

Zoho CX Helps Business Stay Close to Customers in Pandemic Uncertainty

Zoho

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The Challenges

The year 2020 was a peculiar year by many standards. The increased digitization efforts of businesses worldwide were aligned with the enhanced adoption of advanced industrial and consumer technologies to produce a more effective connection between brands and their consumers—and then came COVID-19.

To call the impact of COVID-19 on global business “severe” would be an understatement. The pandemic has had devastating consequences on the economy overall.

We are witnessing an economic setback on a global scale—one that hasn’t been seen for generations. Normal business activities that we have long taken for granted have been thrown off the rails almost overnight, due to lockdowns, isolations, and quarantine requirements. While navigating through this global economic turmoil, small and large businesses alike are seeking innovative customer technologies

that can provide them with a structured approach that extends beyond the traditional interaction methods to enable their brands to identify and create a new type of consistent experience journey.

During this rough time with distancing and other measures in effect, companies are presented with a unique set of challenges when re-evaluating customer strategies for their brands:

1. Is there a customer solution that supports my core business activities to fuel customer interactions and to minimize the impact of distancing?
2. Will this solution work seamlessly with my legacy and bespoke applications in production, back office and front end, without me putting in too much data management efforts?
3. Will this solution also make my internal customers—that is, my work-from-home employees—happy?
4. And last but not least: is it affordable?

With consumer expectations rapidly changing during this pandemic context, visionary brands want to create a more effective feedback loop to ensure they are: capturing consumers' near-real-time perception of their product or service; staying closer and closer to their customers; and maintaining a more embracing digital brand journey that is personalized for customers. The ultimate goal is to continuously improve and deliver consistent, meaningful customer experiences.

The Company

For 25 years Zoho has grown organically from a network management application developer to become a global CRM solution provider that is trusted by 60 million users worldwide. In its path of growth, Zoho has built more than 50 business applications, with everything built bootstrap and from the ground up. It is the only enterprise software solution provider I know of that has expanded its business without any acquisitions or mergers.

As of early 2021, Zoho had extended its global footprint to more than 180 countries. The vendor's global customer community is supported by a completely connected ecosystem managed by more than 9,000 Zoho employees and thousands of solution implementation partners. The company operates physical locations and data centers on all continents. Even though as a private corporate Zoho doesn't reveal its financial information, one statistic indicates this company has been growing above the industry average rate: Zoho had around 4,000 employees in early 2018 when I first reviewed their new launch—Zoho One. By 2021, that employee count had grown by 2.25 times.

The Solution

One common feedback we captured from customer relationship management (CRM) software users is that while traditional CRM software may manage the customer well, including the customer's common profile, transaction information, and support requests, it falls short of managing the relationship side of the business well. Needless to say, most of the traditional CRM solutions on the market today are transaction oriented, rather than experience driven. CRM software providers also see this reality and, as a result, customer experience has become a hot frontier in CRM software development and is now regarded as the last missing piece of a complete customer relationship enabler.

In 2014 Zoho launched the Zoho CX Platform with the introduction of Zoho CRM Plus, a unified customer experience platform to deliver an exceptional experience to every customer across all stages of their lifecycle and convert them into brand advocates. Zoho CX is designed to provide a personalized and unified customer experience from a single-source platform, from where all internal resources—including the sales force, field service force, marketing, customer support, and back-office operations teams—can work as one team to provide contextual, consistent interactions with each customer.

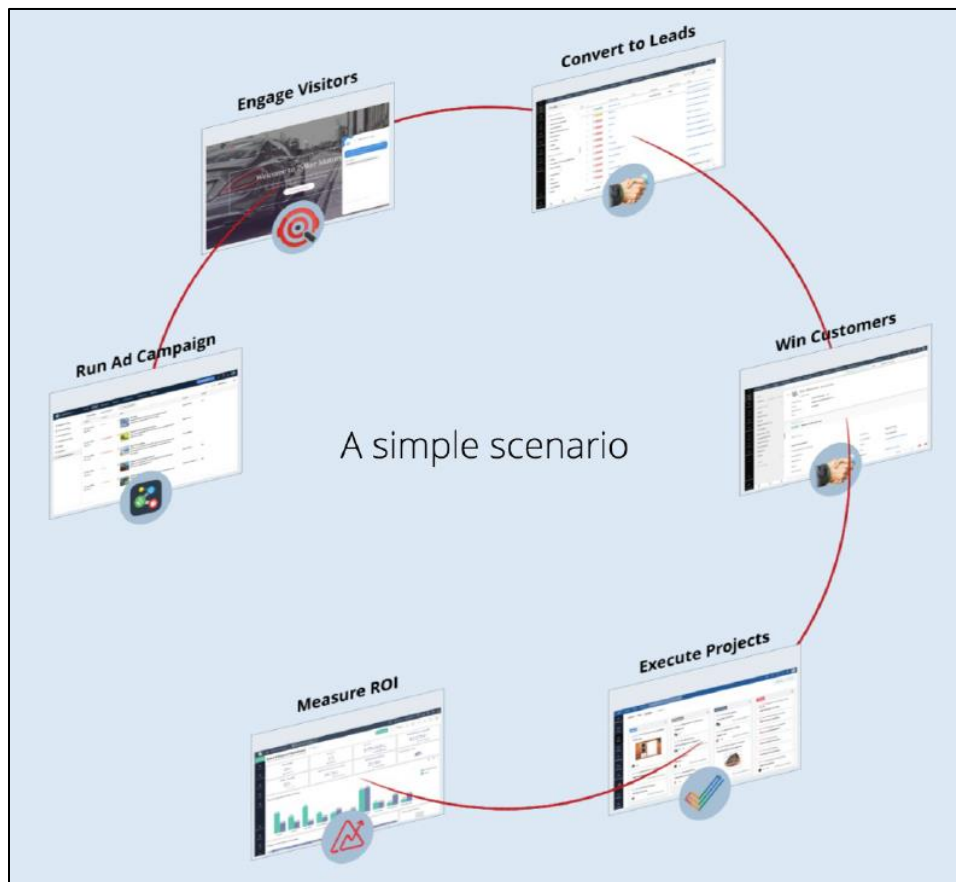


Figure 1. Zoho's View of Customer Experience Lifecycle

More than six years into the market, Zoho CX has seen consistent year-over-year (YoY) growth in both revenue and profit. The top industries quickly adopting Zoho CX include health care, life sciences, education, retail, and financial services.

Zoho CX Functionality Sets and Layered Approach

The Zoho CX platform encompasses a group of functional applications that address the following key customer engagement touchpoints (figure 1):

- Advertisement campaigns and social marketing
- Real-time customer engagement
- Sales leads enrichment
- Sales process automation
- Customer feedback capture
- Help desk
- Deep analytics involving AI-generated customer sentiment information

The Zoho CX platform is not a single stock-keeping unit (SKU) license, but rather a solution stack with service that can be subscribed to independently or as a subset of Zoho One, enabling customers to customize their solution mix to deliver highly personalized experiences to their customers. It uses a layered solution structure approach, enabling managing traditional customer transactions with the Application Layer and performing relational or customer sentiment analysis with the Personalization Layer. These two functional layers then work co-dependently on top of a contextual data platform, the CX Platform Layer, and all three layers function together by relying on Zoho's global cloud infrastructure, the Infrastructure Layer (figure 2).

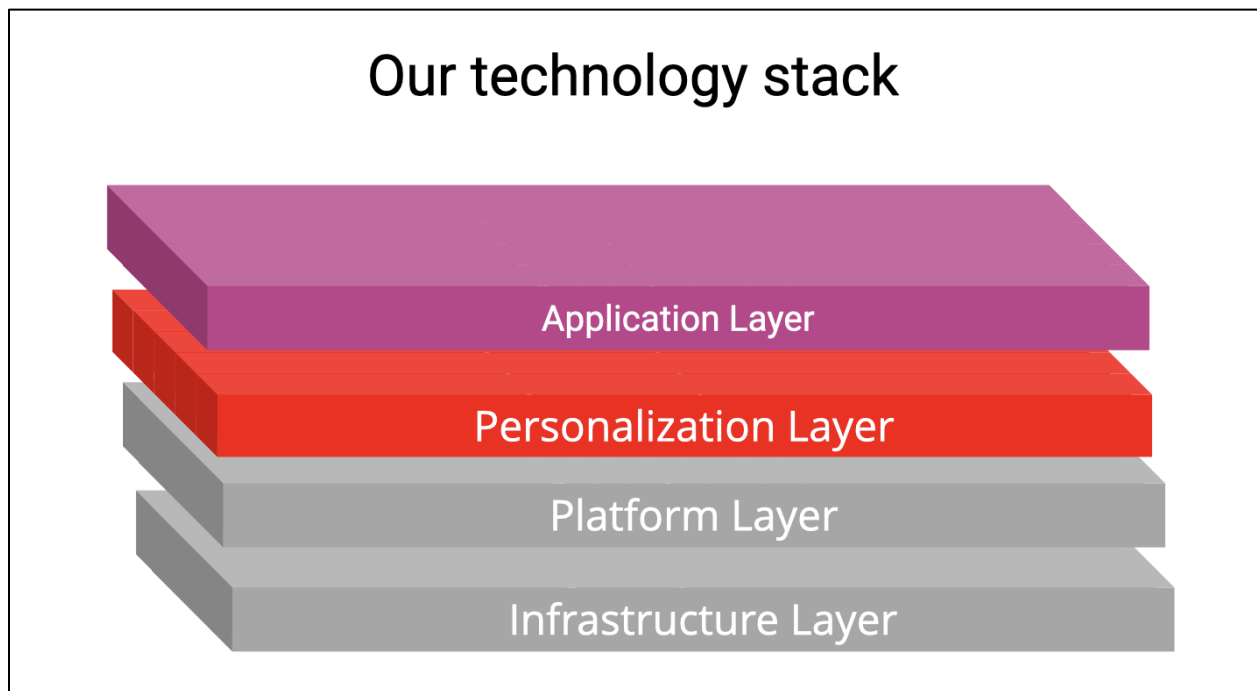


Figure 2. Zoho CX Technology

The Zoho CX Application Layer contains most of the up-front CRM transactional management functionalities, such as salesforce automation, marketing automation, customer support, POS, and e-commerce. Shortly, customers seeking extended CRM capabilities will also find specific applications such as field service management (FSM) and config, price, and quote (CPQ) in this layer. These industry-specific applications may not be as sophisticated and capable as their complete-suite peers, such as IFS FSM, ServiceMax, or Click Field Service Edge, but they do provide fundamental FSM and CPQ capabilities that companies require for their brands.

The Personalization Layer in the Zoho CX platform deserves special consideration (figure 3).

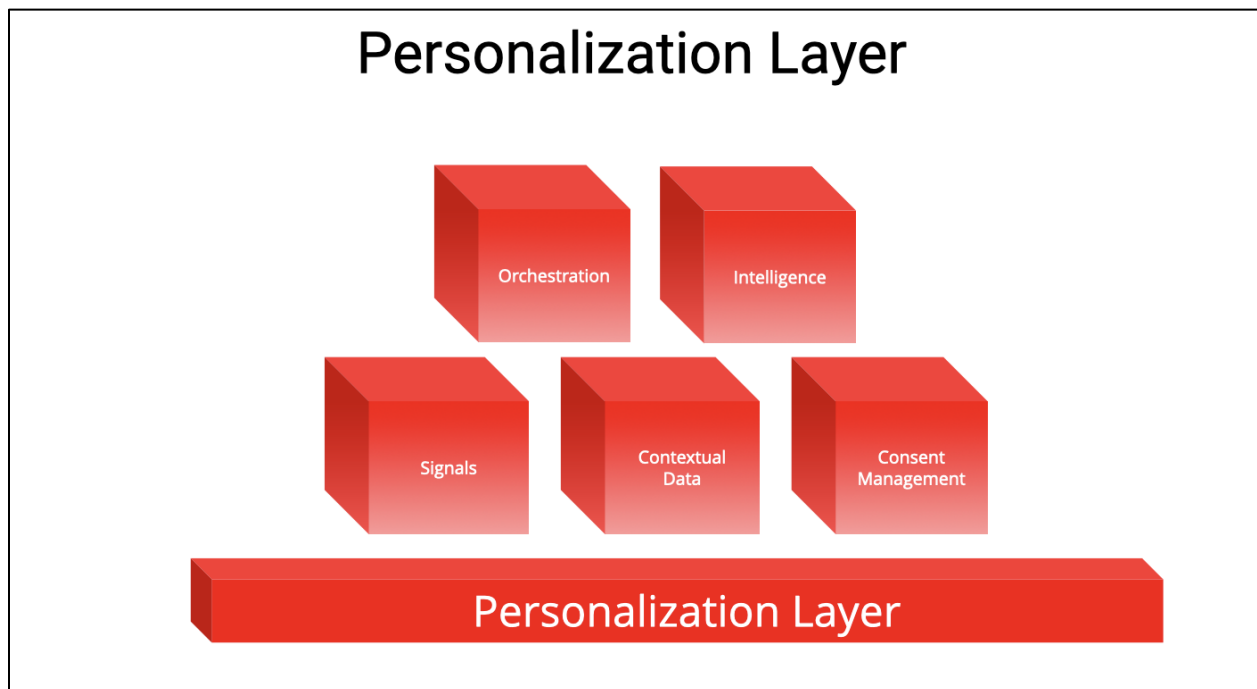


Figure 3. Zoho CX Personalization Layer

The applications that reside in this layer are the key differentiators that set Zoho CX apart from many peer CRM solution providers.

Zoho CX Predictive Analytics

One of the key indicators for a system to be able to deliver a truly consistent customer experience is this system's capability to handle contextual customer data, or in simple language, provide a 360-degree view of the customer.

Zoho CX platform apps capture customer contextual data from three data categories:

1. Static customer profile data—such as the customer's product or service preferences, privacy requirements, and demographics.
2. Dynamic conversational data captured at customer interaction touchpoints—such as email, phone, and chat records; real-time web behavior; documents consumed; product pages searched; survey feedback; and furthermore, the customer's social media feeds mentioning the brands and the products.
3. Dynamic customer transaction data—such as current purchases and history, product or service categories, purchase frequency, point-of-sale (POS) activities, and customer monetary value updates.

Figure 4 shows an example of how the Zoho CX platform creates a snapshot of a customer's real-time web activity to identify sales signals on a mesh-up interface.

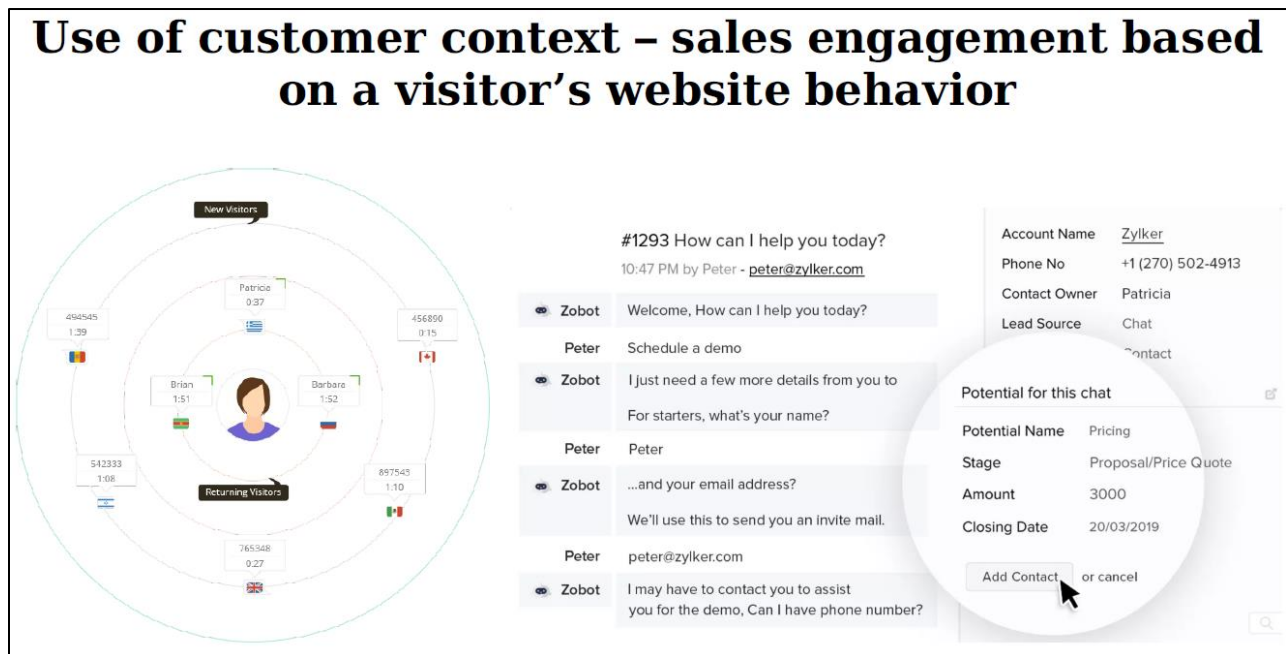


Figure 4. Customer Context in Web Sales Scenario

It's been a dream of all brands to have that wide array of customer data in a single system. However, this almost all-inclusive customer data input capability brings a natural and logical challenge: when you have such a deluge of customer data, how do you extract meaningful customer insights from so many data points?

The solution put forward by Zoho CX is one of the CRM industry's best deep analytics tools that is natively designed to slice and dice customer intelligence data. There are many robust business intelligence tools in the marketplace, but very few were like Zoho CX BI, which from the outset was developed for supporting customer experience enrichment. This specific reporting and analytics capability is another differentiator that sets Zoho CX ahead of the competition curve.

The Zoho CX business intelligence function layer provides deep customer information analytics and enables the user to view customer insights across the sales, marketing, and customer support fronts. Zoho CX users can set key performance indicators (KPIs) and anomaly alerts and let the system generate sentiment analysis, capture interest or sales signals, or even determine the best time or best channel to contact the customer (see figures 5 and 6).

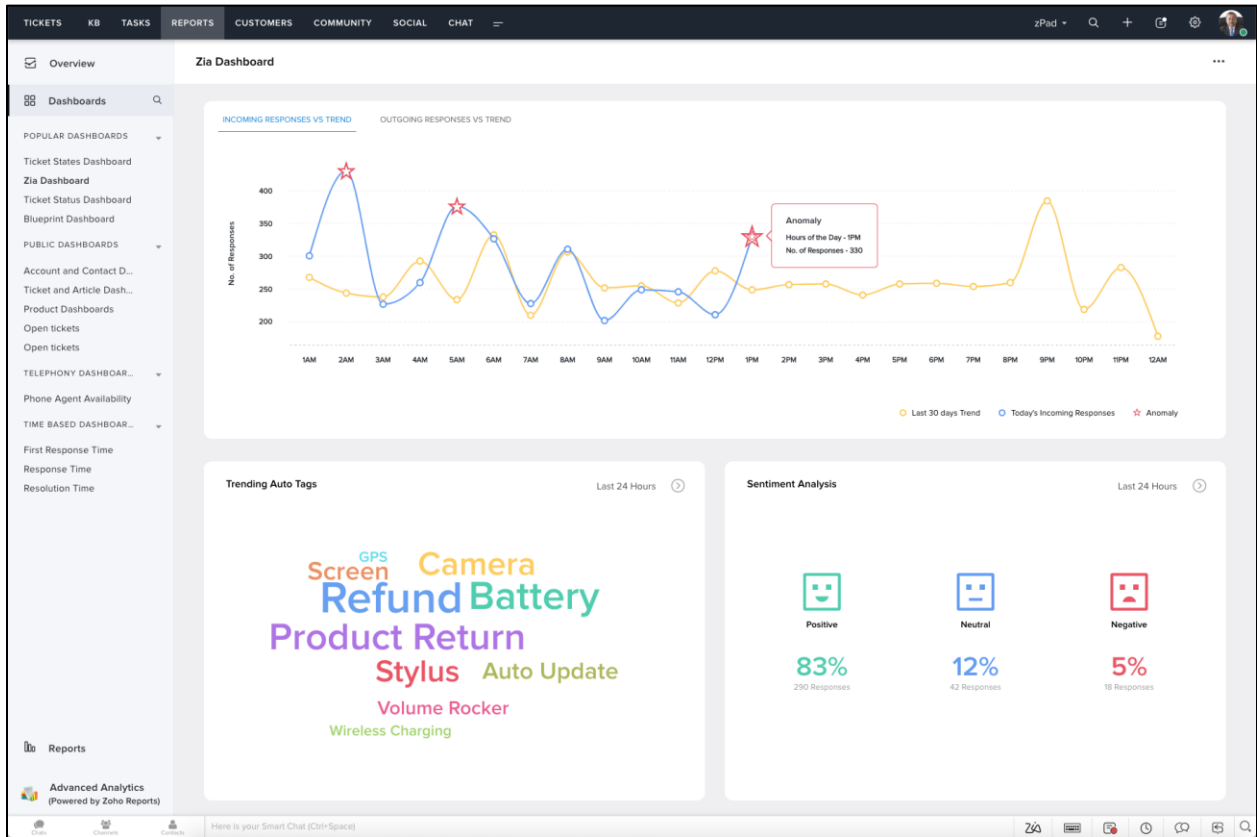


Figure 5. Zoho Zia Customer Analytics

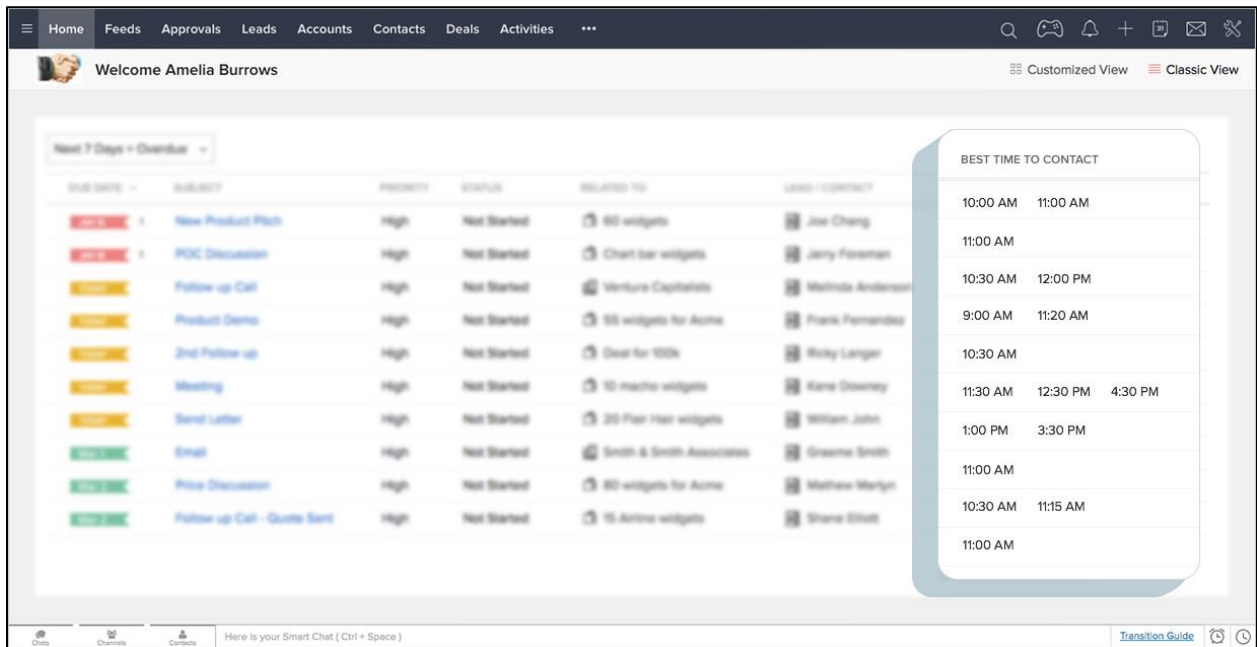


Figure 6. AI-Suggested Best Time to Contact the Customer

The analytics tools are highly configurable, as Zoho offers low-code or no-code programming options to Zoho CX users, enabling them to structure their data warehouse through drag-and-drop motions on intuitive interfaces.

Zoho CX Customer Testimonials

In my recent interviews with Zoho CX platform customers, I collected some interesting feedback about how the product has been benefiting companies operating in diverse fields.

Jason Lambourne, Applications Manager for H&K International, a kitchen equipment manufacturer and distributor with 1,500 employees servicing global customers on all continents, had this to say on how Zoho CX helped the company during this rough time:



The COVID-19 situation literally grounded our sales from a lot of traveling and customer meetings as they did before. However, two Zoho CX features helped us greatly to go through this rough time. One is the Zoho SalesIQ webchat function—our sales and customer service teams simply love it, as it digitally bridges the distance with our customers, in real-time. Another thing we see a lot of value in is Zoho’s mobile application. It enables our work-from-home employees to access business information from any of their mobile devices and surprisingly got us to a higher level of internal collaboration efficiency than before. We also use Zoho Analytics a lot, as we found it’s quite intuitive when it comes to analyzing customer data. We now have more freedom to move all kinds of data around, simply by drag and drop.



Julie Dories, Director of Sales Operation at Rain for Rent, a leading provider of temporary liquid handling solutions, expressed the following sentiments on how the company’s workforce has taken advantage of Zoho CX:



We have been running our core CRM within Zoho since 2018, after moving over from a well-known CRM brand that was costly to maintain, overly complex, and not reliable to support our field sales. We were looking for options in the market and tested out Zoho CRM and Mobile applications. The switch decision was made quickly because of Zoho’s performance and its hard-to-beat pricing. Two years after we went live, not only did we find the apps got the job done but also we got an unexpected benefit—the users,

mostly sales and marketing people, didn't hate it. One reason is that Zoho gives us all the open API tools to integrate smoothly with our ERP. Secondly, it provides us with new capabilities that we didn't find in our legacy systems: super easy user interface, highly reliable mobile access, omnichannel customer engagement capabilities that allow us to 'stay close' with our customers in COVID-19 lockdowns, and most of all, it's a solution that is simple enough to learn and manage—now we are Zoho experts. Zoho has new apps released all the time, so we will try to leverage all its potentials down the road. Overall, we are pretty happy with where we are going.



As a third example, Mike Sigvaldason, Corporate Zoho Administrator at Arctic Spas, a designer hot tub manufacturer, said the following on how they are using the full functionality of Zoho CX:



We've been using Zoho for over 7 years. In the beginning, it was only CRM. But in these years, Zoho has grown rapidly from a single solution provider to a business platform, an all-in-one source of different business applications and tools that we can run our core business with. We are now using 14 to 15 Zoho apps that support our CRM, analytics, workflow, document, scheduling, customer journey, and helpdesk functions. I don't think we are going to look elsewhere for another software provider, because Zoho gives me everything I want from a solution: simplicity, integratability, user adoption, and powerful mobile manageability.



Final Thoughts

Zoho is undoubtedly one of the front-runners in this platform technology economy and has achieved high popularity and success in the small to midsize business (SMB) space. Based on customers' feedback, Zoho CX is often chosen for the following main reasons:

- In-depth functionalities
- Scalability
- Ease of use
- Mobility
- Hard-to-beat pricing
- Customer-driven, advanced reporting, and analytical capabilities
- Agile development scope (pro-code, low-code, or no-code customization, and easy integration with third-party applications)

While Zoho CX provides a wide array of toolkits that small or midsize companies can choose from depending on their needs, large enterprises may seek a prepackaged offering that subsumes all the technologies they need to meet their exacting requirements. With one of the industry's widest selection of technology capabilities, Zoho is currently laddering up to the large enterprise market and may be served well by formulating a targeted solution packaging strategy.

About the Author



[Yu Chen](#) is a senior analyst covering a range of application areas, including enterprise mobility management (EMM), enterprise resource planning (ERP), enterprise asset management (EAM), field service management (FSM), and customer engagement. Yu has more than 15 years of experience in IT business development and application analysis.

Before joining TEC, he worked as a team leader at one of Canada's largest B2B IT resellers for 7 years, helping business clients with structuring or upgrading storage and mobile application and hardware infrastructure. After joining TEC, he first worked as a senior consultant in Vendor Services, which enabled him to acquire an in-depth understanding of software vendors' challenges and pain points. He helped develop programs assisting vendors across the world with content creation and competitive intelligence.

Chen holds an MBA in business policy and strategy from the John Molson School of Business at Concordia University in Montreal, Canada.



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