Be the wow: A guide to creating the most empathetic contact centre

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Introduction

When Rudy arrives at the DMV to renew his license, he learns that he needs to schedule an appointment online before the agent will help him. This new policy is more than an inconvenience since Rudy doesn't have a smartphone to make the appointment. Another agent notices Rudy looking confused, and she helps him make an appointment on her smartphone.

With this in-person interaction, it's easy to see how one agent acted with empathy while the other agent did not. However, no matter how an interaction occurs, empathy should be at the forefront.

As communication channels become less "human," empathetic customer interactions are even more valuable. Delivering a personal touch can help you stand out from the competition and build customer loyalty. And emphasising empathy will also make work more rewarding for your agents.

71% of customers agree that if they perceive a brand puts profit over people, they will lose trust in that brand forever.[1]

But how can you ensure that your contact centre has empathetic processes and procedures that will surprise and delight your customers? This eBook provides tools and strategies to help you operate the most empathetic contact centre possible.

1 Edelman: Trust Barometer Special Report: Brand Trust and the Coronavirus Pandemic (2020)

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Why empathy matters

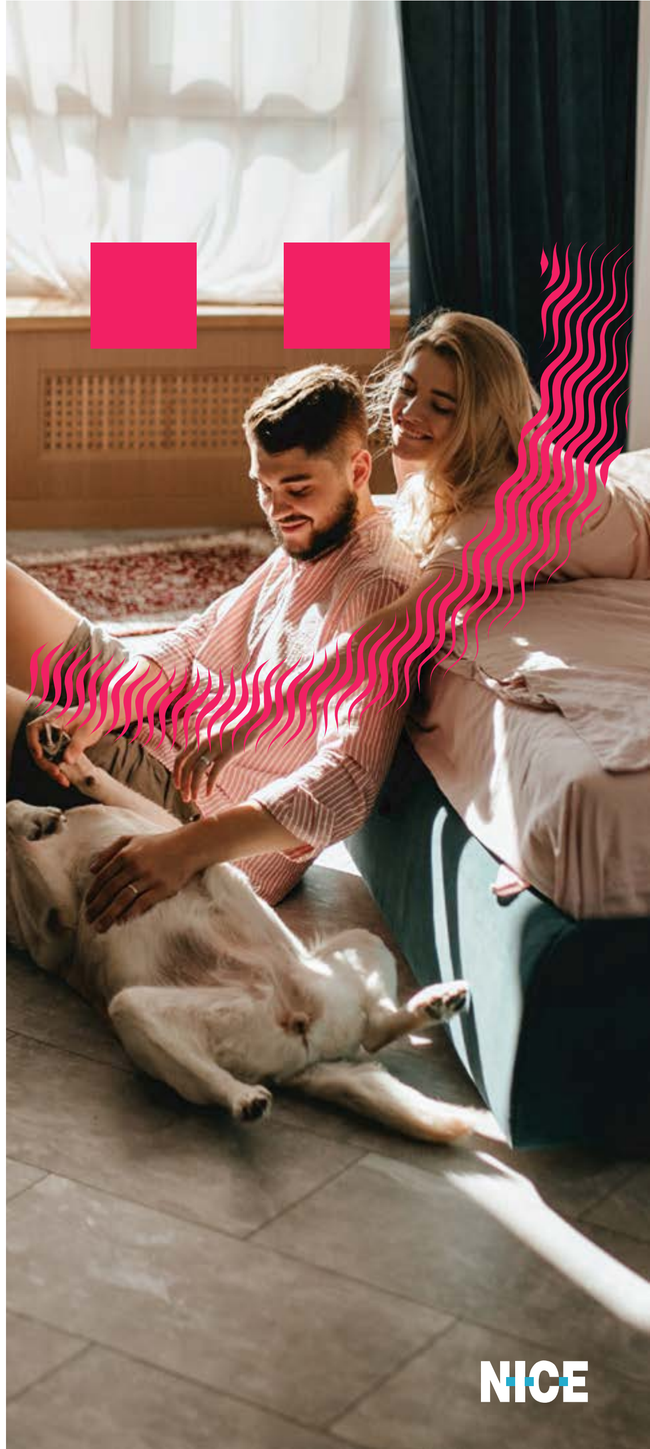
Most contact centre resources focus on self-service, and that's as it should be. The majority of customers prefer to solve their own issues rather than talking to an agent.

However, some matters can't be resolved through self-service. Studies show that half of the customers who start with self-service are ultimately transferred to a live agent.[2]

This is why contact centres must apply empathy holistically throughout all processes. It's important to use empathy to examine the customer journey and find opportunities for improvement. Having empathetic AI is also important to provide a more human experience overall.

Having emotional intelligence is more than just being "nice." It means having self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management skills.[3]

Empathy means having the ability to understand things from another person's point of view and understand their emotions and feelings.[4]



2 NICE CXone: Customer Experience (CX) Transformation Benchmark (2020)
3 Harvard Business Review: What People (Still) Get Wrong About Emotional Intelligence (2020)
4 Masters in Communication: Empathy: What It Is, Why It Matters, and How You Can Improve

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Regardless of the markets you serve and the size of your contact centre, your customers expect to have a personalised experience and to feel understood during interactions. Personalisation is the strongest driver of customer loyalty in most markets. It increases trust, satisfaction, and brand loyalty.[5]

An agent must be able to interact empathetically in order for the customer to feel understood. Ensuring empathy is at the forefront of your contact centre training and processes is the best way to give that human touch to set your brand apart. Many customers say empathy is the most valued characteristic of call centre agents.[6]

But empathy isn't only appreciated by customers. Having a deeper connection to your customers can help agents become more engaged at work.

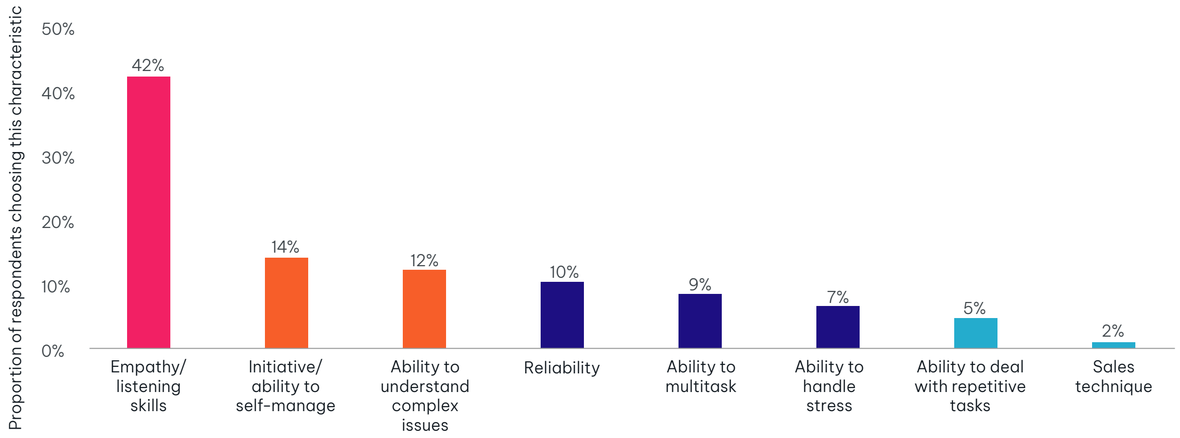
Employees who feel like their work matters are less likely to job hunt and quit.[6]

Empathy clearly matters to the customer experience and leads to more meaningful work for agents. Now let's dive in to how to make empathy a priority in your contact centre.

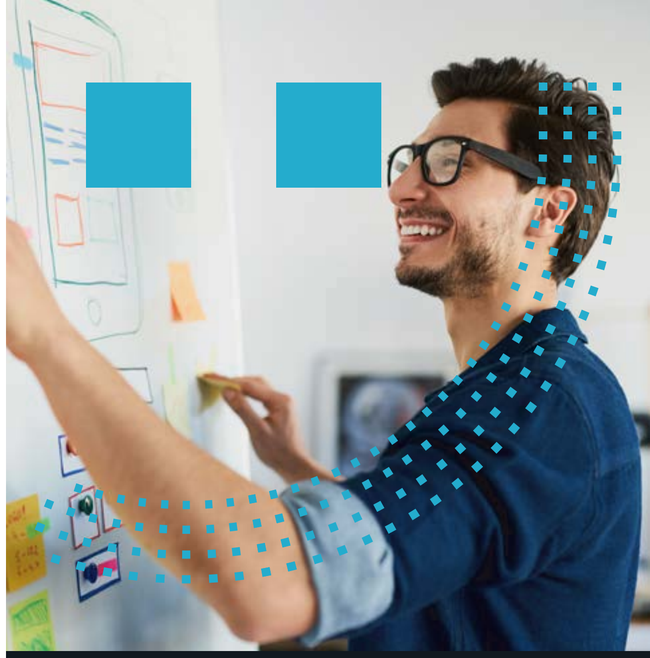
Here are the five strategies we will focus on:

1. Hire empathetic agents
2. Teach empathy in all onboarding and everboarding
3. Apply empathy to the customer journey
4. Teach empathy through training exercises
5. Use empathetic AI tools

Most valued characteristic of a contact centre agent[8]



Add NICE (ContactBabel) Survey 2021



68% of customers expect brands to demonstrate empathy.[7]

69% of employees have one foot outside the door.[9]

5 IDC: The Future of Customers and Consumers: Creating Loyalty through Digital Transformation (2020)
6 ContactBabel: Inner Circle Guide to Agent Engagement and Empowerment (2021)
7 Salesforce: "State of the Connected Customer"(2020)
8 Accenture: The Future of Work Study (2021)
9 Achievers: Workforce Institute's fourth annual Engagement and Retention Report (2021)

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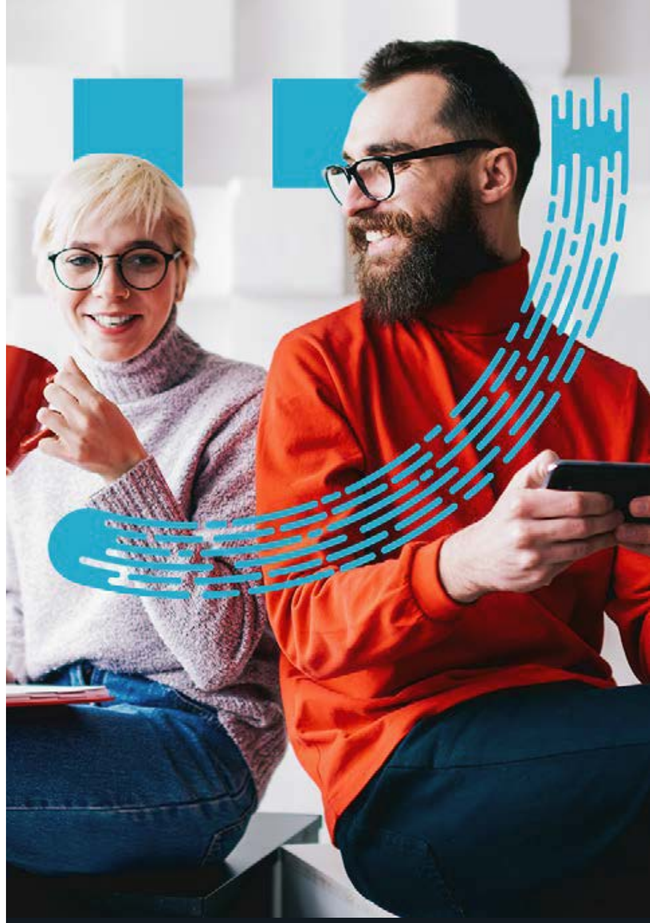
Hire empathetic agents

Some people are born with an empathetic nature. And if you're lucky, some of those people already work in your contact centre. This inherent empathy is called dispositional empathy, and it's a very important trait to look for when hiring agents.

People with dispositional empathy can understand the experience of other people from their frames of reference. In layperson terms, they can step into another person's shoes and understand what they are thinking and feeling and why.[10]



75% of an agent's long-term success depends on people skills.[11]

10 PubMed: Dispositional empathy, emotional display authenticity, and employee outcomes (2020)
11 American Management Association: The Hard Truth about Soft Skills (2019)

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Here are seven tips to help managers look for dispositional empathy during the hiring process:

7 tips for conducting empathy focused interviews[12]

1. Interview in pairs

- Make it conversational and engaging
- Take notes while the second interviewer converses
- Identify comments that should be pursued in more depth
- Discuss the interview after it's over to look for greater insights

2. Observe body language

- Certain gestures and movements can speak louder than words
- Take notes about non-verbal cues as well as what participants say
- Use non-verbal cues to drive the conversation and focus questions

3. Ask neutral questions

- Avoid implying there is a correct answer
  - Example of a biased question is: "Do you agree that the customer is always right?"
  - Example of a neutral question: "What do you think of the common phrase, "the customer is always right?"

4. Pursue tangents

- Let candidates finish tangents once they start
- Discover what they are passionate about
- Gain insights into how a candidate feels about certain issues and causes

5. Ask why

- Don't assume you know why a candidate says or does something
- Challenge the interviewee to stop and think about their own actions
- Remember that a candidate admitting they aren't sure about something can be a sign of emotional intelligence

6. Encourage storytelling

- Dig deeper into a candidate's thoughts and beliefs
- Look for signs of empathy and ask strategic follow-up questions
  - Example that invites storytelling: "Tell me about a time when you helped a customer solve a problem. What solution did you find?"

7. Embrace silence

- Allow long pauses to let them reflect on something they previously said or experienced
- Let the participant break the silence to provide you with deeper insights
- Learn how past events shaped their perceptions and understanding

Common non-verbal cues to watch for:

- Crossed arms
- Slouched posture
- Facial expressions
- Tilted head
- Moving closer
- Eye contact
- Fidgeting

Check out appendix A for sample empathy interview questions.

12 Stanford University: Stanford d.School Empathy Interview Guide

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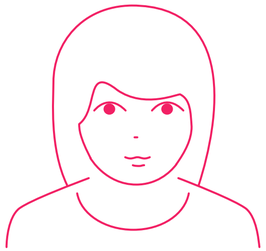
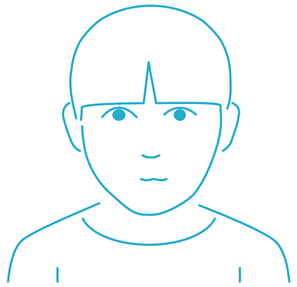
Teach empathy in all onboarding and everboarding

Even if an agent doesn't possess dispositional empathy, you can still foster situational empathy[13]—which is the ability to listen, understand, and help customers in a given situation.[14]

Your contact centre team spends countless hours onboarding, upskilling, and coaching your agents. But it's a mistake to simply bundle empathy into an existing onboarding plan. In order for empathy to make the impact it deserves; it requires something beyond coaching—it requires teaching.

One of the most effective ways to teach empathy is to remove barriers. A lack of understanding is the most common barrier to empathy. If an agent has never experienced a situation similar to that of the customer, it can be difficult to understand customer responses.[15]





Here are a few examples to illustrate the point.

Agent: Does not have a chronic condition

Customer: Experiencing chronic pain

Having never experienced a chronic health condition, the agent might not understand why the patient is so emotional.

Agent: Not visually impaired

Customer: Visually impaired

An agent might not know how to direct a visually impaired customer about the best way to find information online.

13 Forbes: Yes, Training For Customer Service Empathy–Situational Empathy–Works. Here's How. (2020)
14 ContactBabel: The Inner Circle Guide to Agent Engagement & Empowerment (2021)
15 Heart of the Customer: Enable CX Action by Removing Barriers (2020)

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Managers should take a proactive approach to ensure this training takes place before agents encounter difficult interactions.

Teaching your agents to move past situational barriers can be accomplished through empathy cues, customer personas, empathy maps, and roleplaying.

Listen actively and withhold judgment

Two of the most important aspects of connecting to another person with empathy are active listening[16] and withholding judgment.

How to engage in active listening

To start, teach your agents to listen closely enough that they can **paraphrase what the customer says** to ensure they understand. Encourage note-taking to help the agent stay focused. Notes can be offered as a feature through software but provide notebooks and pens or pencils for agents who prefer that method.

Teach your agents how to **reflect back on the emotions of the customer** to help the person better understand and regulate their own emotions.

Encourage your agents to **express their emotional response** to the words and emotions and **communicate** what they can do to help.

How to withhold judgment

Teach your agents to focus on **understanding the customer's perspective** without labeling what the customer says as "good or bad." This doesn't automatically mean the customer's perspective is "right or wrong."

Show agents how to **avoid making snap judgments**[18] about customers by asking questions and taking a deeper look at the customer journey and experience.

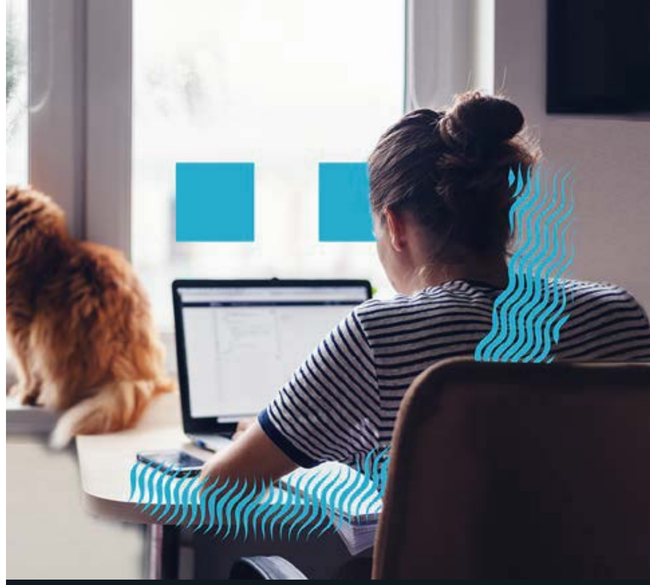
Encourage your agents to take the necessary time to **collect information** and **gather their thoughts** before responding and making any promises to the customer. By letting customers know the agent is gathering information they can keep the customer informed. If necessary, the agent can even place the customer on hold.

Once the agent has a thorough understanding of the customer need, the agent should explain how they will help the customer **find a solution to the problem**.

If the agent cannot offer a solution, they should offer a **helpful next step**. This step could be finding a supervisor, transferring the customer to another department, or offering to call the customer back with an answer.

Empower your agents to **speak up** if a customer is using reprehensible language, such as racist slurs and sexist remarks. Speaking up is an act of courage and compassion for both agent and customer.

16 CX Today: Metrigy: How Contact Centres are Using AI to Improve CX (2021)
17 NICE: CX megatrends for 2021
18 Inc.: The Importance of Withholding Judgment



38.7% of companies are implementing active listening to improve CX.[17]

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"That must be frustrating for you."

"I know what that feels like."

"I'm sorry to hear that. I appreciate your patience while I help you get the help you need."

"We're always here to help. You can contact us any time."

"Can you tell me more about how I can help you, please?"

"Thank you for alerting us to this..."

"I will help you resolve this ..."

"I'm sorry you experienced that..."

"I can understand your frustrations..."

"Yes, I believe you are right."

"I think I understand the problem, can you clarify..."

"Here's what I'm going to do to help you..."

"This should be fixed by..."

"I will contact you as soon as I have an update on the situation."

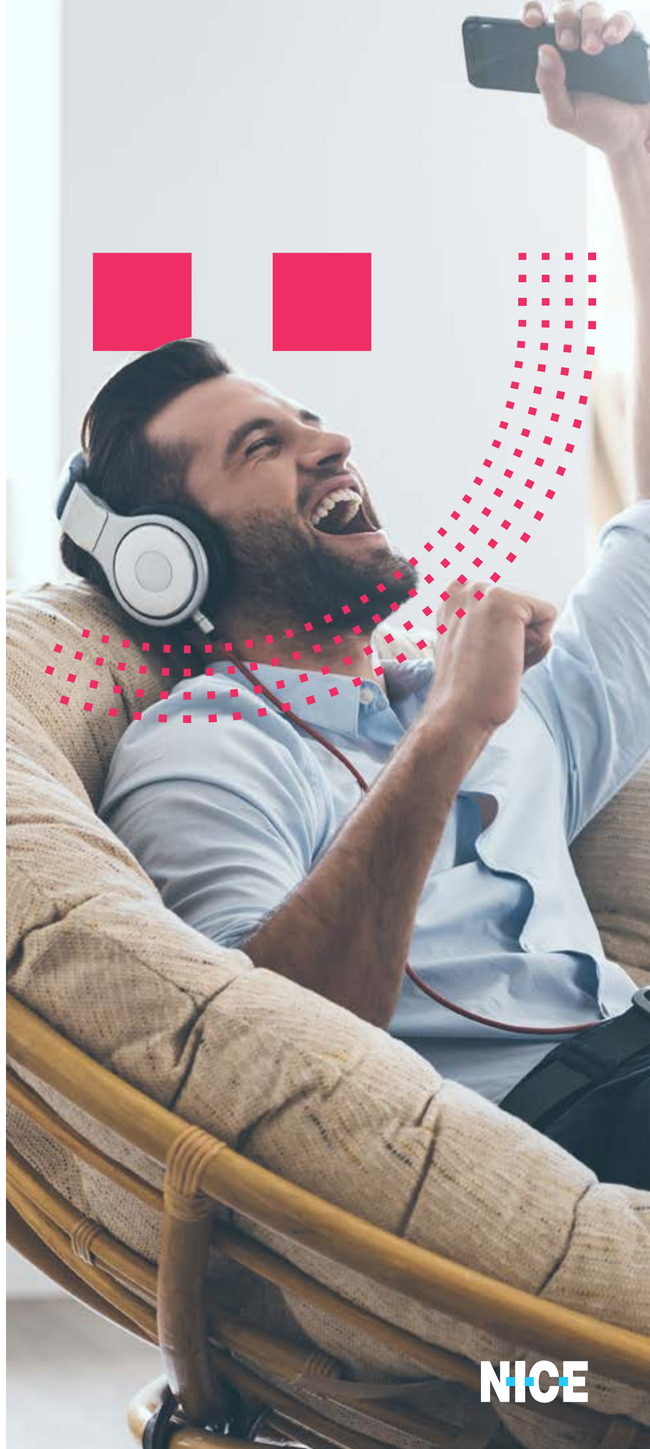
"I am working to resolve the problem. I will be in touch with you shortly."

"Please let us know if you have any more questions."

"We value hearing your feedback. I will be sure to pass on what you have said to our management team."

"I have experienced a similar problem, so I can understand how frustrating this can be."

"Have we covered everything that you wanted to discuss today?"



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Teach empathy cues

Micah Solomon, author of *Ignore Your Customers (And They'll Go Away)*, names seven empathy cues that can help contact centre managers teach situational empathy.[19]

Cue 1: Every interaction is distinctive for the customer.

Teach your agents to avoid conducting a new call like a continuation of an earlier conversation. Every call is a new conversation.

Cue 2: Ask, don't demand.

Request customer information in full sentences to display empathy. For example, "Will you please give me your date of birth?" and "May I have your first and last name?"

Cue 3: Lift up the customer.

Teach agents to give customers the benefit of the doubt and focus on lifting a customer up. Customers aren't stupid, they just need help. Providing that help without judgment shows empathy.

Cue 4: Provide realistic expectations.

Teach your agents to be forthcoming with customers to set realistic and specific expectations. For example, if a package might arrive by the end of the week, but that's not a certain result, say so.

Cue 5: Develop a recovery plan.

Implement a customer service recovery plan to help agents find their way out of difficult situations. Any situation can be turned around if agents keep their cool, listen, and convey understanding.[20]

Cue 6: Avoid jargon

Resist using jargon, as it can confuse your customers and cause frustration. Teach your agents to use common terminology and avoid acronyms. And also avoid using jargon in your training materials.

Cue 7: Embrace the customer journey

Teach your agents to take their cues from the customer. Agents can improve CX by aligning to the customer's pace or some other variation.

19 Forbes: Yes, Training For Customer Service Empathy–Situational Empathy–Works. Here's How. (2020)
20 Hubspot: 6 Customer Service Recovery Strategies to Add to your Toolbox

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Apply empathy to the customer journey

Every customer is unique and their journey should be customised. The majority of these journeys start before the customer connects with the agent, so it's important to apply empathy to create a journey that personalises each customer experience—no matter where or how the journey begins.

The means:

- Meeting the customer on their preferred channel
- Offering intelligent self-service options
- Allowing them to move effortlessly between channels
- Creating a personalised experience
- Improving accessibility

Tips for applying empathy to the self-service journey are covered later, however; before we can go there, we need to truly understand the customer. All well-intentioned CX initiatives will fail unless they prioritise the customer's needs.

Creating in-depth customer personas is the best way for you to design an empathetic customer journey. Personas are also crucial tools for your agents to learn and reference in order to remove barriers and teach situational empathy. Many organisations focus on markets, segments, verticals, and demographics. Those metrics are important for marketing and sales, but they're not the same thing as personas.

Customer-centric companies are 60% more profitable than those that are price or product-centric.[22]

73% customers say having a differentiated experience is what inspires their loyalty.[21]

21 IDC: The Future of Customers and Consumers (2021)
22 Forbes: The Surprising Secret To Customer-Centric Success (2022)

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7 common-sense customer expectations for today

E **Effortless**

Consumers should be able to complete interactions with little friction and effort.

97% of customers have backed out of a purchase because it was inconvenient to them

X **Xenial**

Xenial means being a good host. Customers expect empathy and want to be known and understood. Companies should strive to anticipate their needs and customise with real-time, contextually relevant content and responses according to customer preferences and needs.

87% of companies say customers expect omnichannel personalisation

P **Purpose-driven**

Consumers want to support brands that support what they value. Companies should stand for more than just the products or services they sell, and the brand promise needs to directly connect to customer experience.

8 in 10 consumers say purpose is at least as important as CX

E **Efficient**

Consumers want a company accessible when they need help. They expect simple and quick resolution, minimal wait or hold times.

82% of customers expect to solve complex problems by speaking with one person

C **Consistent**

Consumers expect the same quality across channels.

80% of customers expect the same level of service regardless of where they engage

T **Transparent**

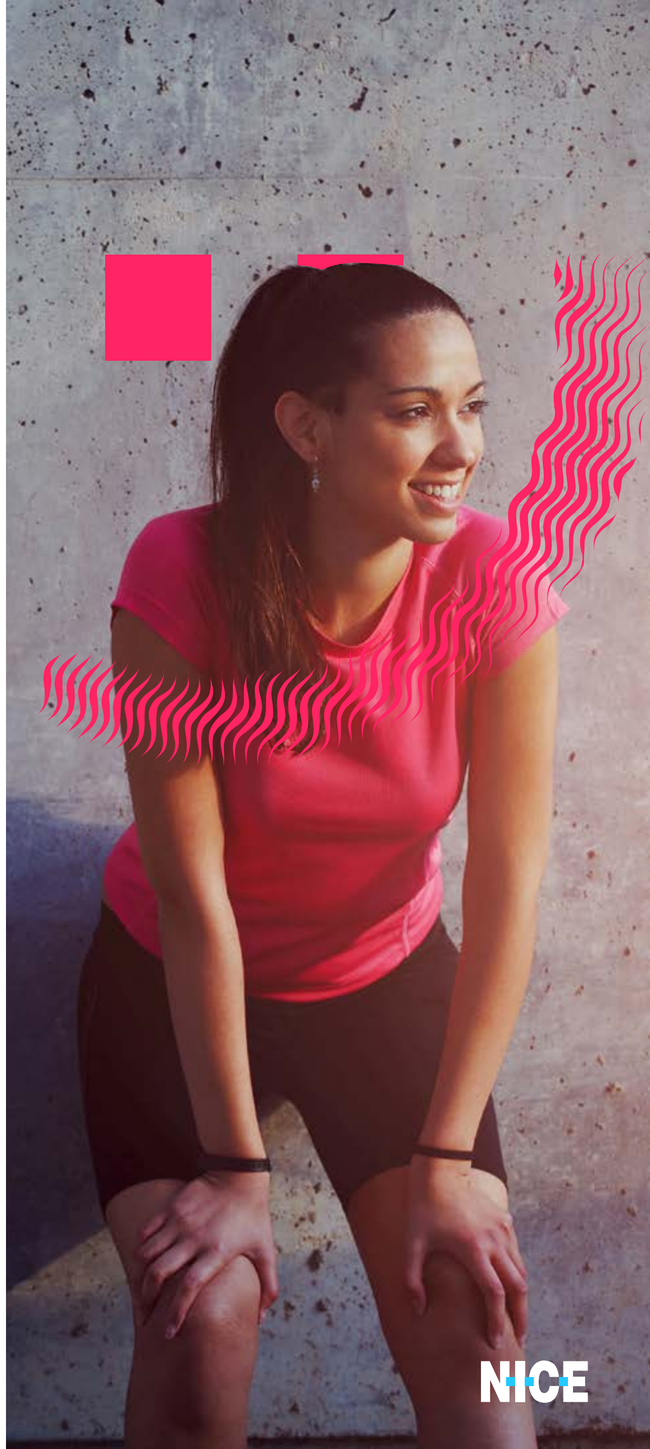
Consumers want to trust that companies are who they say they are, that their private data is safe, and the information they receive is accurate

86% of consumers want more transparency over how their personal information is used

S **Seamless**

Consumers want a connected cross-channel journey where they don't have to start over or repeat information in each channel. Interactions should easily elevate to agent, customer historic data should travel with customer, and the customer should be able to jump from various channels as they prefer.

96% of customers expect companies to make it easy without the need to repeat information



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Create customer personas

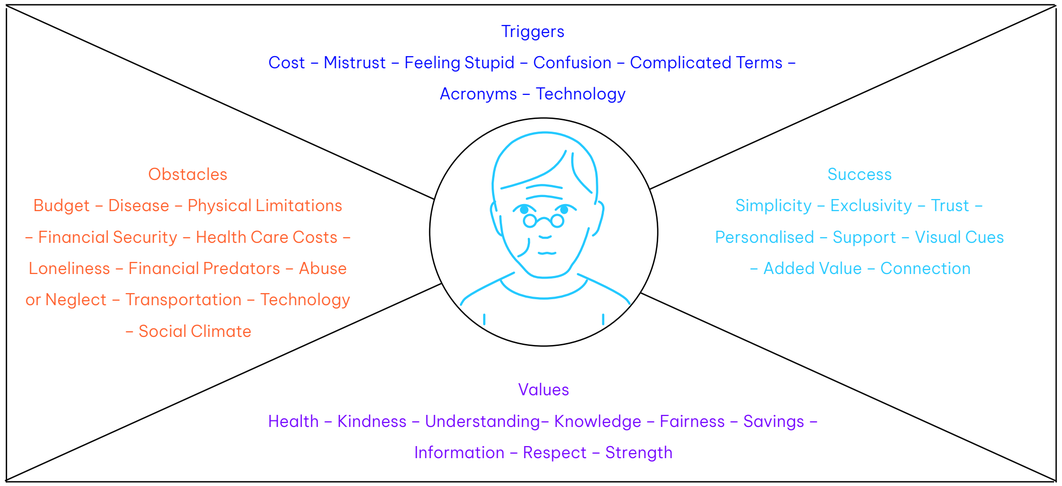
A persona is a snapshot of a customer that helps us understand how customers define "value," including their drivers, motivators, and needs. Personas are typically research-based profiles that describe your ideal customer segments that are based on demographic and psychographic data.[23]

A customer persona should include these six sections:[24]

- An image that represents the persona
- Name for the persona
- What they value
- Obstacles to success
- Situations that might trigger distress
- What success looks like for them

To illustrate, here is a sample persona for Rudy from the opening section. Create your personas using survey responses, customer data, customer feedback, and feedback agents.

Sample person: Senior citizen | Grandpa Rudy



23 Study.com: Customer Personas: Definition & Examples - Video & Lesson Transcript (2021)
24 Smartsheet: Free Customer Persona & Profile Templates (2021)

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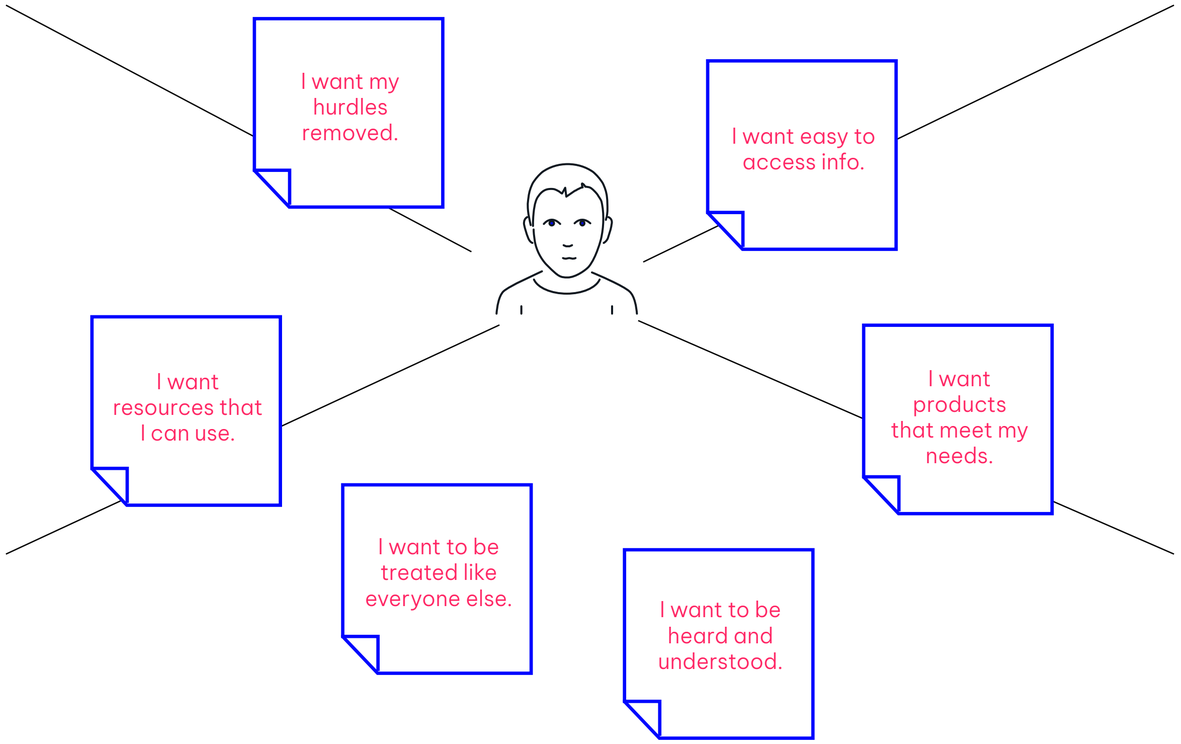
Develop customer empathy maps

Another relevant tool for creating an empathetic customer journey is empathy maps. Contact centres need to understand what each customer persona needs. All people want to feel heard and understood. Empathy maps can be particularly helpful with teaching your agents how to interact with different types of customers.

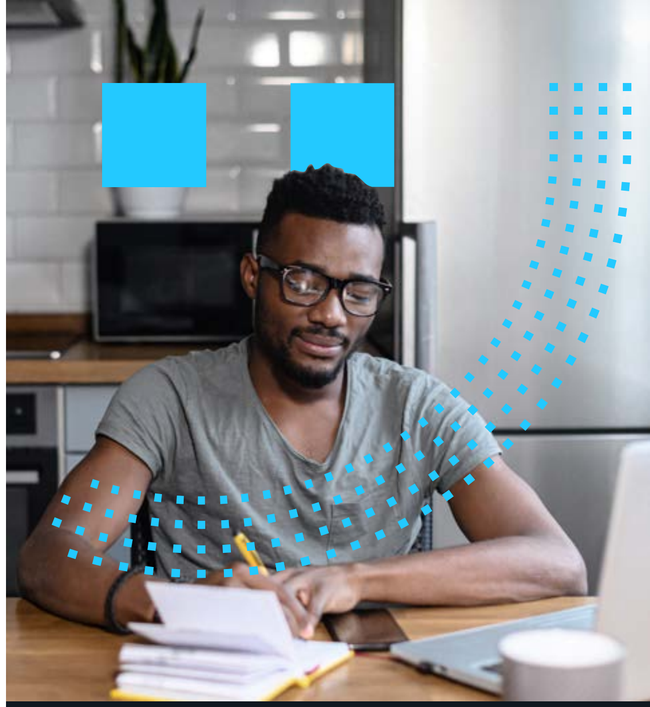
Create your empathy maps using your ideal customer personas based on feedback and data. Then, ask yourself these four questions:

1. What is the customer saying?
2. What is the customer thinking?
3. What is the customer doing?
4. What is the customer feeling?

Sample empathy map: Customers with disabilities



25 Salesforce: State of the Connected Customer, 4th Edition (2020)



66% of customers expect companies to understand their individual needs and expectations.[25]

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Research shows that cultivating mindfulness can be one of the most effective ways to promote emotional intelligence and empathy.[26] Here are just a few practices you can use during onboarding and continuous professional development:

Role-playing

Role-playing is one of the most effective customer service training tools because it simulates real conversations in a safe environment for learning.[27] In this environment, the agent doesn't have to fear offending a customer or losing an important order if they make a mistake. This can help agents prepare for unexpected scenarios.

Brainstorming

During staff meetings and training, give agents the opportunity to share their ideas on how to promote empathy for their fellow employees and your customers. It can also be helpful to have them share times when they felt understood by another person and why it was important.

Empathy challenge

An empathy challenge can be a great way to encourage your agents to show each other empathy as well as your customers. Have your agents take note when a fellow employee shows them compassion and then invite them to share these stories in daily meetings. Reward the agents who get the most mentions per month or week.

Incentives

Make an empathy score an important part of the feedback your agents receive from management and customers. Consider offering prizes for the agents that show the most empathy toward others. Maybe even encourage your agents to show three random acts of kindness toward others each week.[28]

26 PCM: Effect of Mindfulness on Empathy and Self-Compassion: An Adapted MBCT Program on Filipino College Students (2020)
27 Hubspot: 10 Customer Service Role Play Scenarios [+Scripts to Master Them] (2021)
28 Random Acts of Kindness Foundation: Make kindness the norm (2022)

Check out Appendix B for additional resources for teaching empathy.

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Use empathetic AI tools

AI can be a valuable resource to help your agents with situational empathy. Organisations that use technology to revamp CX can increase customer satisfaction by 15% to 20%, reduce the cost of service by 20% to 40%, and boost conversion rates and growth by 20%[29]

Here are just a few examples of how technology can help you improve empathy by making interactions personalised and proactive.

An empathetic experience is personalised

These days, customers expect businesses to know them. So, it's important to have a complete picture of the customer journey and where improvements are needed.

Use customer journey analytics to identify negative aspects of the journey and improve your processes and products. You can also identify topic-oriented trends that are relevant to your customers.

Integrating your customer relationship management platform with your contact centre software will automatically provide customer insights—helping agents personalise each interaction. Giving agents a complete customer history and full context before they begin interacting will also help them be more empathetic.

70% of contact centres lack access to relevant customer data at the moment of agent interaction.[30]

29 McKinsey Digital: Service industries can fuel growth by making digital customer experiences a priority (2020)
30 Forrester Consulting: Contact Center Leaders Weigh In on the Top Challenges to Improving the Agent and Customer Experience (2020)

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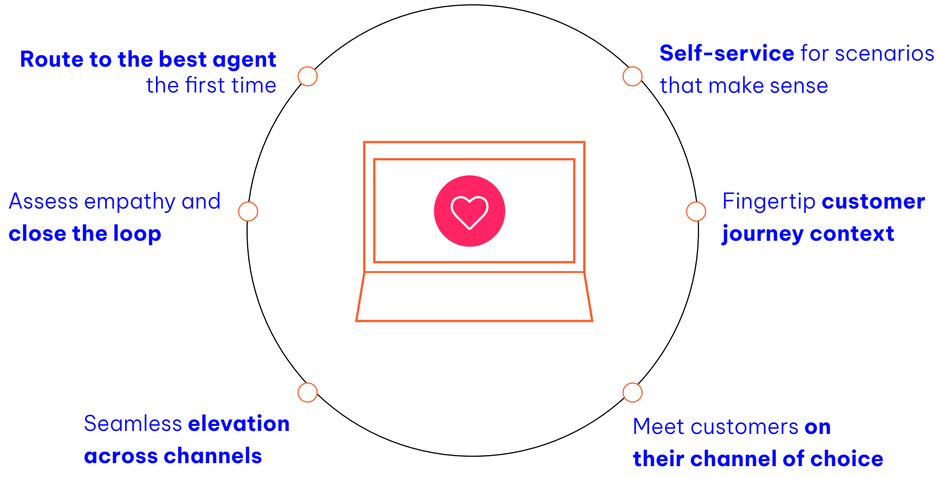
An empathetic experience is proactive

Having the right AI tools can help agents be more proactive and engage customers at just the right moment. Technology can continuously monitor customer pain points and triggers and proactively guide the customer toward immediate resolution with targeted, timely, and relevant information.

Sentiment-based AI routing can pair the customer with an agent who is the most likely to deliver an optimal experience based on the customer's need and vast resources of holistic data. Some agents are naturally a better fit for handling highly emotional interactions, while others are efficient at handling issues quickly for impatient or easily frustrated customers.

Sentiment Analytics can help managers monitor interactions across teams and individuals for customer satisfaction and agent soft-skill behavior scores that directly influence CSAT. Role-based dashboards make it possible for both managers and agents to see individual performance, how they rank across their teams, and where they can improve.

Sentiment analytics and post-interaction feedback will help agents and supervisors proactively advance their empathy skills. Seeing examples of their own good and bad scores will help them identify areas for improvement. RTIG can be used to prompt agents in real time to help them interact with more empathy.



With CXone, Bayada was able to get callers to the right place the first time. As a result, call abandonment rates fell by 87%, and the average speed to answer decreased by 97%.

Read case study

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The benefits of sentiment-based agent enablement include:

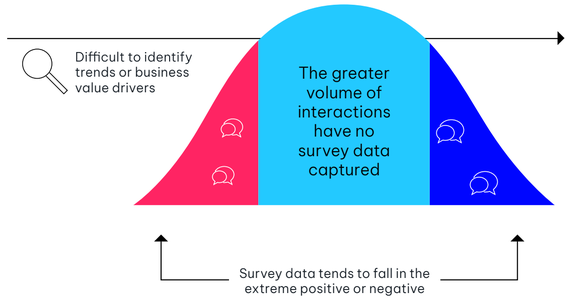
- Empowers agents to self-improve on their own
- Empowers managers to deliver personalised, targeted coaching
- Focuses all roles in the organisation on driving customer satisfaction

Technology can also provide contact centres with customer-based satisfaction scoring, which is more informative than traditional feedback surveys because it scores every transaction.

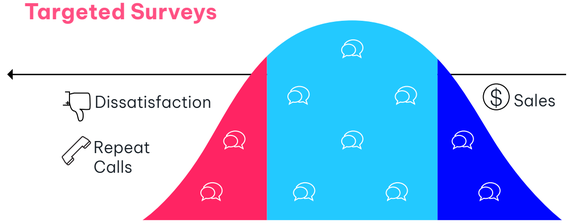
AI sentiment and agent soft-skill behavior scoring helps CX programs by enabling supervisors and agents to see how they can improve behaviors shown to impact customer satisfaction. It also helps Voice of the Customer (VoC) programs by delivering sentiment scores after every interaction. This enables the contact centre to close the loop with every customer by sending targeted and contextual surveys after a negative interaction to ask if the customer wants a manager to contact them and resolve their issue.

The VoC program can also route these interactions to a targeted customer retention group who can call the customer back and demonstrate the needed empathy and understanding to resolve the customer's issue. Studies have shown that contextual surveys and proactive customer outreach result in higher customer engagement and reduced customer churn.[31]

The Challenge with Traditional Survey Programs



Using Sentiment with Targeted Surveys



Adaptive survey collection can use sentiment information to send targeted feedback after key interactions, such as possible churn or cancellation risks.

AI can also offer real-time coaching to deliver agent support and behavioral coaching to help improve empathy toward customers. Managers can monitor how agents are doing during interactions and offer support when needed.

60% of agents lack the tools they need to deliver meaningful CX.[32]

31 Aberdeen and NICE: The ROI of Real-Time Agent Guidance: How AI Helps Align Agent Performance with Customer Expectations (2020)
32 ICMI: State of Agent Experience and Engagement in Today's Contact Centers (2018)

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Key Takeaways

When it comes to uncovering valuable insights about your customers to improve situational empathy, a combination of soft skills and technology can transform your organisation into a customer-centric business.

With NICE CX software, for the first time, all stakeholders have the intelligence required to accelerate customer satisfaction and brand loyalty.

- NICE Enlighten AI delivers immediate results and prescriptive insights to leverage every interaction
- CRM Integration provides customer insights to help agents personalise each interaction
- Real-Time Interaction Guidance delivers a top-notch service experience with agent tips and monitoring
- Call Recording ensures quality and compliance call, digital, and screen recording capabilities
- Workforce Management helps forecast, schedule, adapt, respond, and engage your agents
- CXone SmartReach helps agents be more proactive and engage customers at just the right moment
- AI-Routing provides sentiment-based AI that can pair a customer with an agent who is the best fit for their personality and needs

To learn more about how AI is revolutionising the customer experience and contact centre analytics, visit nice.com/enlighten-ai.

Learn more about how you can create a fail-proof customer journey strategy.

Get the eBook

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Candidate interview check list for spotting empathy

1. What body language cues did you observe?
2. What tangents did the interviewee share?
3. What insights did you glean?
4. What stories did they share and what did that tell you?
5. What topics and issues are they passionate about?
6. What did you learn about their emotional intelligence?
7. Did you find the person to be authentic or eager to please?

B

Tips for communicating with empathy

- ☐ Ask what they need and listen attentively
- ☐ Repeat important information back to the customer
- ☐ Simplify the message
- ☐ Avoid assigning blame
- ☐ Provide short and simple answers to questions
- ☐ Use clear language
- ☐ Avoid using acronyms and slang
- ☐ Speak slowly and clearly
- ☐ Remain calm even if the customer is agitated
- ☐ Avoid talking down to the customer
- ☐ Provide options to help them work around technology
- ☐ Avoid giving unsolicited advice
- ☐ Have realistic expectations

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About NICE

With NICE, it's never been easier for organisations of all sizes around the globe to create extraordinary customer experiences while meeting key business metrics. Featuring the world's #1 cloud native customer experience platform, CXone, NICE is a worldwide leader in AI-powered self-service and agent-assisted CX software for the contact centre–and beyond. Over 25,000 organisations in more than 150 countries, including over 85 of the Fortune 100 companies, .partner with NICE to transform–and elevate–every customer interaction

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