EMAIL

Email was the first of the non-voice multimedia channels to be used, and is still by far the most well-used, having been mainstream for well over a decade.

Email should stand as a salutary lesson that it is not businesses that make new channels a success, but customers. Email, in its first incarnation, failed almost entirely. Too many businesses rushed to push customers to this new channel – commonly supposed to be cheaper than voice – without having the processes, solutions or staff to manage this properly. What happened next can be understood as a 'herd inoculation': enough customers had enough bad experiences from enough organisations that the entire channel was discredited, even for those businesses which were providing a reasonable service through email or just keeping a watching brief.

The reason for this rejection was the unacceptable level of service provided by many of the early multimedia businesses. With response times stretching into many days, if not weeks, the companies failed to understand that any communication with the business has a degree of urgency to it, else why would they be trying to speak with the business at all? Of course, even when a response was eventually provided, the issue might have gone away, or been dealt with by calling the contact centre, meaning that customers' existing confidence in the voice channel was further reinforced at the expense of the email channel. It is also the case that email does not fit the type of enquiries that people make in some cases, such as the need for quick, simple and confidential information (such as an account balance), and the increasing requirements for identity checking places a cap on the usefulness of email as a channel for some types of business.

It took many years, much investment and the coaxing of customers to try new channels again for email to emerge as being credible. Of course, businesses and customers now both realise that email is more suitable for some interaction types than others (the rise of web self-service has meant email is no longer the only online communication method available), and complex issues such as complaints, or other enquiries requiring a formal paper trail are well-suited to email. In fact, much of the demise in the letter and fax as channels can be traced to a direct replacement by email. Email is also an excellent outbound channel, providing reassurance, great levels of detail and attachments, and is able to link to other specific areas of information via hyperlinks.

As an inbound channel, it has inherent weaknesses: an inability to carry out customer authentication and to carry out a real-time 2-way conversation being amongst them, as well as the lengthy wait to get a response. However, it does have the advantage over virtually every channel that there is no queue time at all – the customer writes the email and presses 'Send' immediately – a 'fire and forget' interaction.

Retail respondents often report the high proportion of inbound traffic as email, with the B2B manufacturing and services sectors also receiving high levels. The technology, media & telecoms sector also reports high levels of email activity this year.

The insurance sector again shows considerable use of email after many years of very little activity, and this may be due to a change in working practices which allows customers and intermediaries to send through documents via email rather than by the more traditional fax and letter.

Figure 119: Inbound interactions that are email, by vertical market

Vertical market	% of inbound interactions that are email
Services	30%
TMT	25%
Manufacturing	24%
Retail & Distribution	21%
Housing	16%
Outsourcing	15%
Insurance	14%
Transport & Travel	13%
Public Sector	12%
Finance	9%
Utilities	8%
Average	**17.2%**

As with previous years, emails are proportionally less important for large contact centres, although this gap has shrunk considerably over recent years.

Figure 120: Inbound interactions that are email, by contact centre size

Contact centre size	% of inbound interactions that are email
Small	26.3%
Medium	11.7%
Large	14.7%
Average	**17.2%**

The cost of email is considerably lower than live telephony (which has a mean of £6.26 this year), but it is still much more expensive than a self-service session. In a similar way to live phone calls, emails are getting longer and more complex as the easier work is handled through self-service, which is keeping their average cost up despite a move towards using more automation to answer them.

Figure 121: Estimated cost per email

	Email cost
Mean	£3.68
1st quartile	£5.00
Median	£2.67
3rd quartile	£1.35

Do you need an email response management system?

An organisation that has relatively small volumes of email will tend to handle it initially on an ad-hoc basis, often using Microsoft Outlook to do so. At some point, the contact centre will realise that costs are going up and quality going down, and that they need to implement the more sophisticated email response management system. What signs are there that show this is the right time to do so?

- While there is no fixed figure for email volume, as it will depend on the complexity and time required to handle each one, organisations receiving greater than 100 emails per day are likely to have issues handling and tracking them

- There are a significant number of customer telephone calls that refer to emails that were sent, but which never received a response

- Prioritisation and routing of emails to agents with specific skills sets is no longer a matter of a few minutes of management time

- Email handling times are not going down, despite most being about a small number of topics

- Complex emails may take days or even weeks to resolve, and different agents may be working on similar types of issue without even realising it, thus duplicating the effort

- You lack flexibility in dealing with spikes in email traffic, as it is too difficult to bring secondary email agents to bear without damaging the voice channel's service level

- Visibility and accuracy of service levels for email channel is worse than that for the voice channel

- It is difficult to report on the content of the emails that you receive as this has to be done manually.

For businesses that handle substantial volumes of email, while it is not suggested that they should aim to answer an email in the same amount of time that it takes to complete a phone call, it is desirable to manage all interactions closely to consistent business rules, and to act quickly if service levels slip. Too often it seems, contact centres have become so used to managing the telephony queue that they neglect multimedia interactions. The result is that multimedia response times (mostly email) have historically been sacrificed to meet telephony service levels, and although there have been steady improvements in response rates in recent years, these seem to have tailed off somewhat.

In 2015, reported email response handling times reversed the improvements of recent years, especially in the all-important 'less than 1 hour' segment. This year, the proportion of emails answered the same working day is 59%, while those taking more than 1 day is 36%, an improvement on 2021's worst figures on record.

Taking longer than one day to answer an email runs the risk of the customer losing patience, and going elsewhere or phoning the contact centre, placing a greater cost burden on the business than if they had just called in the first place. Clearly the pressure placed on businesses as a whole and the phone channel in particular throughout the pandemic does not help, but this chart shows that email response rates have shown little improvement for many years.

Figure 122: What proportion of emails are answered successfully and completely within these timescales? (2009-22)

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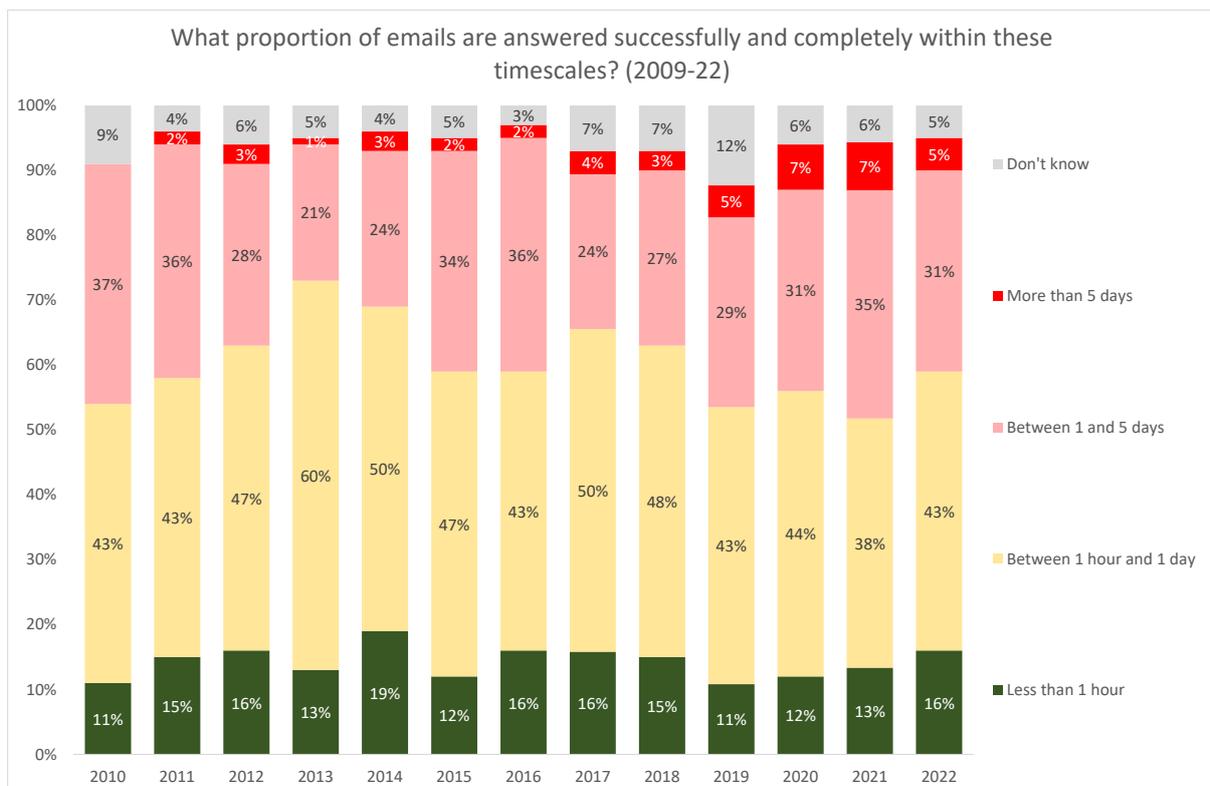
The most popular method of answering inbound emails is to use agents rather than automation. Around half of emails are answered by agents who start with templatised, editable responses and change them accordingly, thus not having to compose every email from scratch, but also being able to draw from a common pool of knowledge. Starting with a blank email and letting agents complete it themselves is not only likely to take longer, but also leads to an increased risk of poor grammar, spelling and punctuation, as well as a less consistent response.

Only 10% of emails have automated responses, (these statistics do not include simple automated acknowledgements), and of those, most are checked by agents before sending.

Figure 123: Level of automation used in email management (2015-2022)
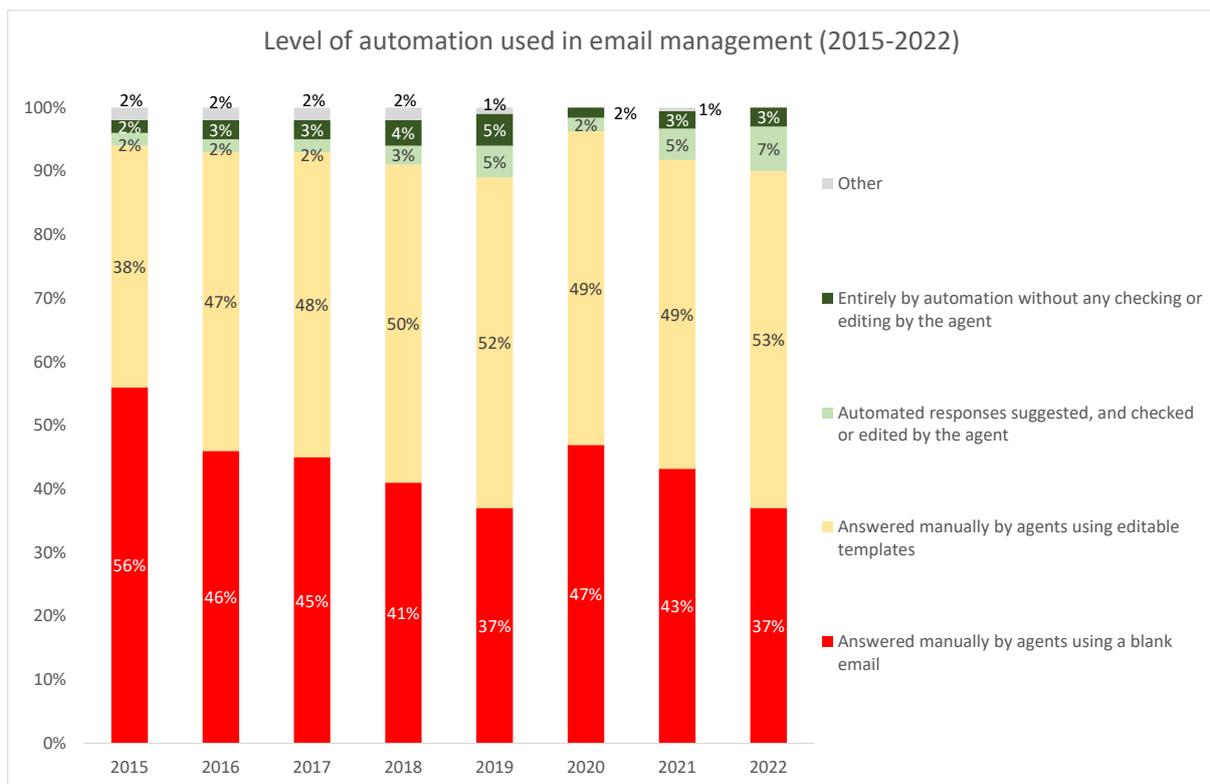
Respondents state that around half of their inbound emails are queries about products or services that have already been bought, with only 1 in 6 being from prospective new customers, who have queries about products or services which they are considering buying.

Complaints represent around 15% of inbound email traffic for our respondents, compared to the telephony figure which is usually below 10%.

Respondents were asked to estimate the proportion of emails that required the use of another channel to be answered fully. 44% of respondents stated that fewer than 10% of their emails could be answered fully without recourse to alternative channels – an improvement on many past years' results – with only 11% stating this year that more than half of their emails needed supplementary channel assistance.

Figure 124: Emails that require the use of another channel to be answered fully (2015-2022)

Emails that require the use of another channel to be answered fully (2015-2022)

Year	Less than 10%	11-25%	26-50%	More than 50%	Don't know
2015	39%	27%	13%	16%	5%
2016	40%	25%	19%	14%	2%
2017	38%	27%	15%	10%	10%
2018	33%	32%	14%	12%	9%
2019	35%	33%	10%	16%	6%
2020	45%	21%	13%	17%	4%
2021	47%	26%	12%	10%	4%
2022	44%	32%	11%	11%	2%
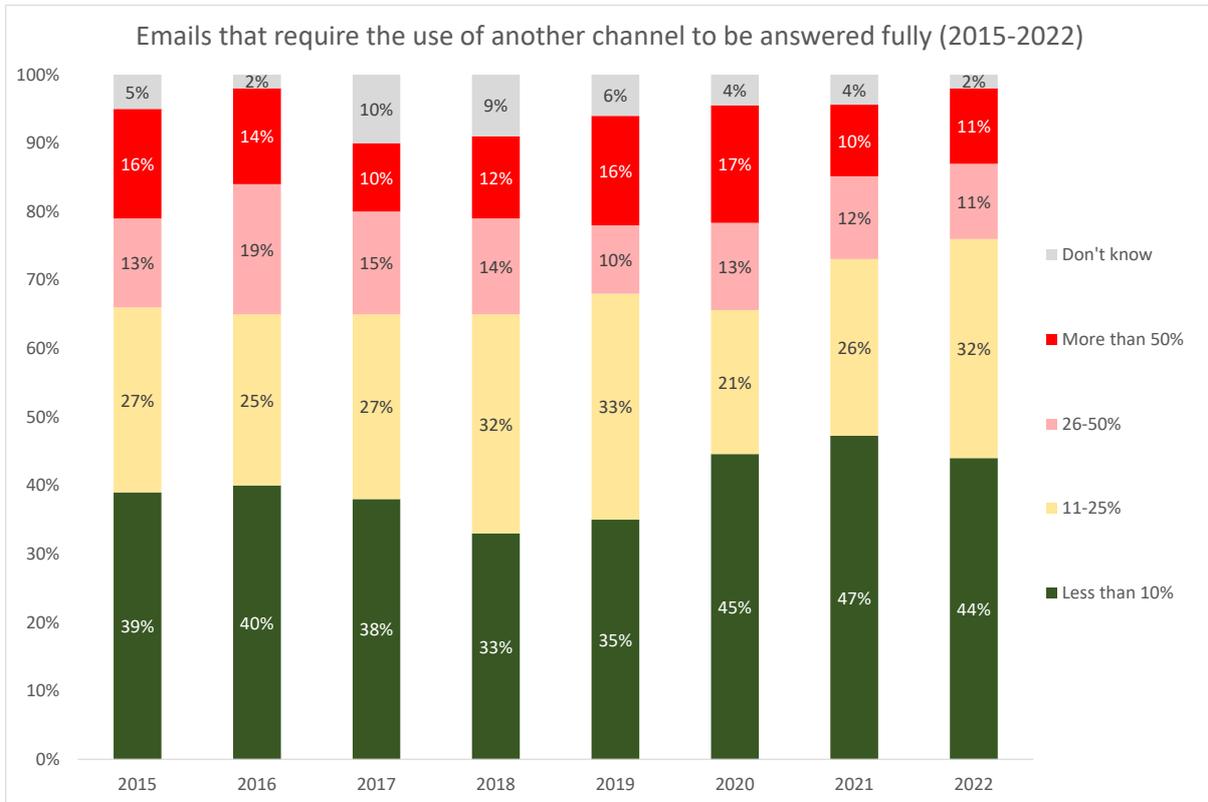
Respondents that indicated that a proportion of their emails require the use of another channel to be answered fully were asked to give the top three reasons causing this.

Two interlinked responses came out clearly ahead: the multiple, back-and-forth nature of the queries are quicker to answer on a call; and that complex issues are better handled with a phone call rather than an email.

The ability to take customer through security checks more easily in a different channel was also considered important (i.e. given a top 3 place) by 62% of respondents, and 28% considered that email agents do not always have access to the sources of information that they need to answer the question fully.

Figure 125: Reasons for using another channel to answer emails fully

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