

The Influence of Call Centre Tone of Voice on Baby Boomer Customers



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Almost 1 in 2 UK Adults feel that call centres 'seldom' or 'never' adapt the way they speak to be mindful of the customer's age.

As a baby boomer, I have numerous memories of talking to client service advisors or sales professionals who clearly have no sense of the fact that they are speaking to a middle-aged man, or someone who is not very likely to want to be their 'mate'. Talking to other baby boomers it appeared I am not alone with this impression of the mainly millennial advisors we speak to.

To overcome our own confirmation bias, we decided to run a simple mini-poll to test our suspicion that the majority of call centres are not adept at adapting their spoken tone of voice to those they are talking to.

In case, you are thinking that this is a case of grumpy middle-aged man syndrome, it's worth remembering that **30%** of the UK population is **55+** (20m Adults)¹ and that almost one third of the workers in the UK are aged over **50** (10m Adults)². They represent a significant part of the economy and for the retail sector some of them have a sizeable disposable income. They are most definitely a sector worth paying attention to.

¹ [Index Mundi United Kingdom Structure 2018](#)

² [Centre for Ageing Better](#)

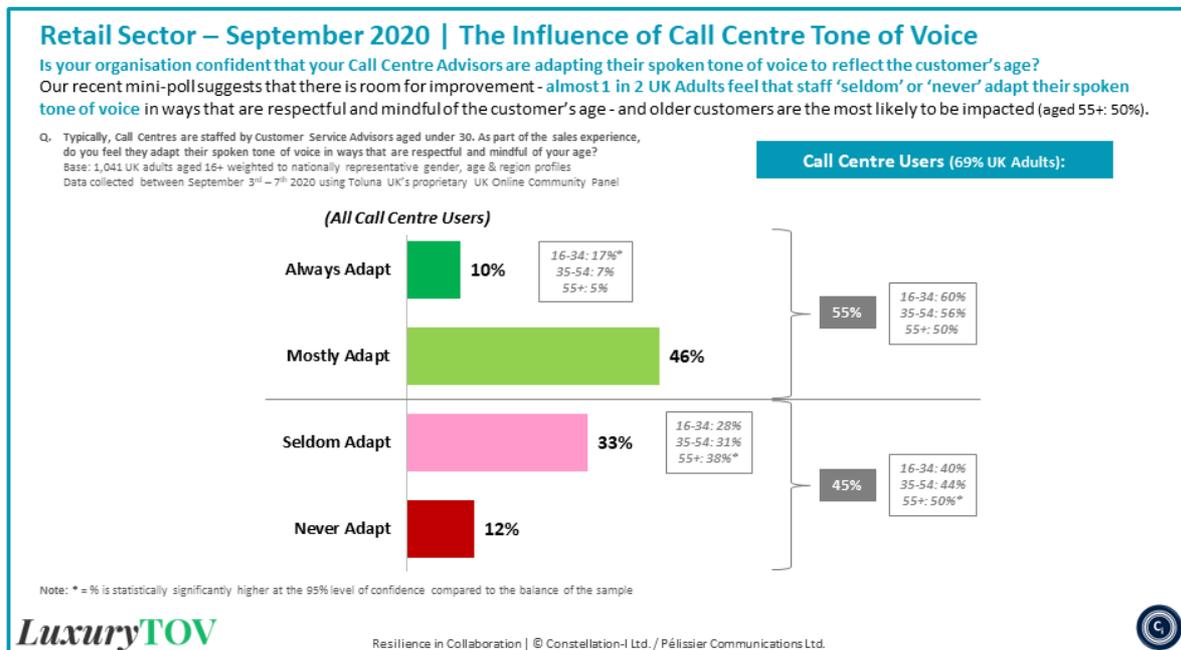
Spoken Tone of Voice Survey

Call centres come in many shapes and sizes, and so our mini-poll was general. We weren't testing spoken tone of voice in either a retail, financial services or communications context. We were just interested in a quick snapshot of whether the public thought customer service advisors adapted their spoken tone of voice to whom they were talking to.

We asked a representative sample of the general public:

'Typically, Call Centres are staffed by Customer Service Advisors aged under 30. As part of the sales experience, do you feel they adapt their spoken tone of voice in ways that are respectful and mindful of your age?'

Research was conducted between 3rd to 7th September 2020 using Toluna UK's proprietary UK Online Community Panel. Responses were given by 1,041 UK Adults aged 16+ weighted to nationally representative gender, age and region profiles.



When we first looked at the results, we were a bit alarmed. After all, it shows that 55% of respondents feel that customer service advisors 'Always' or 'Mostly Adapt' their tone of voice. But then we looked a little closer and our initial impression about spoken tone of voice stood up.

Whilst the majority of advisors are adapting their tone of voice in ways that call centre directors would want and expect, the results show that nearly 1 in 2 are not. The implication is that 45% of conversations take place with the customer feeling that the advisor has failed to adapt their spoken tone of voice adequately.

From secondary research³ and our experience in advising luxury client service centres, **56%** of such employees are aged **16 – 34**. This range includes both Generation Z and younger Millennials. This is significant and explains two things. Firstly, why younger survey respondents are more likely to say that advisors ‘Mostly’ or ‘Always’ adapt their tone of voice, i.e. they do not feel there is a significant communication gap between the ages. Secondly, why older respondents, particularly those aged 55+ feel that advisors do not adapt the way they speak.

The implication is that call centres are missing out on the opportunity to build better relationships with older segments of the population. This is happening because either there is poor awareness of the importance of spoken tone of voice, a lack of training or inadequate training - in some cases, all three.

To do nothing about it is not an option, all that will happen is an on-going distance between the generations. Whilst historically, there is always a gap between the generations, **the omnichannel and digital world in which we live now requires advisors to be more adept at communicating with customers, whatever their age, background or status.**

As one, baby boomer in our survey commented, *“I, just find they speak like turkeys...far too quick and gobbling their words, and in an accent [that] makes it even worse.”*

The problem is not with regional accents. Instead it lies in the spoken impression the advisor leaves in the memory of the customer and the negative story they then share. As a brand, you want to restrict the potential for negativity and having a better understanding of spoken tone of voice is one way of doing this.

Recommendations for implementing a highly adapted spoken tone of voice

Based upon our experience and guided by the mini-poll results, we can make the following recommendations:

1. Recognise that **spoken tone of voice has a measurable impact** on how customers feel they have been treated by an advisor, particularly those aged 55+
2. Develop **excellent listening skills** - improved spoken tone of voice starts with the ability to distinguish the age, background and status of the customer
3. **Train advisors to adapt the way they speak** based on their understanding of the person to whom they are talking
4. Acknowledge that **Baby Boomer customers have different expectations** to Generation Y, Millennials or Generation Z - find out what they are in relation to your brand or service
5. Remember that Call Centre and Client Service Advisors represent a brand, how they speak must **reflect the values and ethos of the brand**

Brands that invest in spoken tone of voice are conscious of the lasting impact it has on customers. They are aware that an excellent experience produces pleasant memories, ones that they are more likely to share in a positive way than those that leave them confused, angry or disappointed.

³ Cordant Contact Centre – Profile of the Contact Centre Sector Workforce

About the Authors

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Joe specialises in helping businesses to discover, define and deliver a tone of voice that is congruent with the values of the business and the expectations of prospective and existing customers. With over 25 years' experience of media and business communication, brands that have benefited from his expertise include Nespresso, Vente Privée, Louis Vuitton and Gucci.

What do we do? LuxuryTOV is a business communication skills consultancy that provides advice and mentoring for business leaders and training for sales, marketing and client service employees.

How do we do it? We follow a process that involves an in depth understanding of your brand, your communication weaknesses and the channels you use. From here we create guidelines and training as well as support tools to monitor and measure the quality of how you communicate.

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Phil believes you make better business decisions with evidence-based consumer and marketing insights. Drawing upon years of senior-level experience, gained at Independent and International agencies, Phil is a specialist in the Automotive, Health & Well-being, Retail and Technology Sectors. In the last 2 years, Phil has been an Insight Partner for organisations including Finsa Europe, Honda UK, The Institute of Osteopathy and Nominet.

What do we do? Constellation-I helps organisations to reduce the risk and increase the confidence in decision-making with expert independent evidence-based Research, Insight and Strategy.

How do we do it? By unlocking the value in understanding Proposition Development, Stakeholder Motivations and Brand Engagement.

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