



Customer service expectations continue to shift as a result of the pandemic



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The manner in which consumer behaviour has changed since the emergence of Covid-19 continues to have significant implications for anyone working in a customer services environment, states a KPMG report.

Since May 2020, customer experience experts at KPMG have been canvassing the views of consumers in markets around the world in a series of surveys. Results from their **latest survey in September** show trust in consumer brands beginning to revive after a dip in the summer; the continued localisation of purchasing activity; and growing numbers of customers becoming permanent converts to digital channels.

Numbers released back in June by KPMG showed that net trust in brands stood at +3%, meaning that consumers trusted brands more at that point than they did pre-Covid. However, by August, that number had fallen to -4% as initial goodwill eroded. It has now rebounded slightly to -2%, with even the most badly affected sectors, such as entertainment, leisure and travel, beginning to claw back some of those summer losses.

Nikki Hall, Senior Manager in the Connected Customer team at KPMG, commented: "The trust numbers are always some of the most interesting in the whole survey. There's a strong link to personal safety here with businesses and their customer service teams having to prove the extent to which they're protecting customers' safety. It's about showing that customers come before profit and demonstrating corporate integrity and purpose by doing so. If you can't do this, then trust suffers."

"Back in the spring, trust numbers rose as those businesses which were able to open, particularly grocery retailers, made a very visible show of how they would protect their customers during their face-to-face interactions. However, people wanted constant reminders of this. As visibility of these efforts has waned, trust has begun to erode. That's not to say personal safety wasn't still being protected but perhaps it was no longer as clear as consumers wanted it to be. The answer may lie in what I've heard referred to as 'the theatre of cleaning', reassuring customers that those safety-first measures are still in place."



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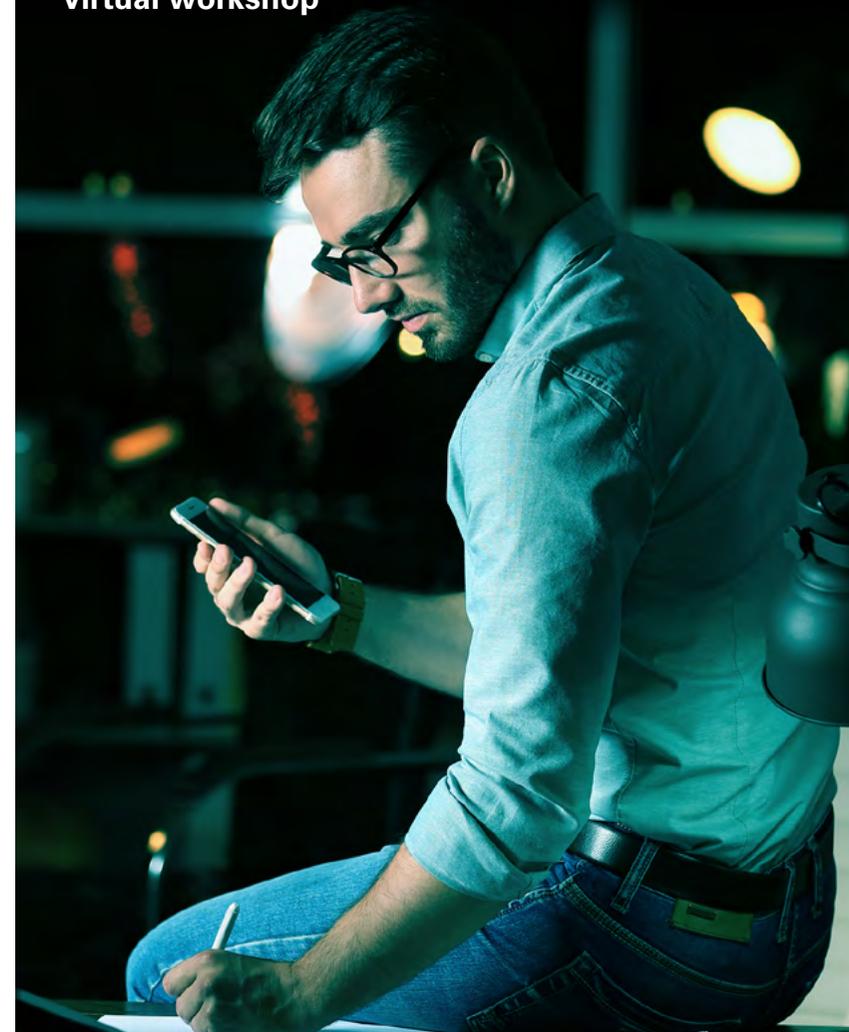


Nikki Hall
Senior Manager,
Connected Customer,
KPMG UK



It's so much more than simply handling enquiries. In fact, the quality of an organisation's customer service can make or break its reputation.

Introduction to customer service, a half-day virtual workshop



Critical purchasing considerations

Each of the six waves of KPMG research so far has asked consumers about the most important factors behind their purchase-making decisions. Value for money has been the clear leader throughout (63% of respondents currently see it as an important factor) but, over the summer, personal safety rose to joint second alongside ease of buying (both are still on 40%), making it marginally more important than trust in the brand (38%).

Nikki Hall continued: "As well as noting the increased importance attached to personal safety, it's also interesting that respondents tell us how these factors all matter more to them now than they ever did pre-Covid. This tells me that consumers are now more thoughtful about everything they're buying. They're more cognisant of everything from value for money and safety through to the customer experience or environmental and social considerations. All these things matter more now – and that's something that anyone working in a customer service environment needs to be aware of."

Headline findings

Elsewhere in the report, the survey data shows that 20% of consumers want to stay at home as much as possible; that 32% believe the impact of our current circumstances will be felt for over a year; and that net spending across all consumer categories is expected to be down by 21% over the next 6-12 months.

Forty-three percent of consumers feel vulnerable, anxious or overwhelmed about their financial security in 2021. Roughly the same proportion report being already worse off now. However, nearly half feel financially comfortable, while a far-from-insignificant 14% actually feel better off.

Even though savings are the number one priority for 36% of those with disposable income, these later numbers nevertheless represent an opportunity for some businesses, especially if they can effectively segment their customer base and meet different segments' increasingly different needs.

"The continued economic polarisation of customers is something to keep a close eye on," continued Nikki. "But so too is what people are spending on and where. Localisation is the big emerging theme – with people spending on things for the home and doing so from home (digitally) or much more locally than before. They're spending on eating at home, rather than in restaurants, and treating house and garden improvements, electrical goods and technology as more of a spending priority. Consumer businesses will have to think about what the essentials are in this new 'home hub' world and what changes they may have to make to remain appealing."



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The inexorable rise of digital

Of the 43% of customers who previously mainly used in-person channels to contact brands for support, 1 in 3 (33%) have now switched to digital channels as their main channel.

"It appears that organisations have converted customers to digital channels much more quickly than they might have expected," commented Nikki. "And where they've done this well, it's fair to assume that a good proportion of those customers may now remain on these digital channels, rather than switching back to in-person channels as soon as they can. From a business perspective, that represents a significant opportunity to reduce costs in the long run."



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"Within this, the interesting thing for me is the increased popularity of digitally-enabled contact channels, such as web chats and video calls, that we're now seeing.

The numbers are still relatively small but there's a sense that people will be looking for more of these 'humanised digital experiences' when they run into problems with an online process or system."

"We're actually pretty comfortable doing quite complex things online – like a mortgage application for example – but when something does get too complicated, a personal touch can help. It's also in the best interests of both the consumer and the organisation to keep that conversation going on the digital channel – in terms of time, convenience and cost - so expect to see more use being made of these techniques in future."



Digital learning

Face the challenge of rising customer expectations by taking charge of the six pillars that underpin every outstanding customer relationship.

Customer experience, a 90 minute 'skills bursts' series

You may also be interested in:

- The emergence of a new type of customer; the importance of empathy and resolution; and the growing importance of societal factors within people's purchasing decisions – find out how the arrival of COVID-19 affected the retailer-customer relationship. [Click here to read more.](#)
- Traditionally, the public sector has been something of a poor relation when it comes to customer service, rarely hitting the heights scaled by the B2C superstars such as retail, banking or restaurants. Yet maybe now the tide is turning. We shine a light on three public sector organisations working hard to deliver a better customer experience. [Click here to read more.](#)
- The series of KPMG's reports on consumers and the new reality can be accessed [here.](#)

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