



## **Preparing for the unexpected:**

strategies for maintaining trust and reputation through customer service and crisis management



**When something goes wrong in a business, it can leave your consumers panicking, your customer service operators stressed, and put your reputation at stake. So, while we all know that life can be unpredictable, organisations should always be prepared for the unexpected - whether it's a small hiccup or something more serious.**

From tech failures to global pandemics, cyber-attacks to product recalls, unanticipated challenges can cause chaos for any organisation. When crises like these occur, controlling the fallout and mitigating customer stress becomes paramount.

These incidents can be difficult to manage because of their swift, widespread impact. Situations can affect many customers at once, resulting in a sudden surge in demand for speedy, high-quality customer service. Responding to this influx of inquiries and concerns can put a strain on even the most efficient customer service teams.

While crises are, by nature, unpredictable, businesses can still plan and prepare for them. Developing a comprehensive crisis management plan for customer contact equips your team and customer service operators with the skills and resources necessary to deal with unexpected circumstances, big or small.

Read on as we discuss the strategies you need to ensure your business maintains customer trust and safeguards its reputation during challenging times.

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# What is crisis management?

No business is immune to incidents that put their customer service operations to the test. Data breaches that expose customers' personal information, such as a recent incident where [Vans announced its customers were at fraud risk](#), aren't entirely uncommon. Major supermarkets frequently face product recalls, such as [Sainsbury's salmonella scare](#) earlier this year. Project setbacks, construction delays, or event cancellations can cause widespread outrage among the public that needs managing, as the postponed opening of Manchester's Co-op Live venue has shown.

National emergencies can have an impact on customer service teams, too. The UK's cost-of-living crisis had a huge effect on housing association call centres, [sometimes turning them into emergency lines](#) - an outcome which required new levels of empathy and specialised training for operators.

As these examples demonstrate, it's impossible for businesses to predict the kinds of emergencies or mistakes they might need to deal with later down the line. However, this doesn't mean that organisations should be caught off guard when these incidents occur. Taking the right measures ahead of time can help you mitigate damage and provide your customers with the reassurance they need when problems do arise – whether that's providing a quick resolution to customers' problems or offering sufficient reassurance while your organisation works on a solution. During times of uncertainty, customer service is the primary route of communication, so ensuring your team has the skills and resources they need to respond to a customer's needs and concerns quickly is paramount.

Ultimately, when it comes to businesses managing unpredictable situations, overcoming challenges successfully relies on comprehensive planning and proactivity.



# Why is the right customer service so important to crisis management?

When problems arise, both customers and customer service operators are put under stress. Limited staff dealing with heightened emotions can easily lead to a breakdown in effective communication. Customer service teams are left dealing with an increased, often unmanageable workload, and customers become unattended and anxious for a solution. All this can impact customer loyalty, employee morale, a business's reputation, and its bottom line. It is essential that the right training and planning are put in place to ensure that this doesn't happen.

A proper **crisis management** plan works to minimise damage by providing frequently reviewed guidelines for sourcing staff and communicating with customers in the face of the unexpected. Organisations need to ensure that they can quickly and sustainably ramp up **customer services during a crisis**. Outsourcing is a great way to achieve this because it allows businesses to rapidly scale their customer service capacity by leveraging external resources and expertise. Plus, by partnering with specialised outsourcing providers, companies can access a pool of trained and experienced professionals who know how to empathetically handle customer inquiries and complaints, ensuring timely and effective resolution in uncertain times.



Did you know?

**30% of organisations**

had no crisis response team in place when the COVID-19 emergency arose.



# The DOs and DON'Ts of crisis management in customer service



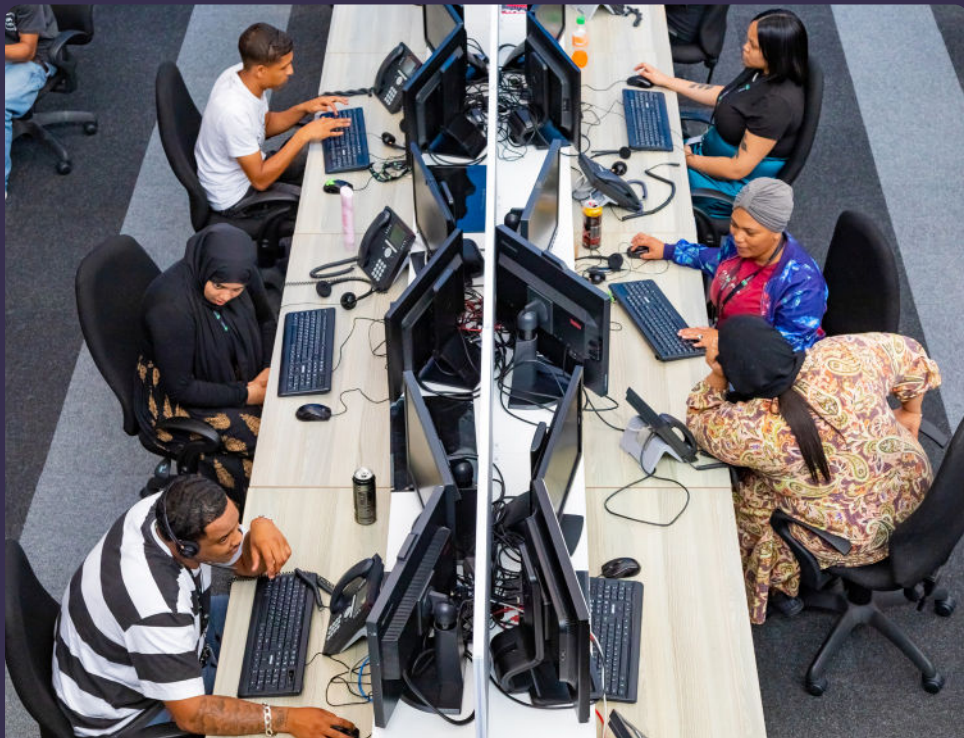
- |                                                                                                                                                                                                              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|  <b>Stay prepared</b><br>with a proper <b>crisis management</b> plan and the right training for your customer service team. |  <b>Play the blame game</b><br>customers need solutions, not finger-pointing.                                                                                                                      |
|  <b>Champion well-being</b><br>and ensure your customer service team's mental health is protected.                          |  <b>Be inconsistent</b><br>in your messaging – ensure that all communications deliver consistent information to avoid customer confusion.                                                          |
|  <b>Use automation effectively</b><br>to triage customers' queries and requests.                                           |  <b>Rely on AI</b><br>or chatbots as a primary tool to deal with customer queries. Their lack of human empathy and limited capability with complex scenarios can exacerbate customer frustration. |
|  <b>Be empathetic</b><br>and make sure your customer service retains a human touch.                                       |  <b>Underestimate the impact on your customer service team</b><br>they need proper training, support and extra assistance.                                                                       |

# Case study: the UK Energy Crisis

## What caused the UK Energy Crisis?

In 2021, there was a sharp increase in wholesale gas and electricity prices in the UK. This was triggered, in part, by a rebound in global demand as economies re-opened following COVID-19 lockdowns; supply constraints exasperated by tensions between Russia and the West; and unplanned outages and maintenance issues.

The combination of soaring wholesale prices, the retail price cap, and the inability of some suppliers to hedge costs properly meant **26 energy firms failed between August 2021 and early 2022** as they could not recover their increasing supply costs from customers. This created huge instability in the market.



## How were customers impacted?

Many people were faced with major disruption as failures meant they were moved to a different energy supplier with little notice. For the companies taking on these customers, their customer bases ballooned by thousands practically overnight - and each new acquisition needed guidance on how the transition would impact them. During all this, many people experienced emotional distress, long wait times, and poor customer service.

## During the UK Energy Crisis:

The average UK annual  
energy bill rose from

**£1,000** → **£3,600**  
in April 2021 in October 2022

An estimated  
**8.5 million**

households fell into fuel poverty after  
the October 2022 price cap increase

There was an **excess of winter deaths** related to cold homes

# How did Sigma Connected help?

At Sigma Connected, we helped a considerable number of energy companies through the Supplier of Last Resort (SoLR) process. Because immediate assistance is required with a SoLR takeover, demand for customer service responses can become overwhelming. During the energy phases by  $\xi$  crisis, we stepped in to support customers through all

- Deploying temporary customer service teams within just 3 days of being notified of an SoLR event.
- Training these teams on systems, basic handoff processes, and FAQs to handle the surge in customer inquiries.
- Enabling a cost-effective scale-up with a Bring Your Own Device model.
- Outsourcing customer service work to teams in South Africa to handle increased demand.
- Prioritising support for prepayment and vulnerable customers.
- Assisting with data processing and handling more complex customer issues related to the SoLR transitions.

Combining our experience with SoLR processes and an empathetic, customer-centric approach, Sigma Connected's **crisis management services** played a crucial role in helping energy companies navigate the logistics of the Energy Crisis, protecting customers and customer service staff at the same time. [Read the full case study here.](#)



# Discover better crisis management with Sigma Connected

When faced with unexpected challenges, businesses need to act fast to maintain customer trust and safeguard their reputation – and having a solid crisis management plan in place allows them to do just that.

Developing a customer service strategy should be at the forefront of this plan to ensure that a rapid scaling of customer services, clear communication, and empathetic support is available to mitigate damage and protect customers and customer services teams in times of emergency or disruption. Partnering with customer service and outsourcing experts, like Sigma Connected, can provide the resources and expertise needed to effectively carry out this strategy at short notice – while retaining that all-important human touch.

If you want to learn more about the businesses we've worked with, we have plenty of [case studies](#) that showcase our customer service expertise. Want to discover how we could create a crisis management solution for your business, too? Let Sigma Connected help prepare your business for the unexpected.

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