uniphore

DELIVER A FRICTIONLESS CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE DESPITE STAFFING CHALLENGES

A PLAYBOOK FOR
TRAVEL & HOSPITALITY

E-BOOK

HOW TO REGAIN THE TRUST AND LOYALTY OF TRAVELERS

The travel and hospitality industry was one of the hardest hit sectors of the pandemic. In fact, it has not yet recovered. Just as a rebound was gaining steam, further roadblocks to recovery appeared — geopolitical concerns, economic headwinds and talent shortages to name a few. In truth, the industry may never be the same because of lasting changes to how we live, work and travel since the onset of the pandemic.

In light of evolving demand and ongoing changes to consumer and business travel behavior, leaders in this industry are realizing that they must do everything possible to regain customer trust and loyalty. Industry experts such as McKinsey & Company agree and view customer experience as the top challenge for companies in this sector as operational constraints, staffing challenges, supply scarcity and reduced amenities and services combine to threaten customer satisfaction.[1]

What will it take for these companies to adapt to the new needs, wants, and behaviors of travel consumers and deliver the kind of experiences that drive loyalty? It will require a transformative approach that overcomes customer service challenges while optimizing customer journeys, eliminating friction, and personalizing the experience before, during and after travel. At the same time, transformation must include improving the agent experience to help them create better customer experiences, become proficient faster and resolve issues quickly.

None of this is possible without conversational artificial intelligence (AI) and automation that can listen to, understand and analyze human conversations to optimize the end-to-end experience, allowing travel and hospitality companies to realize the value of every conversation.

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[1] "Rebooting Customer Experience to Bring Back the Magic of Travel," McKinsey & Company, September 2021.

Slow on the Rebound

U.S. travel remains at 10% below 2019 levels and 16% below where spending would have been in 2022 if not for the pandemic. Business travel lags the most, with the projection of domestic business travel volume in 2022 being 19% below pre-pandemic levels.

Source: "U.S. Travel Forecast: All Sectors Projected to Surge in Short Term, but Headwinds Are on Horizon," U.S. Travel Association, June 2022
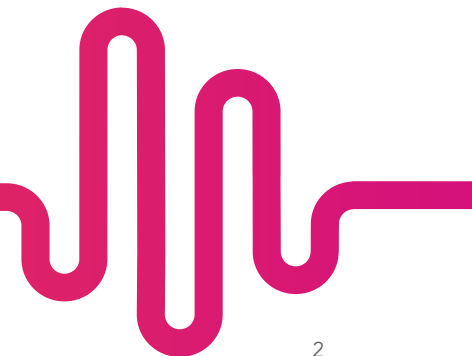
CUSTOMER SERVICE FACES MORE TURBULENCE

As travelers hit the road in greater numbers, higher volume of interactions is both a blessing and a burden as customer service operations struggle to overcome new and growing challenges, including:

Ongoing labor shortages: Companies in this sector can't hire fast enough to meet surging demand. One reason is that during the pandemic, up to 70% of all hospitality workers in the U.S. and the U.K. were furloughed or laid off and it's proving difficult to get them to return.[2]

High attrition rates: Pre-pandemic, the perks of being an employee in the travel industry — deals on airfare, hotel stays and more — helped keep attrition low. Not so anymore. With many non-travel and hospitality jobs offering more flexibility now, retention has become a much bigger problem than in the past.

Customer dissatisfaction: Rental car shortages, cancelled flights, not enough staffing and reduced amenities at hotels are a few of the inconveniences and frustrations facing travelers today. Then when something goes awry, the long wait times for service — with staffing issues once again the culprit — sap customers of the last bit of patience they might have left.

High complexity of transactions: Continuing COVID restrictions that vary from hotel to hotel, city to city, country to country, and in the case of business travel from corporation to corporation, mean that travelers contact customer service with more complex questions and concerns than ever. Employees lack easy access to up-to-date information, leading to longer handle times, inconsistent responses and increased customer effort.

Changing traveler behavior: The reasons why someone is traveling are not as easy to identify in the post-pandemic era. As work from anywhere takes firmer root in our corporate fabric, the needs and expectations of the traveler and their families are also changing.

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1.5 Million Open Jobs

"Not having employees is just as damaging as not having customers. There are currently one-and-a-half-million open jobs in leisure and hospitality in the United States. This lag and workforce recovery bears on the performance of our industry."

Tori Emerson Barnes, *Executive Vice President of Public Affairs, U.S. Travel*

Source: "Industry Leaders Address Travel's Labor Shortage at IPW Show," Johanna Jainchill, Travel Weekly, June 2022

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[2] "How to 'ACE' Hospitality Recruitment," McKinsey & Company, June 2022

IT TAKES A GOOD AGENT EXPERIENCE TO CREATE GOOD CUSTOMER EXPERIENCES

Often, a great customer experience in the travel and hospitality sector starts with a great self-service journey. But it doesn't always end there. One of the major lessons coming out of the pandemic is that a great employee experience is essential for a great customer experience. You can't have one without the other. Satisfied employees stay in their jobs longer, are more productive and empathetic, and take the right steps to reduce customer effort and improve satisfaction.

Until now, travel and hospitality companies have struggled to use technology in ways that significantly improve both the experience and agent performance. The crux of the problem is that companies had no way to listen to and understand every interaction with customers. They couldn't extract the value of each conversation to enable personalized, accurate and automated customer and agent experiences.

Advanced conversational AI and automation are changing that. An integrated platform of conversational AI and automation solutions transforms the customer and agent experience by:

○ Guiding customers at any touchpoint and helping employees/agents manage complex customer conversations and processes to drive seamless travel experiences

○ Automating entire conversations, tasks and processes across touchpoints for effortless customer experiences

○ Understanding not only what customers say, but what they need with real-time and historical insights

The following use cases illustrate some of the exciting ways these new technologies are being implemented across the travel and hospitality industry. They provide a glimpse into how a conversational AI and automation platform can help contact centers in this sector optimize the conversation and overcome the staffing, training, complexity and other challenges they face.

Most Hotel Bookings Are Self-Service

On average, more than 8 out of 10 hotel bookings are completed without human intervention.

Source: "Growth Opportunities for Global Travel and Hospitality Customer Engagement," ResearchandMarkets.com, June 2022

# Use Case #1: Reduce Onboarding Effort and Time to Proficiency for New Agents

While the challenges of filling vacant jobs are what make the headlines, onboarding and helping employees quickly become proficient is as much of an issue in today's complex environment. The faster an agent can become proficient, the better the experience for the agent and customers.

A solution that includes real-time, in-call agent assistance and interaction analytics helps you make the most of a limited pool of talent and shorten training time. With dynamic and preprogrammed guidance, you can help agents avoid mistakes, resolve issues faster and be more productive sooner.
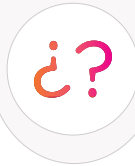
Questions to Ask

- How much time do your agents spend manually looking up information across multiple systems?

- Do your agents have real-time, in-call coaching guidance?

- Which agent actions during the call are most likely to result in mistakes and omissions?

- Are your agents required to memorize or look up manual workflows?
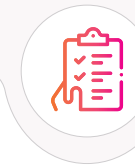
Action List

- Take advantage of advanced conversational AI to provide personalized, dynamic guidance based on the conversation, with real-time analysis of customer context including sentiment, emotion and intent.

- Give your agents real-time agent assistance with pre-programmed guidance including proactive and predictive help in the form of scripts, embedded processes, guided workflows and next best actions.

- Automate tasks during and after the call to free up agents to focus on the conversation, resolve issues more quickly and avoid errors that result in repeat calls.

- Take advantage of post-interaction analysis of 100% of calls to identify call drivers and update agent training to address the most frequent issues.

Outcomes

- Help agents become proficient faster.

- Streamline processes to reduce training and onboarding time.

- Provide information in real time so agents can focus on the conversation.

- Reduce the number of screens that agents need to log into during the workflow.

- Reduce average handle time and shorten wait times for customers.

Use Case #2: Improve the Agent Experience and Retention

Given all the issues finding and hiring new employees, it's critical to make sure you're doing everything possible to retain them. Conversational AI and automation can help reduce agent stress and anxiety and improve their job satisfaction. The right AI-powered solution augments human agents to make their experiences better, helping them spend more time on the things they do best and less time on menial tasks.
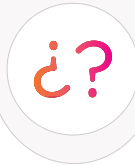
Questions to Ask

- Are agent satisfaction and retention low?

- Which tasks create the greatest frustration and poor experiences for agents?

- Do agents have immediate access to customer information without having to manually look up information in multiple systems?

- How much time do agents spend summarizing the call?

- How much time do your agents spend on all after-call work (ACW) activities
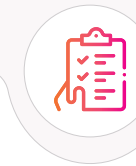
Action List

- Deploy real-time, in-call agent assistance for automatic insights and guidance, empowering agents to focus on the conversation.

- Implement a conversational AI and automation solution that automatically handles ACW — including categorizing and summarizing the call, updating systems, and taking follow-up actions.

- Choose a solution that automatically updates the CRM system as well as others to further reduce or eliminate manual tasks.

- Implement AI-powered interaction analytics to monitor and analyze agent sentiment and emotion to uncover issues impacting agent experience, satisfaction and retention.

Outcomes

- Improve agent satisfaction and reduce attrition.

- Free up the agent to spend more time interacting with customers.

- Optimize and enhance the traveler's and the agent's experience.

- Identify further opportunities for automation and operational improvement to reduce agent frustration and improve the agent experience.

Use Case #3: Improve Traveler Satisfaction and Contact Center Efficiency

High call volumes are stressful and frustrating for agents and travelers alike. The problem is that current self-service efforts often fall short of consumer expectations, forcing travelers to start over in a new channel to seek resolution for issues such as cancelling reservations.

The right conversational AI and automation solution can help travel companies increase self-service and automation rates and deflect transactional interactions from contact center agents — all while delivering an optimized customer experience, improving contact center efficiency and enhancing scalability for seasonal demand.

Questions to Ask

- Can travelers quickly find the answer to their questions?

- How often do customers have to start over in a new channel to get their queries resolved?

- Are your contact center agents overwhelmed with calls, including many that could be resolved more quickly and easily with conversational self-service?

- Do your IVR and/or self-service channels understand customer sentiment and intent?

- Do your self-service channels transfer context as conversations move or escalate to an agent or do customers have to start over in the new channel?

- Does your current self-service capability offer the same experience across multiple channels?

Action List

- Deploy a multimodal intelligent virtual assistant (IVA) across IVR, web and mobile as a voicebot and/or chatbot to improve the traveler self-service experience.

- Make sure your IVA uses conversational AI to understand customer sentiment and intent, which will drive self-service automation rates, thus reducing the number of contact center interactions.

- Choose an AI platform with automation that passes the context from your IVA to agents to create a frictionless interaction and a shorter average handle time.

Outcomes

- Deliver a seamless, consistent customer experience via voice, web and mobile.

- Offload interactions and reduce contact center volume.

- Accelerate resolution and improve traveler satisfaction.

- Improve the customer and agent experience when escalating from self-service to agent assistance by alerting the agent to customer sentiment, intent and next best actions.

Use Case #4: Fulfill Promises Automatically to Improve Traveler Satisfaction and Loyalty

When a corporate travel agent or other customer service agent promises to take follow-up action after a call, travelers rely on those promises to be fulfilled. Yet, a common cause of customer dissatisfaction is the lack of a promised follow-up communication or action after the call has ended.

Automating promises management reduces the amount of time your agents spend on manual, time-consuming tasks to manage and fulfill promises while improving the customer experience, satisfaction and loyalty.

Questions to Ask

- How are promises/commitments logged today?

- How are commitments fulfilled?

- How much time do agents spend on promises management during and after the call?

- How many repeat calls are due to missed commitments and follow-ups?

- What additional time is added to call handle times to address repeat and escalated calls due to missed commitments?

Action List

- Choose a conversational AI and automation platform that can automatically recognize, log and enrich promises. After the call, it should send the traveler a summary of the promises made to align expectations and then automatically manage the fulfillment of the promises.

- Deploy a solution that automatically logs and enriches promises and commitments made by agents in real time.

- Use automation to align expectations with customers immediately following the call to reduce repeat calls.

- Take advantage of robotic process automation (RPA) to automate fulfillment of promises after the call.

Outcomes

- Improve traveler satisfaction and loyalty.

- Reduce repeat calls.

- Shorten agent processing time and free up agents to help the next traveler.

Use Case #5: Automate Knowledge Across the Enterprise

Keeping track of all the relevant information about local venues, destinations and experiences is an impossible task for centralized contact center agents. Unfortunately, knowledge management systems are unwieldy and time consuming to use — especially for new employees.

Instead, contact centers can use knowledge AI capabilities to automate collecting and using information from across the enterprise. Knowledge AI empowers IVAs for self-service and assists human agents during customer interactions, getting the right information to travelers quickly and with less effort.

Questions to Ask

- How long does it take travelers to obtain site-specific information?

- Do centralized agents transfer customers to local employees to get answers to customer questions about properties, policies or experiences?

- Do your self-service tools provide answers to questions specific to a location, such as "Is the pool open at the hotel I've reserved?"

Action List

- Look for a solution that offers knowledge AI capabilities such as semantic understanding, knowledge extraction and cognitive search to deliver intelligent, relevant and contextual answers in real time to customers and agents.

- Use knowledge AI to empower IVAs and human agents with relevant, personalized answers and recommendations.

Outcomes

- Improve customer satisfaction and loyalty by delivering the information travelers seek.

- Reduce customer effort and improve self-service adoption and usage rates.

- Enhance agent productivity by orchestrating processes and knowledge in a single conversation flow.

- Increase conversions by giving travelers the information they need to book their travel.

PRICELINE SHORTENS HANDLE TIME FOR 4.5 MILLION INTERACTIONS

A pioneer in online travel bookings, Priceline.com needed a better way to provide consistent and empathetic customer service at scale while efficiently handling complex scenarios. Whether online or traditional, travel agencies must coordinate with many partners, especially when it concerns cancellations and refunds. This makes many customer-service calls time and resource intensive.

That's why Priceline turned to Uniphore for its U-Assist solution that provides real-time, in-call agent assistance. U-Assist streamlines and automates complex calls, including those that require coordination across multiple parties. With U-Assist guiding and automating more than 4.5 million sessions a year, Priceline has:

• Shortened average handle time by up to 60 seconds

• Improved accuracy

• Increased business agility

• Reduced after call work

> *"A visual drag-and-drop interface enables business analysts, senior agents and product owners to quickly create, modify, test and deploy call flows or establish layouts, change roles, rules and privileges — without the need for IT support."*
>
> **SVP Customer Care**, *Priceline.com*

❯ NEXT STEPS

As travel and hospitality leaders focus their efforts on regaining customer trust and loyalty, they must find better approaches to delivering frictionless experiences. The best approach — one that improves the experience for all the humans involved — is based on harnessing the power of conversational AI and automation.

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