



From Triage to Strategy

The Future of Customer Care
In the Post-Pandemic Age





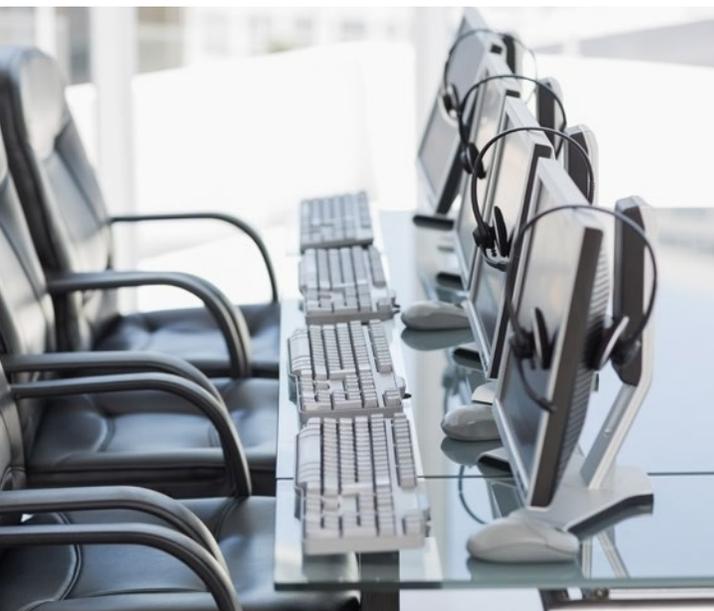
Contents

Introduction	1
<hr/>	
The First Phase of Covid-19	1
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Finding Capacity to Stabilize Service Now	2
<hr/>	
Span of Influence, Span of Control	3
Pandemic Factors to Overcome	3
Accelerating Operational Change to Drive Results	4
From Triage to Strategy: The Future of Customer Care Post-Pandemic	5
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The New Normal Will Never Be Normal	5
A Strategy Built for The Future of Care	6
The Future of Agents	6
The Future of Technology and Security	7
The Future of Learning and Development	7
The Future of Quality	8
From Here Forward	9
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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has had devastating effects on the health of communities, the stability of the workforce, and the economic future for businesses. With ninety percent of global organizations using on-premise solutions for their call centers¹, customer experience (CX) leaders, worldwide, moved mountains to set up work-from-home capabilities for as many of their agents as possible.

While these emergency triage efforts have enabled some level of customer support, wait times increased by 27 minutes as customer satisfaction dropped by as much as 28%². These long response times are still leaving customers frustrated at a time when every interaction is so vitally important to a company's financial future. Customer care organizations have entered a transition phase where it is critical to look for ways to improve service levels in the short term, while also building a strategy for what their care organization will look like post-pandemic.



In this paper we will discuss:

- Tactics to find immediate capacity while high-density contact centers are still closed
- How to transition from a “lift-and-shift” triage to a stable remote care strategy
- Strategies on building a care program that can thrive in a post-pandemic future

The First Phase of Covid-19

According to research, there are approximately nine million contact center workers across the US, India, the Philippines, Southeast Asia and China³. Most of this workforce services customers in physical locations designed to maximize the number of agents available in minimal square footage. These high-density contact centers were drastically affected by Covid-19. By mid-March, as businesses began to realize the potential health dangers of the virus, contact centers all over the world started moving as many agents as possible to work-from-home scenarios.

Although many CX leaders had built business continuity plans, few anticipated a pandemic outbreak that would have such a dramatic and long-term impact on operations. As a result, they were forced to develop a number of interim policies, procedures, and solutions. Despite these best attempts, some business process outsourcers (BPOs) saw 46% of their agents unable to work ⁴, particularly for offshore BPOs, translating into performance levels that would never be acceptable under normal circumstances.

In parallel to this “lift and shift,” Covid-19 is causing customers to need assistance more than ever, regardless of the vertical industry, where many businesses are seeing inbound volume increase 68% ⁵. In fact, several industries, such as telehealth, video teleconference services, food and meal delivery, TV entertainment, big box retailers, utilities, crisis centers, and government have seen massive jumps in call volume, some as high as 891% ⁶.



The intersection of decreased capacity and increased volume is causing CX leaders to make difficult choices. Business to business (B2B) organizations’ ability to respond to calls has decreased by 57%, and that response lag expands to 70% in business to consumer (B2C) ⁷. Some organizations are shutting down voice channels and pushing calls to chat and email. This can be frustrating for customers because it’s hard to always keep an eye on a chat box if you don’t know whether the agent will respond in 10 minutes or 50 minutes. More sessions are being pushed to artificial intelligence and machine learning (AI/ML) bots that are often not capable of handling more than the simplest request. Average speed to answer (ASA) and average handle time (AHT) have skyrocketed as support agents navigate emotional conversations as both parties feel isolated and anxious. Consequently, customer satisfaction (CSAT) scores have dropped by 28% on average ⁸.

Finding Capacity to Stabilize Service Now

While models on the spread of the pandemic change according to dynamic factors, there is no question that traditional business operations will not resume for some time. The viability of a business depends on delivering customer satisfaction whereas CX leaders cannot wait for the pandemic to pass to implement new strategies for service level stabilization. To do that, additional capacity is needed. While outsourcing would be an option in normal times, numerous traditional BPOs are having the exact same challenges, if not worse, offshore. In fact, many offshore BPOs have run as low as 10% capacity due to technical infrastructure challenges in the region ⁹.

So, while CX leaders have done an admirable job of moving tremendous resources in a short time, a new model is needed to shrink the capacity gap quickly. There are several factors to consider when trying to identify short term strategies to get more customers supported now.

Span of Influence, Span of Control

With steeply rising contact volumes in every industry, CX leaders are asking, “How do I find immediate capacity to save my customers?” To answer that question, CX leaders must overcome the pandemic-influenced challenges that may not be effectively controlled by altering operations.

Pandemic Factors to Overcome

The first and most obvious constraint is the inability to reopen a brick and mortar contact center. While economies around the world are opening slowly with varying degrees of caution and restriction, there is no doubt that high-density environments may remain too risky. Concerts, sporting events, and nightclubs all put a large amount of people in a restricted geographic space. Contact centers fall into this category as well. It must be assumed that reopening contact centers will not happen in the foreseeable future. This in turn means that not all in-house or outsourced contact center agents will return to full productivity in the short term. Another constraint is the work-from-home environment of the agents. Early in their careers, these capable young agents most often have roommates and are transient. The nature of their home-workspace is likely to be overly casual, which can lead to disruption on customer interactions. Even if you could equip every representative with the proper technology, their workspace is uncontrollable and could negatively impact the customer experience.

Technology is also beyond the control of the company. Customer care organizations are built on the premise of financial efficient operations. Space planning allows for many agents to work in limited square footage. Scheduling and shift management that has different groups of agents to handle call volumes at different times. Workspaces, and workstations, in contact centers are often shared. Internet connectivity, telephony, application management and security are often handled by very small teams working from central locations. Trying to replicate the hardware, software, connectivity and security experience of representatives in their home environment depends on factors that IT departments can't control. Does the agent have broadband access with enough upload/download speed? Can hardware safely be delivered to the agent's location with proper set up and connection? How will the agent receive ongoing technical support?

To overcome the Covid-19 factors that organizations can't control, customer care leaders must find a population of representatives that:

- › Work outside of traditional care centers
- › Have a stable and professional work from home environment that will limit disruptions
- › Have the proper connectivity to leverage all the technology needed to engage with customers



Accelerating Operational Change to Drive Results

While there are many factors outside of a care organization's control, it is possible to adapt operational solutions quickly to rebuild trust with customers. When pivoting to a new solution, it's crucial to analyze the sliding scale of cost against the speed of which you can affect change.

Potentially, the most important element is finding a solution significantly less impacted by Covid-19 than your current operation. While sending all of your agents home is an option, as clearly evidenced above, it is not a good one. Contact centers are great places to start a career, because they provide a highly structured environment where one can contribute quickly while developing the professional skills needed to grow; but with Covid-19, the structured support system needed by most contact center agents is difficult to replicate virtually unless a robust system is in place. Therefore, self-motivated resources who can work autonomously in a virtual environment must be found.

Security is always a concern in customer care. Contact centers have strong technology controls in place to keep hackers out of their systems and away from personal data. With hundreds or thousands of potential entry points into the network in a work-from-home scenario, security software, monitoring and response methodologies must be adaptive. For whichever solution you chose, learning and development is crucial.



In a classic environment, learning is done in a physical classroom. However, distance learning is a science that requires more than presenting classroom slides over Zoom®. Courses must leverage all adult learning techniques, including interactive elements to deliver quality service.

Finally, performance management and quality assurance for a virtual solution is much different. Contact centers have floor walkers that help representatives with challenging transactions or escalations. Contact center agents get a series of off-the-phone engagements to listen to calls, receive coaching, and augment training every week. This is not easily translatable when you send your agents home.

To overcome these constraints, contact center leaders must:

- › Find agents with a predisposition to handle virtual work professionally
- › Solve for the technology needs of the care agent while still controlling cost and security
- › Implement a virtual learning and development program
- › Perfect a quality assurance program that is executable while agents work-from-home

From Triage to Strategy: The Future of Customer Care Post-Pandemic

While we are thankfully seeing a flattening of the Covid-19 curve around the globe, there is also significant concern about another potential spike in infections this fall and winter. No one can predict how and when this devastating disease will be defeated. While we hope for a complete eradication of the virus, we must plan for a future of customer care that will 1) protect people and 2) provide customers with the support they need. To accomplish this, it is crucial to find a solution that decreases risk while still delivering exceptional care.

The New Normal Will Never Be Normal

Let's imagine that the Covid-19 curve continues to flatten enough to allow contact centers to reopen. To protect the well-being of the representatives, several new strategies must be considered.

Workspace and facilities planning will have to change. The idea that contact centers can return to high-density environments with multiple agents utilizing the same workstations is naïve. Cubicle designs will have to be dispersed to provide more room in between agents. This will require significant resources to redesign and time to implement. The summation of this effort will be less agents per square foot in the contact centers, which will have an impact on real estate planning and cost control.



As we look to the future, call volume itself might be more volatile than ever before. In the restart of the economy, many industries will be dealing with Covid-19 driven restrictions for months to come. Social distancing is already promoting fewer seats sold on planes, fewer tables in restaurants, rooms occupied in hotels, less tickets to movies.

This new economic reality will drive highly unpredictable spikes in call volumes. Couple this with new operational models on every aspect of customer care, from onboarding to contact center design, and it becomes clear that the harsh truth is that we are never going back to business as usual.

A Strategy Built for The Future of Care

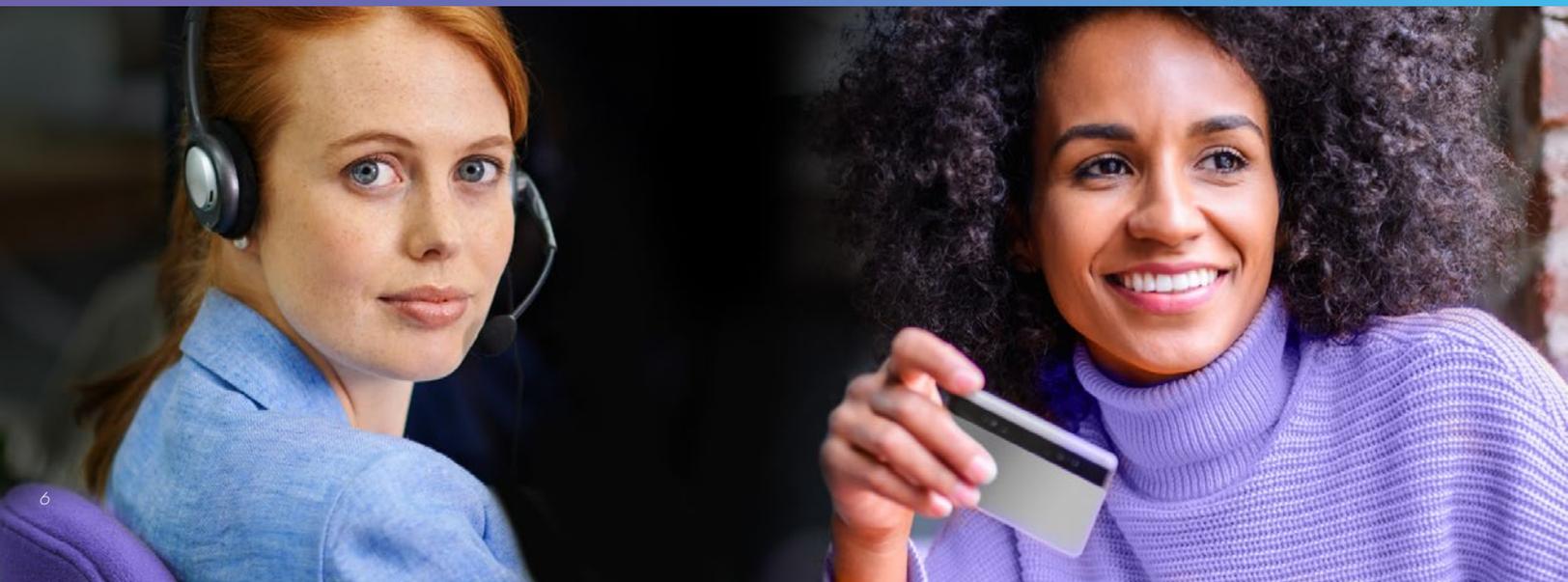
In early March, no one would have predicted that the world would come to a stop due to a virus. In our hubris, we believed modern healthcare could handle any challenge thrown at us. CX leaders have moved heaven and earth to try to serve their customers. Given the changes that the post-pandemic world will require, CX executives need to find a solution that mitigates the risk of this type of disruption going forward. Covid-19 is shining a harsh light on many of the vulnerabilities in customer care design; and while the effects of this event have been overwhelming in lives lost and economies disrupted, it does illuminate the path forward to build stronger, more flexible solutions for taking care of customers and limiting the risk of financial disaster.

The Future of Agents

With at least nine million customer care agents housed in large contact centers across the globe, it's clear that organizations continue to use the same CX solutions in the same manner today as they did in the 1990s. This strategy was mandated by technology at the time. Most people didn't have the computers, connectivity or telephony needed at home to service customers remotely. That's just not true anymore. To be successful you need the right combination of strategy, technology and people. It's fundamental that you think about the people differently. Like any organization, contact centers have built expertise over time in the use case they execute most often. This means recruiting agents usually just starting their careers that may not have the resources or maturity needed to thrive in a virtual environment.

Strategies for changing that paradigm:

- Start by considering outsourcing as the fastest path to finding a quality, virtual-first solution in the short term. This would give you the time to evaluate if an in-house, virtual model makes sense for your business.
- If outsourcing, make sure the vendor has a virtual-first mindset. Evaluate the way they determine the work-from-home capabilities of the resources that will be supporting your customers.
- In the long term, develop a maturity model that establishes requirements for what type of representative is eligible to work remotely. Consider the agents' disposition and ability



The Future of Technology and Security

Because security has always been a significant concern when dealing with customers and their data, contact centers were designed with every piece of the technology stack being owned and controlled by the business. Again, this made sense in the 1990s, but today voice over IP (VoIP), virtual private networks (VPN), and even secure virtual desktop technology allow agents to use their home connectivity and hardware to establish reliable connections with customers.

Strategies for secure remote technology:

- Building a dependable, secure technology stack for remote work takes time. To bridge the gap from short-term to long-term, consider choosing an outsourced vendor that has already established a stable virtual platform for remote resources.
- Evaluate all aspects of the technology ecosystem when outsourcing or building a technology stack. Security and reliability must be present from the redundant cloud infrastructure, to agent authentication, bandwidth validation, encrypted VPN access, two-factor authentication, proxy and country blocks and security information and event management (SIEM).
- Long term success will require a complete redesign of all systems as well as development of new procedures and technology stack requirements to enable productivity for a remote workforce.

The Future of Learning and Development

The field of learning and development has significantly evolved in the last 10 years. Much of this knowledge is based utilizing audio, visual and kinesthetic media as well as virtual scenarios to improve learning.

Strategies for evolving your learning and development:

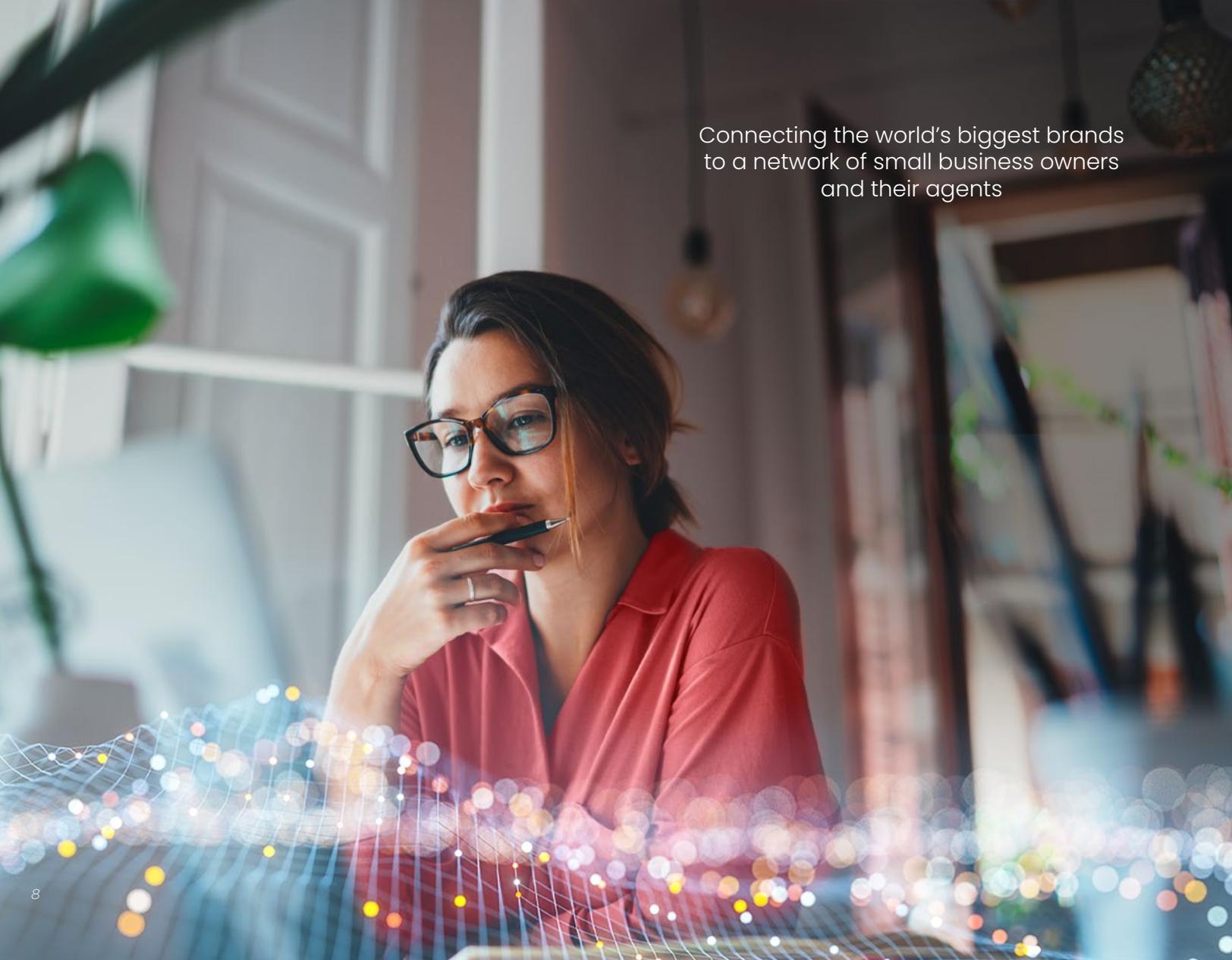
- Ensure dedicated virtual-first instructors. Just as not everybody is suited to work at home, not all instructors are suited to instruct virtually. Instructors with a background and experience within this unique form of teaching are a key to success.
- Build a curriculum that balances instructor-led and self-directed learning presented through a variety of media to maximize engagement and appeals to all types of learners.
- Deploy best-in-class tools to support focused learning and break-out sessions, that encourage learner participation and allow instructors control over engagement.

The Future of Quality

The fundamental nature of a physical call center will change in the future, therefore the way to achieve quality and provide support will change as well.

Considerations for quality assurance:

- Deploy remote communications and engagement technologies to support agents.
- Leverage chat technologies to enhance the experience with AI solutions to learn and address the most common topics where agents need support.
- Establish a consistent set of KPIs that can be measured virtually and schedule virtual support sessions to drive strong results.

A woman with dark hair and glasses, wearing a red shirt, is shown in a thoughtful pose, resting her chin on her hand. She is looking slightly to the left. The background is a blurred indoor setting with a window and some plants. Overlaid on the bottom half of the image is a digital network graphic consisting of a grid of lines and glowing nodes in various colors (blue, yellow, orange, red, purple).

Connecting the world's biggest brands
to a network of small business owners
and their agents

From Here Forward

Over the past months there have been many challenges with more on the way. This inflection point presents the opportunity for leaders to transition from focusing on immediate need to building a strategy that is sustainable for the future. Long term successful organizations must make virtual-first care a central part of their strategy to reduce risk, protect their employees and improve quality of care to their customers.

With every challenge comes an opportunity; and with every set back comes an opportunity to overcome. The COVID-19 pandemic is an event that will leave its mark on history. It has challenged our societies and economies like never before; and in this time of incredible disruption, customers need our help now, more than ever. They need more than an answer to a question or to complete a transaction, they need our understanding and support in an uncertain time. It is our duty to be there for them. By aggressively making virtual-first care an integral part of our customer engagement strategy, we can be exactly that.

Arise Virtual Solutions has created a disruptive technology platform that connects the world's biggest brands with a previously untapped network of small business owners and their agents. This entrepreneurial network of work-from-home service partners creates exceptional customer experiences that increase sales, improve loyalty and speed customer growth. The Arise® Platform enables brands to transform the relationship between their company and their customers through state-of-the-art security, access to brand advocates and on-demand flexible capacity to handle sudden or seasonal volume changes.

The Arise® Platform is the future of customer care.

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3 Jiwa, Nick, “Market Size: Just How Big Is the Call Center Industry?”

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8 Ibid.

9 (TJ Singh, personal communication, April 21, 2020.)