

Business has become faceless during the pandemic – how can organisations inject a personal touch?

There is no question that the world of work has changed immeasurably over the past 18 months or so. In the shift to remote working, organisations have taken on a plethora of new tools and processes to ensure the smooth running of their businesses.

Consequently, individuals have naturally found themselves having fewer face-to-face interactions with their colleagues and customers alike. And while the introverts among us may be relishing such alone time, this has caused a number of difficulties; chief amongst these has been the fraying of critical workplace connections.

According to recent research from *Soffos*, almost two in five (39%) of UK business leaders say that the quality of their customer service has declined throughout the pandemic as a result of relying too heavily on technology that simply can't replicate interpersonal interactions. Meanwhile, employee relations have also suffered, with a further 38% of respondents indicating that their organisation relies too heavily on excessive communication channels for internal conversations – leading to interruptions, confusion and reduced

productivity.

The underlying message seems to be that business has become more 'faceless' throughout the pandemic. So how can organisations turn the tide, and reconnect with their employees and customers?

From customers to colleagues – communication is frayed

First and foremost, organisations ought to reconsider how their staff work together and communicate in newly created hybrid workplace environments.

Indeed, as I mentioned earlier, many businesses have relied on digital tools throughout the pandemic, only to find that those technologies provided inadequate solutions to common business needs. Further to this deluge of digital channels, 38% of business leaders also said that these tools actually caused a negative effect, having hampered their ability to deliver successful learning and development (L&D) to employees. Consequently, just shy of half (48%) of the respondents in the sample stated that employees expressed a desire to return to in-person meetings or days in the office.

Right now, this may not be too far from reality, as many businesses have been working up to implementing a *return to the office* – but things won't look like they did before. According to that same Soffos research, 43% of business leaders believe that COVID-19 has permanently killed-off traditional communication like face-to-face meetings and water-cooler conversations. And certainly, we can expect to see businesses continuing with some degree of remote work for the foreseeable future, as many firms make a transition towards hybrid working arrangements.

Leaving aside internal problems, the issues don't end there – many businesses also reported problems serving their customers from afar. Over a third (36%) of organisations enlisted the support of ChatBots to field customer queries throughout the pandemic, in the hope of improving outcomes. But these technologies generally leave a lot to be desired. Nearly two in five (39%) of those companies newly using ChatBots said that the quality of their customer service declined over the past 18 months, despite the adoption of new technology products.

Considering new solutions to fit the

hybrid arena

This begs the question: how to grapple with these issues?

Firstly, organisations must streamline their operations by investing in genuinely efficient technologies, and work towards shifting outmoded perspectives when it comes to adopting new tech. Sometimes, it is as simple as adopting the mantra 'less is more'. Rather than working across a range of different mediums - using Slack, Teams, Zoom, and perhaps many other platforms used where one would suffice - businesses should attempt to streamline and simplify.

Many existing platforms already integrate multiple facilities such as videoconferencing, productivity scoring, diary management etc., so organisations can often work smarter by thoroughly researching available solutions before adopting them. Often, one overarching software package is sufficient, retaining both simplicity and clarity.

When it comes to the delivery of first-class employee training, businesses should look to balance genuinely useful online platforms, which can personalise their content to individual employees, with more targeted in-person solutions. In particular, training platforms which utilise artificial intelligence (AI) to learn about each individual employee can provide real value to businesses. These state-of-the-art systems can put the insights they create good use, by identifying areas of strength and weakness, as well assessing when and how individuals learn best, thus offering a truly tailor-made learning approach. Organisations need technologies that are far removed from 'standard' dusty online learning modules. Adopting newer and more sophisticated products should help to change existing perceptions, as employees must now adapt to working between their offices and kitchen tables at home.

Improving customer relations

Likewise, when it comes to how businesses service their customers' needs, the ChatBot arena has long been shrouded in misconceptions. ChatBots generally work within a set of very limited binary 'decision tree' parameters. They require a high degree of manual human curation to function. This may well prove frustrating to customers. Indeed, when these more basic systems fail to respond to complex or involved questions.

However, recent advances in Conversational AI (CAI) mean that newer systems will not fall at the first hurdle. Unlike standard ChatBots, they do not require so much human intervention to respond to queries - rather, they can learn from previous interactions and have a better understanding of language and semantics, thanks to neural network technologies. Implementing solutions like

these should be a positive first step to re-engaging with customers; making them feeling truly understood.

In the last year or so, organisations have been forced to climb a steep learning curve in terms of customer relations. Now is the time to shift away from the technological 'quick fix' mentality that many heads of industry chose in the early stages of the pandemic. For workforces to be happy, efficient and successful, there must be a move towards more natural and interpersonal day-to-day interactivity between colleagues. Only then will the hybrid working model become acceptable to everyone concerned.

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