endnotes

¹ Forrester surveyed 141 customer experience decision-makers from large North American firms. Ninety percent said that customer experience would be either very important or critical to their 2010 efforts. See the February 19, 2010, "The State of Customer Experience, 2010" report.

² Forrester/CustomerThink May 2011 Global Customer Service TechRadar Online Survey was fielded to 75 customer service professionals from Forrester's ongoing CRM research panel as well as to readers of CustomerThink, a global online community of business leaders striving to create profitable customer-centric enterprises. Ninety percent of survey respondents self-identified themselves as being primarily a business executive, manager, or contributor, while 10% of respondents identified themselves as an IT executive, manager, or contributor. Respondents identified focusing on customer experience as the top goal for improving customer service operations. See the November 7, 2011, "Craft Your Contact Center Investment Plans In Light Of Technology Adoption Patterns" report.

³ Years of Forrester data confirm the strong relationship between the quality of a company's customer experience (as measured by Forrester's Customer Experience Index [CxPi]) and loyalty measures like willingness to consider the company for another purchase, likelihood to switch business, and likelihood to recommend. We used that data to build simple models that show how changes in loyalty associated with higher CxPi scores can affect a company's yearly revenue. See the July 7, 2011, "The Business Impact of Customer Experience, 2011" report.

⁴ To assess the state of customer experience in 2011, Forrester asked more than 7,700 US consumers about their interactions with a variety of companies. Based on their responses, we calculated Customer Experience Index (CxPi) scores for 153 brands in 13 industries. This year's rankings show that only about one-third of brands earned "excellent" or "good" CxPi scores and the rest ranged from "okay" to "very poor." Retailers and hotels continue to be the two highest-ranking industries, while health insurance plans, TV service providers, and

Internet service providers (ISPs) continue to own the cellar. See the April 12, 2011, “Customer Experience Index, 2011” report.

⁵ This data was derived from the 2010 Technographics® survey which asked 3,639 US customers what communication channels they had used to receive customer service in the last 12 months.

⁶ Compared with other channels, satisfaction with phone interactions is most problematic for retailers, parcel shippers, PC manufacturers, and Internet service providers. See the April 6, 2011, “Why Your Call Center Needs User-Centered Design” report.

⁷ Forrester surveyed 279 contact center decision-makers in North America and European enterprises about trends in their contact centers and found that multichannel integration is anticipated in 10% of contact centers. See the August 13, 2009, “Contact Center Purchase Plans And Trends In 2009” report. In a recent survey, Forrester found that 24% of the respondents are supporting multichannel initiatives in 2010. See the May 14, 2010, “Contact Center Purchase Plans 2010” report.

⁸ Data from 60 website usability projects showed that success metrics increased when known usability problems were addressed. These problems included navigation, aligning content with user needs, and the presentation of content. See the November 12, 2010 “Europe 2010: Fixing Known Usability Problems Pays Off” report and the October 10, 2008 “How Much Will Your Web Site Metrics Improve?” report.

⁹ Customer experience professionals don’t have to look far to find examples of companies that achieved significant results by improving the usefulness and usability of their websites. Many examples are listed in the October 10, 2008 “How Much Will Your Web Site Metrics Improve?” report.

¹⁰ Forrester fielded a survey to 68 leaders within global telecommunications companies, commissioned by Amdocs in November 2011. The US comprised 59% of respondents, 31% were from the UK, 3% from Australia, 3% from Canada, 3% from Spain, and 1% were from other countries. Respondents identified themselves as being part of the following industries: telecom service providers (41%), communications service providers (29%), cable and/or TV providers (24%), and Internet service providers (6%). Respondents came from the following sizes of companies: 20,000 or more employees (54%), 5,000 to 19,000 employees (25%), 1,000 to 4,999 employees (12%), and 500 to 999 employees (9%). All companies had call centers with 250 or more customer service agents. All respondents had direct knowledge of the agent desktop and agent tools. Fifty percent of respondents identified themselves as customer service managers, 28% identified themselves as supervisors, 19% identified themselves as directors, and 3% were vice presidents.

¹¹ Nicor saw its employee and customer loyalty move in lockstep over a five-month period from November 2009 to March 2010. See the January 28, 2011, “How The Voice Of The Employee Empowers Customer Experience Efforts” report.

¹² Source: Tom Gilb, *Principles of Software Engineering Management*, Addison-Wesley, 1988.

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Forrester Consulting provides independent and objective research-based consulting to help leaders succeed in their organizations. Ranging in scope from a short strategy session to custom projects, Forrester's Consulting services connect you directly with research analysts who apply expert insight to your specific business challenges. For more information, visit www.forrester.com/consulting.

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