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How To Mitigate Unconscious Bias In Customer Service Interactions

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Bias is often thought of in the context of HR and staffing, but unconscious biases in customer service interactions can negatively affect your brand and thwart longer-term customer relationships.

Companies are working to eliminate biases in hiring, but progress on tackling them in another key area of human interaction—customer service—has a long

way to go. Despite the best intentions of instituting policies to remove conscious bias behavior, unconscious bias tendencies still persist.

Nearly every step of the way, unconscious bias can cloud interactions between customers and companies—on both sides of the equation. For example, an [analysis](#) (download) of complaints to seven major U.S. airlines on Twitter for a period of nine months found that "African-American customers are less likely to receive responses to their complaints on social media." Similarly, a Zendesk study found that customer satisfaction [dropped from 79% to 58%](#) when call centers moved outside the U.S.

Types Of Unconscious Bias In Customer Service

- **Similarity Bias:** Customers and agents may prefer to interact with people they perceive to be most like them.
- **Anchor Bias:** Perceptions of a brand may be affected by a previous interaction—good or bad. Reversing negative perceptions, or having to live up to a “gold standard” of exemplary service, can present challenges.
- **Confirmation Bias:** Employees and customers may [favor information](#) that confirms previously existing beliefs or biases. For example, customers who have a negative perception of a company due to online reviews may unconsciously perceive interactions as confirming that point of view.

The Lurking Dangers Of Bias

Unconscious biases have the potential to damage a brand’s reputation in the eyes of customers, affecting sales over time and thwarting long-term relationships with customers. Customer actions that are informed by bias, when not dealt with swiftly, can also affect employee morale and retention. Poor customer service costs companies [\\$75 billion per year](#).

Five Steps To Controlling Bias In Customer Service Interactions

1. Know your customers and employees.

Taking stock of employee and customer sentiment through surveys can guide mitigation strategies. To that end, Alexandra Feldberg of Harvard Business School and Tami Kim of the University of Virginia's Darden School of Business [suggest](#) reaching out to customers from a variety of backgrounds and asking them how they perceive their treatment.

2. Dig into the data.

Large companies typically have reams of information—call recordings, recording transcripts, chatbot transcripts and detailed employee notes, just to name a few. This data can inform strategies to identify and manage unconscious biases in customer service interactions. Areas that could be assessed most readily, according to Kim and Feldberg, include how customers and employees are addressed, the level of detail of the advice given to customers and the level of politeness or civility during interactions.

3. Leverage the right technologies.

Technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI) and natural language processing (NLP) tools can help firms evaluate customer and employee sentiment. According to a recent [report](#), NLP tools can help companies identify opinions, categorize them and track complaints and trends over time. Tools that analyze reviews on external platforms can also help firms understand preconceived biases of customers and employees. These tools also have proactive functions that reach out to contacts that share opinions, gaining even more granular data.

4. Weigh the risks when considering solutions.

Some tools designed to combat biases may introduce new risks. For example, a recent solution from a Silicon Valley tech firm sought to change the accents of customer-service agents to make them more relatable to customers. But such a solution might legitimize biases by acting to accommodate them. According to [Nayana Prakash](#), a researcher at the Oxford Internet Institute, the technology “reinforces and indeed permits the biases people have toward Indian accents—and thus makes those biases acceptable.”

5. Challenges are ongoing, and testing should be, too.

With the help of tools and researchers, companies can get customers and employees to answer questions or take part in studies to help understand how and where unconscious biases happen. By testing how employees and customers respond to various situations, companies can get a better picture of how bias might enter customer service interactions and the types of actions they can take to address it.

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