# 5 Ways to Manage Demand Swings in Your Contact Center

# Introduction

Most contact centers are built for efficiency, finely balancing service delivery against ongoing costs.

Even for companies that provide consistent, high-quality service, unforeseen events can quickly wreck all of the good work that's been done.

When the unexpected strikes or customer demands suddenly change significantly, contact centers must adapt quickly. They need a set of tools and processes that can help them maintain service quality with minimal effort and impact.

While the pandemic is an obvious example of a disruptive event, more common and even anticipated events such as planned system outages or holiday sales can also dramatically change the demand for contact center services.

**That's why agile businesses have levers ready to pull to keep their service delivery where it needs to be.**

This eBook shows five ways to maintain customer service levels when unexpected events occur:

1. **Leverage self-service for live call avoidance**
2. **Manage high inbound call volumes through call-back and queue management techniques**
3. **Use proactive outbound to flatten inbound demand**
4. **Improve speed and resolution through AI agent assistance**
5. **Offer alternatives to voice by integrating digital channels**

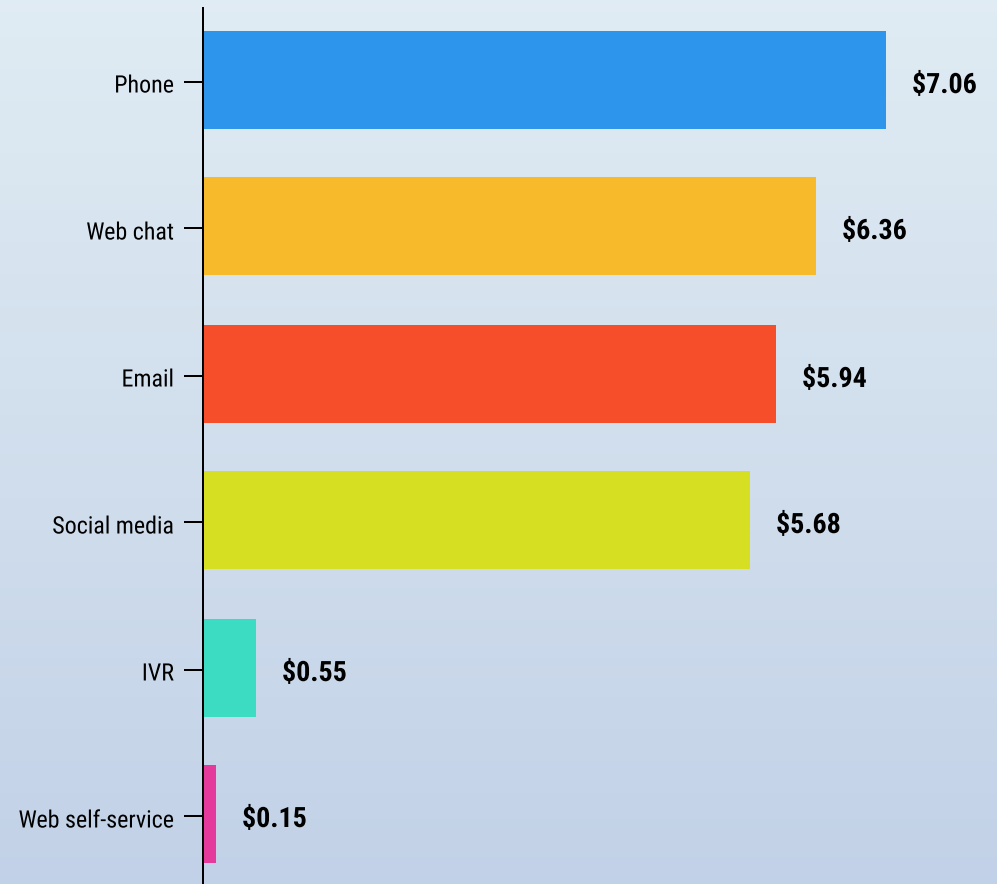# 1. Leverage self-service for live call avoidance

A reduction in live inbound phone calls means a drop in costs, and also an easing of pressure on phone service levels.

However, as the chart shows, the cost differential between live channels is by no means dramatic. For most, **a policy of moving live calls to manually handled digital channels—such as email or chat—will not significantly reduce the per-interaction cost or service level provision.**

The main reason for this is the relatively low level of automation being used for digital channels. And for emails, it's also the case that if the query is not resolved in the first response, the time and cost of multiple replies and potential follow-up phone calls will soon be greater than if the customer had simply just called in to speak to a live agent.

These figures suggest that despite the omnichannel revolution, **automation – whether through self-service or automating digital channels – offers the greatest opportunity for the most dramatic cost savings, which is particularly resonant in times of crisis.**

## Average cost per interaction

| Channel | Cost |
|---|---|
| Phone | $7.06 |
| Web chat | $6.36 |
| Email | $5.94 |
| Social media | $5.68 |
| IVR | $0.55 |
| Web self-service | $0.15 |

# 2. Call-back and queue management techniques

In our large-scale survey of wait times, 61% of the public really hate not knowing how much longer they will need to wait to talk to an agent. This reaction is less likely to happen in a store where a customer can see how many people are ahead of them, estimate their own wait time, and exercise some level of control over the situation. This physical queuing is psychologically easier for the customer to manage, even if the actual wait time is longer than a contact center queue.

**61%**
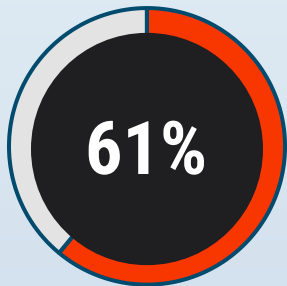
**Not knowing how much longer you'll have to wait**

**46%**
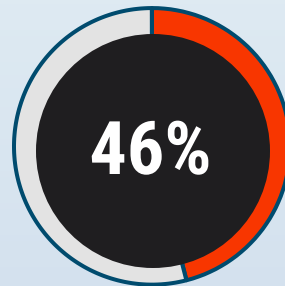
**Can't do anything else in the meantime**

**45%**
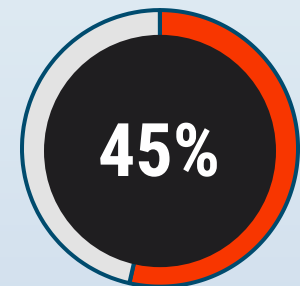
**Repetitive announcements**

Source: ContactBabel survey of 1,000 customers. Question: "What do you particularly dislike about call centre queuing?"
Data show % customers scoring this factor at the maximum 10/10.

The phenomenon of 'Dentist-Chair Time' – where time seems to stretch out to infinity – is very much active in the contact center world. Data from thousands of contact centers over many years indicate that an average wait time is around 30-60 seconds. However, when the public was asked to estimate the time they typically spent waiting to speak to a contact center agent, the average answer was 11½ minutes – up to 23 times longer than the reality.

**Sharing estimated queue times and offering call-backs gives back control to customers and helps you better manage inbound call volumes.**

# 3. Use proactive outbound to flatten inbound demand

While agents carry out the vast majority of targeted outbound contacts, the opportunity exists for automated proactive outbound, which not only improves the overall customer experience but can reduce costs as well.
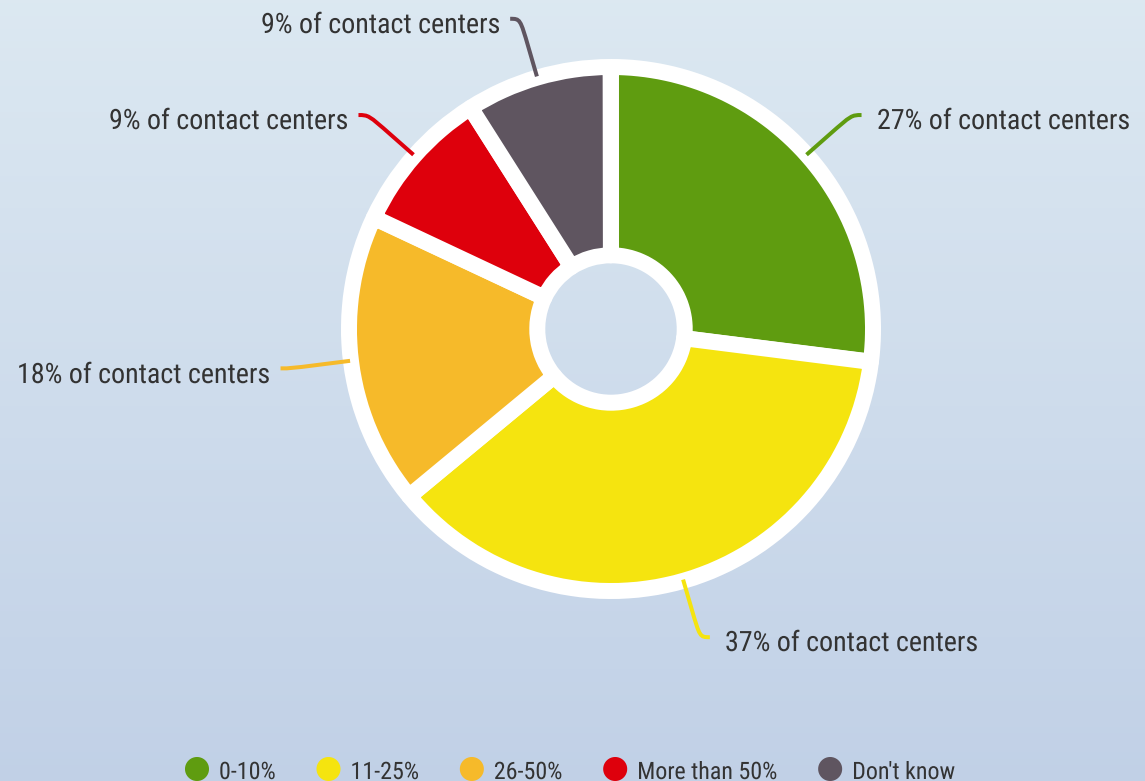
In our survey, 18% of US contact centers reported that between one-quarter and one-half of their inbound calls could be avoided if more proactivity was used.

And 9% of survey respondents stated that more than half of their calls could be avoided through proactive outbound service.

Customers often seek clarifications or status updates by contacting your contact center, especially in crises. By identifying when and why customers contact you, you can set up pre-emptive outbound messages such as an email or SMS to proactively assist customers. With this approach, you reduce inbound interactions and your costs.

**Businesses should analyze the type of customer interactions that they receive to see if there's a cost-effective way of proactively handling these.**

## % of inbound calls that could be avoided by proactive outbound

9% of contact centers

9% of contact centers

27% of contact centers

18% of contact centers

37% of contact centers

● 0-10%  ● 11-25%  ● 26-50%  ● More than 50%  ● Don't know

# 4. Improve speed and resolution through AI agent assistance

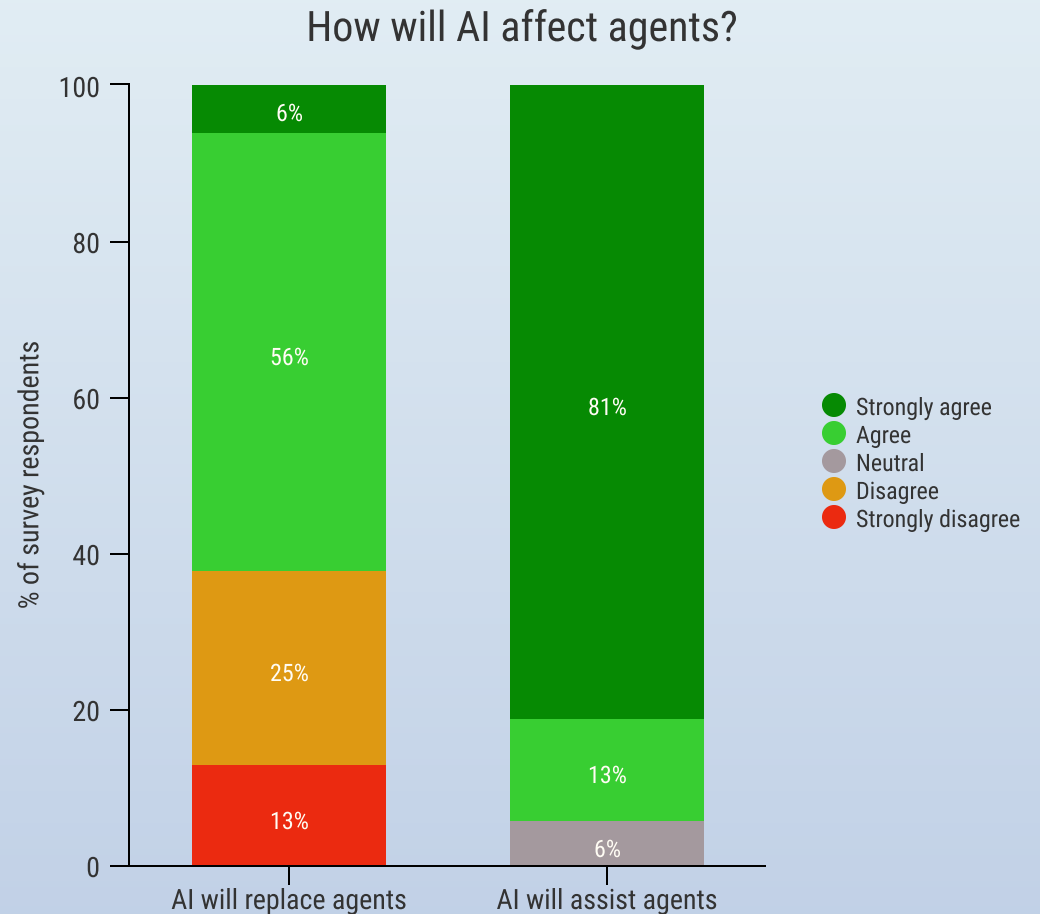Using AI to assist agents in real time is a real paradigm shift.

An agent-customer interaction is between two people, and the level of support that an agent can actually be given within a call is limited.

Now, AI can work alongside agents to provide relevant knowledge that would otherwise take a long time to find, update the knowledge bases – available both to humans and AI self-service systems – and track actual outcomes to see what works and what doesn't.

Survey respondents were conflicted as to whether AI would replace agents, with 62% agreeing or strongly agreeing that this would be the case, and 38% disagreeing to some extent.

**When asked if AI would support human agents, 94% agreed or strongly agreed that AI and agents will work alongside each other.**

Using AI to complement agents reduces risk, speeds up responses and provides customers with higher quality resolutions.

## How will AI affect agents?

% of survey respondents

| AI will replace agents | AI will assist agents |
|---|---|
| 6% (Strongly agree) | 81% (Strongly agree) |
| 56% (Agree) | 13% (Agree) |
| | 6% (Neutral) |
| 25% (Disagree) | |
| 13% (Strongly disagree) | |

Legend:
- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

# 5. Offer alternatives to voice by integrating digital channels

## Customer channel preference by type of interaction



| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **High emotion** | Phone 41% | Email 24% | Self-service 12% |
| **High urgency** | Phone 17% | Email 12% | Self-service 42% |
| **High complexity** | Phone 29% | Email 12% | Self-service 14% |

Legend: ● Phone ● Email ● Self-service
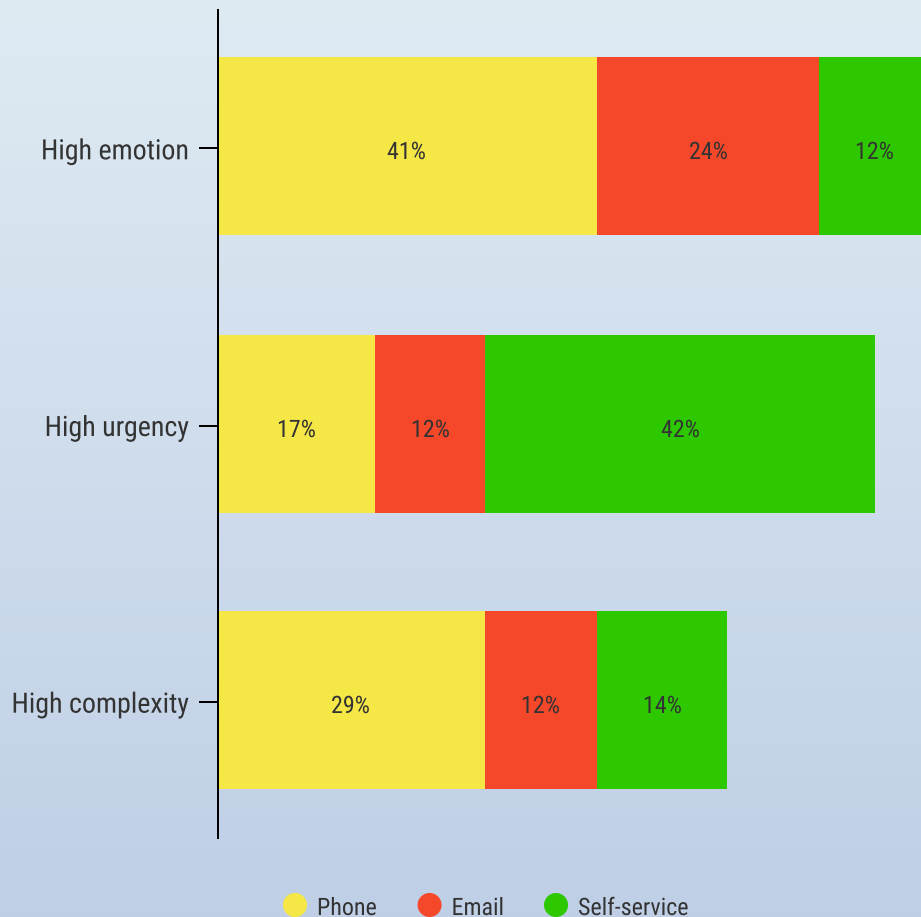
While new channels have been added to the contact center over the past 10 years, voice is still crucial to the customer experience. It's ubiquitous, familiar, quick and flexible.

However, it's also expensive, and if businesses can encourage customers to use alternative channels – and support those with automation – then they create a win-win scenario: faster service for customers, lower costs for businesses.

Findings from a survey of 1,000 US customers show that, while voice is the #1 channel of choice for emotional or complex matters, self-service is the leader when it comes to urgent interactions.

Furthermore, email is a popular choice for high-emotion issues, and if properly supported, could reduce inbound call volumes in addition to giving the customer the service they want.

**Understanding more about the types of calls you receive and if digital channels would be the best option could make a major difference to service levels, cost, and customer experience.**

# Key takeaways

**Leverage self-service for live call avoidance**

Investing in self-service functionality can reduce your cost of service from dollars to cents per customer interaction.

**Manage high inbound call volumes through call-back and queue management techniques**

Help customers take control of their destiny by sharing queue times and spread the inbound load by offering call-backs at quieter times.

**Use proactive outbound to flatten inbound demand**

Mass outbound notifications – through recordings, emails and SMS – proactively provide customers with  the right information before they have the need to contact your business.

**Improve speed and resolution through AI agent assistance**

Harness the power and speed of AI to help agents perform better. Learn which approaches and information lead to successful outcomes and share them across your workforce.

**Offer alternatives to voice by supporting digital channels**

Voice remains popular, but sometimes customers want to use other channels. Support them by offering superior functionality and automating digital channels.

# About ContactBabel

ContactBabel is the contact center industry expert. If you have a question about how the industry works, or where it's heading, the chances are we have the answer.

The coverage provided by our massive and ongoing primary research projects is matched by our experience analyzing the contact center industry.

Free research reports available from www.contactbabel.com (US and UK versions):

- The Inner Circle Guide to AI, Chatbots & Machine Learning
- The Inner Circle Guide to AI-Enabled Self-Service
- The Inner Circle Guide to Cloud-based Contact Center Solutions
- The Inner Circle Guide to Contact Center Remote Working Solutions
- The Inner Circle Guide to Customer Interaction Analytics
- The Inner Circle Guide to First-Contact Resolution
- The Inner Circle Guide to Fraud Reduction & PCI Compliance
- The Inner Circle Guide to Omnichannel
- The Inner Circle Guide to Outbound
- The Inner Circle Guide to the Voice of the Customer
- The Inner Circle Guide to Workforce Optimization
- The European Contact Center Decision-Makers' Guide
- The UK Contact Centre Decision-Makers' Guide
- The US Contact Center Decision-Makers' Guide
- The UK Customer Experience Decision-Makers' Guide
- The US Customer Experience Decision-Makers' Guide
- UK Contact Centre Verticals: Finance; Insurance; Outsourcing; Retail & Distribution
- US Contact Center Verticals: Finance; Insurance; Retail & Distribution

# About NICEinContact

NICE inContact works with organizations of all sizes to create extraordinary and trustworthy customer experiences that build deeper brand loyalty and relationships that last.

With NICE inContact CXone™, the industry's most complete cloud customer experience platform, we enable an exceptional agent and customer experience—every time and on every channel.

For more information, visit niceincontact.com