

PREDICTIONS REPORT

Predictions 2026: Customer Experience

October 21, 2025

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Summary

CX teams face a critical turning point in 2026. After years of stagnant CX performance and mounting pressure on resources, some will break free from legacy practices — especially score obsession — and reposition CX as a driver of business value. Others will cling to outdated approaches and risk deeper irrelevance. This report outlines the key predictions shaping CX in 2026 and provides strategic guidance to help leaders rebuild with advanced analytics, insightful metrics, and pragmatic AI implementation.

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A Few CX Teams Will Rebuild While Most Succumb To Fatigue

Fatigue has reached a tipping point for most CX professionals: CX performance rarely improves, and CX budgets and headcounts are under constant threat. As a result, 2026 will be a critical inflection point. Some CX teams, realizing that the CX profession can't continue to struggle this way, will rally and evolve. They'll modernize, upskill, and reposition CX as a catalyst for sustainable business value. However, most CX teams will remain entrenched in legacy practices, particularly the organizational fixation on survey scores, deepening the dysfunction that has long limited CX's strategic impact. Typifying this dichotomy, in 2026:

- **Budget pressure will lure 15% of teams into a death spiral by feeding metric obsession.** [Budgets for large CX teams](#) have remained flat despite inflation and are likely to stay flat or decline. Desperate to prove their worth and earn higher budgets, some CX teams will feed their firms' [metric obsession](#). These teams will exhaustively collect and report survey scores, but their dashboards — lacking narrative and context — will offer little guidance on which customer problems to solve, how to solve them, or why they matter to the business. CX teams that continue this approach will remain mere reporting functions with little obvious value and short lifespans. CX teams can escape this trap by building [advanced CX analytics](#) capabilities and developing AI fluency. These teams will upgrade from survey-dependent reactivity to data-based proactivity and help embed CX data into AI models for [customer interaction tools](#) — both key improvements that make the team valuable to the business.
- **At least two major scandals will result from firms acting on AI-led customer research.** A third of CX teams already use AI to analyze customer data, and AI-generated insights are table stakes in [research platforms](#). Interest in AI-powered research applications like [synthetic audiences](#) and AI-moderated interviews is skyrocketing. In 2026, more overstretched CX teams will hand off planning and

execution of research to autonomous AI agents — a shortcut embraced by genAI decision-makers who overestimate the consistency and accuracy that these tools achieve on their own. Avoid the risks of AI-led customer research by relying on skilled researchers who can [pressure-test insights](#) with complementary methods like qualitative interviewing, user testing, and participatory design — especially in organizations that give [AI agents the power to change customer interactions](#).

- **Three in 10 firms will harm their total experience growth with frustrating AI self-service.** [Over three-fourths of AI decision-makers](#) now consider genAI outputs trustworthy. This misplaced confidence, combined with mounting pressure to cut operating costs, will cause companies to deploy genAI-powered chatbots and intelligent virtual agents prematurely — and in contexts where they're unlikely to succeed. This will erode the customer and brand experience, causing [Total Experience Scores](#) to stay flat or decline. To mitigate the risk, CX teams must work with customer service leaders to fine-tune their strategy for where and how to deploy AI-powered self-service and clearly disclose when they use AI in customer interactions. This is especially important for companies that deploy autonomous back-office agentic systems, since they can fail in ways that are difficult to detect but affect customers — like if an AI agent mismanages supply and prices for a retail store.
- **Two-thirds of CX teams will abandon journey mapping due to a self-inflicted stigma.** CX teams have spent years defaulting to journey mapping, but stakeholders are dismissive. [Managing journeys — customers' path to goals](#) — is certainly valuable, as companies like [Nedbank](#) and [Nissan](#) have shown. Yet most CX teams don't *manage* journeys — they only *map* journeys. What's worse, only [30% of CX decision-makers](#) say that their CX teams have the skills to create high-quality maps, and most journey owners are on CX teams instead of in business units or teams, so maps remain disconnected from business decision-making tools and processes. CX teams can overcome journey mapping's stigma with journey management that solves real business problems in customer-focused ways. Start by building a strawman [journey atlas](#) and [prioritizing lighthouse journeys](#). Blend ad hoc and permanent [journey teams](#) to drive continuous improvement and create a central budget to fund break/fix activities and some breakthrough improvements.
- **Eight in 10 companies will invest in their design systems to preempt emerging AI risks.** [Forrester's data](#) shows that [sixty-seven percent](#) of organizations have a [design system](#) — the principles, foundations, components, guidelines, and resources that guide design efforts. But adoption and impact remain modest. In 2026, organizations will turn a corner as design systems become essential to mitigating risks from three emerging shifts: staying compliant with recent

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accessibility regulations such as the [European Accessibility Act](#), ensuring that new [AI-powered customer interactions](#) follow design guidelines, and preventing missteps when using AI agents in design workflows for efficiency gains. To drive design systems' adoption and impact, CX leaders must treat them like a product — collaborating with peers in marketing, design, and product to build the case, build out the system, and [measure](#) and socialize its impact.



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