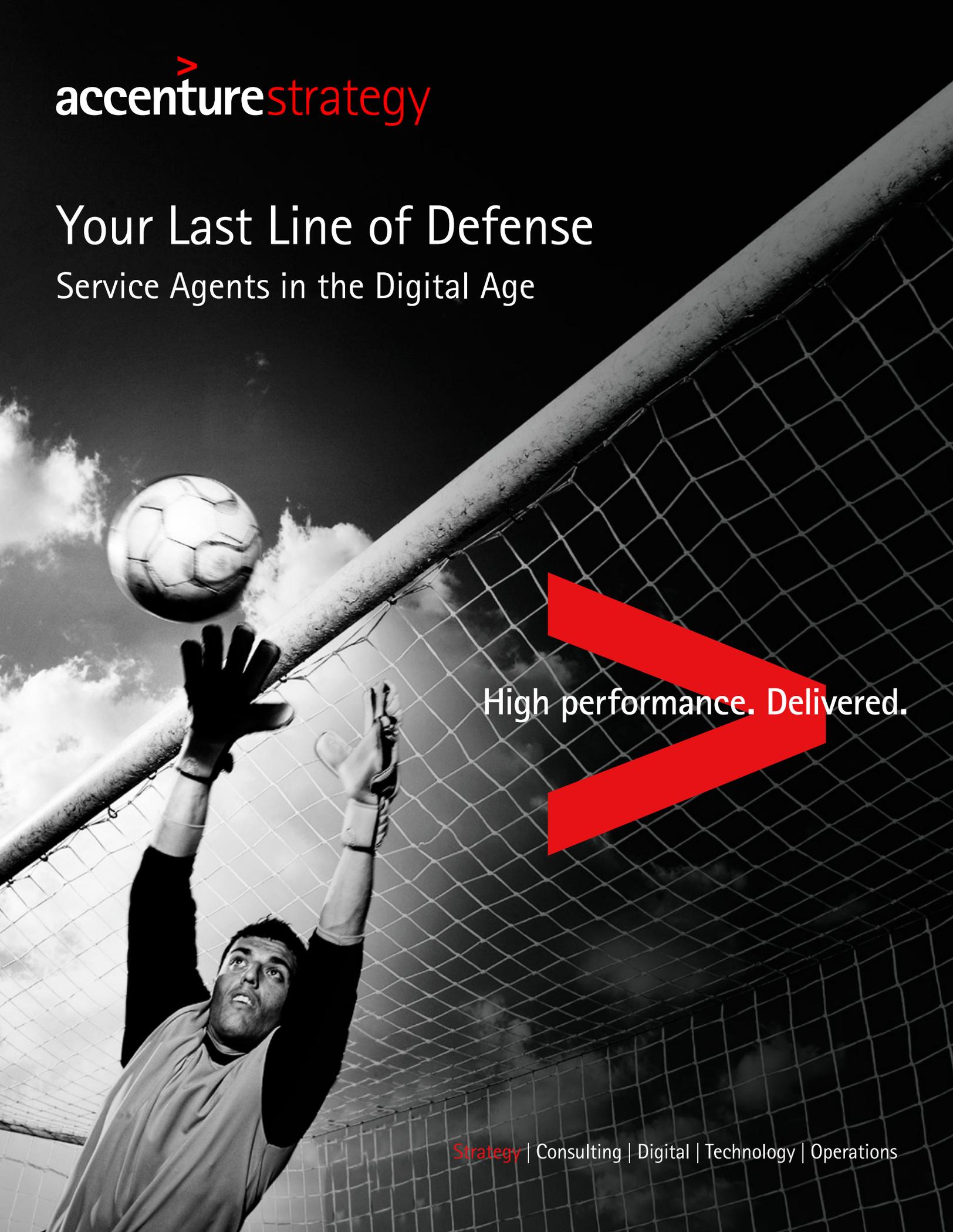




Your Last Line of Defense

Service Agents in the Digital Age



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As customers embrace automated, "always-on" channels to access product information and assistance, will customer service agents become irrelevant? Not for tomorrow's business leaders. In the digital age of customer service, agents will play a more important—albeit different—role than ever before.

Customer service in the digital age

Companies have taken significant steps to improve their service offerings in recent years. Investments in online, self-service support capabilities have reduced costs and provided customers the online experiences they increasingly demand. But digital initiatives haven't really put a dent in defection. Accenture research indicates that 65 percent of customers switched providers in 2014 because of poor service.¹ Companies have found that positioning customer service as a key source of competitive differentiation and delivering experiences that customers notice, value and reward in the digital age is harder than originally thought.

Service is no longer an isolated function. The linear path to purchase is dead. Digital customers now evaluate a company's products, services and support capabilities on an ongoing basis. They don't think of customer service as a standalone function;

they see it as one aspect of their experience at every touch point. Companies need to adopt the same mindset.

Companies no longer fully control the service experience. One-quarter of customers now turn to third-party websites, forums or chats to resolve issues according to Accenture research.² Companies can't ignore the influence of these "crowd-service" channels. They need to actively participate in these volunteer user communities to ensure their voices are heard.

Generalization no longer has meaning. In the world of automated service, demographic characteristics serve little predictive value. Companies think high-value customers prefer human interactions and Millennials want digital-only service solutions. Neither assumption is true. What is true is that customers now live in both the digital and physical worlds simultaneously. That means service must be tightly integrated and delivered across all the channels customers might select.

Dehumanize service at your own risk

Digital solutions have clearly changed the nature of service—but not yet to the extent that many imagine.

While 30 percent of customers now consider online channels their preferred means of support, that's barely more than the 28 percent who still opt for speaking to agents when given the choice. Further, only 43 percent are satisfied with the likelihood of resolving issues without speaking to an agent. Only 36 percent believe online channels are better.³

These statistics are not an indictment of online services. Rather, they suggest that opportunities abound for companies to improve digital service experiences in the years ahead. Accenture has identified that customers will increasingly choose digitally enabled interactions to manage their routine service transactions. Further, as technologies become ever more sophisticated, customers' online service experiences will become more satisfying. This is good news for companies. Customers will get the experiences they expect, and companies will be able to serve more customers at a lower cost.

But what many companies fail to realize is that self-service technologies will only get them so far. Digital solutions do not replace human interactions; they complement them. Together, the digital and human elements of service deliver the multi-channel service experiences that customers demand. Yet, some companies are focusing on digital at the expense of the human dimension of customer service. They will

suffer as a result. One online insurance company, for example, delivered its service functions online. Human interactions between company representatives and customers occurred at just one touch point: the scene of an accident. While the adjusters managed claims issues quickly, they simply weren't trained in delivering customer service—especially to customers experiencing stress. As a result, the company witnessed significantly more customer churn after those interactions. Similar scenarios unfold in the utilities or telecommunications industries. Field workers sent out to repair or upgrade equipment typically miss valuable opportunities to engage with customers, better understand their needs, and potentially sell more services.

As these examples illustrate, even the most digitally advanced companies need to deliver personalized help at some point. That's where customer service agents come in. Agents will be expected to resolve the most complex issues. But they will do more than solve a problem; they will deliver a critical moment of truth for the customer and represent a singular opportunity for human-to-human engagement with customers. What those agents do—and how well they do it—will be hyper relevant for creating a positive customer experience. In many cases, the quality of the human interaction will be the company's last, best hope for retaining customers.

Optimizing the service experience

Delivering a satisfying and personalized customer experience across channels can be quite challenging. Building the service organization of the future will require organizations to fundamentally rethink their service delivery channels, operating models and talent requirements. Accenture has identified three critical actions companies can pursue today.

Master the digital experience

Companies need to continue evolving their online, automated and self-service capabilities to offer outstanding service via their digital channels. Accenture research has revealed that 52 percent of customers visit a company's website or company-managed online forum for service. But only 46 percent are satisfied with the experience. Other digital channels, including online text or video chats, are more highly rated. Mobile services hold

particular promise. In 2013, 24 percent of consumers accessed online service sites via their mobile devices "always" or "the majority of the time." In 2014, 31 percent of customers did. Yet only 40 percent of them believe companies are effectively using the mobile channel to deliver an enhanced and tailored experience.⁴ Clearly, as these channels become increasingly popular, companies will have plenty of opportunity to improve the digital service experience. Those that master digital service today will be better positioned to satisfy the growing number of customers seeking online support in the years ahead.

Implement a true multi-channel service strategy

Customers live in a digital/physical blur. Few want digital-only or human-only services; they want multi-channel experiences that engage and delight them wherever they are. The need for multiple modes of interaction is particularly evident in the area of service. Digital service options are becoming increasingly popular. But agents continue to serve a vital role—especially when customers have exhausted all digital sources of support. Analytics, customer segmentation, social monitoring and active listening all play a role in helping companies determine the right balance of digital and non-digital support services they provide. Multi-channel service strategies must extend beyond the walls of the business. Companies need to inject themselves in the crowd-servicing movement. Company-controlled platforms will enable them to not only take part in the conversations, but also identify service opportunities and issues early and respond accordingly.

Equip the front-office to succeed in critical, multi-faceted roles

In the digital age, service agents must do more than solve customer problems; they must be able to create satisfying experiences for frustrated customers whose requests could not be solved digitally. Empathy, active listening, conflict resolution and crisis management become key skills. To help today's service agents to become the customer experience designers, PR managers, solution coaches and loyalty experts they need to be, companies need to rethink their talent procedures, pipelines and structures. Specifically, they will need new:

- Measures to assess performance. Call handling time, for example, will take a back seat to a balanced scorecard of metrics that focuses on outcomes such as customer satisfaction, retention and problem resolution.
- New talent acquisition and workplace models to attract and retain agents with the social and technical skills required. Efforts to engage volunteers in the crowd-servicing arena and flexible work options will become more commonplace.
- To instill and continually reinforce new values, expectations and capabilities.
- To adjust compensation models to appropriately reward service agents for the strategic tasks they perform and the skills they bring to the table.

People first

Ironically, elevating the human component is what will differentiate customer service in the digital age. Companies that transform their service skills and operating models now to meet the critical needs of today's "always-on" customers will be better positioned to protect revenues and retain customers. By making people a critical component of the omni-channel service solution, companies can create distinct competitive advantage in the digital age.

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