

4 Crucial Trends for the 2018 Holiday Retail Season

Executive Summary

It's the most wonderful time of the year. No, not the holidays. Rather, we mean this post-holiday moment, when retailers assess the just-concluded season and start planning for the next one. Seasons change, but one core issue is perennial, the volume of tickets. One Zendesk study found that for retailers it can go up by as much as 42 percent.

As ticket volume invariably rises during the holidays, companies can find it challenging to manage both the influx of customers and the accompanying surge of support tickets—requests for password resets, product questions, troubleshooting, questions about returns and exchanges. What's more, that ticket surge will vary by channel, along with increasing service expectations for the channel of their preference.

Know the basics

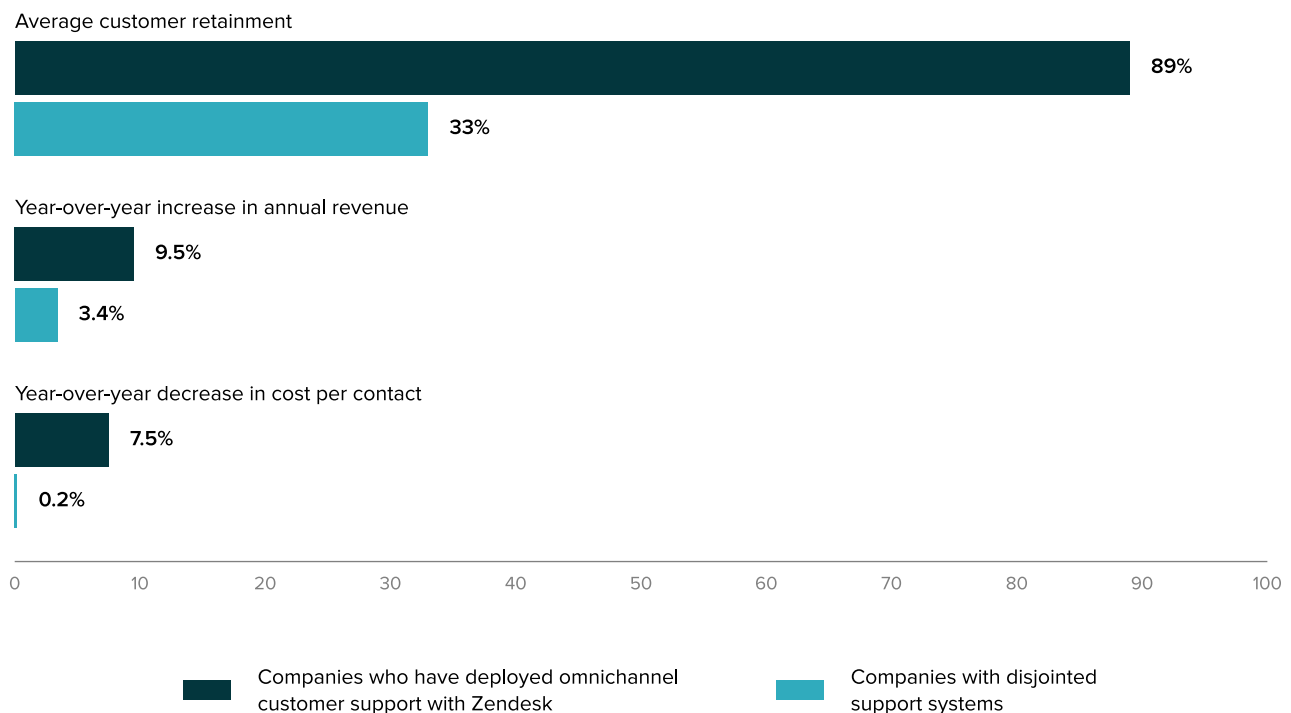
- Speed of the first reply is directly linked to customer satisfaction (Figure 7)
- There is a clear trend of ticket volume increases across all channels in November and December
- Ticket volume year over year has climbed dramatically in each channel – and astoundingly so for new channels like Facebook and Twitter
- When ticket volume surges, disjointed support systems fail, sacrificing first-reply times and CSAT scores

The Power of Omnichannel Customer Support

Omnichannel customer support—support across a spectrum of channels—is increasingly something that companies view as part of their baseline offering. At the heart of omnichannel customer support: efficiently and effectively serving your customers in the channels they choose to promote short-term customer satisfaction and long-term loyalty. Identifying the optimal omnichannel strategy for your company is critical for a successful holiday season.

If you have yet to adopt an omnichannel customer support strategy, it's time to stop procrastinating. At the risk of sounding dramatic, it's hard to overstate the perils of being an omnichannel laggard. It's of course never good for business when a customer walks away from a transaction less than thrilled. During the holidays, though, the repercussions for your business could have a grim and indelible impact. Unhappy customers can walk away for good, your reputation in tatters—and just like that, everything you and your team have worked so hard for is destroyed. No one wants their company to go viral because of an enraged tweet about being ignored, or the gift not arriving, or a human agent with the warmth of a second-rate robot.

Figure 1: Omnichannel customer support meets customers needs across channels, according to the customer's communication preference.



Findings and Analysis

Traditional support channels use continue to rise, while new support channels see dramatic increases, straining many customer support organizations.

We pulled anonymous Zendesk ticket volume data from all global customers that identified their industry as Retail. We analyzed the numbers; they tell a compelling story.

Not surprisingly, when comparing the months of January and December in 2017, there is a dramatic jump in ticket volume across channels—a 49 percent increase for email, 92 percent for Chat, 106 percent for Talk. In Facebook support, the increase is more than threefold.

Without a doubt though, ticket volume in November and December rises significantly over the rest of the year due to an increase of customers shopping for the holidays. Between June and December, the increase is 21 percent for Chat, 28 percent for Talk, and 7 percent for email. For some Zendesk customers, like JibJab, it's critical to have the ability to scale to meet seasonal demand. JibJab has seen volume increase from an average of 8,000 to 80,000 tickets over November and December. [JibJab](#) staffs up and uses Zendesk Support to meet demand and keep the team tied to its 24-hour SLA, even during peak seasons.

We see a steady rise year over year, too. Comparing December 2016 to December 2017, Talk ticket volume leaps 55 percent, Chat increases 29 percent, and Email by 26 percent. Most astounding is the rise in ticket volume for social channels – 63 percent increase for Twitter and whopping 160 percent increase for Facebook. These trends reflect the rise in popularity and ubiquity of channels like Chat and Social, but it's also a loud-and-clear indication of the increasing expectation that customers have for efficient service. They want to make purchases, yes, and they expect that you'll be there to meet any related needs, no matter how they choose to reach out.

Ticket volume: month over month for 2017

Figure 2: Chat Channel

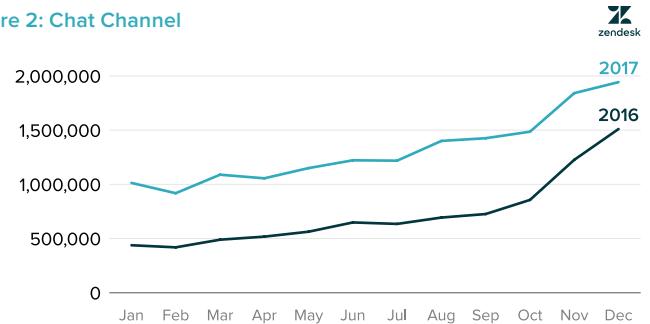


Figure 3: Talk/Voice Channel

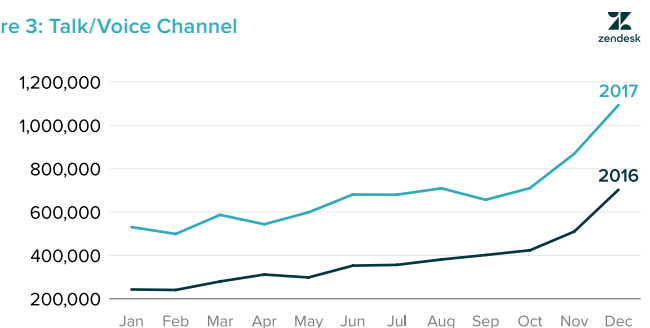


Figure 4: Social Media (Facebook + Twitter) Channel

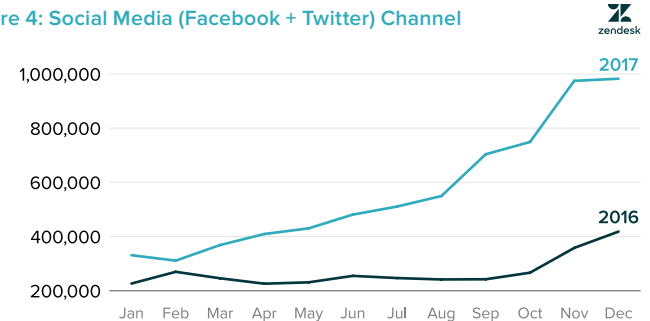
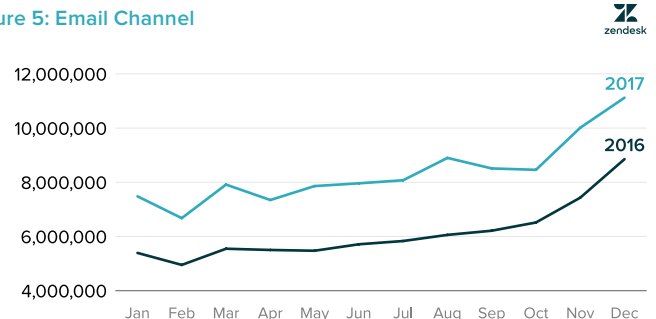
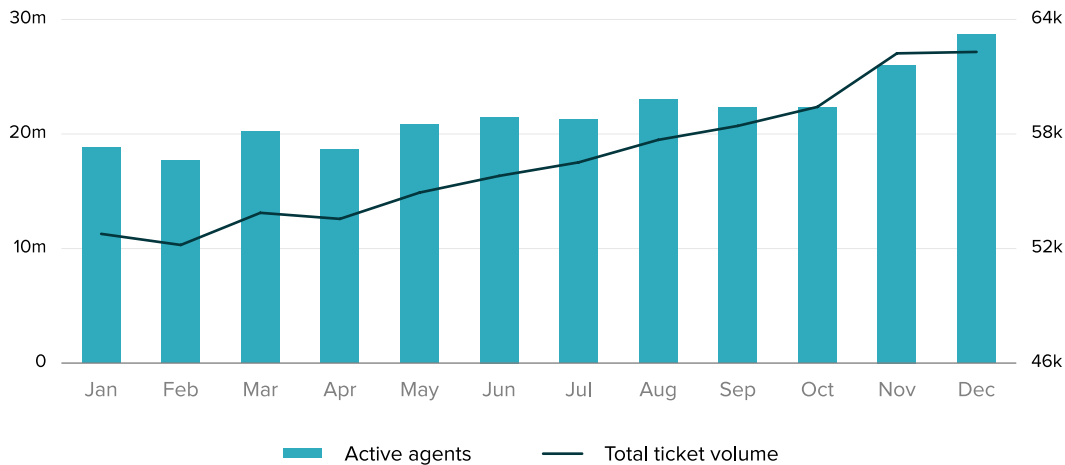


Figure 5: Email Channel



How you staff your support center over the holidays has an impact on CSAT

Figure 6: Active agents vs. total ticket volume per month in 2017

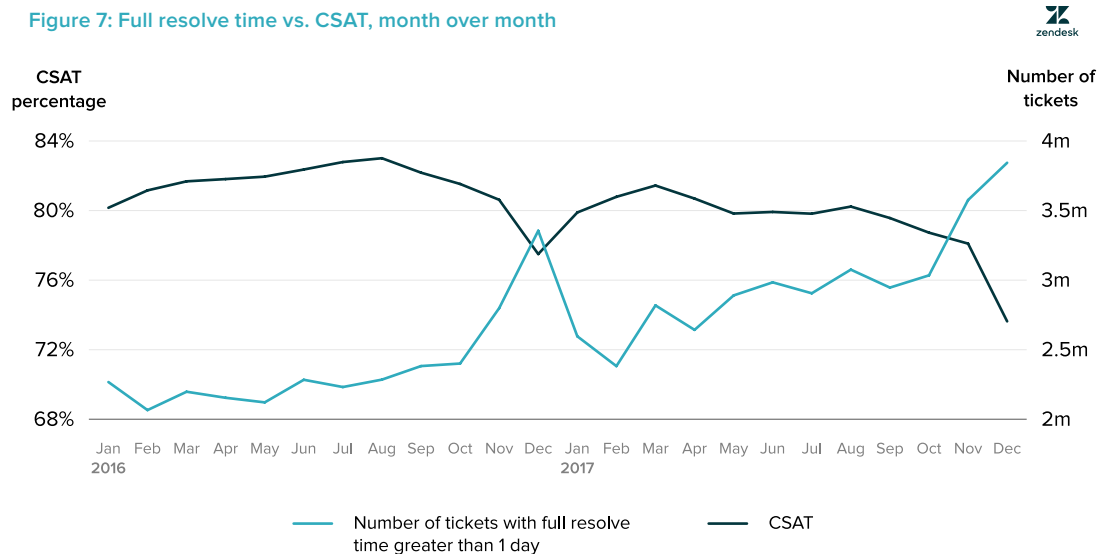


There's an intriguing difference in holiday agent adds in 2016 versus 2017. Retailers added 22 percent more agents between the beginning of Q3 and the end of Q4, in 2016. The figure for 2017 is less than half that at 10 percent. Comparing the end of Q4 and the beginning of Q1, the increase in agents is 28 percent in 2016 and 18 percent in 2017.

Retailers added significantly fewer agents during the holiday season in 2017, despite larger ticket volume, than in the previous year, channel over channel. The dramatic increase of tickets submitted through alternative channels such as Chat, Facebook, and Twitter is catching some organizations off guard and could be one of several explanations for this lack of proper staffing.

Rise in ticket volume matches rise in customer expectation

Figure 7: Full resolve time vs. CSAT, month over month



*Not all respondents complete CSAT surveys

As we see above, during the holiday season of 2016 and 2017, the heavier ticket volume causes support teams to resolve tickets at a much slower pace, often with delays as much as a full day later. What's all the more telling is the relationship between the response time and the level of customer satisfaction (CSAT). This statistic may seem like an obvious cause and effect relationship, but many support organizations continue to be unprepared for the holidays with disjointed ticketing systems or understaffed teams.

Additionally, we ran some comparisons between the volume of monthly tickets replied to within the first eight hours and those with a response time of greater than a day. The difference between December 2016 and 2017 — the month with lowest CSAT for both years — is striking. In December 2016, there were 30 percent more tickets with a response time greater than a full day, compared to those responded to within the first 8 hours. That delta increases in December 2017 to 44 percent.

Channel-by-Channel Best Practices

Each channel requires a different touch

Just as literary genius isn't a must-have for a Talk agent, an infallibly calm tone of voice won't do much to assist a frustrated customer in Chat. Below, some tips on which skills to emphasize when.



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Use shortcuts, tickets, and smart metrics monitoring

1. Identify the most commonly asked questions and create shortcuts—they'll improve resolution times and keep your agents from typing the same thing over and over again.
2. Integrate Chat with the Zendesk Support ticketing system to convert chats into tickets that can be resolved later via email.
3. Customized chat widgets can spread the holiday spirit in a way that's pleasing and on-brand.
4. Monitor chat and agent metrics with [Chat Analytics](#). If you see that your satisfaction score is dropping after an influx of chats, you can then consider adding more agents.
5. Think of the best chat support as a mix of phone and email skills—it's conversational and real-time like a call but requires strong writing and the ability to interpret a customer's tone.



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Consistent but savvy responsiveness is key

1. Always respond to a customer's social post, especially when they need help. Even if you can't answer right away, make quick initial contact with them and let them know when and where you'll respond.
2. Stay alert to obvious attempts at creating an altercation in a public space. These comments are often directed at the company itself, and sometimes it can turn into something of a feeding frenzy.
3. Social media contacts occasionally walk a line between something that should be handled by a support agent and something that should be handled by marketing. Know when to delegate elsewhere.
4. If you need the customer's personal info to solve the problem, step out of the public eye and invite them to continue the discussion in a private and secure channel.



Take the weight off your agent

1. Agents should be able to swiftly access customer information. In retail, integration with an ecommerce platform like [Shopify](#) is incredibly powerful—whenever possible, your agents should not have to switch between multiple systems.
2. An app like Pathfinder informs your agent if the customer has already viewed a help center article. Or maybe they emailed you recently about the same issue. Knowing the customer's user history gives your agent a leg up in resolving issues quickly and minimizing customer frustration.
3. Refine the workflow with tools like automatic ticket creation that track phone calls, anything to take the weight off your agent so they don't have to take notes or use different systems for different channels.
4. Don't forget the soft skills. Smiling while you speak can make your agent sound friendly and approachable. To that point, it's important to reflect the customer's tone and emotional state — mirroring — at least at first. Once you've established a connection, you can guide them to a softer place. Above all, truly *listen* to their needs.



Always be considerate, and try to match the customer's tone

1. Templates that include some pre-written text are key for efficiency. But they shouldn't be overly rigid and unwavering. Employ suitable structure for common responses (like a list of step-by-step instructions). Personalize your answer before replying to customers to create a sense of real human interaction.
2. Emails, especially a first response, need to be answered within a defined timeframe. A stellar email support agent will prioritize by urgency and consider how long the customer has been waiting.
3. Tone can be hard to decipher in words, so choose your words carefully. A good rule of thumb is to use a gentle, informative tone—it takes a lot of ability to keep it in check when faced with a frustrated customer.
4. Look for cues if something is unclear. Sometimes it's harder for customers to express themselves by writing, so don't read too quickly and don't jump to conclusions. It takes a lot of training to understand the nuances of different customers, but it's a critical aspect of great customer service. For example, someone that works in sales might come off as assertive while you're providing them support, while an engineer might need complex technical details to see their problem solved.

Conclusion

Maintaining consistent customer service across channels throughout the year is critical.

The challenge of staying true to customer-service values has gotten trickier with the proliferation of new channels. Ticket volume is increasing year over year, but retailers don't seem to be adding a sufficient number of agents and are slow to recognize the astounding rise of new support channels that require fully integrated support systems. First-reply time takes a hit, and this ripples over into CSAT, which decreases when customers have to wait longer both for the first reply and for full resolution.

In retail and beyond, omnichannel customer support is now standard. Customers expect to be able to reach out with support queries across a variety of channels, depending on their urgency and need. Expectations of customer support dramatically increase during the holiday season, making it crucial to have an omnichannel solution tailored to your organization. This means figuring out your staffing needs in advance, understanding the nuances of each channel, and ensuring you make the most of Zendesk resources to help you manage volume between systems - all ultimately leading to a polished experience for your customers.

Methodology

All data comes from global Zendesk customers who identify as retailers.

