



Spotlight on

first direct

Ranked 1st in 2024

first direct has been in the top three companies in our UK Customer Experience Excellence index 13 times in the past 14 years. In 2024, it retains its number one position and continues to lead the banking industry for customer experience (CX). Over the past 12 months, first direct has seen an improvement in its Integrity and Empathy scores. Here, Chris Pitt, CEO, first direct, provides insight into why he thinks the bank continues to perform so well.

Removing customer pain points

“For consumers, financial services is boring, but it’s also important and complicated,” says Pitt. “When it comes to financial management, they just want it sorted quickly, easily and without undue fuss. We strive to ensure that

when customers do have to call us, we can help them resolve their issues at the first point of contact up to 80 percent of the time. This is an important focus for us, and we are continually monitoring why customers are prompted to contact us and endeavour to remove those reasons one by one.

“For example, this year we noticed that resetting digital security was a growing issue. Customers would find themselves locked out and would require us to reset their access. Solving this by implementing an AI-powered verification system, to ensure we are dealing with the right person, has improved security and efficiency. This had a huge benefit for us. Firstly, we were able to communicate the security of our approach to customers, and this may explain the rise in our Integrity score. But importantly, it also dramatically reduced inbound calls, resulting in shorter wait times for customers and a more efficient use of company resources.



"We have done a lot of work with our AI chatbot 'Dot the Bot', which now handles 25 percent of our interactions. We started with examining why people were contacting the bot and understanding what really matters to them. This is more than just the reason for calling, but the broader context of the call, what were they seeking to do, and why was contact with the bot necessary in the first place.

"Sometimes people must come out of the bot and speak to a human. We have systematically gone after the issues that cannot be resolved in the bot, to find ways of ensuring that the customer can complete their task in their chosen channel. Age, mindset and perceived importance of the ask play a big part; our younger customers want to complete everything in the bot, whereas older customers, who may, for example, be moving a sizable amount of money for a house purchase, want the security of speaking to a human – we need to cater for both. The result has been a large increase in the bot's NPS score."

An empathetic focus on customer outcomes.

"Our approach to AI is a simple one: we start with the customer outcome we are looking to improve and then work back to the technology that can make a difference. We see AI in the context of what the customer is seeking to do in totality, and the benefits they are looking to secure. It isn't just about reducing cost.

"We have been examining life-event-prompted interactions that have low frequency but high emotion. For example, losing a job, bereavement, and divorce. We know that these are particularly difficult for customers and want to help them as empathetically as we can, and we have worked hard to make these as easy for customers to navigate as possible. We have recently scrutinised how we can improve Power of Attorney for vulnerable customers where proving identity can be problematic, and have implemented a set of improvements. Vulnerable customers are a group who are hugely important to us. We have a team of over 90 people available to help them."

A customer centric culture

"Culture has always been important at first direct and as a leadership team it is possible to become fixated on the numbers, credit loss, fraud etc., but it is important to understand the human dimension also. Every Monday,



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Chris Pitt, CEO, first direct

I call customers who have had problems the previous week. This enables me to understand what our customers are experiencing and helps identify systemic issues. It also helps turn data into human stories, which informs our approach and makes it real and meaningful.

"Every year, the leadership team talks to every staff member on a face-to-face basis to update them on the direction of the business and our priorities. We ran 20 sessions this year, firstly to say thank you to our amazing people, but also to share what we have achieved in the past year and what we intend to do this year. This creates a real connection with the team.

"Overall, our culture at first direct is focused on continuous improvement, continually trying to find ways of making our customer's lives easier and more fulfilling."

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