

Multichannel Customer Service

Customer service, if it is done right, should not restrict you to a particular channel, but should be a veritable menu of options

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My nieces, ranging in age from 10 to 22, continue to teach me about how we choose to communicate. I receive the periodic email from my oldest niece. The middle niece snubs email as too slow -- she uses instant messaging to exchange homework answers and to organize her social life. I hardly ever catch my youngest without her mobile phone -- not to call, but to SMS cryptic messages to her friends. And me, when I want something from each one of them, I do it the old fashioned way -- I pick up the phone and call them.

My nieces never read the paper, watch the news, or turn on the radio. Instead, they rely on blogs from their favorite underground news correspondent for the latest war video footage, wikis to research their homework assignments, and user groups and forums for tribal knowledge to help them troubleshoot their multimedia devices. They only pull the information that they want, when they want it, in the format that suits them at that particular instant in time.

I think about my nieces quite frequently when I am at work - not only because I miss them, but because our company offers customer service products that should be successful with customers like my nieces. The number of communication channels available today is exploding. Customer service, if it is done right, should not restrict you to a particular channel, but should be a veritable menu of options, which allow you interact in the manner that you are most comfortable with in order to resolve your issue. Multi-channel customer service will help build trust and loyalty with your customer base. And, only when you have a receptive customer base, can you be successful at marketing and selling to them.

In our brave new world, customers expect to find answers on a company's support website without having to place a call to a support desk. This is a service which is most effectively accomplished by a seamless integration of a well-maintained knowledge base to a support site.

A support site powered by a knowledge base should display answers to the most frequently asked questions, and offer tools to help customers search the knowledge base using either keywords or natural language. The best self-serve implementations also include sophisticated knowledge retrieval methods that help narrow down search results. This is because search typically overwhelms a customer with too many solutions to consider. Tools

such as decision trees, and clarifying questions should be used in conjunction with search to quickly hone in on the right answer.

Content from a knowledge base should be on-topic, written in the customer's vernacular and kept up to date. Forward-thinking service organizations are experimenting with having power users publish content directly to a knowledge base without it being routed through a review process so that new information is instantly available to their customer base. These service organizations are also integrating knowledge bases with discussion groups and forums so that user communities can easily recommend information to be added to a knowledge base, ensuring that it organically grows with customers changing demands.

If a customer cannot solve his issue via self service, he should be able to escalate his question to a customer service agent using the communication channel of his choice -- for example a web form, a free-form email or an on-line chat session. In each case, the details of the customer's self-service session should be captured and passed to the customer service agent receiving the request so that no information needs to be repeated.

Communication back from a customer service center should also be offered in a variety of flavors. Customers should be able to choose to receive answers to their questions via SMS, email, chat or all three. Customers should also be able to submit with their issue, a request for example, to be called back at a particular time, like during their lunch break or after-hours.

There are customer service centers that have taken service to a new level of proactivity. For example, if an agent perceives that a customer is taking too long to complete a high-value transaction, such as for example a mortgage application, a proactive site would offer up a chat session to the customer to see whether he needs help in completing the application. The agent could also offer to co-browse the application with the customer, helping him navigate the complex form. For very high value transactions, sites also offer agent-enabled click-to-talk services to ensure that the customer has all he needs to complete his purchase.

Using a blend of analytics and knowledge of customer preferences, these service centers are also proactively pushing knowledge to customers, sometimes even before they experience a common problem. Analytics let you pinpoint the most frequently asked questions from your knowledge base, and if a service center detects a skewed interest in a particular question, like for example a question regarding a feature in a newly launched product, these centers are able to push the answer to this question to all customers who purchased a particular product.

Even more forward-thinking customer service centers have melded speech-to-text conversion tools with knowledge bases and customer service tools so that you no longer need to use your computer for self-service. For example,

some telco companies can inform you of outages in your area when you call in. This information is derived by matching your customer information with service alerts for your area stored in a knowledge base; information which is read back to you after a text-to-speech conversion.

Other companies offer voice activated self-service help via a knowledge base as you are waiting in queue for a live agent. You are prompted to search the knowledgebase or walk down decision trees as you wait -- and if your issue is not solved by the time you are connected to an agent, your entire transaction is passed along to the agent, maximizing the value of your hold time.

Or imagine the scenario where you call with an issue about a flight itinerary, and a knowledge base using text-to-speech conversion, is able to walk you through a guided dialogue where a customer service application integrated with the knowledge base captures your name, flight number, flight change request, and is then able to execute the requested transaction.

At the heart of each of these customer service solutions is a knowledge base integrated with a case management system which can manage multi-channel customer requests -- via the phone, web, email or chat. This integration ensures that agents always have the same view of the customer, and are able to offer the same answer to a question every time, irrespective of the medium is used to ask the question, or that is requested to receive the answer.

With customer service software like this, even my nieces who are used to getting information "their way" should be content.

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