How Retail **CX** **Leaders Can** Regain **Control**

2026 Edition

What actually works when complexity creeps in | A Route 101 Point of View

Route101

Feeling Pressure From **All Sides**

MOST RETAIL CX LEADERS ARE CLEAR ON WHAT THEY ARE TRYING TO ACHIEVE. BETTER EXPERIENCES FOR CUSTOMERS. LOWER COST TO SERVE. TEAMS THAT CAN COPE WITH CHANGE WITHOUT BURNING OUT.

From the outside, expectations are relentless. Retail customers don't see your operating model or the systems behind a journey. They expect things to work every time, across every channel.

AI-driven expectations, shaped by digital-first brands setting the pace on speed, personalisation and availability. are rising faster than organisations can realistically respond.

From the inside, the pressure is just as intense.

Teams are expected to improve experience while reducing cost. They are asked to support more channels without increasing headcount.

They are told to adopt AI quickly, but not at the expense of service quality, security or compliance.

At the same time, they are managing legacy platforms, long-standing contracts and decisions made years earlier for a very different retail environment.

The Common Response

WHEN COMPLEXITY SHOWS UP, THE INSTINCTIVE RESPONSE IS OFTEN TO ADD SOMETHING NEW.

A new tool to fix returns queries. Another channel to absorb peak demand. Automation layered on top to deflect contact.

While it might feel proactive and decisive, creating the impression of a solution, in practice, this approach often shifts complexity rather than removing it.

Over time, ownership becomes blurred, journeys become fragmented and agents are left navigating systems that were never designed to work together.

Often, they are asked to learn new systems without old ones going away meaning journeys become harder to manage end-to-end.

AI, in particular, can magnify this effect if it's treated as a shortcut.

Zendesk's CX Trends 2026 research shows that 73% of agents believe AI copilots would help them do their job better, yet many retailers are still struggling to translate AI investment into day-to-day operational impact.

Our Point of View

What makes it difficult is how retail goals collide with day-to-day reality. Over time, tactical decisions build up. Tools are added to solve specific problems. New capability is introduced under pressure.

The stack grows more complex and progress becomes harder to sustain.

Each improvement creates new dependencies. Each change takes longer to land. Effort increases, but momentum slows.

Our point of view is simple. Sustainable progress does not come from adding more capability.

It comes from simplifying the foundations first, then building forward with intent: choosing solutions rooted in clear business needs, and informed by a realistic view of organisational readiness and maturity.

That shift in approach is what allows customer experience, efficiency and scale to move together instead of pulling in different directions.

Consistency beats complexity

In our experience, exceptional retail CX is rarely about adding new channels or touchpoints. While that is the quickest 'fix', the real solution starts by making sure the experience holds together wherever and however customers make contact.

The retailers making progress focus less on individual interactions and more on the journey as a whole. They simplify how journeys are designed, owned and evolved, so customers are not passed between teams or asked to repeat themselves as they move across channels.

When ownership is clear and journeys are designed end to end, experiences become easier to manage and easier to improve. Changes land faster. Breakages are easier to spot.

Customers experience fewer points of friction, even as the environment behind the scenes continues to evolve.

Consistency does not come from more technology. It comes from clarity in how experience is designed and delivered.

85%

of CX leaders say customers will abandon a brand if their issue is not resolved on the first contact.

Zendesk, CX Trends 2026

Efficiency that stands up to pressure

Operational efficiency in retail is often framed as a cost exercise. In practice, it is what allows CX teams to cope with constant change without losing control.

The teams making progress simplify before they optimise. They reduce duplication in their stack, streamline workflows and modernise systems that slow everything else down. Effort drops across the organisation, not just in one area.

Automation and AI then sit in clearer places, able to take on repeatable retail queries such as order status, delivery updates and returns can be handled efficiently, while agents focus on higher-value and higher-emotion interactions. It can also support decision-making where context matters, removing the manual information search.

The result is less firefighting and fewer exceptions when demand changes.

Efficiency built this way tends to last, because it reduces strain rather than redistributing it.

Experience only scales when agents do

No matter how advanced the technology, retail customer experience ultimately depends on agents being able to do their job well.

Retailers making progress design with agents in mind from the start. Context switching is reduced. Access to customer, order and delivery information is improved. Agents are supported with tools that help them make confident decisions when it matters most.

When agents are properly supported, outcomes improve quickly. Resolution is faster. Quality is more consistent. Change lands more easily because teams are not already stretched to capacity.

Empowered agents are not a nice-to-have in retail. We know they are essential to making experience, efficiency and scale work together.

73%

of agents receive fewer than four hours of ongoing training per month.

ICMI, State of Agent Experience & Engagement Survey
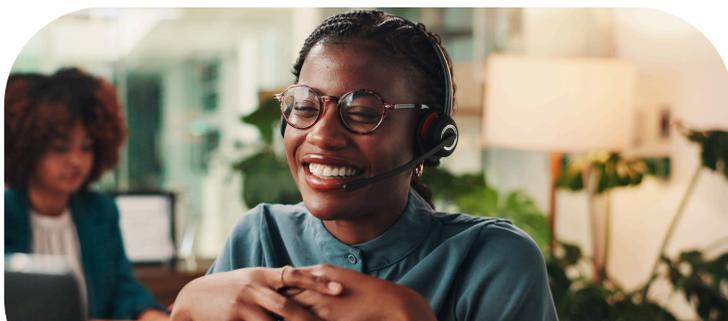
A Conversation
Worth Having

Do these challenges sound familiar?

You're not alone.

Scan the QR code!

Book a strategy call to see how we can help.

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