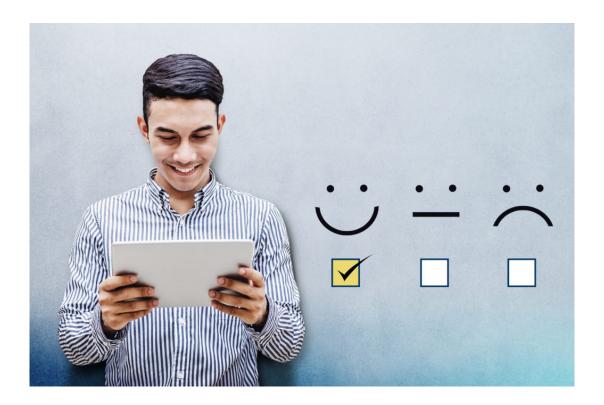**NUANCE** | **WHAT'S NEXT BLOG**

Customer engagement, Contact Center AI

# How to tool-up your contact center in step with Forrester's COVID-19 response plan

Nuance Communications

July 1, 2020



In high-pressure circumstances, today's contact center leaders are making technology decisions that will shape customer experience for years to come. With its COVID-19 technology response framework, Forrester Research has provided a roadmap for customer service organizations looking to establish business continuity in the short-term, while planning for the post-pandemic future. We share some of the analyst's key recommendations and explore the technologies in question.

For many customer service organizations, the response to COVID-19 began as a frantic sprint. But as the weeks have passed, it's become clear this is a marathon. And as every runner knows, if you want to succeed over long distances, it pays to have a plan.

Forrester Research has published a framework to provide that necessary strategic guidance.

Its *30-60-90-Day COVID-19 Response Plan for Customer Service* is designed to not only provide service organizations with practical short-term advice, but to help them "treat this crisis as an opportunity for a blank slate", and "design the ideal remote workforce and work and interaction channels", rather than simply replicate traditional contact centers in a new format.

Forrester's plan is organized around four different frameworks: people, objectives, strategy, and technology. In this post, we'll explore the last of these in depth, unpacking Forrester's advice, and sharing additional tips and resources.

# In the first 30 days: Storming

It's worth exploring Forrester's tech recommendations for the first stage of your response, even if your organization has already weathered the worst of COVID-19.

Some of its suggestions will help you re-establish normal service levels faster. Others will expand your emergency service toolkit, ensuring you're better prepared for any future disruption.

### Forrester's advice: "Redouble chatbot efforts for crisis communications"

In times of crisis, virtual assistants (VA) and chatbots can quickly become a contact center's MVPs.

By answering customers' simplest queries—or directing them to self-serve resources—VAs and chatbots can reduce the strain on your human agents. Through their customizable greetings and auto-opener messages, and they're also a great way of educating customers about agent capacity and setting service expectations.

### Forrester's advice: "Change IVR prompts and flows to reflect new reality/queue times"

When your customers' needs change, your IVR must change too. At the start of the pandemic, we helped many organizations adapt their IVRs at speed, to ensure they could continue to contain calls effectively.

It's worth noting that if your IVR allows customers to speak freely (rather than simply following touch-tone menus) you may need to update your speech engine to recognize crisis-related vocabulary.

### Forrester's advice: "Explore scheduled callback, start visual IVR, and use other tools to fight long queue times"

There are other ways your IVR can help you weather the first few weeks of a crisis. You can adapt your IVR's greeting to educate customers about current waiting call times—and about digital channels, where they might find an answer more quickly.

Even better, you can couple your IVR with a callback solution. Giving customers the option to be contacted by an agent at a future time allows you to chop off traffic peaks and shift them to less busy period. It's a strategy we've seen our customers use to great effect.

# In the first 60 days: Optimizing

At the time of writing, most organizations are emerging from the first shock of COVID-19 and are beginning to adjust to a new customer service landscape.

For many, the pandemic has increased the profile and importance of digital channels. Others have seen home-working impact their ability to coach agents, and to keep operations secure. Now is the time to reflect—and optimize.

### Forrester's advice: "Offer offline-to-online transition (e.g., IVR to SMS)"

Many organizations are still operating with significantly reduced agent capacity, leading to lengthy call waiting times.

Developing your IVR's ability to transition callers direct to digital channels—for example, by sending them a message by SMS—could be smart strategic move. That message could initiate an SMS conversation with a live agent, or simply link the customer to a live chat tool or web-based FAQ page.

### Forrester's advice: "Add chatbot use cases for relationship stabilization"

If you're depending on chatbots and VAs more than ever before, it's a great moment to look for even more potential use cases.

In the last few months, we've helped organizations extend the scope of their VAs to support new parts of the customer journey—for example, adapting a customer service VA to assist with online sales.

*Forrester's advice: "Expand digital human resources for onboarding new talent virtually"*

You may have already embraced new technologies for agent enablement and support. For those separated from supervisors and peers—and facing new questions, on new offers—AI-based coaching tools can provide timely and essential guidance.

As you restructure your agent workforce, it's worth investigating how AI can also help new employees get up to speed faster, compensating for a lack of face-to-face training and mentoring.

## In the first 90 days: "New normalizing"

From new channels to new working patterns, the pandemic has forced many service organizations to innovate at speed. Service leaders must work to consolidate and embed this progress, making the pandemic a catalyst for lasting CX and AX improvements.

*Forrester's advice: "Plan to drive a digital-first approach across the board"*

If your COVID-19 response has accelerated your shift to digital, keep your foot on the gas. Now that customers are becoming more familiar with messaging, live chat, and web channels, re-examine your engagement strategy. Assess your agents' skillsets. Ask what it would take to become digital-first.

The same applies to cloud infrastructure. Have your on-premises solutions struggled to handle traffic peaks or support remote agents? Look again at the business case for switching to more scalable cloud services.

*Forrester's advice: "Take lessons from previous phases and design new desktop automations to reduce agent stress"*

One common consequence of the pandemic has been a new, forced focus on agent experience. As well as creating new desktop automations as Forrester suggests, you could consider starting the journey to simpler identification and verification.

Disruption creates ideal conditions for contact center fraud, with isolated agents more susceptible to social engineering, and honest customers behaving in more suspicious ways. Replacing knowledge-based authentication with biometric authentication has the potential to improve security and CX, while saving your agents the stress of having to interrogate customers who can't remember their memorable answers.

*Forrester's advice: "Refine auto-scoring and other automated quality for new interaction realities"*

When the way you engage with customers changes, the way you measure quality and agent performance should change too.

Let's imagine that you've deployed a VA to front-end your live chat interactions. One result could be an increase in Average Handle Time for your live chat agents—not because they're being less efficient, but because the VA is now handling all the low-hanging fruit.

You can find Forrester's complete roadmap for tech decisions in its *30-60-90-Day COVID-19 Response Plan for Customer Service*. Download it today, and you'll also discover Forrester's phased roadmaps for making key decisions regarding your service team, strategy, and objectives.

**Tags:** COVID-19, Forrester, Contact center strategy