
MEASURING CUSTOMER SERVICE

TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 4 [Introduction](#)
- 5 [Benchmark Your Performance Using These Measures](#)
- 6 [Top 10 Measures: Performance and Importance](#)
- 27 [Outcomes and Key Takeaways](#)
- 28 [Sponsor's Perspective: Esker Inc.](#)
- 29 [About this Research](#)

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INTRODUCTION

Reputation and *relationships* are two of the most crucial assets an organization holds in its competitive arsenal. Your customer service representatives are the front-line “face” of your organization, and order management and customer service can make or break your organization’s reputation in your customers’ eyes, which ultimately impacts revenue and profitability.

Questions: How do you know if your organization’s function is performing well overall? How do you determine if customer service processes are efficient and effective? What tasks are consuming most of your representatives’ time? Which measures do other organizations use to evaluate customer service?

Answer: Select the appropriate key performance indicators (KPIs) to evaluate your customer service performance and benchmark against other organizations.

In 2023, APQC conducted research, sponsored by Esker Inc., which took a detailed look at the top KPIs organizations employ to measure customer service and order management. These KPIs were first identified in APQC’s 2022 research [Optimizing Customer Service](#), also sponsored by Esker, which examined how organizations can enable better customer service and alleviate critical challenges facing both customer service and order fulfillment teams.

With insights from 200 large organizations with revenues of at least \$500 million USD, this whitepaper takes a deeper dive into the top ten KPIs you can use to assess your customer service function, including:

- // identification of the top ten measures and the current state of performance for each;
- // insights from research respondents into why each measure is important from three perspectives: the organization, the customer, and the customer service employee; and
- // additional analysis and key takeaways.

By applying the appropriate measures and comparing them to other organizations, you gain awareness into whether your customer service efforts are helping you achieve strategic advantage by fostering rewarding customer relationships, a reputation for reliable order fulfillment, and a satisfying customer experience.



BENCHMARK YOUR PERFORMANCE USING THESE MEASURES

The top KPIs for customer service and order management include:

1

**Total costs
for customer
service**

2

**Customer
service
employee time
allocation**

3

**Number of
customer
service full-
time equivalent
employees
(FTEs)**

4

**Systems
(technology)
costs for
customer service**

5

**Proportion of
in-house versus
outsourced
handling of
customer
complaints**

6

**Customer
satisfaction**

7

**Response time
to resolve
customer issues**

8

**Number of
customer
inbound
contacts by
type**

9

**First contact
resolution**

10

**Proportion of
in-house versus
outsourced
handling of
customer
inquiries**



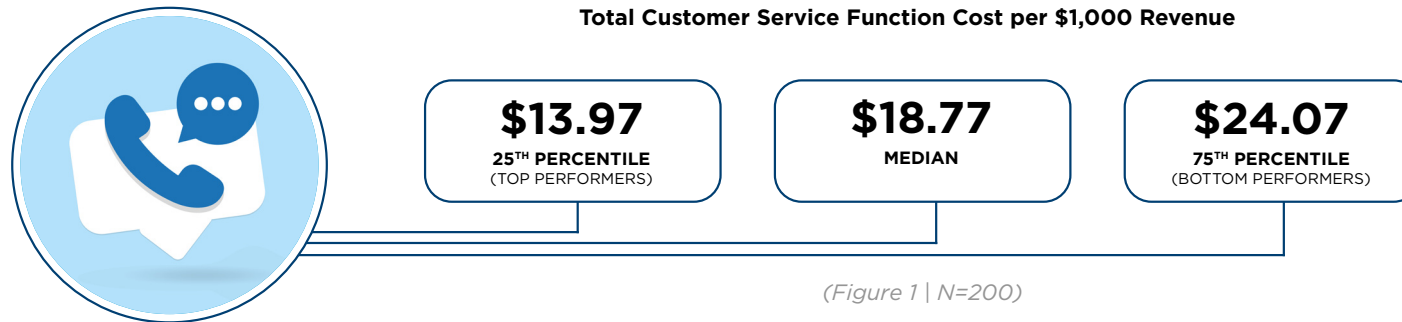
TOP 10 MEASURES: PERFORMANCE AND IMPORTANCE

When considering how to measure customer service performance, it is important to choose a balanced set of measures that include both internally focused measures, such as costs and employee time allocation, as well as externally focused measures of customer service success, like customer satisfaction scores and customer response times.

The following section focuses on each of the top 10 measures that are the most important to understanding and improving effectiveness of the customer service function. For each measure, data on current levels of performance provided by research participants is included. Some measures include additional analysis of the data and insights on how to improve performance in that area.

For each measure, there are also insights, based on a synopsis of responses from research participants, regarding *why* the measure is important to the organization, to the customer, and to customer service representatives (CSRs).

1 TOTAL COSTS FOR CUSTOMER SERVICE



Cost is the most traditional measure of process performance. The most popular KPI for customer service cost is the total cost of the customer service function per \$1,000 in revenue. Examining this cost per \$1,000 revenue enables comparisons across organizations of different sizes. Total cost is primarily comprised of personnel, systems, overhead, and outsourced costs.

As Figure 1 shows, the top performers on this measure, defined as those who are most efficient and spend the least on customer service compared to revenue, spend about \$14 per \$1,000 of revenue on customer service. Bottom performers spent about \$24 per \$1,000 in revenue. For a \$2 billion company, the savings potential of moving from bottom to top performance levels is more than \$20 million per year.

Typical drivers that organizations examine when looking to reduce costs are:

- // organizational structure (e.g., the impacts on cost of centralization or decentralization),
- // technology (e.g., how to leverage technology and automation to reduce costs),
- // strategic outsourcing of non-core tasks, and
- // key practices related to the process (people practices, procedures, protocols, etc.).

Costs can also be reduced through process mapping to identify opportunities for improvements such as bottlenecks, redundancies, handoffs, lack of important process documentation, and opportunities to streamline activities.

One warning is that cost cannot be the *only* measure an organization focuses on for customer service. An organization that prioritizes lowering costs too much may actually be at risk of *losing* customers if lower costs result in longer wait times or less responsive customer service. APQC recommends a balanced set of measures that speak to internal costs as well as external customer experience outcomes.

Why This KPI is Important to Your...

Company

Total customer service cost compared to revenue provides visibility into the resources allocated to customer service activities, including personnel (salaries and benefits), technology, infrastructure, training, and support systems. This comprehensive view helps identify opportunities for enhancing efficiency and reducing costs, adjusting business strategies, and making informed decisions about customer service investments in order to allocate funds appropriately.

Customer

Monitoring customer service costs enables the business to optimize customer service investments, allocate resources efficiently, and focus on delivering a high-quality customer experience that enhances the customer relationship through personalized and empathetic interactions.

CSR

Part of monitoring costs means encouraging employees to contribute ideas for process enhancement within the customer service function. Because they are closest to the customer, CSRs have personal knowledge of gaps in the customer experience and ways to make processes more efficient.



2 CUSTOMER SERVICE EMPLOYEE TIME ALLOCATION

Labor is the largest cost component of customer service costs. APQC research finds that at the median (i.e., the midpoint or 50th percentile), customer service personnel costs are 58 percent of total customer service costs. To reduce the amount of labor needed and improve productivity in this necessary process, it is important to first understand how that time is being allocated by activity.

The top two areas where customer support spends its time, as shown in Figure 2, are acknowledging orders and responding to order status requests. As identified [later](#) in this paper in the discussion of the KPI for number of customer inbound contacts by type, this time represents an opportunity to automate some basic tasks and free up CSR time for higher-value activities. Further analysis of the data revealed that for those organizations that have made this shift to more customer service FTE time allocated to higher value activities, specifically *answering product questions* or *handling claims/complaints*, total customer service cost per \$1,000 revenue is approximately 5 percent lower.

Customer Service Employee Time Allocation

Customer Service Activity	Percentage of Customer Service Time (Average Per Workweek)
Acknowledging customer orders	14%
Responding to order status requests	14%
Handling claims for returns/refunds, responding to complaints	13%
Answering product questions	9%
Cross-selling/upselling	7%
Proactively contacting customers	6%
Managing email inbox(es) NOT related to communicating directly with clients/customers	6%
Processing remittances/payments	6%
Responding to social media messages	6%
Entering customer orders manually	6%
Printing/collecting/organizing documents	5%
Selecting items from warehouses and planning delivery	5%

(Figure 2 | N= 200)

Why This KPI is Important to Your...

Company

Knowing how customer service staff time is distributed allows organizations to effectively monitor and optimize resource utilization on an individual or team level, track the time spent on different activities, and make data-driven decisions to improve overall efficiency and productivity.

Key benefits to the organization include better workforce planning (preventing both overstaffing and understaffing scenarios), tracking compliance with Service Level Agreements (SLAs) in customer service operations, and monitoring and analyzing trends. Automated time-tracking tools enable tracking this KPI with more accuracy and in-depth analysis.

Customer

By tracking and making improvements to how customer service resources are allocated, organizations can address bottlenecks and ensure more prompt and efficient customer service that enhances the customer experience.

CSR

This measure highlights areas where time-consuming tasks or complex workflows may be hindering productivity. Organizations can also use this information to find areas where representatives need additional training. This knowledge enables fair and transparent performance evaluation and provides the basis for incentives and rewards to motivate and recognize high-performing agents.



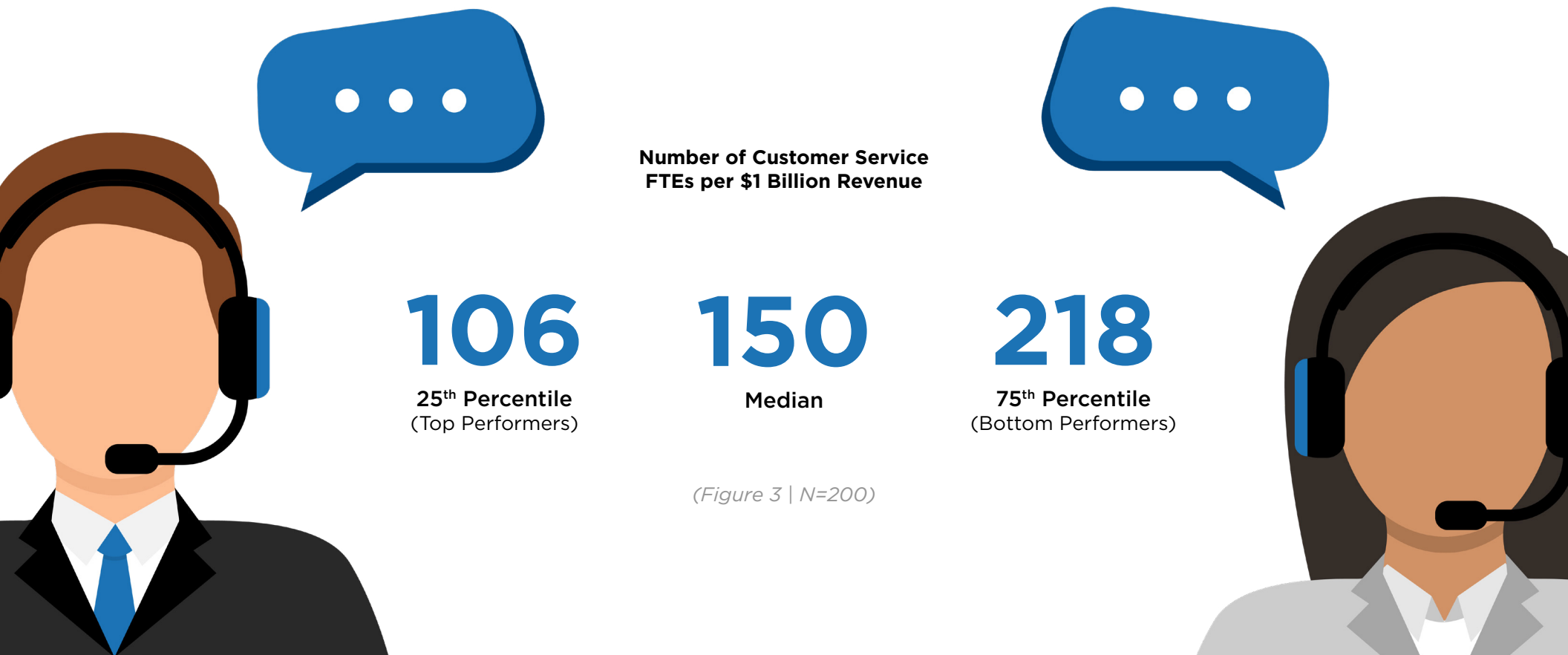
“We have been trying to identify reasons for repeat contacts or escalations to find the root causes and make changes to enhance performance, streamline procedures, and foster better collaboration between departments.”

3 NUMBER OF CUSTOMER SERVICE FULL-TIME EQUIVALENT EMPLOYEES (FTEs)

Top performers are able to execute customer service processes with about 112 fewer full-time equivalent employees (FTEs) per \$1 billion in revenue (Figure 3) compared to bottom performers. For this measure, top performers are defined as organizations at or below the 25th percentile, and bottom performers are organizations at or above the 75th percentile.

Accomplishing the same work with less than half as many people is more efficient; however, fewer customer service employees is only better if the organization is hitting its targets on a balanced set of measures. As mentioned in the cost discussion, this measure should be considered in conjunction with other cost, productivity, and customer-facing measures to ensure that greater efficiency in customer service is not being achieved at the expense of customer experience and satisfaction.

Facing heightened customer expectations, many organizations are turning to automation to reduce the number of FTEs needed for customer service activities. Many top performers prefer to also reduce FTEs by outsourcing some or all customer service interactions. These organizations pass responsibility for these activities to specialized vendors that focus on managing customer service in an efficient, customer-friendly, and cost-effective manner.



(Figure 3 | N=200)

Why This KPI is Important to Your...

Company

The number of FTEs devoted to customer service compared to revenue is important because it reflects the level of investment the company is making in providing quality customer service, and it allows the assessment of the performance, efficiency, and productivity of our customer service team. This KPI provides real-time visibility into staffing levels, schedule adherence, and performance metrics, which helps inform decisions about workforce planning.

Customer

When the company optimizes its staffing levels, “We can ensure we have adequate resources to handle customer inquiries and provide timely resolutions, thus reducing customer wait times and improving satisfaction,” said one research participant. Optimizing this measure provides customers with a higher level of service and enhances corporate reputation while balancing the cost versus revenue equation.

CSR

Tracking this measure facilitates the planning and implementation of training and development programs that represent investment in the professional growth and skill development of the customer service workforce. This measure also comes into play when implementing incentive programs, rewarding high-performing employees, and driving motivation and engagement within the customer service team.



4 SYSTEMS (TECHNOLOGY) COSTS FOR CUSTOMER SERVICE

General statements about spending on systems for customer service are not very actionable. Organizational leaders need to weigh multiple factors in each circumstance such as organizational structure, scope, complexity, funding availability, and process management maturity. Nevertheless, systems costs per \$1,000 revenue is a useful starting point for comparisons. Bottom performers on this measure, defined as those having the highest customer service technology cost compared to revenue, have systems costs almost double those of top performers (Figure 4). When assessing the current state, systems consolidations, integration, and ownership should all be part of the discussion.

Systems/Technology Costs for Customer Service Function per \$1,000 Revenue

\$1.86

25th Percentile
(Top Performers)

\$2.59

Median

\$3.35

75th Percentile
(Bottom Performers)

(Figure 4 | N=200)



Why This KPI is Important to Your...

Company

Systems (technology) costs for customer service per \$1,000 revenue is important because it allows organizations to calculate the return on investment (ROI) of customer service systems and examine the costs associated with different technologies, including implementation, licensing, maintenance, and integration.

This measure allows for informed decisions about technology investments and identifies areas for improvement, technology enhancements, and potential cost-saving measures. According to one research participant, “We are increasingly focusing on systems cost and are evaluating and renegotiating contracts while transitioning to cloud-based solutions, eliminating the need to purchase and maintain expensive equipment and software licenses.”

Tracking technology costs also helps organizations meet compliance and auditing requirements by providing transparency and accountability.

Customer

The right amount of investment in technology can help enterprises quickly respond to customer needs, address issues, enable self-service, and provide satisfactory solutions. Systems that enhance customer satisfaction, prevent escalation, and strengthen relationships with customers are seen as valued investments by many organizations: “By optimizing costs, we can ensure we are investing in the right technologies that align with our customer service strategy and provide desired outcomes.”

CSR

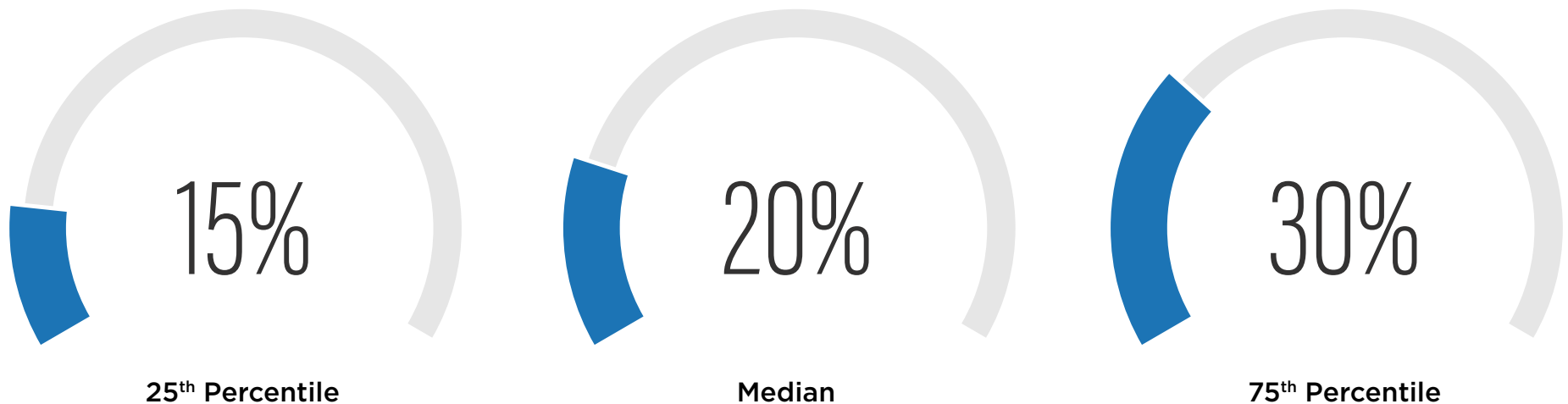
Investment in technology and automation such as chatbots and virtual assistants can remove some of the workload from CSRs, which not only reduces costs but also streamlines workflow and enables CSRs to spend time on value-added activities.

5

PROPORTION OF IN-HOUSE VERSUS OUTSOURCED HANDLING OF CUSTOMER COMPLAINTS

The process of managing customer complaints deals with every aspect of customer complaints, from initial receipt and routing to resolution and response. Managing customer service complaints positively helps maintain customer relationships. It costs less to retain an existing customer and keep them happy than it does to find a new one. Therefore, training staff on how to better deal with customer complaints can be essential to customer retention. Given the importance of dealing with complaints appropriately and the high consequences of failure, it is not surprising to see that at the median (i.e., midpoint or 50th percentile), handling for only one in five complaints is outsourced (Figure 5).

**Proportion of Customer Complaints Handled
by Outsourced FTEs**



(Figure 5 | N=200)

Why This KPI is Important to Your...

Company

Research participants differed on strategy for outsourcing complaint handling, with some feeling that “by handling complaints in-house, we can ensure consistent brand representation and maintain control over the customer experience.” Others expressed that “outsourcing customer service allows us to focus on core competencies and avoid the distractions of managing a customer service department.”

A recurring theme across firms was the importance of evaluating the cost-effectiveness of customer complaint handling and the need to be able to scale handling capabilities according to fluctuations in volume.

Customer

Monitoring how complaints are handled is one facet of ensuring customer complaints are handled promptly and efficiently and maintaining a high level of customer satisfaction. If the in-house team lacks the expertise for diverse complaint types, outsourcing can provide specialized knowledge.

CSR

This KPI assesses if the in-house team can handle complaint volume adequately. If capacity is exceeded, outsourcing can provide additional support, avoiding backlogs or delays. To improve processes, tracking this KPI can help identify areas for improvement. For example, if in-house handling is dominant but not yielding desired results, it may indicate the need to re-evaluate training, processes, or staffing.



6 CUSTOMER SATISFACTION

Customer satisfaction is one of the primary aims underlying most customer service efforts, and organizations prioritize this customer-facing measure when choosing KPIs.

[In prior research conducted with Esker](#), APQC identified the three most important goals for senior leaders when it comes to customer service support for business strategy. Improving customer satisfaction topped the list, chosen by 45 percent. This goal aligns well with changing customer expectations for faster service and consistency across channels.



“The customer satisfaction rate demonstrates a business's dedication to delivering exceptional service, giving them a competitive advantage that attracts new customers and potentially convinces customers to switch from less satisfactory competitors.”

How Do Organizations Measure Customer Satisfaction?

Organizations employ a variety of different measurement tools and ways of rating customer satisfaction, such as:

- // automated satisfaction surveys offered at the end of each call, email, or transaction (e.g., surveys could be used to calculate [net promoter score](#));
- // periodic surveys delivered by email, phone call, or in-person interview;
- // monitoring social media mentions, tags, or direct messages; and
- // using website analytics including time spent on pages, bounce rates, and conversion rates.

Why This KPI is Important to Your...

Company

A high level of customer satisfaction indicates that the customer service function is performing as it should and signals a strong relationship with customers, which provides a competitive edge in terms of loyalty and repeat business. As one research participant stated, “Customer loyalty, positive word-of-mouth, reputation and market image, and increased customer lifetime value are critical points for us, so we ensure customer service is meeting expectations.”

Customer

Monitoring customer satisfaction offers valuable insights into customer preferences, needs, and pain points. The customer experience is enhanced when firms listen to their customer base and work to ensure they are satisfied.

CSR

Measuring customer satisfaction helps customer service representatives identify areas where customer service can be improved, helps them address customer concerns, and reduces customer churn and associated costs.

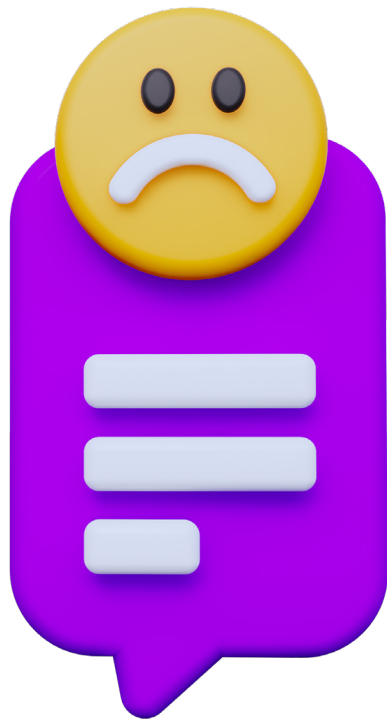


“AI-powered voice analytics tools analyze customer support calls and extract valuable insights. By analyzing tone, sentiment, and keywords, we identify patterns and areas where customer satisfaction can be improved.”

7 RESPONSE TIME TO RESOLVE CUSTOMER ISSUES

Many organizations measure the time it takes to acknowledge customer inquiries, requests, and complaints. However, just *acknowledging* the customer's issue does not mean that the customer has received the answer they are seeking. A measure used by a larger percentage of organizations is the time to *resolve* customer inquiries/requests/complaints in hours. When customers feel that their concerns are being heard **and** addressed quickly, they are more likely to be satisfied with the company and do business again.

The top performers on this measure resolve issues in about five hours or less (Figure 6). It takes almost twice as long for bottom performers to resolve customer inquiries, requests, and complaints, likely pushing into the next business day.



Response Time to Resolve Customer Inquiries/Requests/Complaints (in Hours)



(Figure 6 | N=200)

Why This KPI is Important to Your...

Company

The time it takes to resolve customer inquiries and complaints is a prime example of a measure that reflects how well an organization is delivering a satisfying experience and building a solid relationship with its customers. As one respondent explained, “Rapidly resolving customer complaints is instrumental in maintaining customer retention and loyalty.”

Respondents agree that this measure is “the foremost one and is directly proportional to customer satisfaction. Faster resolution strengthens the bond between the customer and the company.”

This measure is also important because it is another way to track costs and set performance targets for individuals and teams. Setting specific goals for resolution time, such as 24 hours or at first contact, helps signal to customer support that this KPI is crucial.

Customer

When inquiries and complaints are handled in a timely manner, customers are more likely to feel valued and perceive that the organization cares about their needs and wants to keep their business.

CSR

Resolving problems quickly prevents issue escalation or call abandonment and encourages a satisfying customer experience and repeat business in the future. Tracking this measure can help identify individuals and teams who are meeting their performance goals and providing excellent customer service.

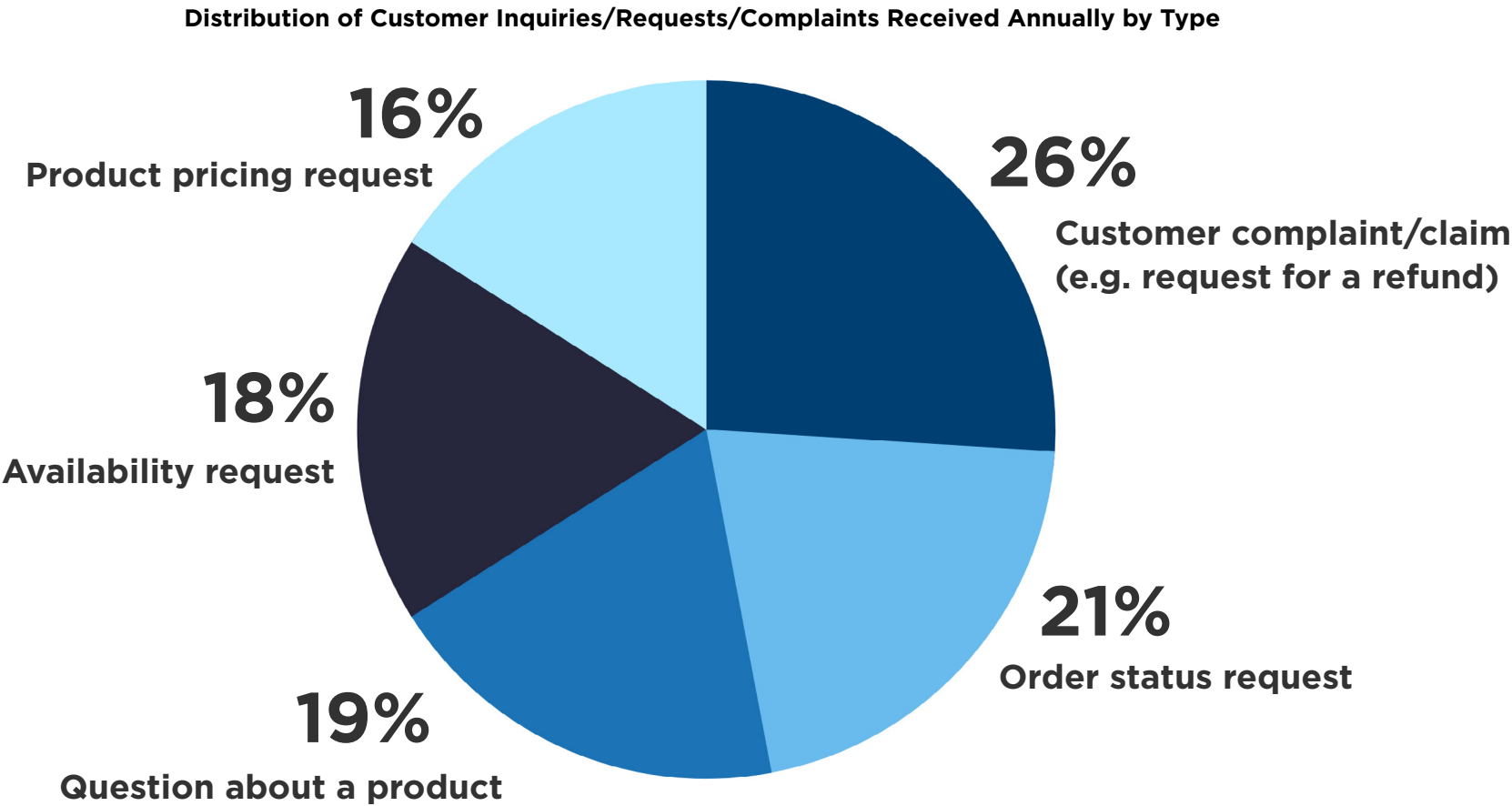




NUMBER OF CUSTOMER INBOUND CONTACTS BY TYPE

To better understand why customers are proactively contacting customer service, many organizations track and report the volume of customer inquiries, requests, and complaints.

The most common type of customer inquiry is a complaint or claim such as a refund request (Figure 7). As mentioned previously, this category (i.e., responding to complaints) presents a chance for customer support to shine by responding quickly and satisfying customers so that they feel valued. But the second most common type of contact received is the order status request—one of the simplest to automate and take off the customer service representative’s plate.



(Figure 7 | N=200)

Why This KPI is Important to Your...

Company

It is important to track the reasons customers contact support because this information allows organizations to identify trends and allocate resources based on changing customer needs. By offloading rote tasks such as updating the status of orders, the customer service function can focus on more high-value activities—such as responding to questions about products—that build trust, enhance client relationships, and provide opportunities to increase revenue.

This KPI can provide a strategic advantage by helping companies pinpoint customer needs, potential product enhancements, and opportunities for differentiation in the market. It can also uncover where problems might be emerging so that firms can proactively make improvements and prevent issues from escalating.

Customer

By monitoring customer inquiries, customer service departments can gather the data they need to implement self-service tools and enable real-time order status updates. Automating as many of these services as possible allows CSRs to focus on providing a personal level of service where it makes the most impact, such as issue resolution and in-depth product knowledge and support.

CSR

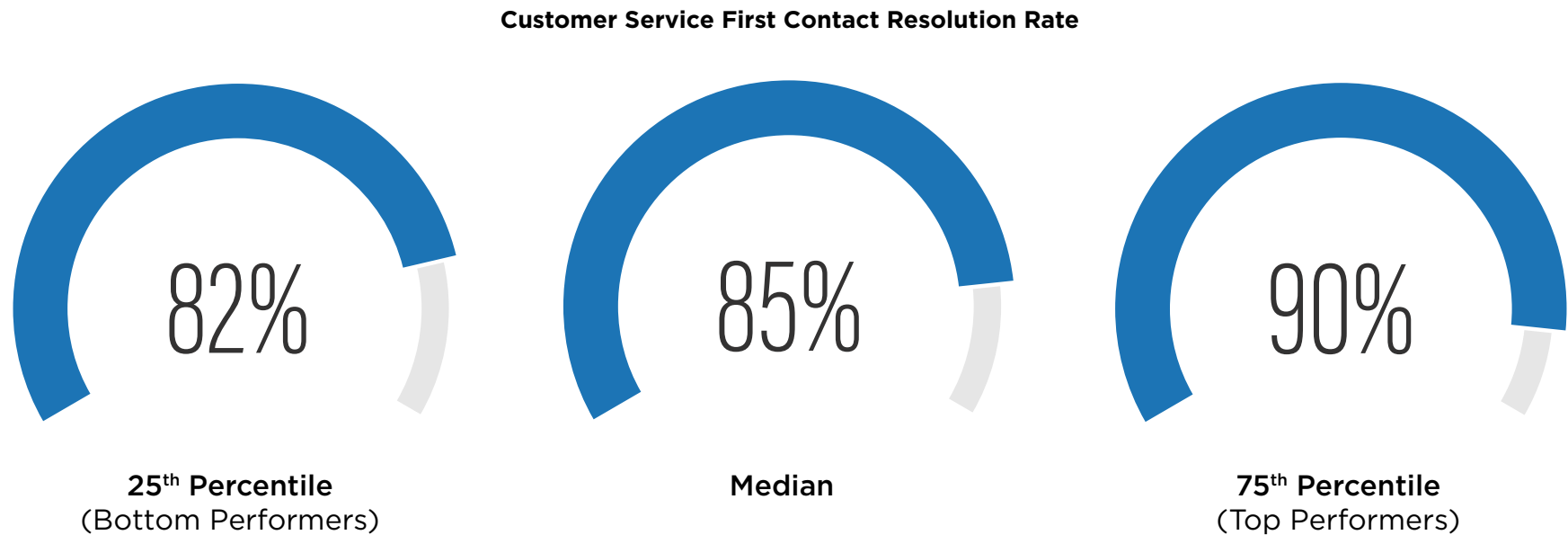
Tracking this KPI gives insight into where additional resources and training for CSRs may be most needed. This knowledge allows teams to develop targeted communication and education, proactive support measures, and other strategies such as dedicated support resources for certain key customers.



“Reducing the number of inquiries and complaints is one of our most important KPIs. We are working on several initiatives to achieve this goal, including improving our SLAs, implementing proactive communication, and identifying areas for improvement.”

9 FIRST CONTACT RESOLUTION

First contact resolution is a KPI used to measure the percentage of incoming requests that are resolved during the first interaction with the customer, eliminating any need for a second or subsequent follow-ups. It is a widely used customer service measure. Top performers (Figure 8) can resolve 90 percent of customer issues on the first contact. However, at the median, it drops to 85 percent, which means that 15 percent of customer issues require multiple follow-ups, representing more customer service time and cost to the organization.



(Figure 8 | N=200)

Why This KPI is Important to Your...

Company

It's important to know how frequently customer complaints and inquiries are resolved on the first try rather than escalated because having a higher initial resolution rate saves money, enhances organizational reputation, and increases customer retention.



“Quality customer service is crucial to the success of a business. It can not only improve customer satisfaction and increase loyalty, but also improve competitiveness and build a good rapport”

Customer

Customers save time and frustration if their issue is resolved on the first attempt. Their overall customer experience is improved, resulting in more loyal customers who are more likely to return for repeat business.

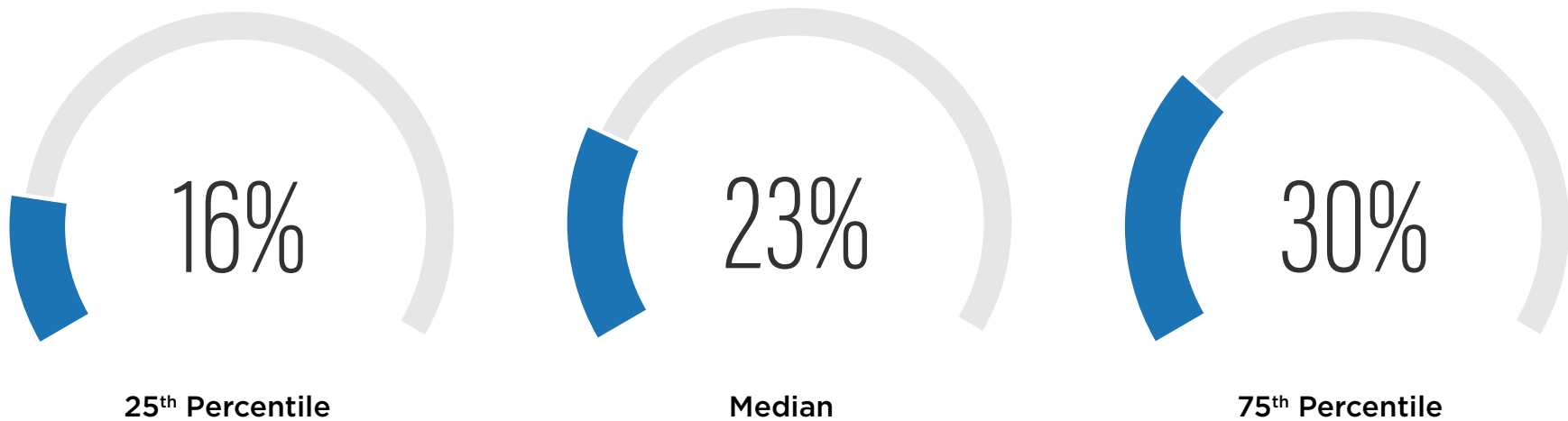
CSR

When employees can swiftly and effectively resolve customer issues, it increases their job satisfaction, reduces the need for follow-up interactions, and allows them to handle a higher volume of inquiries.

PROPORTION OF IN-HOUSE VERSUS OUTSOURCED HANDLING OF CUSTOMER INQUIRIES

Research participants are outsourcing the handling of routine inquiries to a slightly greater extent than they are for [customer complaints](#), as previously described. As Figure 9 shows, at the median for this measure, 23 percent of customer inquiries are outsourced. Whether or not to outsource is a strategic decision balancing the ability to control the customer experience and ensure consistent brand reputation versus the ability to focus in-house employees on core competencies and avoid the distractions of managing a customer service function.

Proportion of Customer Inquiries Handled by Outsourced FTEs



(Figure 9 | N=200)

Why This KPI is Important to Your...

Company

Research participants felt it was important to evaluate the proportion of inquiries handled in-house in order to keep an eye on costs and scalability. Organizations reported that outsourcing this task allowed them to off-load a costly task and focus on their core competencies. “Outsourcing customer service gives us access to specialized skills and expertise that we may not have in-house. This is especially beneficial to operate in multiple countries or regions, as we outsource customer service to a company that has a local presence and understands the local culture.”

Another respondent pointed out that “tracking this KPI can help manage risk by diversifying the customer inquiry handling methods, allowing us to strike a balance and mitigate risks associated with either approach.”



Customer

Outsourcing inquiries can allow customers 24/7 availability and access to alternative ways of reaching the business, such as social media platforms. Other considerations include the tradeoff that “in-house customer service representatives are typically more familiar with the company’s products and services, but outsourced customer service representatives may be more objective and impartial.”

CSR

Internal handling of inquiries allows customer service teams to leverage their product knowledge to serve customers and further enhance the organization’s relationship with its customers. They also have access to in-house tools like instant messaging platforms, internal chat systems, and project management software to collaborate in real-time, share files, and handle customer inquiries more efficiently.

OUTCOMES AND KEY TAKEAWAYS

Using the appropriate customer service performance measures can provide a comprehensive view into resource utilization, time spent on customer service activities, and the contribution of the customer service function to organizational profitability and customer satisfaction.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

To improve the customer experience and drive better organizational outcomes:

- // Evaluate the top ten KPIs and decide which measures are most relevant to your organization. Use these to gauge progress over time and benchmark your performance against external KPIs.
- // Take a comprehensive view of the metrics and how they relate to each other, recognizing that there are tradeoffs. For example, your organization might see higher technology costs while undergoing automation efforts, but these might result in lower FTE costs down the road.
- // Use these measures to evaluate whether your processes and practices enable your customer service team members to make the highest and best use of their time. Outsourcing or automating activities like order status updates can free up CSRs for activities that build stronger relationships and contribute to the bottom line.

Tracking and benchmarking the appropriate customer service measures empowers your organization to make data-driven decisions to improve overall efficiency and productivity, enhance the customer experience, and in turn ensure that your customer relationships and reputational assets continue to provide competitive advantage and profitability.

Providing a stellar B2B customer experience (CX) has arguably never been more important. Not only are the stakes higher in B2B relationships (more complexities encountered, more effort required, more revenue on the table), today's Customer Service departments are also being asked to take on a more strategic and proactive role in unlocking value and driving business growth.

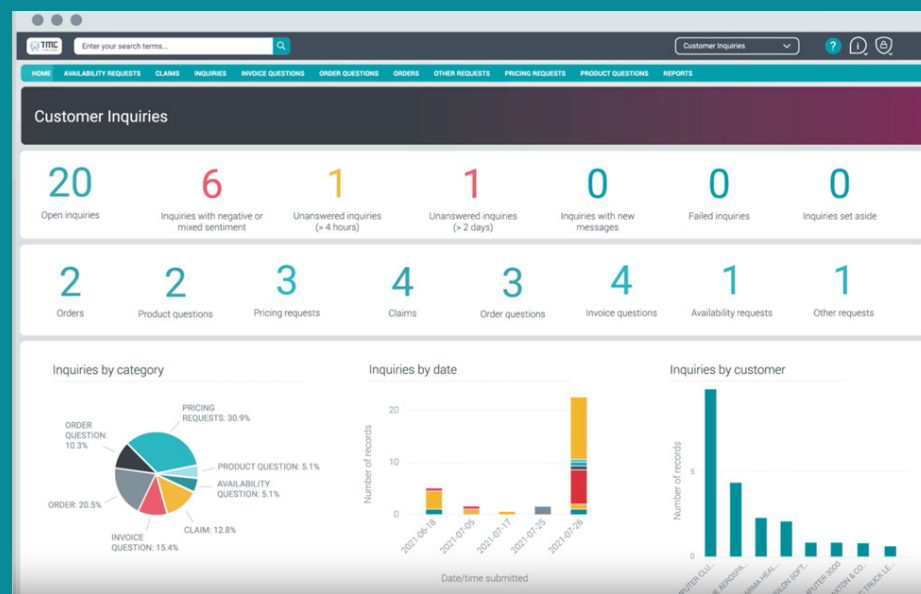
Unfortunately, delivering timely and meaningful interactions is something many B2B Customer Service teams are not equipped to do. For this reason, more organizations are investing in AI-driven solutions that not only automate the low-value tasks associated with managing customer requests, orders, and claims, but also empower employees with business-relevant KPIs and analytics.

HARNESSING THE POWER OF DATA

In an automated environment, all pertinent data associated with customer communications is captured and displayed in a customizable dashboard. This allows both Customer Service team members and leadership to:

- Visualize to-do lists organized by category, highlighting priority orders
- Monitor and analyze customer inquiries by type, date, or customer
- Track and evaluate SLA and performance of Customer Service team members
- Examine trends to identify problems and opportunities as they arise

Having these critical metrics readily available from one centralized platform not only gives management much-needed oversight and peace of mind, it also helps Customer Service teams operate in a solution-oriented rather than problem-oriented manner without the need to gather data from multiple sources. It all equates to happier, more productive staff, a vastly improved CX, and a stronger foundation for future business growth.

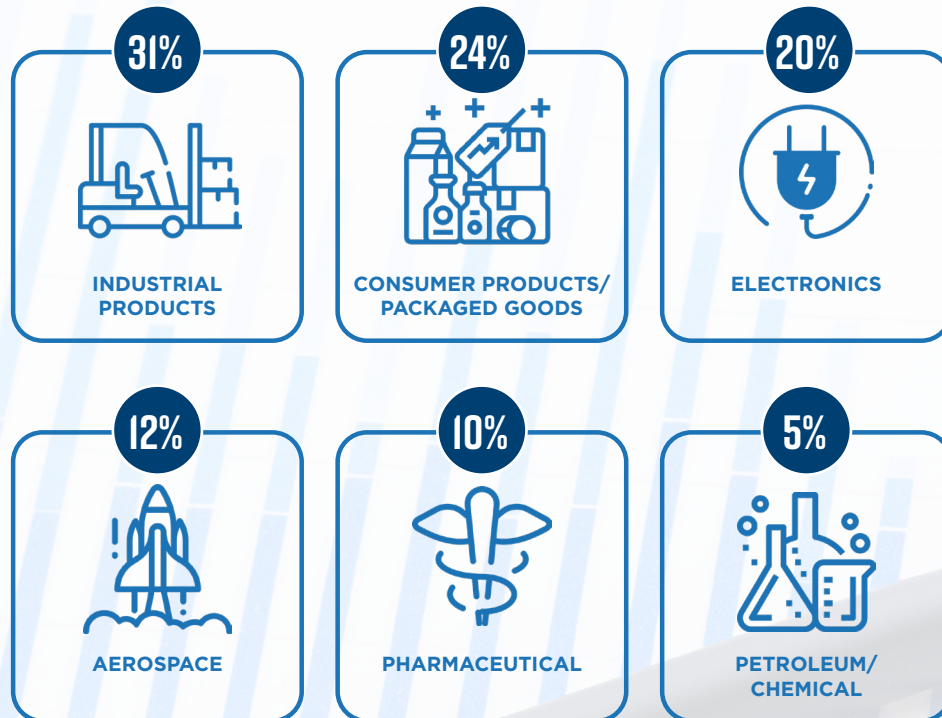


"From a management perspective, the dashboard and being able to pull reports at a moment's notice has really been a game-changer for us."

Stacey Edlund | Sr. Manager, Customer Service | Viega

ABOUT THIS RESEARCH

In 2023, Esker Inc. sponsored this APQC research to take a detailed look at the top KPIs organizations employ to measure customer service and order management. The 200 publicly held business-to-business organizations participating in the research were from North America with at least \$500 million in revenue and represented various industries:



ABOUT APQC

APQC helps organizations work smarter, faster, and with greater confidence. It is the world's foremost authority in benchmarking, best practices, process and performance improvement, and knowledge management. APQC's unique structure as a member-based nonprofit makes it a differentiator in the marketplace. APQC partners with more than 500 member organizations worldwide in all industries. With more than 40 years of experience, APQC remains the world's leader in transforming organizations. Visit us at www.apqc.org, and learn how you can make best practices your practices.

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