



GUIDE

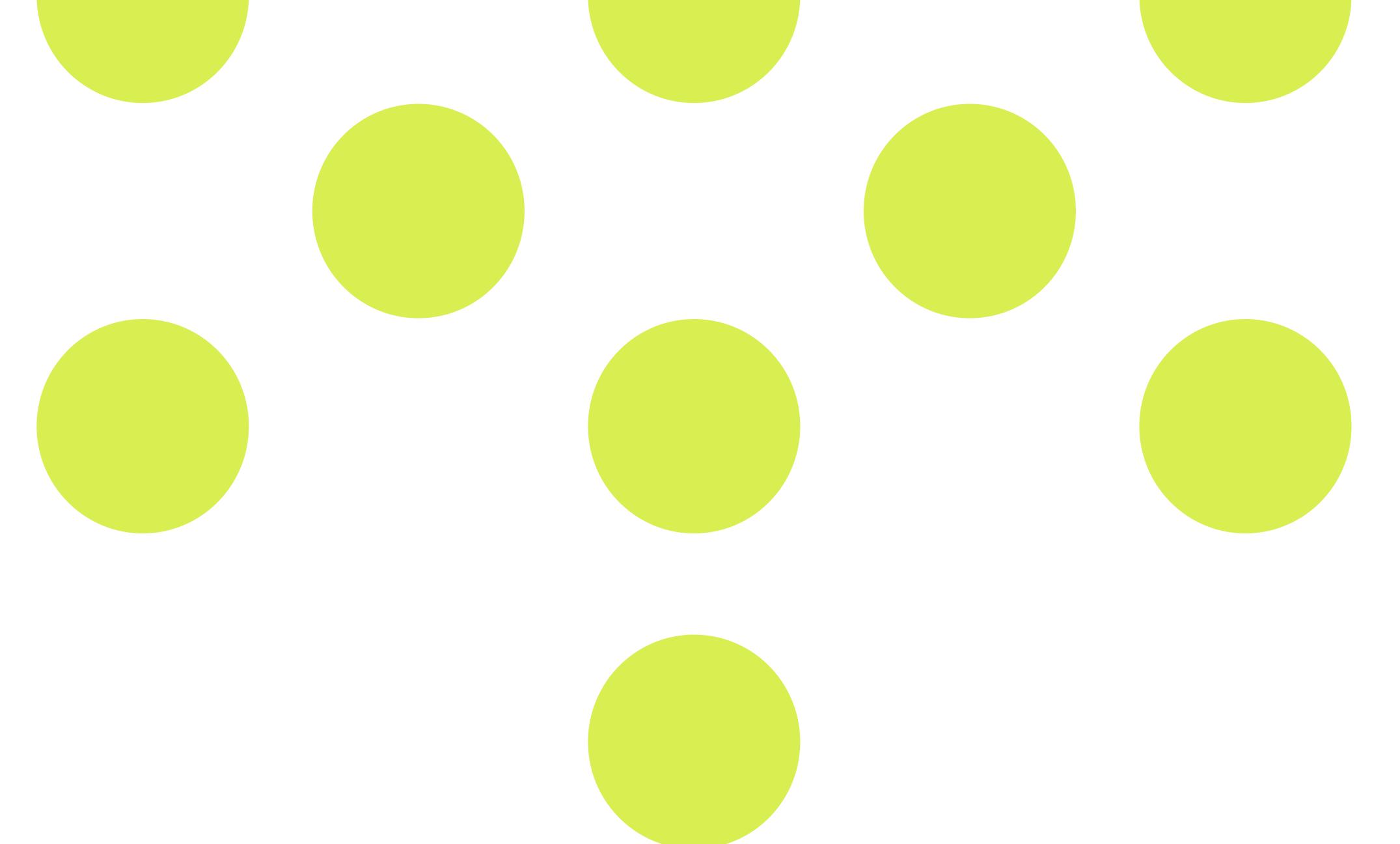
Navigating unpredictable call volume in retail



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Halloween, Black Friday, Cyber Monday, Thanksgiving, Christmas, and January sales.



Your customers are ready to make a lot of purchases over the holiday season. As a result, your call center is likely inundated with customer phone calls, and it's all you can do to keep your head above water.

Margins are already tight, and retailers are often unable or unwilling to invest in customer service. The call center is considered a cost center, while customer service leaders are still expected to meet demanding service levels.

Customer service leaders will look to automation to meet demand, and many will have had bad experiences with voice technologies. Think conversational IVRs that open with, "Please say in a few words why you're calling," and then fail to understand what a customer says.

For too long, customer service leaders have been unable to rely on automated solutions to fully resolve customer queries over the phone.

Conversational AI for retailers

Putting customers in the driver's seat with customer-led voice assistants

To accurately resolve customer queries, voice assistants must be able to do two things:

1. Give customers the freedom to speak however they want. This means speaking in their own words, no matter how long or complicated the story, interrupting, asking questions, and diving in and out of different topics.
2. Give customers the confidence that they can resolve their problems without needing to speak to an agent.

Customer-led voice assistants give customers the freedom to speak however they like. They earn trust by understanding callers and delivering helpful responses through natural conversations.

Here are seven ways customer-led voice assistants can help you exceed service levels this holiday season.





1. Smooth out call peaks at a lower cost-to-serve

You likely find yourself hiring temporary agents to manage seasonal peaks in call volume.

While temp agents usually receive more limited, expedited training, you still expect to budget for hiring, training, and software licenses for less productive agents than your permanent staff.

Chances are that your temporary staff are handling the more simple, repetitive calls, while your permanent team is taking more complex calls. In that case, it's likely that a voice assistant could automate close to 100% of calls that your temp staff is handling.

Even if you could reduce the number of temp staff by 1/3rd, you can reduce your hiring spend by the same amount.

Let's say each temp agent costs around \$20,000, including hiring, training, benefits, and overheads.

In a 300-person contact center, increasing staff by 50% for three months would cost \$3m. If you could reduce seasonal hiring to 30%, you can reduce spending to \$1.8m.

Voice assistants operate at 100% utilization, meaning you only pay when they're working. This makes them a perfect solution for unpredictable or peak call volume.

2. Manage complex WISMO requests

Nothing dampens a customer's holiday spirit like panicking about whether their delivery will arrive on time. Most retailers have implemented comprehensive tracking systems allowing customers to see where their order is.

However, many customers are still calling for the following reasons:



Customers don't always order one item at a time. They may have queries about multiple packages that require more detailed explanations.



Callers asking to track orders will often want to take action based on the information they receive. For example, if party supplies will arrive after a birthday and will no longer be of use, the caller might want to cancel the order.



In the same way callers want to track delivery status. They may also want to chase a return, a refund, or a repair.

A PolyAI voice assistant starts every call with "How can I help?" rather than an automated menu of options that turn your customer into a passive (and likely frustrated) participant. This approach creates a much more personal experience.

When a customer wants to track their delivery or has a question about their order, automated systems will often request they speak or type their order number. Without this information, most customers will hit a dead end on the phone or must be passed to an agent.

PolyAI voice assistants can authenticate customers against their number, name, address, and postcode to pull real-time information about their orders, including locating their order number or rescheduling and negotiating delivery slots.



3.

Handle unexpected call peaks

Retailers can experience peaks in call volume due to unexpected external events. For example, snow storms can cause a courier's distribution centers to shut down, and postal strikes can impact deliveries.

Because these peaks in call volume are unexpected, retailers can't prepare for them.

Mismanaged or unplanned peaks can have a negative impact on the customer service provided by the contact center. Inexperienced agents often take longer to complete a task than experienced agents. They need to rely more on experienced agents for help and may even give incorrect information to the customer. This all adds up to create inefficient customer service.

A lack of preparation can impact the whole organization in some of the following ways:



Contact center managers have to call in staff to meet the demand



Marketing teams need to send out last-minute emails



Social media teams will need to keep customers updated on social channels



Telephony teams need to put a recorded message on the IVR explaining any disruptions to regular service

These activities require the coordination of multiple teams under strict time constraints.

PolyAI mitigates the risk of unexpected call peaks with voice assistants available 24/7, enabling you to quickly handle more calls without preparation.

4. Access to call data and customer insights

Retailers can gain vast insight from the data gathered during customer calls. Their challenge is getting the data into a structured, usable format.

Data gathering often falls to agents already answering calls, taking notes, and inputting information into internal systems. Inputting data under immense pressure can easily lead to human error and incorrect entries.

Voice assistants automatically gather unstructured data, such as call transcripts, during every call and turn it into structured, usable data. Retailers are presented with clear information about trends, why customers are calling, and which products have been highlighted for negative and positive reasons.

Retailers can feed this insight into the business to train agents, support marketing strategies for product promotion, enable sales to upsell trending products, and help digital teams enhance the online shopping experience for the holidays and beyond.





5. Inventory checking

Trending products create immense pressure during the holiday season, with customers asking after the next must-have gift (who could foresee the air fryer becoming a hot commodity in 2022?!).

Customers will call to check the stock of an item in their nearest branch and receive suggestions of alternatives when needed.

PolyAI voice assistants can integrate with a retailer's database to provide accurate, real-time product information that reduces handling times by automating the process.

6. Handle FAQs

Most retailers offer seasonal store opening times, return policies, and product sizing information on their websites. However, many customers still call to ask for this information, contributing to a large portion of a contact center's call volume.

By deploying a voice assistant, retailers can fully resolve a customer query without them ever needing to speak to a person. This frictionless process is achieved by guiding callers to genuinely helpful resources through natural conversation and bridging the gap between the voice channel and a retailer's existing digital self-service options.

So, when customers ask how long they have to return an unwanted gift at Christmas, a voice assistant can answer their question on the call or point them to the right resource by sending them the website link via SMS.

Managing FAQs helps to support individual stores by taking the pressure off in-store staff and allowing them to focus on face-to-face interactions with customers.





7.

Lean on CX as competitive differentiation

Many retailers leave their customers on hold with easily solvable issues and deflect callers to their website or online chat to reduce call volume in the contact center.

In comparison, retailers that invest in voice assistants and prioritize customer experience will answer calls and resolve customer queries immediately by creating a seamless experience between existing digital channels and the voice channel.

Instead of outsourcing support and delivering a less-than-stellar customer experience, voice assistants enable retailers to provide a consistent brand experience across every touchpoint. Retailers know better than any other industry that CX is the way to grow, and support channels shouldn't be left out.



Request a demo at poly.ai/request-demo

Customer-led voice assistants are transforming the retail customer experience

By offering more efficient, accessible, and natural ways to interact with their favorite brands using their preferred channels.

Deploying customer-led voice assistants gives time and resources back to the contact center, enabling agents to focus on more complex customer queries and leave a positive lasting impression of the brand experience.

[Discover more about how voice assistants drive value in the contact center](#)

