

# Inbound Contact Channels



Jenny Rains  
Senior Research Analyst, HDI

After a customer purchases a product or service, the accessibility of the technical support staff can be a crucial component in building a company's reputation and securing a customer's trust and loyalty. Today, as technologies advance and customer expectations increase, the means by which customers are able to contact a support professional are becoming increasingly diverse.

This edition of the HDI Research Corner focuses on technical support centers that provide support to customers who purchase their companies' products or services. Online survey responses were collected from October 2012 to January 2013. This report summarizes the data from 241 support organizations across more than thirty vertical industries, focusing on inbound contact channel use, metrics, satisfaction, and other practices.

## Survey Results

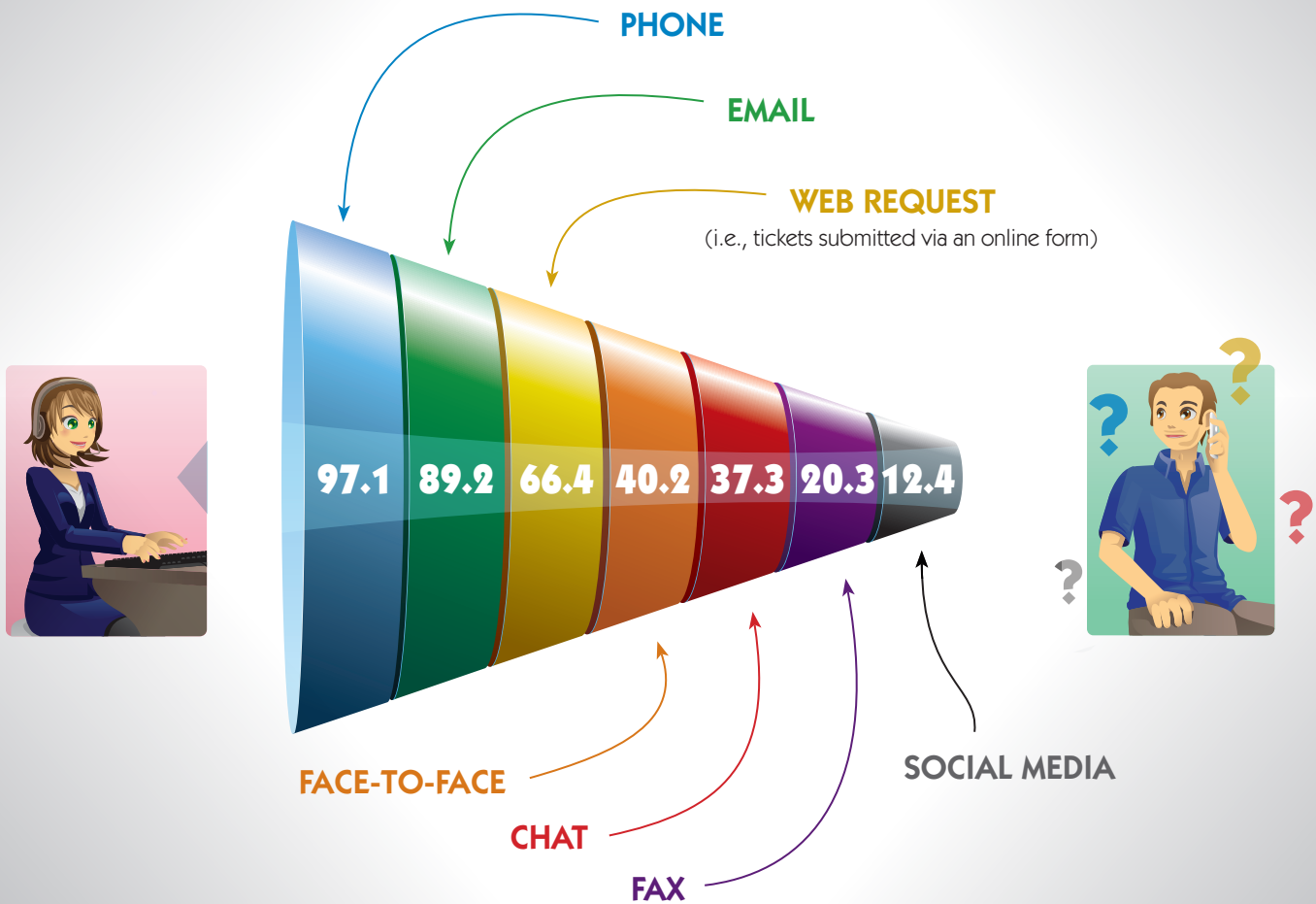
### Inbound Contact Channels Available to Customers

When customers have issues that require assistance, they're most likely already a bit perturbed with that product or service, whether justified or not. They want answers, and to get those answers they must contact the technical support center. Recent data from the American Express 2012 Global Customer Service Barometer revealed that customers prefer different contact channels depending on the complexity of the issues they're experiencing.

Phone is still the king of the inbound contact channels, with 97 percent of organizations taking phone calls from customers. However, for customers that have had unpleasant experiences with phone trees or wait times, the phone just might not be their preferred choice for contacting someone who can resolve their issues.

Enter the email option, provided by 89 percent of support centers; the web request option (i.e., customers submit tickets via an online form), provided by 66 percent; the face-to-face option, not always an option for all organizations, but provided by 40 percent; and online chat, provided by 37 percent of support centers. Interestingly, while 20 percent receive tickets via fax, what some might consider an outdated channel, 12 percent of support centers receive inbound requests through a more modern channel: social media.

## Percentage of Customer Technical Support Centers Using the Following Inbound Contact Channels



### Staffing Inbound Contact Channels

As organizations increase the number of inbound contact channels available to customers, they must reassess their staffing strategies. Should specific agents be assigned to specific channels? If so, should they be dedicated to that channel, or can they resolve tickets received via other channels too? Most commonly, staff manage multiple channels simultaneously, although many organizations have agents assigned to respond to a specific channel to ensure coverage as they take calls or answer emails.

The chart below shows the different staffing practices by channels. For example, of those organizations that communicate with customers via chat, 36 percent have staff dedicated solely to chat at all times, and 17 percent have dedicated staff for specific time frames, such as peak hours. At other times, agents might be assigned to manage chat but are available to respond to other channels as well (37%).

## Staffing Inbound Contact Channels

Of those organizations that use each contact channel,  
how are they staffing them?

	CHAT	EMAIL	FACE-TO-FACE	FAX	PHONE	SOCIAL MEDIA	WEB REQUESTS
One or more staff are assigned only to this channel during all working hours	35.6%	28.5%	19.6%	18.4%	46.7%	23.3%	27.7%
One or more staff are assigned only to this channel at specific times	16.7%	20.1%	11.3%	8.2%	15.3%	16.7%	13.2%
One or more staff are assigned this channel but respond to other channels as well	36.7%	41.6%	27.8%	36.7%	43.2%	33.3%	43.4%
No staff specifically assigned to this channel (i.e., staff always manage this channel and others)	35.6%	37.4%	56.7%	46.9%	31.0%	40.0%	40.9%

## Metrics

To draw an accurate picture of the success of each channel, metrics need to be measured for each channel independently. This has been common practice for the phone for years. Other channels are still a bit immature in this regard, but they show promise. Most organizations (>50%) are tracking the number of tickets opened through every channel.

### Metrics Measured for Each Channel

Of those organizations that use each contact channel, which types of metrics do they measure?

	CHAT	EMAIL	FACE-TO-FACE	FAX	PHONE	SOCIAL MEDIA	WEB REQUESTS
Number of tickets opened through this channel							
Time to respond/answer	68.9%	75.3%	53.6%	53.1%	82.1%	50.0%	81.3%
Handle time	48.9%	43.7%	23.7%	24.5%	70.5%	16.7%	51.9%
Resolution on first contact	46.7%	36.3%	28.9%	26.5%	71.8%	23.3%	40.0%
Resolution without switching channels (i.e., email to phone)	46.7%	43.3%	34.0%	14.3%	63.2%	20.0%	43.1%
Resolution without escalation	8.9%	10.7%	10.3%	2.0%	14.5%	6.7%	8.1%
Customer satisfaction	37.8%	29.8%	29.9%	8.2%	45.3%	23.3%	33.8%
Other metric(s)	66.7%	56.3%	46.4%	34.7%	65.4%	40.0%	61.9%
We do not measure this channel	18.9%	13.0%	10.3%	10.2%	17.5%	20.0%	11.3%
	15.6%	16.3%	28.9%	26.5%	9.8%	26.7%	13.8%

### Customer Satisfaction

Customer satisfaction with each channel is the second most commonly measured metric. Somewhat surprisingly, in a time when almost anything can be done without speaking with, let alone being in the same room with, another human, face-to-face communication receives the highest marks when it comes to customer satisfaction. For the customer technical support industry, the convenience of web requests (ranked the lowest) doesn't measure up to the impact of an interaction with a real, live person. The ratings in the chart at right are averages based on a one-to-ten scale where a score of ten indicates that customers are extremely satisfied with the channel.

### Average Customer Satisfaction with Each Channel

(10 = Extremely Satisfied)



9.05

FACE-TO-FACE



8.41

PHONE



7.96

CHAT



7.83

EMAIL



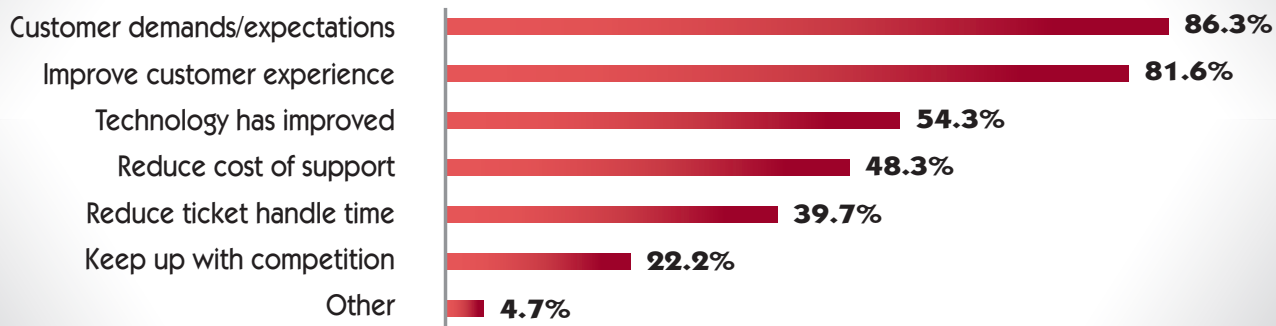
7.75

WEB REQUEST  
(i.e., tickets submitted via web form)

## Providing Support via Multiple Inbound Contact Channels

In 2013, it is far from common practice to provide only one channel for customers to contact technical support. In fact, less than three percent of organizations have only one inbound contact channel. The average number of contact channels available is 3.67; the median is four channels. Of those that provide more than one channel, 64 percent are able to track the inbound contact channels used by individual customers through the organization's CRM or CIS. Further research is needed to determine how organizations are utilizing that information, if they are at all.

### Reasons for Providing Multiple Inbound Contact Channels



With advances in chat and web request tools, as well as improvements in ticket tracking and measurement, it's no surprise that these technological improvements have played a major role in the decision to make multiple contact channels available to customers; 54 percent of organizations report technological advances as a factor in their decisions. However, more often than not, organizations open up multiple inbound contact channels (86%) in reaction to customer demand and expectations. Improving the customer experience is the second most commonly selected factor (82%).

Meeting customer expectations and improving the customer experience is a critical part of building customer trust and loyalty, which for many organizations in the field of customer technical support also means preventing customers from taking their business to a competitor.



Want the next Research Corner report sent to you? Take the current survey!



For all available HDI Research Corner reports, visit [www.ThinkHDI.com/BePartOfTheCorner](http://www.ThinkHDI.com/BePartOfTheCorner).

Copyright © 2013 UBM LLC. All rights reserved.