Bridging the Gap: Enhancing Customer Experience with AI and Human-Centric Strategies

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Presents:

On July 10th, Intelligent Enterprise Leaders Alliance founder Rob Shannon had a captivating conversation with Brooke Lynch, Divisional Director of Digital, and Brian Cantor, Managing Director, Digital at Customer Management Practice.

During the engaging LinkedIn Live session, the trio explored how AI and human-centric strategies are transforming customer experience. They dived into the key factors behind customer dissatisfaction, how AI can deliver personalized support, and the importance of blending digital and human interactions.

Discover the insightful discussion below.

Rob Shannon

Hi, everyone. Welcome to the Intelligent Enterprise Storytellers. My name is Rob Shannon. I'm the founder of the Intelligent Enterprise Leaders Alliance. And today, it is my absolute pleasure to welcome to the program two analysts I really respect in the customer management space, Brian Cantor and Brooke Lynch. Brian is the managing director at CCW Digital division of the Customer Management Practice, and Brooke is the Divisional director at CCW Digital.

I had the pleasure of hearing a presentation not too long ago where Brian and Brooke recently presented some very thought provoking insights at CCW Vegas in late June, and today I'm really looking forward to diving a lot deeper into those findings. Brian, Brooke, welcome to the program.

Brian Cantor

Thrilled to be here. And it was great seeing you in Vegas, great seeing you this weekend. Really great seeing you and the full team's commitment to better understanding how we can make our companies more intelligent, and how we can leverage technology in a productive way that enhances rather than sacrificing humanity.

Rob Shannon

Absolutely. And I have a lot of questions. We have 30 minutes, so we're going to have to move through some of these pretty quickly.

But, Brooke, I want to start with you. You just talked about a couple of weeks ago CCW digital published its annual customer experience survey on six trends, challenges and opportunities, and that study uncovered a big divide between what customers expect from their experiences and what brands are actually capable of delivering. And so I was hoping you can share just a couple of those findings with us.

One of them really stuck out to me. I think it was something like 55% of customers feel that their experiences with brands have gotten worse over the past year. So, obviously that's a concern.

But I know you guys have really dive deeply into the research. so I'll let you talk to us and our viewers out there today about some of these findings.

Brooke Lynch

Yeah, sure. And thanks so much, Rob, for kicking us off here. But we're very excited to share some new research from our CX trends, challenges, and opportunities market study. This is the one time every year that we ask customers what they are seeing in terms of experiences. So it's really enlightening. And Rob, like you mentioned, we found some really interesting statistics, one of them being that 55% of customers right now say that experiences are getting worse.

And this is honestly surprising to me because we talk so much in this space about customer centricity, about innovation, and how we're so focused on experiences, and yet we're still seeing numbers like 55%. And that's a huge number. And so I think you kind of briefly alluded, Rob, to the fact that there's just such a disconnect between what customers are expecting right now out of brands and what companies are actually working to deliver.

So I wanted to share some sentiment on how experiences are today. So in our most recent market study, like I mentioned, we found that only 26% of customers say that experiences are convenient, 22% say that they can actually choose the channel, whether it's phone or digital or self-service - they don't really have that autonomy. Only 17% say that the experience is consistent across different channels, and only 16% that that experience is really personalized to their needs.

So honestly, customers are not overwhelmingly happy. I think in in any aspect of the experience right now, they're not getting that consistent support. So every channel is kind of its own experience, whether you call in, whether you use a chat function, you're not getting the same level of support. It doesn't really feel connected in any way, so it's not convenient.

And they can't even choose the channel that they want. So they're lacking that autonomy to have a really seamless and fluid experience. And again, they're not even getting that level of personalization. So it all just kind of feels very generic. It's convoluted. It's honestly difficult at sometimes. And yet, we're at this place where technology really offers such a huge potential in innovating and improving operations. So it's a really interesting dynamic.

So I think from, from my perspective, I think leaders really must take this moment right now to listen to customers, get their feedback and use technology to enhance those key areas that customers are complaining about. so they make customers happy so they're able to remove those points of friction and make the journey more seamless for customers.

I think from there, they can then pick really specific use cases and leverage tools like AI to make more productive changes. And we're obviously going to get into that today. But, I think until we really understand what customers want out of experiences and how we need to deliver, then we're going to continue to see numbers like that 55%.

Brian Cantor
Yeah. And just to echo some sentiment there, there's a school of thought, a common phrase out there that customers, above all, care about getting their problem solved. So, you know, it's not the worst thing in the world if it's not ultra fast or ultra convenient or they don't choose the channel, as long as the outcome is worth it.

Now our research every year disputes that notion. We do find that customers care about speed. They care about convenience. But even if we hypothetically assume that they don't, that their only goal is to get a great resolution to their problem. Perhaps most unfortunately, that is really where brands are struggling.

We find that 60% of customers say that they're not getting the refund or the make good, or their compensation they're looking for.

They're being told no more than they ever have. And so you think about all the stats Brooke just shared, right? They're waiting on hold. They're going through all these convoluted channels. They're switching from rep to rep. They're repeating information. They're dealing with all this frustration. And then when they finally get to the end of that rainbow, there's no pot of gold there. There's just a disappointing resolution.

So why wait? Why deal with complexity? Why deal with frustration if this brand, when push comes to shove, can't even give you the resolution you're looking for?

Rob Shannon
Some great points, and thank you for sharing. I think everyone out there, including myself, has had these kinds of experiences that you just talked about.

Although those percentages really surprise me. In fact, one that you talked about really shocked me, because everyone's talking about AI. And so I think there's an assumption that that's going to solve a lot of problems, particularly customer service, customer experience problems. But with only 22% of the folks that you surveyed citing AI as an aid, essentially, did that surprise you as well? What are companies meant to do in that respect?

Brian, I know you've done some specific work in this area, so I was hoping you can talk to our viewers about your findings, regarding AI and the service experience.

Brian Cantor

Yeah. I think the key here is that generic self-service, you know, the static FAQ page, instructional video... We already know how to find that. We can do our own Google searches.

We can search through the website. The customer knows the information that's out there statically. When they choose to engage with your brand, it's because that information wasn't good enough, wasn't easy enough to find, wasn't effective. And so you're only using AI correctly if you're actually enabling customers to get a more relevant resolution, go above what's available on the static FAQ page, make language easier for them to understand.

And unfortunately, what they're finding is that today's bots aren't actually using AI. Companies might be spending millions of dollars on this AI rollout, but the actual interaction they're having is no better than a generic FAQ page. It regurgitates knowledge that's already out there. It doesn't understand what the customer is looking for. It doesn't personalize the interaction. It doesn't add any value.

And so now if you're a customer, you're already predisposed to thinking that if I have a serious issue, I need to speak to an agent, but maybe I'll give this AI thing a shot. And then you give the bot a shot and it gets you no further than where you were without trying.

Except now you've wasted back and forth conversations, extra time that's going to make you even more frustrated with the brand, and even less likely to trust automation moving forward. I know we're going to get into some specific areas like personalization and humanity, and I think it's really important to understand how AI can fuel those, because if it doesn't, we're not going to see the buy in. And all this hype, all this investment is going to be for nothing.

Rob Shannon

Yeah, you mentioned personalization. It was actually the next question that I had for you, Brooke. I know you've done a lot of work in this area as well. That AI is, for proactive companies, being looked at as a way to power more personalized support for customers.

What can you tell us about that topic today?

Brooke Lynch

Yeah, so I think when it comes to personalization today, I just stated earlier that as few as 16% of customers are really seeing personalization in every action, every interaction that they encounter. So it's not a widespread, kind of thing right now. So when it comes to personalization, I think leaders really need to set a clear definition of what it looks like.

I think Brian kind of alluded to this, but when we think about personalization, I think we're quick to jump to the idea of saying the customer's name three times, having this pleasant, nice conversation. But realistically, personalization, I think, needs to dive a little bit deeper than that. It's not just necessarily addressing a customer in a way that recognizes their entire history.

I think it's just having functions in place that allow the experience to be a lot more seamless and give customers easy access to a resolution, as Brian kind of talked about.

So using technology to make customers' experience more seamless and giving them the tools that they need in every single moment, and every touchpoint, and giving them the options to solve an issue in a way that meets their needs in every case, I think is the best way to personalize. And also giving agents the contact to proactively address a concern, I think, is another way to really get that level of personalization up and give agents the insight to be able to, in every interaction, feel like they're addressing customers' needs really effectively.

In terms of AI, I think it can be a really powerful tool for both the customer and the agent experience. I think technology like generative AI has shown us that there's so much potential to enhance the self-service experience. Give us that really conversational tone that customers are lookingfor.Thatreallyintuitive,easyplatformforthemtoengage.

It feels really human-like and easy. And it's such a helpful tool, I think behind the scenes, too. It can help summarize interactions and support a lot of that post call work that agents are dealing with. So I think it can really help personalize both the customer experience when they're on the phone and even just enhance their self-service interactions.

So everything is just more seamless. It's more human centered, and it's just more personal to the customer's needs.

Brian Cantor
I think Brooke summarized it perfectly, but one thing I would add here, a phrase that we've adopted is that personalization is not showing off what you know about the customer, it's using what you know to show them a better experience.

And I think we've all probably called the brand at some point. Thanks for being a platinum member. Thanks for being a VIP member. That is how the brand thinks. It's personalizing the experience. Hey, we called him out. We thanked him, we did a great job. And then guess what happens?

I'm this VIP member who gets very un VIP treatment. I don't reward you for knowing I'm a VIP member. I dislike you because you didn't give me the experience I was looking for. Recently, I actually rented a car for a July 4th trip and had a problem with my bill. You know, it was with Budget, you know, I'm okay with mentioning brands that don't always satisfy me here.

So I called them up. The IVR knew exactly that "Hey, Brian, good to hear from you again." So it recognized my number, it knew who I was. Use some intelligence there. But then the first question, instead of saying, "Are you calling about this reservation?" it said, "Go back to our menu and choose which option you would like." So it completely squandered that recognition.

I go through the menu, I get to the agent. The agent then asks me to repeat everything I already chose in that IVR, because the information wasn't being passed along.

AI is not going to wow you with an amazing conversation, but what it can do is pass the most meaningful intelligence past that to the right stakeholder, be it a bot, be it an agent, and show that recognition and use that to make the experience faster, more relevant, more valuable and let the customer know that you care about them because you're making this experience better, not just that you're making it friendlier.

Rob Shannon

I think we've all had experiences like that. I know I can go on a long list myself. And so when you talk about that example and Brian or Brooke, this one's for you. Is that what you would consider AI being used as a deflection tool? If not, how would you describe AI currently as it's being used when it comes to deflection within the customer journey.

Brian Cantor

Yeah. And I think one of the things here is that people have built this perception that AI is an alternative. It's a lesser experience than what the human can provide. And so that's why you'll see stats and I think we might get into this later if we have time. But you'll see stats saying like 95% of customers still expect access to a live agent.

You'll see stats like an ability to access a live agent is the number one pain point. As much as we love our team members, I promise you it's not because your customers are begging to talk to Mary from your call center. They're doing that because they've been led to believe that the automated solution is fundamentally lesser. It's going to be harder to use. It's going to get you a minimal resolution, and it's going to be not as worth your time is just waiting on hold to speak to that live person.

What we have to start looking at is not AI being for simple issues or for the easy, repetitive stuff, looking at it as where can it save the customer time but still give them the right resolution?

You know, you think of the classic case like your delivery status. Imagine, like in today's world, having to call the restaurant and say, like, when is my food going to be here? And wait to speak to someone if they pick up, deal with all the noise of the restaurant in the background? No, of course, by having the bot say, okay, here's where we are, here's what this customer ordered, here's what their queue looks like, let's predict you a time when the food's going to be delivered. That's a lot more effective.

So the key again is looking at AI not as if you don't want to wait on hold for a live agent and you're okay taking a lesser resolution, say here. Instead, if in this context it can be more

valuable to not have you wait, but still give you what you're looking for, let's save you time. Let's use AI to make that happen. And that's the correct approach there.

Rob Shannon
Yeah. Great points. Brooke, I want to come back to you kind of question that's jumping into my mind. And Brian has touched on a couple of these things in his example with his car rental experience. But it's the balancing the human element with, obviously, the AI powered interactions that are available.

And then looking at customer analytics, obviously, it's a big passion of mine. We spend a lot of time researching in that space and know what it can theoretically do in terms of personalized experiences and giving context on customers and hopefully being able to better suit their needs in the future. But, I don't think many brands are really leveraging the technology in a way that it doesn't feel robotic, feels overly robotic, Brian, as you pointed out.

So I'm just curious, you know, Brooke, the search for human centric experience arguably is more important than ever before, particularly as people talk about AI displacing humans. So it's kind of an interesting dichotomy. How can you recommend that companies navigate that dynamic as they go forward in this dynamic environment?

Brooke Lynch
Yeah. I mean, it's such an important question.

I think it is like the question of this moment right now. And, and I want to share a little bit of research. But it's funny because the number one pain point this year that we found in our market study was a lack of access to a live person.

So just to give some context, over the last few years, we saw the same pain point resurface every year. It was that customers are dealing with long wait times.

So we're noticing a shift, finally, that customers are just not even they're not even waiting online. They're not even able to get online. They can't even access a person or an agent. They feel like they're being constricted to certain channels. And so I think it's a really important observation that we saw in our market study that we're now seeing customers really still want access to humans. And yet we're seeing so much innovation and so much technology that can really remove us from that experience.

So I think with the introduction of things like generative AI, I've mentioned it a few times here. but I think there's been this push now for self-service and digital because we see that it works. We see tools like ChatGPT be really effective and interesting for customers to use.

And now that we can provide those really great, exceptional self-service experiences, why would we need customers to ask an agent simple things. that could be solved with the chat bot. But I, from the customer's point of view, don't think that they see it that way. They don't see the channel choices as just a product of their functionality. Just because chat's easy, that's the best, opportunity for me to engage with the brand.

Sometimes they just want access to a person so they can share maybe their frustration, maybe they want to share some context, maybe they're complaining just to get something back from the company. Like there's so much more to the conversation that sometimes isn't just going to be heard by a chat bot.

So I think that's one of the pieces here that navigating, that need to talk to a human in need to explain your problem while still having like a really convenient and easy experience. So I think keeping your experience human centered and giving customers options is really still critical today, because customers don't want to feel forced into anything. And in the past, I think chat bots have sometimes, as we just mentioned, been leveraged as that deflection tool.

So making this option just as valuable as a phone conversation, I think is one way that we could humanize the experience. But also just giving customers that option and that autonomy to choose how they engage.

One other thing I wanted to mention here about this humanized experience, because it's easy to say, yeah, chat bots sometimes don't work. We want access to a human, and that just solves all of our problems.

But sometimes the human led experience also has its own faults. And I think as we see more customers use self-service, we need to reiterate the importance of giving an amazing experience with a human on the phone.

So, I wanted to share some research, because we recently asked customers what their experience has been like when they actually do reach an agent and have that personal conversation. And 23% said that agents felt knowledgeable. So not very high.

19% said that they are actually focused on solving the customer's issue. And then 16% of customers said that agents feel emotionally intelligent. And so those numbers are obviously a bit concerning. I'm sure people have had their complaints with customer service in the past, but now we're seeing customers really complain that the human conversation is just not that great. They're not getting their needs met on that channel either.

So I think focusing now on building some of their soft skills and allowing agents to connect with customers and not just hold them accountable for some of those key metrics, I think is a really important step if we want to humanize the experience. And then again, Rob, as you mentioned,

the importance of analytics. So giving agents that insight, that data and that context on the customer. So when they are escalated and they are having the conversation with an agent, the agent is a true expert in every sense, and they can address the customer's needs, they can see that context, and build an experience in that moment that feels really powerful and worth their time.

Rob Shannon

These are some really great points, and I'm kind of half smiling because in my mind, I'm thinking about now the challenge of deploying this technology at the same time keeping the human in the loop, and me often screaming "representative" into the phone 30 seconds or maybe not even 30s into an interaction with a lot of brands that I do business with.

So there's no shortage of challenges there. And I think your research really backs that up. And you should also touch on some points as it relates to, you know, we've talked about external facing, customer facing issues so far. But it does kind of bring me to the internal issues. And what are agents facing in this kind of environment that you're describing?

How has AI impacted that experience and how if you've done research or you've had conversations in this area, can I support perhaps a better employee experience within the customer service contact center realm?

Brian Cantor

Yeah. And so I think really when you look at the stats Brooke just shared, when you see that agents are not coming across as knowledgeable or empathetic or focused, it ultimately stems from too much effort distracting them from doing what they're supposed to do, which is be a great brand ambassador and make a truly strong connection with customers.

And to show some data that we had from a previous market study on generative AI, 86% of companies said their agents spend too much time looking up information about customers. You know, then we have issues like 75% have issues with the knowledge base, 74% don't have previous information about what the customer said, 72% are spending too much time on note taking, 71% too much time on post call work.

All those things are consuming too much time, which means, and that time has to come from somewhere, and that time, that energy, that focus, that drive it comes at the expense of a strong customer interaction.

So customers are actually suffering when agents are spending too much time on other things. Let's not forget the agent is also suffering. When you look at what keeps an agent motivated and happy and engaged, our research and frankly, common sense tells you that the effort and the frustration of doing their job is actually the number one driver of their satisfaction.

Yes, of course people want to get paid. Of course they want to have a great work environment. But when you're in a contact center and you're like, if only I was getting paid $0.12 more an hour, I wouldn't care about having to look at 75 different screens every time I want to do my job. No, you know your salary. You know what you're paid. You know your job. What makes you happy or sad is how easy and rewarding that job is. And if we want our agents to be this amazing consultant who can provide more than the bot can provide, who can make that strong connection, we can't have agents who are distracted, and we also can't have agents who are disengaged.

Now, Brooke, I know that you also have some research on the skills they'll need because it's not just about giving them the time they have to rise to this new standard of what it takes to connect with customers.

Brooke Lynch

Yeah. So as you mentioned, Brian, agents are really doing a lot their workload super complex. And yet we're still expecting so much from them in terms of growth and development, as they handle more difficult workflows and more difficult conversations with customers.

So I wanted to share the list of competencies that CX leaders outlined as essential moving forward for the agent to develop. So 95% of contact center leaders say that they want agents to be able to handle complex interactions. As we see self-service handle some of those more simple tasks, agents are going to be left with the more complex interactions.

89% want them to be able to handle more emotional interactions. So if customers are frustrated, if they're emotional, agents really need to have the emotional intelligence and the empathy to handle some of those.

86% want them to engage in multiple channels. So they're not just on the phone, not just on digital. They have so many different skills that they can leverage no matter the channel and really connect with customers at every touchpoint.

And then 84% want agents to be able to collect and leverage knowledge and feedback. So, in the moment, they're able to look at a customer's history, look at that context, and adjust the conversation to meet customer's need in that moment.

Rob Shannon

This is such great information. So I want to actually hit pause for a quick second here.

We've got about five minutes left. Talk to our viewers a little bit about CCW Digital, the mission, and if they can download this information or any other work that your team is doing in this area. Perhaps give them some directions on where they can find that info.

Brian Cantor

Yeah. So I saw some of those questions, and I don't know that from this interface I can share the link, but we'll certainly get that off to everyone afterward.

CCW Digital is the number one community for customer contact and customer experience professionals. So we provide research trends, content, key studies, all dedicated to understanding what ultimately is happening in the world of customer contact, how we can empower our employees to make meaningful connections with customers, both through stronger conversations, better personalization, and, of course, technology.

Most of the stats, you know, Brooke's really been leading the way on stats here. Most of what she shared has come from the six trends market study that both she and Rob alluded to, that's available on the CCW Digital dot com website for free right now.

Additionally, we have a previous market study called State of Generative AI, which has some of the additional stats we've shared. And then coming out later this month will be the AI powered contact center. So, no shortage of free content about what's going on in the world of AI and how to elevate your customer experience as a result of it.

Rob Shannon

Thanks, Brian. Appreciate that. So there's a last area I want to talk about, and I think your next study that you just cited might include this as a big part of it. That's about chatbots and the chatbot experience.

I know your team has done a lot of work on identifying some of the to do's or checklist of how to make that experience. Perhaps better into the future. So for the companies that are listening in here, tell us a little bit about those findings and what sort of things you've learned and what recommendations you might have for organizations currently deploying or thinking about deploying chatbots.

Brooke Lynch

Yeah, so I'll walk through a couple of the recommendations that we came up with. But I would say at this point, Brian and I are kind of passionate about the chatbot experience. We want it to be better. We know that there's so much potential. So we came up with four recommendations.

I'm going to walk through the first two and then Brian can share the rest here. But the first one that we wanted to share is that organizations cannot build walls. So I alluded to this a few times already, but customers want the autonomy to choose how they engage with your brand. When you restrict access to any channel, it becomes a point of friction for the customer. It doesn't matter if that is the most easy, seamless experience possible on your chatbot. If customers cannot reach a human, they're going to be upset and they're going to be frustrated when they don't have that option. So I think not building walls and making sure that you're giving them the choice, I think is most important.

And honestly, you're going to see, I think, more adoption on your chatbot if you just give them access, if you give them choice that they can go on any channel, they're going to use your chatbot, they're going to use different channels because they know it's not their only option.

So that's the first recommendation that we have.

And the second one is to leverage conversational and generative AI. So I think customers are used to really inefficient chatbots. I'm sure we've all had an experience that wasn't the best. Sometimes chatbots can honestly just be like a glorified FAQ page where they're just directing you to content. You're not getting any kind of resolution. They're just kind of basic.

So leveraging conversational AI and generative AI to make that experience more intuitive, I think is a great way to begin making those steps to improve your chat experience.

Brian Cantor

And then I'll try to blast through the latter two, just with a few minutes left. So one, the third one, would be provide real resolutions. And this is an area where one of the major reasons people escalate is because they assume that the bot is going to spit back something from the knowledge base, and if I want a refund, if I want a make good, if I want something a little off script, I have to wait to speak to a live agent.

If you want to build trust in your bot, the bot has to be empowered to provide resolutions. It doesn't mean every bot has to give every customer $1 million, but things like "I'll process your refund" or "I see your order was wrong. Let me get that corrected" That's what a huge expectation is for customers right now.

And then finally, our fourth point is ensure that escalation elevates the conversation.

A little bit of a play on words, you know, with all that with escalation and elevate. But it also speaks to the reality that if you decide okay, to Brooke's point, this bot's not good enough for me, I want to move to a live person. You're declaring that what was in the bot didn't work for you. So when you get to that live agent, that live agent better be prepared to not just give you the exact same answer the bot did.

It better be prepared to hear you understand. You know why the bot failed and elevate that part of the conversation. So that requires empowerment of the agent. It also requires true context sharing. So everything you've shared with the bot finds its way to the agent, and they can continue without starting from scratch.

Rob Shannon
Yeah. Thank you Brian. And thank you, Brooke, for sharing that checklist.

That's really, really insightful. We've basically come up on time.

So firstly, I want to thank you very much for your time and your preparation. Great information. I hope everyone out there is really taking some excellent notes and that you can go ahead and find those, surveys and reports that Brian and Brooke referenced, so you can enjoy those as well at your leisure, and also remind everyone that these issues and much more are going to be discussed at the upcoming Customer Analytics exchange in September in Los Angeles.

So on behalf of the Intelligent Enterprise signing off, thank you again, Brian and Brooke. Take care everyone.

Brooke Lynch
Thanks everyone.