

# The telephone is still the king of customer support, so why aren't SMEs using it?

Office landlines will be extinct by the end of the decade according to the latest Ofcom data. For many SMEs, this will come as no surprise: in 2021, there's no shortage of channels through which to contact a business.

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Likewise, from live chat to SMS to social media, businesses have never had so many options to respond to leads and clients. But even in our digital-first world, human connection is central to business success. Despite massive growth in the communication technology sector, *60% of customers* prefer to communicate by phone. With this in mind, why are so many new businesses automating, ignoring or scaling down their phone support?

## People want real connection

A recent *study by Userlike* found that 60% of people would rather wait in a queue to speak with a human agent than speak to a chatbot immediately. While more than half of respondents also said that they'd be willing to talk to a chatbot initially, 77% said the most important option for using chatbots was to be able to *escalate their issue to a human agent*.

Business success – especially for smaller independent businesses – is built on a

foundation of trust. Your customers know you – you’ve worked hard to earn that trust through a consistent and coherent customer experience and business owners recognise this.

Three-quarters of business professionals agree that when their customers call, they want to hear a human voice at the end of the phone, as opposed to a voicemail or bot. If businesses recognise the value of the phone, why aren’t they utilising it?

## What’s in a missed call?

Often, answering calls is the biggest obstacle to providing consistent phone support. AnswerConnect commissioned an independent study into how business professionals use the telephone. It turns out that businesses miss an average of 16% of inbound phone calls every day.

Based on annual turnover, the number of sales and average customer spend for a single transaction (£6,912), businesses are losing roughly £600,000 per year in revenue to missed calls and long wait times.

For those companies, the issue isn’t a lack of willpower, it’s a lack of manpower. Almost half (49%) of senior managers said their organisation doesn’t have enough dedicated secretaries or colleagues answering calls. The same number said it was common for customers to face a hold time of more than five minutes before speaking with someone in their organisation.

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## Who has time to answer calls?

SMEs face another major hurdle when it comes to offering consistent phone support. Time is an essential business resource but for many professionals, this time is often wasted. Half of senior managers say they spend a lot of time in a typical working day answering unnecessary telephone calls.

Of those who strongly agree the telephone is their organisation’s best customer service tool, 75% say members of their team have to juggle

answering telephone calls with their other work. Time spent on unnecessary calls is time lost on other essential tasks. For many SMEs, however, hiring an in-house receptionist simply isn't financially feasible.

It's no wonder many SMEs are turning to what they see as their only viable option, but is automation the solution they think it is?

## Automation – the new voicemail

In response to a barrage of missed calls and irate customers, SMEs are turning to automated solutions. In the US, 29% of small businesses have already adopted some form of AI for their customer service. There are clear benefits: chatbots are inexpensive, relatively speaking, and can operate 24 hours a day, seven days a week at no extra cost. They're consistent, too, in a limited way.

While this may offer a solution for businesses, it's not the solution customers want. 75% of consumers report being 'highly annoyed' when they can't get a live person on the phone. Chatbots also lack the nuance of a person, meaning conversations with customers will only ever follow narrow, linear patterns. It comes down to a choice for SMEs – convenience, or connection?

## Another way

Modern businesses are facing a unique set of challenges. Staffing issues, fluctuations in demand, the expectation of 24/7 support; there is no simple solution to all these problems. Those SMEs who do offer telephone support are struggling to answer their calls in a timely manner.

Unfortunately, none of this matters to the customer. In a world of abundant choice, customers can simply look elsewhere.

One solution? A call answering service allows you to give every customer professional, real-time support without the overheads of hiring your own in-house support team. For SMEs, that means the freedom to scale without losing the personal touch their customers expect.

The old adage – “be where your customers are” – may have added a few channels, but the sentiment remains the same. For SMEs, fulfilling that mantra starts with investing in their phone service, whatever form that takes.

Maddyness is a media partner of AnswerConnect

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