Cognizant

Algorithms Over Brands: How to Reach Today's and Tomorrow's AI-Augmented Customer

Customers are increasingly trusting digital interfaces, especially voice assistants, over brands themselves, according to our recent research. This new human-algorithm alliance has turned the business-to-consumer dynamic on its head, and is forcing brands to connect more intelligently and *humanly* with customers.

Center For
The Future of Work

What's the meaning of a brand when consumers (nearly half in our study) are indifferent to whether the brands they use today are still around tomorrow? When nearly three-quarters are not easily impressed with new products and services? When two-fifths would buy a brand they'd never heard of if it was recommended by Siri, Alexa or Hey Google?

Executive Summary

Consumers are often described as tech-savvy, always-connected, skeptical and demanding. With the rise of nonhuman intermediaries – recommendation engines, e-commerce sites, mobile apps, wearables, smart speakers and other AI-powered systems – consumer power has climbed to new heights. The machine-learning algorithms behind these systems are augmenting consumers with new levels of intelligence, serving up information, endorsements, guidance, suggestions and even autonomous purchase decisions: "Hey Alexa, buy some milk for me."

Algorithms are the new interface between brands and consumers, and trust is their fuel. Machine intelligence is expanding consumers' intelligence quotient by giving them more ways to access information and explore more choices, making them more powerful and more difficult to predict than ever before.

And consumers seem happy with their new augmented capabilities. Our recent research reveals they're more likely to trust the intelligent algorithms behind voice-based personal assistants and other machine intelligence-driven systems than the information provided directly by businesses via their websites. Not only do these intelligent systems fulfill consumers' desire for information, according to our study; they also imbue them with feelings of freedom, efficiency and creativity.

These changing consumer dynamics are forcing a rethink in how businesses ensure brand stature. What's the meaning of a brand when consumers (nearly half in our study) are indifferent to whether the brands they use today are still around tomorrow? When nearly three-quarters (72%) are not easily impressed with new products and services? When two-fifths would buy a brand they'd never heard of if it was recommended by Siri, Alexa or Hey Google? It's time for businesses to find a new voice to influence customers.

To explore the new expectations and perceptions of consumers in the age of algorithms – especially the changes wrought by new dynamics such as voice-based autonomous buying – the Cognizant Center for the Future of Work surveyed 6,500 consumers globally (see Methodology, page 24).

Based on our research, we believe traditional companies will need to overhaul their digital infrastructure for voice, restructure their go-to-consumer strategies, redefine the customer experience and recreate content to win customers in the future. Great products and services alone won't cut it – companies have to go the extra mile.

Our key insights include the following:

▪ **Algorithms are usurping brand names in terms of consumer trust.** Respondents trust the information and recommendations obtained from search engines (81%), e-commerce sites (75%), mobile apps (70%) and voice-based personal assistants (50%) more than information and recommendations obtained directly from traditional companies' websites (45%). The only exception is when consumers are dealing directly with employees of the business they're transacting with, whether face-to-face or via phone.

▪ **Voice interfaces are emerging as the new gatekeepers.** With 43% of respondents saying they'd implicitly entrust the brand recommendations of their voice-based personal assistant, it's clear that businesses need to incorporate voice interfaces into their brand strategies. In fact, a large majority of respondents said they'd allow their voice-based personal assistants to automatically make certain purchases – like tickets (75%) or travel (70%) – or appointments (68%) on their behalf. The future of voice is already here, and brands need a voice strategy to up their customer experience game.

▪ **Companies are paying a huge penalty for offering a poor payment experience.** If it takes more than a few seconds for customers to make a payment, they won't bother. In our study, nearly one-third (28%) of respondents have canceled a purchase because of a poor payment experience in the last 12 months.

▪ **Personalized experiences are falling way short.** While 68% of respondents said a customized experience is vital, nearly half were dissatisfied with the level of personalization they receive, highlighting the need for companies to close the gap.

▪ **A lack of engaging content = disengaged customers.** More than half of respondents find online content from companies non-engaging and promotional. Businesses need to embrace customers as brand ambassadors, not only buying but also influencing others, and content plays a critical role. It's time for companies to overhaul their content development and management strategies.

Based on our findings, we've created an "R3 framework," based on three key elements of ensuring a successful brand-customer relationship: reputation, relevance and resonance. Successful companies will be those that earn a trusted reputation with both customers and intelligent machines, make their products/services relevant to customer priorities, and ensure their offerings resonate with customers to win their trust and business.

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THE AUGMENTED CUSTOMER: A SHIFT IN TRUST FROM BRANDS TO MACHINES

As algorithms get smarter and more personalized, consumers are increasingly willing to pass the baton to the machine.

Meet Tanya, an average, middle-aged working woman. Her wristband knows she jogs every morning between 6 am and 7 am, tracks her steps and ensures she meets her target. Her virtual dietitian app reminds her which foods are on her prescribed diet. She orders groceries from stores with at least a 4.5-out-of-5 rating and good reviews. Her newsfeed reveals curated travel offers for her holiday this summer. Her finance app manages her investments and expenditures. A nearby restaurant knows Tanya orders sushi every Thursday night, and sends her the special offer for next week. An e-commerce site notifies her that the price of the jeans she put in her cart has dropped 40%, and there won't be a better time to buy them. From jeans to sushi, everything runs smoothly; she has time to relax on the sofa with her favorite drink in the evening, and watch the latest episode of *Black Mirror*.

Tanya is emblematic of the new consumer, who wants products and services to flow smoothly into their lives, when and if they need them. And increasingly, it's not Tanya – or consumers like her – making that determination. While consumers can exert some control over what appears in their curated feeds and recommendations through filters and settings, they're not privy to how, exactly, the algorithm develops this guidance and advice. What's more, it's nearly impossible for consumers to police every digital move they make to control the data feeding the algorithm's ultimate intelligence.
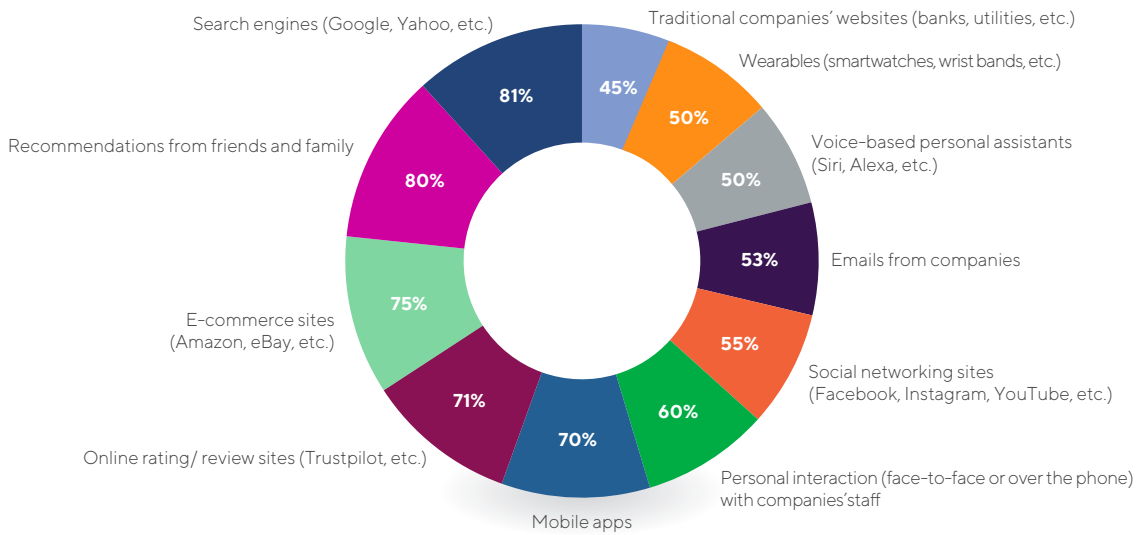
As algorithms get smarter and more personalized – thanks to both increasingly sophisticated techniques such as machine learning and the abundance of data they can access – consumers are increasingly willing to pass the baton to the machine. In our study, the majority of respondents said they trust information and recommendations from search engines (81%), e-commerce sites (75%), apps (70%) and voice-based personal assistants (50%) more than they trust information and recommendations directly from traditional companies' websites (45%) (see Figure 1, next page). Whether it's about enhancing our lifestyle, saving time or giving us a sense of freedom, algorithms have become the dominant trusted influence in our decision-making.

This trend is particularly prominent in Asia-Pacific, highlighting the rapid rise of digital natives in the region leapfrogging traditional commercial communication channels, and embracing AI's impact on their lives. As CEO Reed Hastings of Netflix said at a recent Mobile World Congress, "I'm not sure if in 20 to 50 years we are going to be entertaining you, or entertaining AIs."[1]
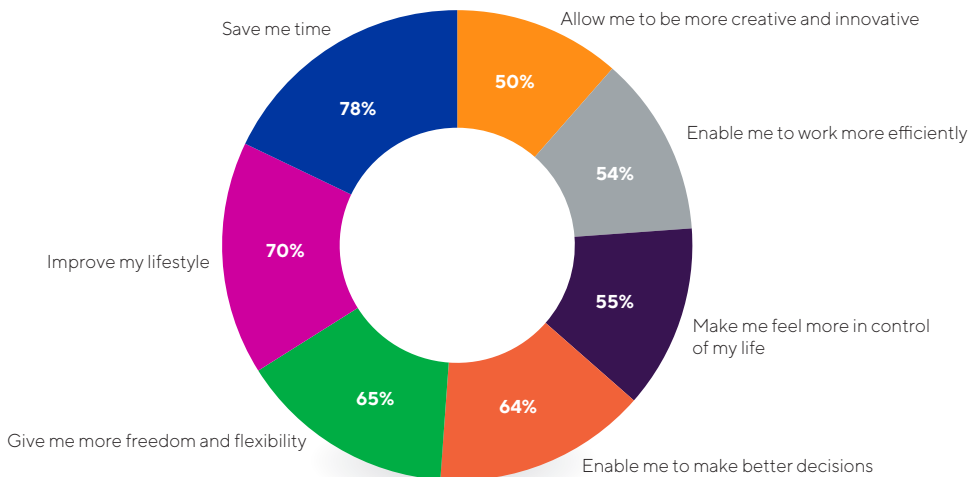
The augmented customer is powered by intelligent machines

How much trust do you place in information and product/service recommendations/ advice provided by each of the following for decision-making?

1–10 scale; 1=Do not trust at all; 10=Trust completely (Percent of respondents who gave a rating of 8+)

Search engines (Google, Yahoo, etc.) — 81%

Recommendations from friends and family — 80%

E-commerce sites (Amazon, eBay, etc.) — 75%

Online rating/ review sites (Trustpilot, etc.) — 71%

Mobile apps — 70%

Personal interaction (face-to-face or over the phone) with companies' staff — 60%

Social networking sites (Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, etc.) — 55%

Emails from companies — 53%

Voice-based personal assistants (Siri, Alexa, etc.) — 50%

Wearables (smartwatches, wrist bands, etc.) — 50%

Traditional companies' websites (banks, utilities, etc.) — 45%

Why do you trust search engines, wearables, e-commerce sites, voice-based personal assistants and the web?

Save me time — 78%

Improve my lifestyle — 70%

Give me more freedom and flexibility — 65%

Enable me to make better decisions — 64%

Make me feel more in control of my life — 55%

Enable me to work more efficiently — 54%

Allow me to be more creative and innovative — 50%

Response base: 6,500 consumers globally
Note: Multiple responses permitted
Source: Cognizant Center for the Future of Work
Figure 1

The decline of the brand

The AI-augmented customer is changing the very meaning of "brand" and the resonance of a "brand name." Forty-five percent of respondents – and more than half of millennials (55%) – were indifferent to whether the brands they used today disappeared. Rather than relying on legacy brand reputation, consumers increasingly want assurance they're getting "the best" product or service for their needs and not being swayed by commercial messages. If an app or bot or personal assistant assures them of that, or if a preponderance of social media influencers back it up, then so be it. Nearly half of consumers surveyed felt brands do not live up to the promises made in their ads/marketing material. The famous line from *Romeo and Juliet* sums up the current brand dilemma:

> *"What's in a name? That which we call a rose*
> *By any other name would smell as sweet."*[2]

But consumers like Tanya are not ready to cut the cord completely with brands and the companies that represent them. Consumers still value face-to-face, phone and email interactions with companies' staff (60%). What's more, recommendations from family and friends still rank high in influence, as do online ratings and reviews. AI will ultimately support human decision-making, rather than replace it. Despite their digital arbiters, AI-augmented consumers will still call the shots.

Forty-five percent of respondents – and more than half of millennials – were indifferent to whether the brands they used today disappeared.

Quick Take

Voice interfaces: the emerging power of augmented customers

When consumers can interact using a voice interface to get advice or a recommendation, they seem even more compelled to trust machine-generated guidance. Forty-three percent of respondents in our study said they'd be likely to purchase a brand they'd never heard of based on the recommendation of their voice-based personal assistant (see Figure 2 , next page). Millennials (49%) and Gen X (48%) consumers are even more open to entrusting purchase decisions with their voice assistants. Every time these interfaces fulfill our needs efficiently and effectively, they take a further step in strengthening their relationship with us.

In fact, a large majority of respondents said they'd allow their voice-based personal assistants to automatically make certain purchases – like tickets (75%) or travel (70%) – or appointments (68%) on their behalf. It's no wonder that voice-based shopping is expected to balloon from $2 billion in retail sales today, to $40 billion by 2022.[3]

Clearly, more complex transactions – such as those related to healthcare, finances and insurance – are still outside the realm of machine decision-making autonomy. But with the avalanche of wealth management chatbots, personal digital assistants and voice-enabled smart devices, working with conversational AI interfaces will mean more than improving customer convenience; it will mean survival for brands. Remember how many companies were caught off-guard by the mobile shopping boom? They believed their original websites would work just fine in response to a smartphone query. When they belatedly optimized their sites for mobile platforms, they risked losing a segment of their loyal customers.
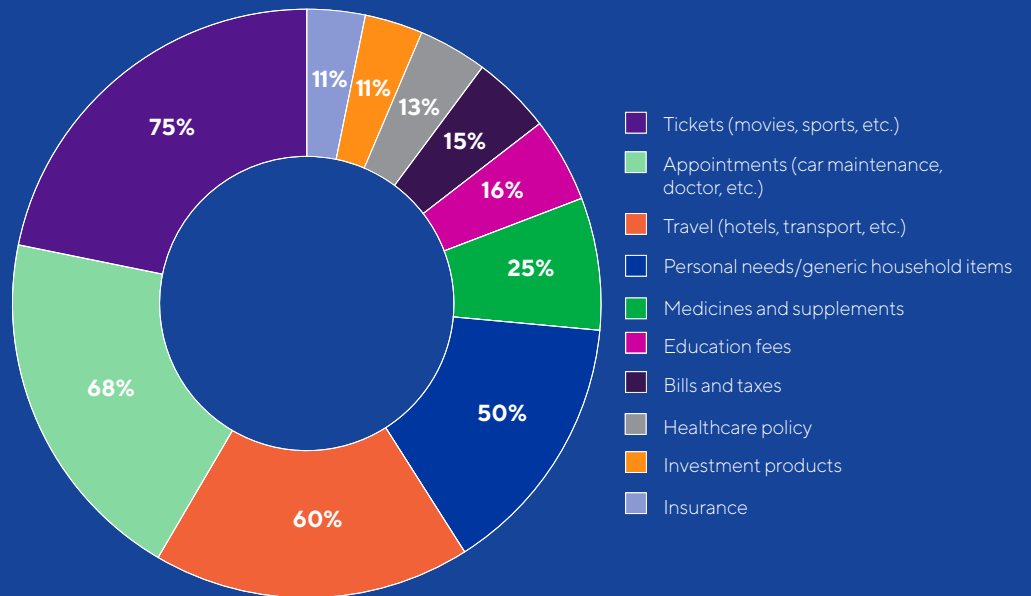
Soon, voice interfaces will be embedded in many other consumer goods, from TVs to cars. These voice-based algorithms will create a walled garden around customers that will be impervious to businesses that don't adjust their brand strategies to blend smoothly into consumers' lives.

Voice assistants: a multiplier effect in consumer power

How comfortable are you with the idea of your voice–based personal assistants and websites automatically ordering/buying/paying (taking a decision on your behalf) for the following when you need them?

Scale 1–10; 1=Not at all comfortable; 10=Very comfortable. (Percent of respondents who gave a rating of 8+)

43%

SOMEWHAT TO VERY LIKELY
to buy a product/service
from a company
I have not heard of
but recommended
by my voice assistant

- 75% — Tickets (movies, sports, etc.)
- 68% — Appointments (car maintenance, doctor, etc.)
- 60% — Travel (hotels, transport, etc.)
- 50% — Personal needs/generic household items
- 25% — Medicines and supplements
- 16% — Education fees
- 15% — Bills and taxes
- 13% — Healthcare policy
- 11% — Investment products
- 11% — Insurance

Response base: 6,500 consumers globally
Note: Multiple responses permitted
Source: Cognizant Center for the Future of Work
Figure 2

THE 3Rs: PREPARING TO WIN THE NEW CUSTOMER

So how can businesses influence not just Tanya and the millions of AI-augmented customers like her but also the apps, intelligent assistants and recommendation engines they use? In our study, we collected consumers' attitudes toward brand trust. We then mapped these preferences to online attributes that matter most to them. We grouped our findings and recommendations into a framework that delineates the three elements businesses need to emphasize to win the customer of the future – brand reputation, relevance and resonance – and the actions they can take online to do so (see Figure 3). The more that businesses align their brand objectives, priorities and budgets around the 3Rs, the greater they can be seen favorably by machine-generated recommendations and the human consumers who trust them.

The online attributes highlighted below are not exhaustive, and may vary by business, but the framework provides a way for traditional companies to fine-tune their customer outreach.

The 3Rs of serving augmented customers

3Rs	What Consumers Want*	How Brands Can Deliver
Reputation	- Fast access to products/services/ information. - Competitively priced products/ services. - Rewards/discounts. - Frictionless payment process. - Positive history with brand. - Positive online reviews and ratings.	- Easy navigation on website. - High visibility on search results. - Availability of information and products through voice search. - Mobile-first engagement. - Brand reputation monitoring. - Price parity across marketplaces and platforms. - E-commerce integration for easy payment and shipping. - Recommendations from social influencers.
Relevance	- Personalized experience/products and services that fit smoothly into their life. - Convenience. - Real-time customer service. - Transparency about how data is used. - A clear commitment to protecting personal information.	- Algorithm-driven hyper-personalized experiences (context-based recommendations/information/offers), customized emails, videos, seamless experience across devices, automatic buying through voice-based personalized assistants, etc. - Cognitive computing-based customer service; chatbots. - Transparency in data usage, discounts/ rewards in exchange for information.
Resonance	- Engaging and meaningful content. - Endorsements from social influencers. - Family and friends' recommendations.	- Responsive design. - Content automation. - Dynamic content (contextual). - Content localization. - Content optimized for voice. - Creative AI (augmenting the workflows of content writers, designers and artists with machine learning capabilities).

* Based on our study
Source: Cognizant Center for the Future of Work
Figure 3

1 Reputation: make it easier for customers to see your brand value

Brand reputation is the perception consumers have about your brand. This perception can be swayed by many online attributes, including how easily consumers can obtain information, buy a product or service or find ratings and reviews. Unfortunately, only 47% of respondents felt businesses made it easy to assess their brand value, especially at the time of purchase (see Figure 4). When AI-augmented customers or the intelligent algorithms they rely on find it difficult to assess brand value online, they'll quickly move on.

Elevating brand value to elevate a brand

47%
BRANDS MAKE IT EASIER FOR ME
to see their brand value,
especially when I am about
to make a purchase

50%
ENDORSEMENT FROM SOCIAL MEDIA
influencers is important
in trusting a brand

28%
CANCELED A PURCHASE
because of a poor payment experience
in the last 12 months

Response base: 6,500 consumers globally
Source: Cognizant Center for the Future of Work
Figure 4

The following approaches will help your organization sync with what consumers care about to make it easier for them to assess your brand's value:

▌ **Optimize your digital infrastructure for mobile and voice.** AI-augmented customers want the quickest path from their question to a potential answer, and they won't wait for a slow website to load on their mobile. A one-second increase in page load time can reduce conversions by 20% on mobile devices.[4] Google has also made clear it will consider mobile-friendly websites first when ranking content.[5] One of the biggest mistakes businesses can make when trying to create mobile-friendly websites is disabling certain content on the mobile version. Mobile customers want just as much information as desktop/laptop users, including text, images and videos, so don't strip them from your mobile site.

Businesses also need to optimize their digital assets for voice search. According to a recent study, 58% of consumers have used voice search to find local business information in the last 12 months, while 46% of voice search users search for a local business on a daily basis.[6] Businesses can't afford not to keep their local SEO listings up to date, and this includes the information in their Google My Business directory listing. Page speed could also influence the chance of getting a response to a voice query.

▌ **Proactively manage your brand reputation online.** It's very easy for consumers to judge brands by what they find online, based on machine-generated recommendations; 96% of angry customers don't complain to brands directly, and many of them prefer to share their poor experience online.[7] Before consumers ever land on your website or pick up the phone to call you — what will they find online? Check your brand's online reviews. How many stars do you have? How are you responding to negative reviews? How are you combating fake reviews and ratings?[8] Brands that can bolster positive reviews and customer recommendations are more likely to be recommended by machines.

Monitoring your reputation and reacting promptly will help you avoid crises and full-on disasters. For example, when JP Morgan Chase saw its YouTube ads appear alongside inappropriate content last year, it took matters into its own hands after a slow response from the video platform provider. The bank developed its own in-house algorithm and plugged it into YouTube's API. This algorithm uses 17 filters to segment safe channels to host its ads. After rolling out the tool and testing it, resulting in a 99.9% success rate, the company has returned to advertising on the video platform.[9]

▌ **Hire social media influencers but with caveats.** Social media Influencers are "people like us" who post on Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter or Facebook about everything from travel to fitness to fashion to beauty. Our data reveals that 50% of respondents trust a brand that is recommended by these influencers, especially millennials (55%). It's no surprise, then, that 80% of marketers find influencer marketing effective,[10] while 65% plan to increase their influencer marketing budgets.

While influencers can help brands gain digital authority, the downside of a mistake is equally steep. Fake followers, and the rising costs of hiring them, are among the prominent challenges marketers face today.[11][12] Twitter is plagued by fake followers, who could have as many as 50 million bot accounts.[13] If your influencer is caught mining fake accounts, chances are the algorithms of these platforms will downgrade your brand ranking.

▌ **Make payment an experience, not just a transaction.** We found that ease of use (72%), the time it takes to complete the payment (71%) and frictionless payment from any device (65%) are the top three attributes that matter to customers when making payments. If it takes more than a few seconds for customers to make a payment, they won't bother. In our study, 28% of respondents have canceled a purchase because of a poor payment experience in the last 12 months. That's nearly 1,800 consumers. If we extrapolate this figure globally, it adds up to millions of consumers and billions of dollars of loss that could have been avoided.

The payment issue seems much bigger in Asia Pacific, as 32% of consumers in the region cited canceling a purchase due to poor payment experience. Just like the FAANG vendors (Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Netflix, and Google) elevated consumer expectations, many digital payment startups are aiming to do the same. Invest in AI capabilities that make your payment processing faster, more intelligent, better equipped to tailor services and better able to reduce fraud.

2 **Relevance: make sure your customers feel they're known.**

AI-augmented consumers highly value brands that know them well, anticipate their future needs and deliver the right product at the right place at the right time. Nearly 60% of respondents in our study say they feel a bond with brands that help them save time and money, and make their life incrementally easier, more enjoyable and more productive (see Figure 5).

This, however, is where the majority of traditional businesses miss the mark. While nearly 70% of respondents said a customized personal experience is important to them, only half are satisfied with the experience they get from traditional businesses (banks, insurance, telecom operators, etc.). Among all industries, banks and financial services companies scored the lowest in personalization (45%), closely followed by insurance providers (46%). The majority of consumers (72%) said it takes more time for businesses to impress them with new products/services than ever before.

Out of sight, out of mind

How important to you is a customized personal experience from traditional companies (banks, retailers, telecom operators, insurance providers, etc.)?
How satisfied are you in receiving a customized personal experience from traditional companies?

Scale 1–10; 1=Not at all important/satisfied; 10=Very important/satisfied. (Percent of respondents who gave a rating of 8+)

68%
Importance of customized personal experience from traditional companies

49%
Satisfied with the customized personal experience from traditional companies

72%
IT TAKES MORE TIME FOR COMPANIES
to connect with me
for new products and services

58%
I FEEL A BOND WITH BRANDS
that help me save time and money
and make my life incrementally easier,
more enjoyable and productive

Response base: 6,500 consumers globally
Source: Cognizant Center for the Future of Work
Figure 5

While nearly 70% of respondents said a customized personal experience is important to them, only half are satisfied with the experience they get from traditional businesses.

The greater the depth of personalization, the higher the probability of influencing machines and the customers who trust them. In a fast-moving, interconnected world, brands that flow with customers' lives are valued the most. So, here's the call to action:

I **Change your approach to customer segmentation.** Traditional personalization efforts are focused on segmenting audiences based on generic data (demographics, past purchases, etc.) and profiling the target audience into groups with similar traits (e.g., an email marked "Dear Tanya" sent with identical content to hundreds or thousands of customers). With hyper-personalization, businesses set a user's browsing, purchasing, demographic and real-time behavioral data as a foundation for relevant, personalized communication. From helping businesses gain insights into customers' driving habits and favorite restaurants, to understanding how they search their website, integrated customer data helps businesses deliver highly relevant interactions, regardless of device or channel. For example, if Tanya's driving habits are automatically sent to her insurance provider, she might receive a discounted premium for safe driving for the following year.

Advanced platforms are available to enable hyper-personalization. For instance, within Adobe Experience Cloud, Adobe Sensei's machine learning crunches the numbers, reveals customer behaviors, uses those insights to serve relevant and personalized experiences, and anticipates what they'll want next to optimize ad spend.[14]

I **Find your new customer experience voice before your competitors do.** A voice search strategy isn't just for ensuring your customers can find you – it's about creating a unique and optimized customer experience that will foster relationships and build brand loyalty. Nearly 60% of consumers surveyed connect with brands that help them save time and money, making their life incrementally easier and more enjoyable. Voice technology can make interactions with brands more natural and seamless, which is exactly what consumers want.

Voice-based assistants are always on the lookout for functionalities that impart their intelligence (i.e., Alexa Skills, Google Actions). Learn from brands that are already doing this successfully. Diageo's Johnnie Walker brand, for example, made a bid for visibility on Alexa with its Happy Hour Skill, which lets consumers enjoy guided whisky tastings at home by helping them make cocktails and even find a nearby bar.[15] Whirlpool has created a line of intelligent and voice-activated appliances that can converse with customers, answer questions, and even provide guidance on what ingredients to buy.[16] As voice technology continues to grow, brand visibility will depend on voice assistants.

▌ **Be real-time or get no time from customers.** Customers want real-time customer service without having to wait even for minutes and expect service reps to already know the purpose of their call. Cognitive computing-based customer service is a unique human-machine collaboration opportunity that will soon become make-or-break for success. By processing the content of calls made to a call center in real-time, as well as the caller's underlying emotions, cognitive systems can guide agents to de-escalate tense situations, resulting in higher customer retention, lower agent turnover, and the insights to create a better customer experience.[17]

▌ **Make "transparency" core to your brand promise, but avoid being creepy.** Hyper-personalization requires data at every customer touchpoint. Empower consumers to know how, where and why their data is used in your hyper-personalization framework. In fact, 75% of respondents said transparency in how their information is used will raise their trust in a brand. With consumers' awareness of the power of data, transparency involves acknowledging the value exchange. A discounted three-course dinner for two at an award-winning restaurant, with a complementary bottle of wine could be enticing, for example, in exchange for customer-supplied information.

As your brand moves into deeper levels of hyper-personalization, there is a thin line between delivering an *a-ha* moment and being "creepy" or insensitive. Imagine someone getting a customized email on wedding offers after a canceled wedding. While predictive intelligence software controls how data is interpreted and presented, it is up to human marketers to decide how those data-driven insights fit into the brand narrative.

▌ **Be an inclusive brand that conveys its stance on issues that matter.** While intelligent algorithms hone in on price, quality and any other rational attribute, they can't account for emotional connections with brands that align with personal beliefs. In our study, millennials (58%) in particular gravitate toward inclusive brands that take a stance on social, societal and cultural issues. Be the first to send a compelling and inclusive story to your audience. Additionally, involve people in sharing and promoting their personal stories. When people notice a genuine interest from brands in connecting with them, regardless of gender, ethnicity, etc., they connect.

With its phenomenally successful "Like a Girl" campaign, P&G is one brand that's already well-known for its support and empowerment of women and girls. The company took this one step further with "We See Equal" – a campaign designed to fight gender bias and work toward equality for all.[18]
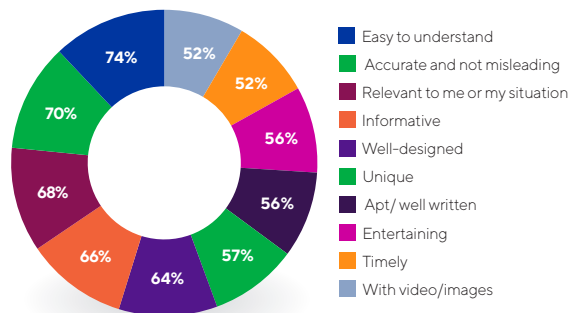
Be the first to send a compelling and inclusive story to your audience. Millennials in particular gravitate more toward brands that take a stance on social, societal and cultural issues.

3 Resonance: content drives customer relationships; make yours READ (relevant, engaged, accurate, designed)

Content conveys your brand, but businesses are often several steps disconnected from their audience. More than half of the respondents in our study rated businesses' online content as lackluster and promotional (see Figure 6). Asia Pacific consumers were most dissatisfied (58%) with content quality, as were millennials (58%) and Gen X consumers (57%). The old trick of crafting average-quality content, then building tons of run-of-the-mill backlinks to make this content improve its ranking by search engines, is dead.

Less engaging content leads to a less engaging brand

What makes content engaging and valuable to you? Top 10 categories shown below

- Easy to understand — 74%
- Accurate and not misleading — 70%
- Relevant to me or my situation — 68%
- Informative — 66%
- Well-designed — 64%
- Unique — 57%
- Apt/ well written — 56%
- Entertaining — 56%
- Timely — 52%
- With video/images — 52%

55%

CONSUMERS FIND ONLINE CONTENT
from companies non-engaging and rather promotional

Multiple responses permitted
Response base: 6,500 consumers globally
Source: Cognizant Center for the Future of Work
Figure 6

AI-augmented consumers are already overloaded with information online. If you bombard them with unwanted messages (company updates, for instance), and blatantly ask for likes, comments and shares, your brand may be de-ranked by social media platforms, review sites and e-commerce marketplaces as a result of actions taken by consumers.

Based on consumer preferences collected from our study, we recommend businesses craft their content around four principles: relevance, engagement, accuracy and design (READ). Think like an entertainment company: Leverage employee stories to make your content authentic, and address customer pain points through content. The more your content meets the READ principle, the greater it will resonate, and the more likely consumers will engage with it. These metrics are tracked by social media algorithms as dwell time, likes, comments, shares and click-throughs. Machines notice this and direct consumers to brand sites that follow suit. Approximately 66% of respondents in our study said that when they find content engaging and valuable, they end up making a purchase. Women (69%) are even more influenced to make purchases based on content quality.

Using READ as a foundation of content, brands can do the following:

▮ **Trigger meaningful conversations.** How do neighbors connect? By engaging with one another; this is what digital platforms have been trying to do. Last year, Facebook announced it had adjusted its newsfeed algorithm to prioritize content "from friends, family and groups" rather than "public" content posted by businesses, brands and the media.[19]

It's no surprise that millennials (65%) are more open to the idea of sharing content they like within their network. While views still have their place in driving brand awareness, it's now shares, comments and reactions that will help organic content find its place on an algorithm's scorecard.

This isn't a one-off job. Businesses need to continuously monitor how their content is faring, and make content adjustments to improve engagement. If some stories are shared more frequently than others, analyze why. Companies can use sentiment analysis and predictive intelligence to understand the topics or experiences resonating with their audience to adapt content that meets people's needs and interests.

Videos are equally important in terms of following the READ principle. YouTube, for instance, does not reward videos with the most views. Instead, videos with the highest watch time and engagement (likes, shares, comments) are ranked more highly on the algorithm.[20] Keep track of high-performing videos, and don't be afraid to remove those that underperform.

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Collect feedback from sales, marketing and customer service teams on the kind of conversations they have with customers; prepare a comprehensive list of phrases and questions and sprinkle them throughout the website to gain the attention of smart assistants.

I **Alexa, can you hear me?** Perhaps the biggest challenge for brands is how to get their content on the tip of voice-based personal assistants' tongues. Humans use different language and phrases when conducting voice vs. text searches; businesses need to fine-tune content that a voice algorithm can understand. A good starting point is to ensure your website is optimized for voice. Collect feedback from sales, marketing and customer service teams on the kind of conversations they have with customers; prepare a comprehensive list of phrases and questions and sprinkle them throughout the website to gain the attention of smart assistants.

I **Up your content quality score by localizing it.** Localization is perhaps one of the most important attributes overlooked by companies. Look at how Netflix and Amazon Prime produce and promote local videos while enabling some of their global content. Would you, as a user, buy from a website in a language you don't understand? In reality, only 25% of global internet users speak English.[21]

Localization is not just translation. It means adapting content not only to local language use, but also to cultural norms and values in specific regions or markets to resonate with the audience in the language they understand and actions they take by liking and sharing the content. Build local partner ecosystem (telcos, local advertisers, etc.) to address local consumer preferences.

Moreover, localization makes it all the more important for businesses to be found by voice assistants. Apple's voice assistant is now available in 21 languages,[22] and Google plans to double support for local languages to 30 by the end of the year.[23] Google Assistant even understands when you speak two supported languages interchangeably.[24] Alexa supports English, French, German and Japanese, with Italian and Spanish on the way.[25] Voice localization is where the game will be won or lost for global brands against local companies.

THE MAKING OF A MORE HUMAN BRAND. WILL YOURS BE?

Intelligent machines are playing an increasingly important role by augmenting consumers with the information they need, influencing their decisions and ultimately helping them become better humans.
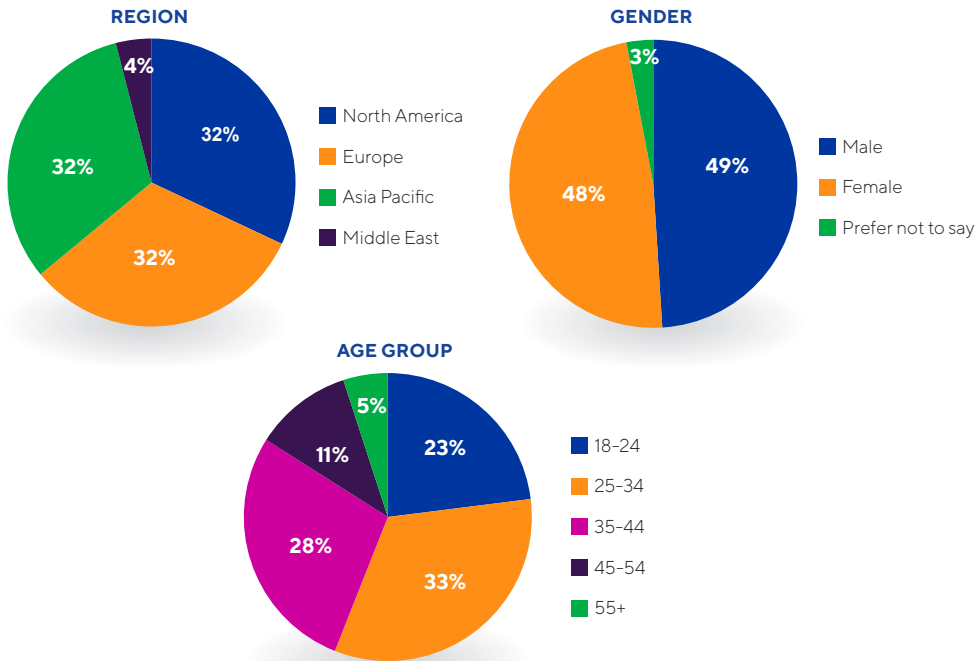
We are on the cusp of a new era. Changes in how we understand and anticipate future customers over the next decade are coming on an unprecedented scale. Intelligent machines are playing an increasingly important role by augmenting humans with the information they need, influencing their decisions and ultimately helping them become better humans. Your brand can't continue to sit on the sidelines. Traditional companies can't become Amazon or Google, but they can be on Amazon, with a Google ranking, to serve customers. You know what your customer is looking for today, but what if you could predict what the customer is looking for tomorrow, and deliver value that they haven't yet realized they needed?

The human-machine alliance will have a profound impact on how traditional business models will evolve, presenting both opportunities and risks to companies. Brands that adopt the 3Rs and reimagine their brand, rebuild reputation, rethink their relevance to form deeper relationships with consumers and resonate with consumer behavior, are most likely to emerge as category leaders tomorrow. By focusing on customers like Tanya to serve in her moment of need, while building an emotional connection with them, your brand will become more human, and customers will respond.

Methodology

We conducted online panel-based interviews with 6,500 consumers across the U.S., Europe, Asia-Pacific, including Japan, and Middle East regions. The sample was equally distributed across geographies, age groups and gender.

REGION

- North America — 32%
- Europe — 32%
- Asia Pacific — 32%
- Middle East — 4%

GENDER

- Male — 49%
- Female — 48%
- Prefer not to say — 3%

AGE GROUP

- 18–24 — 23%
- 25–34 — 33%
- 35–44 — 28%
- 45–54 — 11%
- 55+ — 5%

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Manish Bahl is a Cognizant Associate Vice President who leads the company's Center for the Future of Work in Asia-Pacific. A respected futurist, speaker and thought leader, Manish has guided many Fortune 500 companies into the future of their business with his thought-provoking research and advisory skills. Within Cognizant's Center for the Future of Work, he helps ensure that the unit's original research and analysis jibes with emerging business-technology trends and dynamics in Asia-Pacific, and collaborates with a wide range of leading thinkers to understand how the future of work will take shape. He most recently served as Vice President, Country Manager with Forrester Research in India.

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Acknowledgments
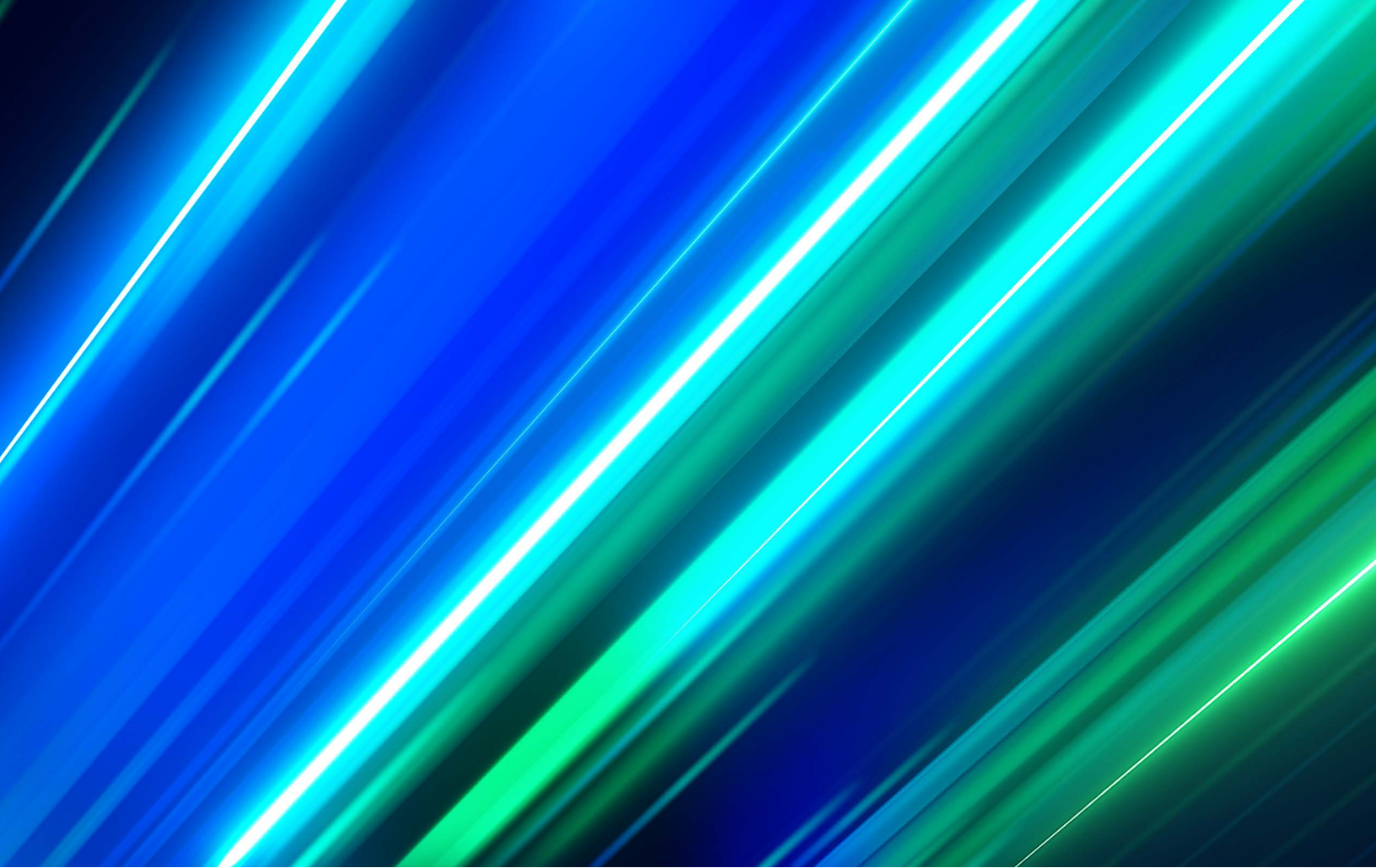
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