



The Vulnerability Blueprint

How to Identify, Support
and Retain Vulnerable
Customers



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Customer interactions with vulnerable individuals include a host of valuable intelligence that can be leveraged to drive more empathetic engagements and transform enterprise outcomes and performance.

Organisations interact with vulnerable customers every day. What most don't realise, is how they respond has far-reaching implications on customer experience (CX), retention and reputation in the market.

While the pandemic changed everything in 2020, customers are constantly experiencing crisis and vulnerability. Every organisation needs a set strategy and process for understanding vulnerability, extracting and operationalising insights, identifying at-risk customers and equipping employees to manage customer relationships with sensitivity, flexibility and emotional intelligence.

What is vulnerability?

A vulnerable consumer is someone who, due to their personal circumstances, is especially susceptible to detriment, according to the UK Financial Conduct Authority (FCA)¹.

The four drivers of vulnerability are:

- Low resilience
- Low capability
- Suffering a negative life event
- Having an ongoing health condition

It's not surprising that vulnerability takes many forms. Perhaps someone lost their job and is unable to pay their bills or lost a loved one and is grieving. Or, maybe it's a working parent with young children enrolled in at-home learning. There's also the digitally vulnerable, which are the individuals who aren't capable or have chosen not to engage with the digital world and are often left behind. This is creating a digital divide – especially as the internet is increasingly used in every area of life.

"Digitally vulnerable people are at heightened disadvantage in today's climate. Without possessing the digital skills of today, research shows that it's harder for people to become employed, communicate with loved ones, online shop, quickly execute tasks with service providers and so much more," said Frank Sherlock, VP of International, CallMiner. "Brands must not only deliver appropriate customer service to those who we consider vulnerable in the traditional sense – they must also provide the means to ensure the digitally vulnerable can receive their preferred customer experience."

Regardless of the type or unique circumstance, vulnerability is rising. In July, the FCA reported that 24 million people in the UK displayed one or more characteristics of vulnerability (mental and physical handicaps, long-term illness, age, socio-demographic characteristics, behavioural characteristics and personal situations, among others). The FCA warns that many more people have become vulnerable as a result of the pandemic and lockdown measures.

1. The Financial Conduct Authority, 2020. Financial Lives: The experiences of vulnerable consumers. Retrieved November 2020 from <https://www.fca.org.uk/publication/research/financial-lives-experiences-of-vulnerable-consumers.pdf>

Today, millions of people are dealing with the effects of physical and mental illness, bereavement and job loss:

According to the **Office of National Statistics**², the unemployment rate from July to September 2020 was 4.8% -- an increase of 0.7% over the previous three months, with 1.62 million people unemployed.

The FCA found 31% of adults have experienced a decrease in household income, with Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) and young people more likely to be affected.

At the end of August, 39% of the UK's population reported that the pandemic has negatively affected their wellbeing and mental health, according to **Mental Health Foundation**.

While many of these circumstances have been exacerbated by COVID-19, vulnerability is not unique to the pandemic. Vulnerability is universal and pervasive. If your organisation doesn't have an effective process for hearing, understanding, serving and learning from vulnerable customers, the time is now to put a programme in place.

How to Identify Vulnerable Customers During Interactions

In today's hyper-competitive environment, organisations don't have the luxury of waiting for customers to tell them what they want. And further, few customers, especially those in vulnerable situations, are transparent and forthcoming with their personal challenges. Organisations need to listen closely, pick up on contextual clues, analyse sentiment and learn from past experiences to determine and act on customer needs.

"It's also crucial for brands to understand how vulnerable customers want to communicate. Many don't have the skills or tools to go online and message a chatbot, complete self-service or send a tweet.

Whether it's due to digital vulnerability, financial hardship, a health condition or simply the need to connect with another human – organisations must provide service on appropriate channels for every vulnerable customer," said Sherlock.

Most organisations only analyse a small sample of customer interactions, which causes them to miss out on valuable insight hidden across customer interactions. This makes it difficult to recognise trends in vulnerability across the customer base, identify individuals in crisis and establish strategies for how to best serve these customers.

Instead, organisations need solutions, like interaction analytics, that help them capture, analyse and monitor 100% of customer interactions across multiple channels in a single system. Companies can follow a customer's journey and repeat contacts regardless of what communication channel is used – from call to email and chat – and extract insight that can be leveraged to improve processes, performance and decisions.

2. Office for National Statistics, 2020. Unemployment rate (Aged 16 and over, seasonally adjusted). Retrieved November 2020 from <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peoplenotinwork/unemployment>.

3. The Financial Conduct Authority, 2020. FCA highlights continued support for consumers struggling with payments. Retrieved November 2020 from <https://www.fca.org.uk/news/press-releases/fca-highlights-continued-support-consumers-struggling-payments>.

4. Mental Health Foundation, 2020. Resilience across the UK during the coronavirus pandemic. Retrieved November 2020 from <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/coronavirus/resilience-across-uk-coronavirus-pandemic>

Identifying vulnerable customers starts with listening. Here are three essential items to cover.

- Monitor for and flag specific words and phrases that insinuate vulnerability, with close attention to hardships such as job loss, illness, unemployment and abuse.
- Screen for non-compliant language such as harassing statements, raised voices and other risky behaviour that depicts emotional instability.
- Look for signs of stress and agitation in consumer and employee voices to help confirm vulnerability using best judgement.

Next, benchmark the common elements that signal vulnerability so you can more quickly and accurately identify vulnerable customers in the future. Once you can listen and identify vulnerability, deploy a real-time alerting system that automatically informs employees when they are dealing with a vulnerable customer.

How to Equip Employees to Manage Vulnerability

Once you can identify vulnerable customers and sensitive situations, it's critical to equip agents and employees with the information and tools needed to respond effectively.

Vulnerable situations require a careful approach and sensitive language – and few people are properly trained to manage these situations appropriately. Employees are only human and will likely struggle when working with a vulnerable customer.

To improve outcomes, organisations should equip customer service teams with:

- Background information on the customer, such as previous touchpoints, issues, personal info and more.
- Real-time alerts and in-the-moment guidance on how to communicate with vulnerable customers.
- Direction to ensure agents stay compliant, as well as recorded, objective documentation to respond to audits and complaints.
- Meaningful and fair feedback on their performance during the customer engagement to power improvement and learning.
- Post-interaction training to support and drive better customer outcomes in future interactions.

Utilising Sentiment Analysis and Understanding Emotion:

Interaction analytics equips organisations to automatically monitor and analyse the context and emotion of communication in addition to the content.

Interaction analytics performs advanced acoustical analysis that measures the overall intensity of a feeling through stress levels, voice volume, speed of speech and other variables to understand emotion, and can score agents on the empathy and agitation they express.

Paired with insight from sentiment analysis that depicts how the customer feels about something, the criteria can be used to build up a more complete picture of vulnerable customers, including sentiment and intensity levels.

Once customer service teams are fully equipped, leadership will have a larger base of data to extract and operationalise consumer insights, empowering them to make strategic changes on an enterprise-wide scale. This includes:

Analysing how employees handled conversations with potentially vulnerable customers:

- Did they ask the right questions?
- Did they show empathy or good listening skills?
- Are they communicating in an easy to understand way?

Identifying conversations, approaches and actions that lead to successful outcomes. This can be shared as best practices with agents as early as the next shift.

Extracting common threads, pain points and needs from across the customer base to improve processes, training and decision making.

The last point is the most important. What can you learn from your customer interactions, and where does your organisation need to adapt and improve? Extracting and acting on consumer insights is a proven, easy and effective strategy for elevating customer experience, strengthening loyalty, and improving business performance.

The most important factors for success are the ability to execute in real time and analyse 100% of interactions.

By analysing all customer engagements – chat, phone, social, SMS, email and more – organisational leadership can more confidently identify criteria associated with vulnerability. These criteria can then be assigned a category and tagged for future automated analysis. Once categories are established, AI-enabled tools can automatically identify when they occur during an interaction.

Organisations should equip their customer-facing teams with applications that monitor interactions in real time and offer script compliance, emotion detection, next-best-action guidance, event alerting and context-driven workflow initiation. It's important to reassure agents that they are asking the right questions and providing the correct guidance and support.

Industry Showcase: Financial Service Firms & The Surge in Vulnerability

The financial service industry is particularly impacted by consumer vulnerability. Companies across insurance, mortgage, collections and other financial specialties are faced with the difficult task of directly communicating with consumers about money, a sensitive subject for many vulnerable customers.

At the end of July, [the FCA](#) published its most recent draft guidance on vulnerable customers for financial services firms and financial markets.

The guidance consultation – GC20/3 – puts pressure on brands to implement practical changes to improve vulnerable people experience outcomes that are just as good as other consumers' outcomes. For many organisations, particularly those in the UK, this is more than just a guidance. It's a critical part of ensuring they meet specific compliance requirements geared toward protecting vulnerable customers. The recommendations had two actionable takeaways for financial firms:

The value of sympathy

FCA case studies show vulnerable customers respond positively to sympathy. Specifically:

- Vulnerable customers are already concerned about how their circumstances would affect the outcome of the interaction. It helped where frontline employees acknowledged this.
- Where the interaction was a direct result of the customer having health issues, employees built positive rapport by demonstrating understanding and showing genuine concern.

The importance of empowered and knowledgeable staff

FCA case studies show that when employees are empowered to respond flexibly during an interaction, the risk of further distress was reduced.

- When employees were able to guide vulnerable customers toward the best options for them, it had a significant impact on the interaction.
- Even where an 'ideal' solution for the customer could not be reached, customers felt that alternatives offered helped them avoid harm.

Insights that Deliver Beyond the Contact Centre

Insights from identifying vulnerable customers deliver value beyond the contact centre. When brands can understand the state of their customers' wellbeing and preferences, every department of an organisation can leverage the insights and improve operations from sales and marketing to product development and beyond.

Elevating these insights to key stakeholders in other departments is critical to driving business improvements. For example, Chief Compliance Officers are highly aware that taking the wrong approach with vulnerable customers doesn't only hurt brand reputation and customer loyalty – it's also a costly compliance mistake. There are regulatory requirements to measure and manage vulnerable customers in a compliant manner for many industries across the world, and failure to do so can result in damaging fines.

For Chief Marketing Officers, being able to identify how digitally vulnerable customers prefer to get in touch with a brand means they can make more informed decisions – such as digital and mailed customer correspondences that provide a clear customer service number, alongside other channels like the website or social media. This means customers feel empowered to connect with an organisation however works best for them.

By delivering key insights to stakeholders in context, interaction analytics and identifying vulnerable customers has enterprise-wide impact.

Improving CX with the Vulnerability Blueprint

According to the **CallMiner 2020 Churn Index**⁵, when consumers were asked about their needs before a call to a call centre, one of the top responses by consumers (23.6%) is that they just want someone to listen to them.

"This is truer than ever as the world continues to battle the COVID-19 pandemic. Vulnerable customers are experiencing isolation and loneliness at higher rates due to lockdowns, the inability to gather with family and friends and more. At the end of the day, most are looking to connect and be listened to – and brands have the opportunity to deliver that in the customer experience," said Sherlock.

Other key findings from the research include:

- **Emotion is key to retention.** While price remains the number one driver of churn, it declined in importance by 4% from 2018. Emotional factors – like loyalty and fair treatment – increased in importance and made up three of the top four reasons for switching brands.
- **Super-agents shape customer emotions.** Nearly 34% of customers had their emotional state change from negative to positive following their last brand interaction; nearly one in five reported having their emotional state shift because of poor agent behaviour.

People don't forget who was there for them during a time of need. For customer-led organisations, it's not just critical that they recognise this, but also proactively adjust service levels, improve business processes and increase flexibility for managing vulnerable situations. Interaction analytics – which helps identify vulnerable customers and enable agents to perform with knowledge, sensitivity and skill, in real time – drives bottom-line impact, increases brand loyalty and helps leadership extract insights to transform and improve business outcomes.

Learn more about interaction analytics and how CallMiner can help your brand better serve vulnerable customers [here](#).

⁵ CallMiner, 2020. The CallMiner Churn Index 2020. Retrieved November 2020 from <https://learn.callminer.com/home/callminer-churn-index-2020>

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About CallMiner

CallMiner is a speech analytics platform that drives business improvement by connecting insight to tangible action. We use the power of A.I. to scale human understanding, analyse interactions at the deepest levels, identify patterns and root causes, and reveal opportunities.

We believe that business improvement starts with a deep interest and curiosity in people. How do we detect a customer's true emotion, and how do we act on it to shift a business's culture and steer it on the most successful path? We aim to close these gaps through innovation, but the heart of our work lies in humanity: understanding, followed by action. We apply this same principle within our culture, promoting an attitude of kindness, compassion, genuine interest and respect for one another.



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