Guidebook

# 5 Reasons Supply Chain Leaders Should Care About B2B Customer Service Automation

## Introduction

# Supply chains & B2B Customer Service

Supply chain operations and the customer experience (CX) have long been associated with one another. But evolving customer demands combined with a myriad of ongoing disruptions have placed an increasing amount of pressure on today's distributors to think more holistically and strategically about the relationship between supply chains and B2B Customer Service teams.

While much is involved in modernising internal supply chain functions, one thing is inarguable: In an era of service differentiation, failure to deliver a consistent and responsive CX can result in damaged customer relationships and the loss of future revenue opportunities.

This guidebook explores the ever-growing importance of B2B Customer Service's role in supply chain excellence. Specifically, you'll learn how **AI-powered automation solutions** remove common obstacles inhibiting Customer Service teams from providing more timely and meaningful interactions that equate to stronger revenue growth and improved supply chain resiliency.

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## Internal challenges

# Where to focus your attention

While external turmoil (market volatility, talent shortages, environmental disasters, etc.) can significantly affect your supply chain, these are not controllable factors. What is controllable, however, are the customer service processes in place at your company that often have a direct correlation to supply chain performance. Some of the biggest internal challenges emanating from manual practices include:

### Errors

Human error is inevitable in a manual environment, as are the pains associated with them — reprocessing orders, having to issue credits, reshipment of goods, paying for same-day air expenses and more.

### Poor communication

It's essential that various teams and departments impacting the supply chain can collaborate in an effective way. Sadly, it's a virtual impossibility without a centralised communication platform.

### Unhappy customers

From slow inquiry responses and lack of order visibility to delays in product delivery, bottlenecks associated with manual environments can negatively and irreversibly impact customer satisfaction.

### High costs

Certain factors known to drive up costs in a manual setting include: errors from hand-keying in data, breaks in chain-of-custody jurisdiction, equipment and labour, and various logistical issues

### No visibility

Having no central queue for order management leaves supply chain owners at risk of having missed customer SLAs, inaccurate demand planning, and no upstream visibility for distribution centres.

### Employee churn

Today's crop of top talent expects meaning and fulfillment of out their day-to-day responsibilities — not tedious, low-value tasks. And if they don't get it, they're not afraid to look elsewhere.

# 5 in 6 organisations

**feel ill-equipped to accommodate the new supply-chain paradigm.[1]**

1 How Greater Intelligence Could Supercharge Supply Chains. 2022. Capgemini Research Institute.

## Customer service automation

# Transforming the supply chain

For B2B Customer Service teams, digital solutions act as a centralised hub for all customer engagements — addressing the key challenges preventing timely inquiry responses, fast order processing and efficient claims resolution. This is accomplished through a combo of supply chain-friendly features such as:

### AI-driven capabilities

The best solutions empower your teams with a mix of "digital assistants" for everything from instantly recognising and classifying data, to prescriptive analytics, to even generating tailored responses to customers.

### Omnichannel visibility

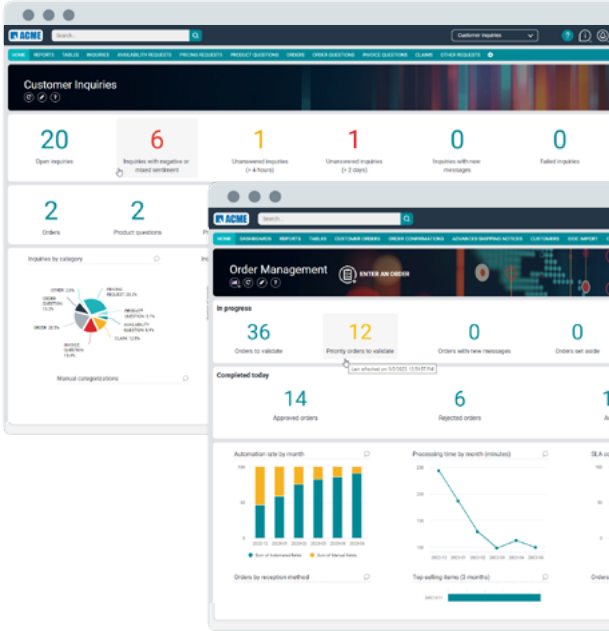
Because digital solutions pull data from every order regardless of how it arrives (email, EDI, fax, AP portal, etc.) users have omnichannel visibility over their entire process — enhancing reporting and overall continuity.

### Self-service portal

Portals enable customers to conveniently place their orders online while also giving them the autonomy to retrieve whatever information they need — benefitting the customer and supplier providing the portal.

### Seamless integration

Automated solutions can be installed alongside your existing IT environment while facilitating collaboration with any CRM or ERP and EDI middleware, ensuring smooth data sharing and workflow between teams.



Reason No. 1

# Increased speed

Supply chain teams put a premium on speed, and for good reason. Slowdowns can result in shipping errors, same-day air costs and damaged relationships due to unmet SLAs. This is where automation solutions work their magic. Using the latest in AI technology, speedy interactions are no longer an anomaly — they're the new standard thanks to:

### Faster inquiry classification

Emailed requests are sent to the solution where NLP algorithms auto-classify inquiries into predetermined categories and are routed to the appropriate person or application.

### Faster order processing

Orders are identified in an email flow while machine- and deep-learning auto-extracts data from orders, removing the need for manual data entry thus avoiding critical fulfillment bottlenecks.

### Faster inquiry response

Responding to status requests is made easy thanks to auto-generated email responses — either via predefined templates or using ChatGPT, which can understand and respond to questions in natural and conversational dialogue coupled with sentiment analysis.

### Faster claims resolution

Thanks to different layers of AI-driven data extraction, claims investigation can be done without manual data entry. Furthermore, CSRs can easily retrieve supporting documents from customer portals via RPA assistance.

**"It takes maybe a second or two to validate an inquiry now. The time savings — particularly for our CSRs — is one of the biggest benefits."**

Aiza Toor

Sr. Director of Business Customer Service Manager, Palmer Holland

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Reason No. 2

# Better accuracy

Human error remains the top challenge facing organisations that are looking to improve their data quality. Even seemingly small errors can set a company back millions and potentially shut down production, leaving staff under immense pressure to get everything right, and putting stress on supply chain leaders, controllers and credit managers to keep errors under control.

Unfortunately, errors are intrinsic to manual B2B customer service processes — particularly in order management. The need to hand-key orders not only casts doubt on the accuracy of data entering the system, it means staff must spend their time on low-value activities instead of actively engaging customers.

**Fortunately, AI-driven solutions nip any downstream drama caused by processing errors in the bud by:**

- Identifying and routing every order — regardless of type or format — to the appropriate queue for digital processing
- Extracting relevant order data and verifying it against ERP master data, detecting potential anomalies along the way
- Automatically creating orders in the ERP for archival, while preserving an audit trail of every touch point

**"Esker allows us to be very accurate with our orders. Customers are receiving their orders faster and we are spending less time processing them and correcting errors. Everybody wins."**

Joe Bowden

Business Analyst, IPC Global Solutions

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**of businesses say they do not have the necessary visibility over their supply chains to avoid reputation harm.[2]**

2 Moody's Analytics: 70% of Businesses Ramp Up Supplier Risk Detection Investment. April 17, 2023. Moody's Analytics.

Reason No. 3

# Enhanced visibility & collaboration

For every action and interaction within Customer Service, there is a wealth of associated data that's there for taking. Unfortunately, traditional operations offer the bare minimum in terms of allowing users to easily access, analyse and share this critical information. This is not the case in an automated environment.

Acting as a single pane of glass for the entirety of the customer experience — from initial inquiry all the way to fulfillment and logistics — digital solutions come equipped with custom dashboard and reporting tools that make it easier to perform critical reporting, forecasting and performance monitoring.

**For supply chain leaders, this means instant insight into:**

- Availability requests
- Priority orders to validate
- Order SLA compliance
- Orders by day week/month
- Open non-trade claims

**"Our distribution centre can now see how many orders are in the queue and use that data to forecast supply chain and staffing needs."**

Amy Argentine

Director of Customer Experience, Parts Town

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Reason No. 4

# Boosted customer satisfaction

As consumers, we've all gotten used to having an Amazon-like level of visibility, predictability and convenience with everything that we order. Consequently, many B2B customers now expect their experience to be closer to what consumer apps offer. The problem is, working in a typical logistics setting (with manual customer service processes to boot) can be extremely cumbersome and not conducive to a positive CX.

Automation solutions are essential in this regard by not only enabling fast and accurate delivery of goods, but also granting customers the self-service tools they desire. **Digital portals** offer customers the ability to do things like access order information, order from an e-catalogue, place recurring orders and contact staff.

The result is happier customers, a less-stressed staff, and a strengthened reputation as a company that's easy to do business with.

**"From front-end, customer-facing digital tools like the customer portal to the back-office tech, automation has enabled us to facilitate processing and increase customer satisfaction."**

Amaia Garaikoetxea

Manager of Customer Service,
Angulas Aguinaga

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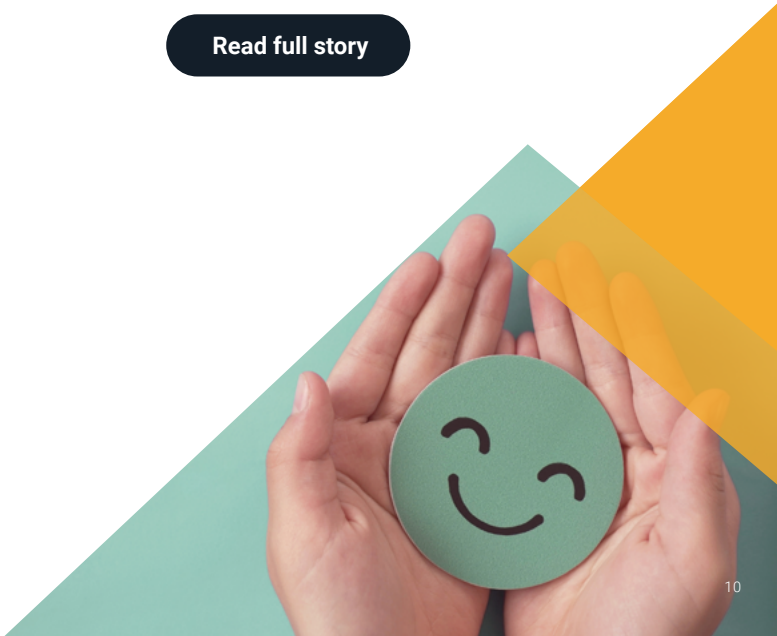

**Changes in customer behaviour and expectations have greatly impacted**

**of organisations' cost to serve, profitability and ability to fulfill orders in a timely manner.[3]**

3 Optimizing Customer Service. 2022. APQC (sponsored by Esker).

Reason No. 5

# Improved business growth & resiliency

To improve B2B customer service is to create a more efficient supply chain — one with as few bottlenecks, blind spots and "black holes" as possible. And, in our current time of seemingly endless disruptions, it's imperative that supply chain leaders have a foundation under them that opens the door for "positive-sum growth." This means creating the conditions necessary to harmonise all the people, processes and technologies that work for and with your business and drive its success.

AI-driven automation does exactly this, paving the way for the most strategic benefit of all, improved business growth and resiliency, through the combination of:

- Faster processing speeds
- Lower operational costs
- Greater reporting & visibility
- Better customer relationships
- More new business & expansion into new markets

**"The benefit of automation spans beyond response time to customers and work cells. It's made us a healthier, more efficient organisation."**

Tracy Buhrman

Director of Customer Experience, RG Group

Read full story

# Hi, we're Esker

Founded in 1985, Esker is a global cloud platform built to unlock strategic value for Finance, Procurement and Customer Service leaders and strengthen collaboration between companies by automating source-to-pay (S2P) and order-to-cash (O2C) processes.

**38**

years of experience with 20+ years focused on cloud solutions

**1,000+**

employees serving 850k+ users & 1,700+ customers worldwide

**15**

global subsidiaries with headquarters in Lyon, France

**€159.3**

million in revenue in 2022, with 90+% of sales via SaaS activities

## Business success is best when shared

At Esker, we believe the only way to create real, meaningful change is through positive-sum growth. This means achieving business success that doesn't come at the expense of any individual, department or company — everyone wins! That's why our AI-driven technology is designed to empower every stakeholder while promoting long-term value creation.

www.esker.com

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