

zendesk

# AI-powered efficiency for startups

What startups can do now to set a good foundation for the future



**Imagine a future in which artificial intelligence (AI) is your customer service team. This isn't a far-off dream, but a reality that's just around the corner.**

Generative AI (GenAI) is changing the game, setting new standards for operational efficiency and personalization across industries and in companies of all sizes. Customer experience (CX) is one of the first industries feeling the disruption, according to [Zendesk Customer Experience Trends report](#) data and, anecdotally, everyone who interacts with a bot as their first experience with a brand. Those bots are getting smarter and better every day, and leaders must have a game plan for how AI fits into the customer experience and even their early-stage growth strategy.

For startups, this is particularly exciting news. With AI, small-but-mighty teams can deliver top-notch customer service without stretching their resources. Leaders don't need to hire humans to ensure every question is answered. The myth of a **three-person unicorn startup**—a small team capable of driving businesses to huge success—is within reach, as AI allows startups to scale more efficiently while keeping costs down.

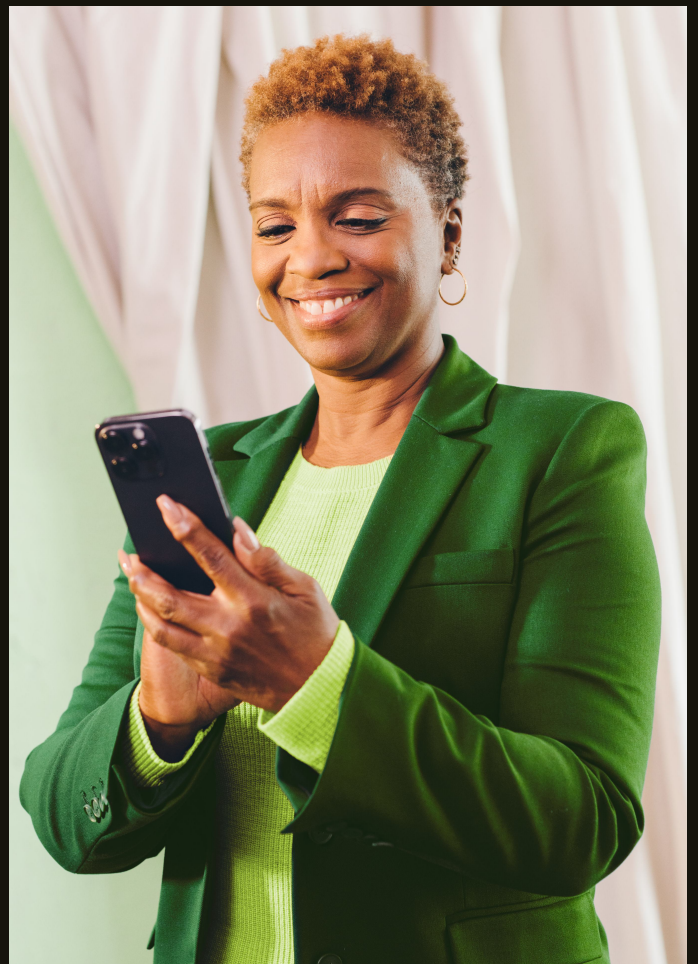
But what about the human touch? That's not lost. In fact, it's strengthened. Though the **2024 Zendesk CX Trends Report** found that 46% of agents worry about AI or bots replacing their job within the next year, success in a customer-facing role stands to shift in a good way. By letting AI handle customer service, you and your team can focus on what really matters: handling complex situations and driving growth. Whether it's achieving product-market fit or fundraising, you can focus your valuable time on the big picture.

So, let's embrace this future. Let's welcome AI into our customer service teams and see just how far it can take us. Because in a world where efficiency and personalization are the norm, AI is the key to standing out.

Remember, the future of customer experience isn't just about keeping up, it's about leading the way. And with AI, you're not just on the path, you're paving it.

## In this guide, we'll dive into:

- **Landscape analysis:** Setting a good foundation for the AI-powered future
- **What you can do with AI today:** Driving efficiency with automation, bots, and more
- **What's next:** Optimizing operations in real time
- **The future of AI in CX**



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## Landscape analysis:

# Setting a good foundation for the AI-powered future

Don't simply employ AI for the sake of being a part of the wave; understand why you're using AI, when you will deploy it throughout a customer's journey, and how you will use it to nurture your customer relationships. This can be accomplished in a number of ways; for example, maybe AI can shorten the journey between when a customer first engages with your startup and when you've earned their business. For many early-stage startups, those first logos can be essential wins, and shortening the time to getting them can help drive momentum.

As you get ready to bring the power of AI to your customer experiences, it's important to be clear on a few key points first. Begin by reflecting on where you'd like to see AI work for you in your startup: from repetitive tasks to frequently asked customer questions to creating clear communication with your customers and more. Use this time to set the stage for AI success.

## Implementation Goals

Prioritize AI objectives to be in line with your startup's broader strategy. Be sure to have a clear definition of what success looks like for your business, and how AI fits into that success. Startup leaders are close to their business plans and pitch decks, already moving with a nimble mindset—sketching that added layer of AI efficiency in these early stages can pay off in the long run.

## Automation potential

It's not a question of "if" it's a question of "how" when it comes to automation. Conduct an audit in your existing operation for any repetitive, time-consuming tasks, which should be filed under "Need to automate."



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## Landscape analysis:

For example, how to help customers reset their passwords or find answers to frequently asked questions. Automation will not only free up your team's time, but can also provide a high degree of consistency in your CX.

### Customer Insights

Founder after founder has emphasized the importance of listening to your customers, and that includes their pain points about interacting with your business. So let your customer clue you in. Combining the power of AI with the intelligence you are already gathering about your own business can result in vast improvements in the customer experience. An audit of customer feedback is vital to understanding your customer and where they might be having a less-than-ideal experience with your business. For example, pay attention to what you find in customer surveys, community forums, or social media.

### Customer Journeymapping

Understand not only where you can implement AI but where it can make the biggest difference. Pinpoint where in the customer journey—the path customers and prospects take in their discovery and interaction with your startup—AI could help. For example, identify where website visitors are engaging with your page the most, and consider placing a helpful AI bot there to serve up additional information about your product or service.

Understanding these paths can help leaders enhance relationships with satisfied customers but reduce friction for new customers and prospects interacting with the brand.



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## What you can do with AI today:

# Driving efficiency with automation, bots, and more

Automation is a great way to build AI-powered efficiencies that will support your business as you scale. Call it a win-win-win by employing automation to keep customers happy, reduce agent stress, and free up your team's time to focus on growing your startup. Make AI automation your startup's sidekick, increasing your team's efficiency and keeping your customers happy with dependable experiences and quick responses. Routine customer interactions? That's no sweat for AI. Read on for more benefits.

### **Enhance queue efficiency and reduce existing agents' workload**

Keeping headcount stable is a huge benefit for founders conscious of spending and funding rounds. Customer-facing roles should be top of mind for founders, but AI can help take the heat off that essential function by forcing a human to sift through endless, repetitive requests. Let AI take the first look at incoming tickets, deflecting them to help center content or rerouting them to the right teams—maybe the question isn't even a customer support issue at all, but does require the attention of another leader or member of the team. With AI support baked into the experience from your early days, you can also be smart about headcount spend and projections for years and funding rounds to come.

### **Self-service**

Businesses with an edge on their competition are working with best-in-class partners to help make generative AI both accessible and operational as their knowledge management practices mature.



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## What you can do with AI today:

Though many generative AI solutions require long lead times and implementation, making them unrealistic for many small businesses, there are many out-of-the-box generative AI bots that can be trained on your company's knowledge base material, learning on day one how to streamline the self-service channel. By incorporating AI into existing CX channels with generative replies for bots or article suggestions from your knowledge base, you can meet the customer where they are to solve their issue.

### Consistent interactions

AI-driven customer interactions ensure dependable customer experiences, as every customer engagement adds data points to your evolving AI model. When your customers have their questions answered and issues resolved in a timely and consistent manner, you're more likely to develop customer loyalty. Bonus: you can accomplish that kind of consistency without adding headcount or worrying about staffing and training a 40-person team to do so.



## What's next:

# Optimizing operations in real time

In the Prehistoric era (i.e. those days before the internet, anyone?), we didn't have the technology to move quickly. Now, with the power of AI, customer-facing teams can move at lightspeed (or closer to it) when they're freed of rote requests and tasks. The humans piloting your startup can track and analyze customer patterns and drive the business forward with that knowhow and analytical thinking.

It's important now more than ever to optimize in real-time rather than waiting for problems to arise or, worse, external discontent (i.e. customer complaints) to spur action. By enabling AI to understand and respond to customer sentiments, startups are setting new standards for exceeding customer expectations. With AI on your side, no message goes unheard and no opportunity to satisfy a customer is missed.

Though some of these capabilities may still be aspirational for startups building a good AI foundation—and a good business, period—a look ahead to the not-so-distant future of CX may help leaders understand what's in store as their businesses grow.

## Analyze and empathize

AI tools can automatically route tickets to the right team based on their intent, language, or whether the customer's message is positive or negative (AKA its sentiment), or a combination of all three, which is a win for customers.

## What's next:

AI-powered reporting and large language models (LLMs) enable leaders to easily understand what customers want and where they're coming from, which is a win for the business.

Taken together, AI can help turn average customer experiences into memorable ones by ensuring that AI-powered channels match customer sentiment and are able to respond in a complementary way.

### AI never sleeps

When your support team is offline, let AI take the wheel so customers can still learn, engage, ask questions, or get a headstart on their question. Used in this way, AI can be the first line of defense for any issues that a human can pick back up tomorrow.



# The future is still TBD— which isn't a bad thing

For startups committed to embracing the future, the promise of AI in CX is a powerful differentiator. What was once the purview of big budgets and enterprises now applies to all businesses that want to streamline operations while delivering a great experience. It empowers founders to cut costs, save time, and invest freed-up resources into scaling their startup. Reduced response times and deeper engagement via sentiment analysis go beyond customer satisfaction scores, increasing customer loyalty and establishing customer retention.

Customer service as we know it is being reshaped from complex to compact. That lean, high-impact three-person unicorn is no longer a myth, but a realistic model for the future of many scaling startups that employ AI. AI serves not solely as a bridge to this near future, but the present-day foundation on which startups can scale and build lasting relationships with their customers.

Join the [Zendesk for Startups](#) program to learn, share, and grow with fellow founders making the most of AI.

