

# UK Business Awards 2021

## Entry Identification

Entry Title	████
Organisation Name	████
Category Entered	<b>Maggie Colman Customer Service Award</b>
Organisation Description	<b>████ supplies phone, broadband, card payments and other utilities exclusively to small businesses throughout the UK. We have over █████ customers, and approximately █████ employees across two offices, in London and Sheffield. Within our sector, we are second only to █████ in terms of customer penetration.</b>
Precis for awards e-brochure	<b>During the pandemic our staff, guided by some highly innovative management, have worked miracles to support small business owners at breaking point. We maintained our exceptional customer service ratings despite an incredible array of challenges, and have managed to protect the health of our business and the small businesses were dutifully serve.</b>

## Criteria

### Summary and Business Strategy

Provide an overview of the entire initiative, capturing the most important information from beginning to end. What was the background of the initiative? How did it meet the strategic needs of the business? For the Business Heroes categories include an overview of the role and responsibilities of the team/individual.

When the pandemic broke, our customer service offering faced a cliff-edge scenario.

To ensure the safety of our staff, we became the fastest business within our sector to work remotely - something we were extremely proud of. However, our service teams - built entirely around office-based systems and processes - were suddenly at home, and facing service challenges that were completely unprecedented.

From the sheer volume of calls to the existential threats facing our customers,

the challenge of maintaining service levels while trying to help our customers to survive was like nothing we'd ever seen.

But through a combination of rapid innovation, bold leadership and an extraordinary work ethic, our customer service team not only coped but prospered - playing an active role in leading us into an extended period of growth.

### **Bucking industry trends**

██████████ is relatively unique within the business telecoms sector for focusing on customer service as our principle USP. Our sector is largely price-focused, which we perceive to be a race to the bottom.

We've invested heavily in customer service over the years, becoming known for an industry-high ██████████ score and our 3-ring promise: we answer all calls in 3 rings or less, from UK-based contact centres.

The success of this focus has correlated with net customer growth and improved customer retention.

All of this has made the remarkable success of our customer service teams, despite all of their challenges, all the more pivotal. Put simply, our entire business model relies on exceptional customer service - and that's why this initiative was so central to our wider business strategy.

### **How we succeeded**

As we will explore further in this entry, the key facets of this initiative included:

- Moving many sales staff into service roles - to maintain service levels and reduce our furlough reliance
- Upskilling more than 100 staff members to use Live Chat on social platforms
- Highly innovative new services like ██████████ - which essentially allowed the transfer of business telecoms to home premises temporarily. Nothing like this had been done before in our industry
- Protection for businesses who couldn't afford their line rental and would normally therefore lose their landline numbers
- Free of charge business restart services for companies who had to cancel their contracts

Most of these services were up and running in the earliest stages of the pandemic. That means they were drawn up by management, programmed by developers, and managed and implemented by agents in days, from home. It's difficult to overstate how difficult that was.

But our renowned ██████████ score of ██████ out of ██████ never once dropped.

## **Goals and Objectives**

What were the specific goals and objectives of the initiative? What business benefits did the initiative set out to achieve?

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Broadly, the objectives of our service innovations were to maintain customer service levels, and therefore, customer satisfaction - both of which are pivotal to our growth model.

However, more specifically, these objectives included targets such as:

- Maintaining our average call answer time of 6 seconds or 3 rings - a pillar of the brand
- Being able to solve 9 out of 10 issues on the very first call - another service measurement we've become known by
- Continuing our business goal of upgrading more than █% of our customer base to Fibre Broadband by 2021. This was important for our long term growth strategies, but also in protecting the future of our customers - with ADSL Broadband set to be switched off within a few years
- Improving customer retention rates, despite the obvious challenges - namely in our customers potentially losing their businesses
- Recording net customer growth through the pandemic
- Minimising the use of the █ █

These objectives were remarkably ambitious given the context, but we wanted to stay true to the targets we'd set before the pandemic.

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## Implementation and Stakeholder Engagement

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How was the initiative implemented? Was there an opportunity to plan? Who was involved and how was communication maintained? What was the leadership model and who were the relevant stakeholders? How were their needs identified and understood, and how were they and others engaged in the process?

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The first and most important point to make is that the initiatives that comprised our customer service response to the pandemic were conjured up, assessed, delegated and implemented in a remarkably short timeframe.

That's because, with staff working at home and our customers in a state of total panic, nothing mattered more than speed.

### **Entrepreneurial spirit**

The entrepreneurial structure of our business was incredibly important in the success our initiatives.

Our senior leadership team work very closely with both our product teams and the team leaders within our customer service teams. We intentionally create an environment in which team leaders, as well as the C-suite, have the freedom to create and launch new ideas rapidly.

Some of the ideas behind our initiatives were partially formed already. █, █, for example, was a simple, low-cost feature that was available but largely invisible to most of our customers. Offering █ as a free coronavirus relief

measure to relevant customers was simply about promotion to the right customers.

Others were entirely new, and extremely difficult to implement. [REDACTED], which essentially allowed customers to freeze their business premises contracts while starting new, cost-price contracts at their home address, was the sort of projects you might normally spend years implementing. Somehow, we had it up and running in weeks.

### **Innovative remote working**

To provide our staff with access to our telephony system we used AWS Workspaces that together with [REDACTED] Authenticator ensured a secure gateway to our systems.

We then used our own [REDACTED] product to provide the ability of our sales team to reach prospective customers.

To scale the solution we implemented additional connectivity with [REDACTED] that already had a presence in our datacentre and allowed for quick provisioning of additional link capacity between datacentre and AWS.

Meanwhile we used [REDACTED] video as a helpline for our staff as well as team meetings and companywide updates to keep all staff informed.

We used [REDACTED] to be able to configure staff laptops quickly and securely. Using [REDACTED] allowed us to better control the remote devices to protect both our customers' data and our company data.

The extended work during the pandemic also prompted us to utilize supplier-hosted cloud solutions rather than on-premise deployments.

Specifically, we migrated [REDACTED] products ([REDACTED], [REDACTED]) to the [REDACTED] Cloud which improved the efficiency of support for our internal staff.

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## **Innovation and Creativity**

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What was especially creative and innovative about the initiative? Was anything unique introduced or which proved an interesting twist and contributed to the overall success?

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[REDACTED]  
As the pandemic unfolded we rapidly recognised that for many of our customers their business broadband connection would become obsolete.

We were eager to support them in a manner that supported their difficult financial circumstances and their changing business needs. We developed [REDACTED] - an option that was entirely new in business telecoms.

Essentially we froze their business tariff, and were able to instead offer a short-term broadband contract at home at an extremely low cost. Effectively, this ensured many customers could continue operating and lower their overheads.

Our service teams used this option to help our customers survive - learning the technicalities of how it worked in a matter of days.

[REDACTED]

We had already developed our digital phone system before the pandemic, but we quickly developed an app-only version that allowed our customers to take or make calls anywhere - another great solution for Covid-related issues. Once again, our service teams learnt how to promote, manage and implement this solution with remarkable speed and efficiency.

### **Live Chat on social platforms**

A hallmark of our customer service offering is the ability to speak to a person in seconds. But we quickly realised as the pandemic spread that many customers wanted to engage digitally.

We decided to upskill service staff to manage and monitor Live Chat through our social platforms. This was tremendously innovative given the complexity of the requests, and the fact all training and development was executed remotely.

### **Discounts and financial support**

We helped our customers survive in a wide variety of ways.

Normal industry processes cause businesses that fail to pay their line rental to lose their phone number. We offered support and payment plans to avoid this, knowing how damaging this can be for independent businesses.

For businesses that had to cancel/cease during the pandemic, we introduced a free restart of their services, allowing business to start simply, quickly and without cost.

We also trained staff to identify and contact customers who were cancelling direct debits to ensure they understood the long term implications to their credit ratings and business prospects. Where possible, we implemented measures that avoided these scenarios.

Furthermore, we froze any charges for public Wi-Fi - with consumers unable to visit our customers' premises.

These were highly unusual relief measures, and effectively meant breaking our own processes and system rules. Once again, training service staff and ensuring they had the understanding of how to implement these measures was incredibly challenging.

### **Sales staff moved to service roles**

We moved dozens of sales staff into service positions to maintain customer service levels as demand increased, but also to limit our use of the Furlough scheme.

As any business like ours understands, sales staff are often completely different to service staff - with different experience, skillsets and training. The process of re-training remotely was once again highly complex - not least of all because our team leaders and trainers were already engaged on multiple projects.

## **Impact and Benefits**

What has been the the resulting impact on the business? What impact has this initiative made on others within the business? What other benefits have been achieved in relation to the goals and objectives, and were there any additional unforeseen benefits?

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The impact and benefits of customer service innovation have been nothing short of miraculous.

### **Customer service levels unchanged**

- [REDACTED] rating stands at [REDACTED] out of [REDACTED] – the same rating we had before the pandemic broke
- Our average call answer time – an industry low of [REDACTED] seconds – hasn't changed
- We continue to solve [REDACTED] out of [REDACTED] issues on the first call

### **Retention and sales targets hit record levels**

Despite all of the challenges we have faced, net account additions during the pandemic have actually improved considerably year on year.

- Between August and December 2020 we recorded positive net customer additions every month
- For perspective, our net customer rate was negative every month across the same period in 2019
- This was a result of exceptional customer service and retention rates – our retention rate was around [REDACTED]% better between August 2020 and January 2021 than the same period in 2019

### **Fibre penetration soars**

The stability of internet connections became a critical issue for small businesses during the pandemic, so our service moved our base to a fibre connection to futureproof their business.

- For the first time, we moved more than [REDACTED]% of our customers on to Fibre Broadband – which was essential for business speed, security and performance
- Compared to 2019, Fibre penetration increased by around [REDACTED]% during the pandemic, and as of January 2021 it sits at [REDACTED]%

### **Active recruitment re-starts**

During a pandemic inevitably marred by redundancies and growing unemployment rates, we're proud that we were able to actively recruit staff into our service and support teams throughout.

- Between the beginning of the pandemic and March 2021, we successfully recruited [REDACTED] members of staff in our service and support teams
- This total included more than [REDACTED] staff recruited during periods of lockdown when remote working and remote recruitment was still required

### **No furloughs after the first lockdown**

- Remarkably, we have not used the furlough scheme for any employees since the very first lockdown ended at the end of Spring 2020
- This is entirely the result of staff performance. The service levels we maintained directly correlated with above-average customer retention levels

And perhaps most importantly, we've managed to play an active role in supporting the survival and protection of hundreds, if not thousands, of vulnerable small businesses.

The fact our service teams have managed this, while also helping to ensure that [REDACTED] has continued to grow as a business, is a fantastic achievement.

And perhaps it's best summed up by our own customers:

"[REDACTED] never lets me down. Been with them for a long time and I'm blessed to have them, especially during the pandemic. I wanted to solve something as we have gone into Tier 4 and my problem was solved in seconds." [REDACTED], [REDACTED]

"Excellent customer service and very sympathetic to small businesses in offering a deduction in cost due to the pandemic! Thanks [REDACTED]" [REDACTED]

"Really helpful due to my salon being closed due to covid. Diverted my number quick and easy and reduced my bill." [REDACTED]