

Improving customer retention and satisfaction by delivering exceptional customer support

In business, it is more expensive to acquire a customer than to retain one.

Between advertising and lead nurturing, it takes a great marketing and sales effort to attract the attention of a new customer and close a deal.

Industry estimates peg the costs of acquiring new customers as being about five times more than the costs incurred to satisfy existing customers. Customer retention and satisfaction also drive profits. According to some experts*, a 2 percent increase in customer retention can have the same effect on profits as cutting costs by 10 percent. And a 5 percent reduction in customer defection rate can increase profits by up to 25 to 125 percent, depending on the industry.

Additionally, existing customers are the ones who are most likely to be future purchasers. They've already shown they want and like your products or services and are willing to pay for them. And in many cases, customer profitability tends to increase over the life of a retained customer.

So what's the key to retaining customers? Keeping customers happy has always been a cornerstone of good business practice. But with today's economic conditions, delivering good service to ensure satisfaction has become critical to any company's success.

This point was echoed by Panasonic founder Konosuke Matsushita. In his 10 lessons for creating customer value, he noted: "After-sales service is more important than assistance before sales; it is through such service that one gets permanent customers."

However, customer service is a double-edged sword. While good service can create loyalty and more sales, bad service can drive existing customers to competitors and worse, dissuade others from becoming customers at all.

When customers have a good service experience, they often tout the company delivering that service. Many organizations use what is known as the Net Promoter Score (NPS) to gauge customer loyalty. With NPS, companies essentially ask their customers one question: "On a scale of zero to 10, how likely is it that you would recommend us to a friend or colleague?" (Zero represents not likely at all; 10 represents extremely likely.)

Writing for the *MIT Sloan Management Review*, Fred Reichheld, who first popularized the NPS concept through his book "The Ultimate Question," noted that those who give a company a nine or 10 rating are known as promoters, "because they behave almost as if they were adjuncts to the organization's sales force. They [represent] by far the highest repurchase rates, account for more than 80 percent of referrals, and are the source of most of a company's positive word-of-mouth."

Endorsements from such key influencers are very important. According to a 2009 *Business Week* article, "It's never been easier for customers to find the opinions of others to validate their product and service choices."

On the other hand, bad service can drive customers and sales away.

* *Leading on the Edge of Chaos*, Emmett C. Murphy and Mark A. Murphy (Prentice Hall, 2002)

According to the American Society for Quality, a business is about five times as likely to lose a customer because of an attitude of indifference by a service provider, than because of dissatisfaction with a product.

Others have a similar assessment. In a research study conducted by the advisory and workplace learning company The Forum, 65 percent of customers surveyed switched providers because they were not treated courteously.

Highly satisfied customers become promoters, behaving almost as if they were adjuncts to an organization's sales force.

In today's connected world, a bad opinion about service can be amplified quickly. In fact, customers are likely to share a bad experience with many others via word of mouth and virally, through social networks and service evaluation sites. Research conducted by Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management on the influence of social media found there is a measurable connection between what is being said about a product in online posts and real-time customer behavior and sales.

Keys to better customer support

Companies with the most effective, loyalty-inducing customer service equip their representatives with the tools and skills to resolve problems and assure quality by soliciting feedback and following up to ensure that service has been delivered to meet the customer's satisfaction.

Most tech companies already use some form of screen-sharing tools to provide basic remote support. The main benefit of these tools is that they offer a way to deliver close customer support, remotely. This allows companies to support geographically dispersed customers economically and reduces travel for service staff.

However, basic screen-sharing tools can only go so far. To provide superior service requires additional features not commonly found in the basic tools. Specifically, what's needed is:

Team collaboration: Sometimes, several people

with different areas of expertise must be brought in to diagnose and correct a problem. One option would be to simply hand the work off sequentially from one person to another. A better solution would be to bring people together in a single client session and fix the problem collaboratively.

This approach can greatly improve resolution of a problem on a first call. The benefit to the customer is that they feel as though a single call has solved the problem, even though multiple people have been called into action to help out. And the customers don't get the impression they have been passed around an organization in the process – something that can make them wonder if anyone knows what they are doing.

Multiple connection methods: A solution should give the customer the option of requesting service help over the Web, accessing self-service over the Web, or receiving a prompt, Web-based response to a phone call for help. Additionally, service representatives must have the capability to invite a customer to join a Web-based remote-support session by having the customer go to the support site and enter a unique connection code.

Online queue: Different customers will likely need different types of service. For example, if a company sells multiple products, it makes sense to route a call to a support team that specializes in servicing a particular model or product line. What's needed is a solution that provides intelligent routing technology which automatically sends customer inquiries to the appropriate support department and creates a queue for the next available representative. Such an approach would, for example, allow a company to direct customers to representatives with special skill sets. And by queuing up all requests, customers can be assured that they will be taken care of in a timely manner.

Support for all platforms: Many screen-sharing solutions have limited platform support. For example, many are designed only for PCs. And in some cases, when there is a Mac version, a session must be carried out between two Macs. What's needed is a solution that can support any platform. So, for example, a service representative using a PC can view or share control of a Mac user's desktop, as well as that of a PC user.

Two-way screen sharing or remote control: The representative providing help should have the ability to see and control the user's desktop. This can be very helpful in identifying problems, and it can be used to show a user how to carry out a task. In many cases, this capability can greatly enhance a phone-only service that might have been the only solution offered in the past.

Remote diagnostics: The person responding to a client's request for help needs to determine the state of the system before any action is taken to remedy problems. In the past, companies that have handled such service remotely relied on special fat-client software, which had to be installed on a PC before a problem occurred. An agent-less Software-as-a-Service (SaaS) solution with a thin-client can collect system information without the need for pre-installation of special agent software, thereby greatly simplifying operations.

File transfer: This capability is essential when helping a client apply new patches or update an application, and it enables technicians to collect log files from a client's computer to speed the diagnosis of a problem.

Reboot/reconnect: There are many cases where the installation of a patch, deployment or upgrade of an application, or removal of malicious software requires rebooting of the client's system. Remote rebooting capabilities are quite common. But what's really needed is the ability to reboot and then automatically re-establish the service session to be sure the task has been completed properly and/or the problem resolved. This can help reduce callbacks.

Annotation tools: Sometimes, a customer just needs some direction to overcome a problem. This is where annotation tools can come in handy. With such tools, a person helping the customer can quickly draw a circle or an arrow to note where to click or what to do.

Session transfer: In some cases, the person handling a request for help might need another person or group to work on the problem. Rather than terminating the session and having the client reconnect or be contacted later, a valuable capability would be to simply transfer the session to the appropriate service team member while keeping the client online.

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Live chat: Service staff should have an easy way to conduct chat sessions with customers who are receiving service. In many situations, a rep may be supporting multiple customers at one time (for example, remotely diagnosing one customer's problems while waiting for files to be downloaded to another). As such, there needs to be a simple way for the rep to conduct and follow multiple chat "conversations." And to improve the service team member's efficiency, there should be a capability to add pre-scripted messages, commonly used phrases, and answers to frequently asked questions.

Security: All of these features are only helpful if the Web session between the user and the professional service staffer is secure. Therefore, a solution that provides service using Internet sessions with customers must encrypt the sessions and all data transfers.

A solution with such tools and features helps improve the operations of a service organization. It helps increase first-contact resolution of problems as these features give the service rep the ability to diagnose a problem remotely, check on a customer's configuration, download software that fixes a problem, communicate instructions to customers, and answer questions.

Some of the noted features – such as the team collaboration and session transfer – help reduce the need for customer callbacks. As already noted, experts can be brought in while a session is taking place, and problems can be escalated without the need for the customer to drop off and then reconnect.

Combined, these features help improve the customer experience when support is needed. Additionally, a solution with these features helps improve staff productivity and efficiency. This, in turn, reduces customer wait time for service, again helping to improve the customer experience.

Management's role critical

In addition to tools that help reps deliver outstanding services, companies need administrative tools to oversee and manage their service operations.

To check the quality of the service being delivered and to gauge whether additional training is needed and corporate policies and standards are being met, managers need to be able to record or monitor sessions silently.

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Additionally, managers need information about the work completed by groups or individual staff members, the time needed to resolve problems, which problems are not yet resolved, and metrics on service delivery. Some common key metrics used by most professional services organizations are billable hours, billable utilization rates, sales cost overset (the number of unbilled customer hours), and total revenue earned.

This information should be easily available, presented visually for quick review, and made accessible in a common file format so that the metrics can be imported into other applications for trend analysis.

Many of the metrics and statistics need to be compiled into reports to gauge where resources are needed, and to provide cost analysis information to management or to the client being serviced. An additional tool that is very useful to help improve service (or justify it) is an end-user survey. Here, what's needed is a remote delivery service that can solicit client comments and ask questions about satisfaction with the service once a problem has been resolved.

Such surveys are crucial. A survey conducted by the global management consulting firm Bain & Company found that 80 percent of companies believed they delivered a "superior experience" to their customers. But when customers were asked, they rated only 8 percent of the companies as having delivered a superior experience.

GoToAssist Corporate as your technology partner

There are many ways to provide service to geographically dispersed customers. But many of the options are difficult to use and do not include the advanced capabilities required to deliver exceptional customer support.

Citrix GoToAssist Corporate leverages the Web, SaaS, and thin-client technology to deliver the features and capabilities that aid customer support centers to meet the demands of today's 24x7 customers.

With GoToAssist Corporate, a support rep can carry out a remote-support session with any customer's computer that is connected to the Internet. That service rep can use GoToAssist Corporate's remote control, remote diagnostic, file transfer, chat, and other features to quickly identify a problem and resolve it or install a new update.

Providing all of these services, features, and capabilities via a SaaS solution offers several other benefits. For instance, the software is hosted for you, there are free software updates and 24/7 support from Citrix, and you get a dedicated account manager.

GoToAssist Corporate helps service organizations significantly improve incident-handling capacity, decrease first-contact resolution, and provide a highly positive experience for both customer and service staff. Its cost-effective approach to meeting the service needs of today's organizations affords a rapid return on investment to businesses of all sizes. Customers already using GoToAssist Corporate report that they have:

- increased first-contact resolution rates by up to 70 percent
- reduced incident-handling times by up to 60 percent for more complex cases
- lowered total call volumes due to fewer repeat calls
- reduced travel costs by thousands of dollars.

For a free evaluation of
GoToAssist Corporate, go to:
www.gotoassist.com