

Web-Based Support...Focus on What You Have, Not What You Want

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Good News: This year more than 90% of the businesses in the U.S. – large and small – will have Internet access. Globally more than 50% of businesses in industrial countries will have Internet access. This year an estimated 60% of homes in the U.S. will have Internet access.

Bad News: This year more than 90% of the businesses in the U.S. – large and small – will have Internet access. Globally more than 50% of businesses in industrial countries will have Internet access. This year an estimated 60% of homes in the U.S. will have Internet access.

Whether your service provisioning targets businesses, homes or a combination -- nationally or internationally – the forecasts for your future are a mixture of good news, bad news. As your business grows so will your support requirements. It's unavoidable. After all, you are an online business – business-to-business, business-to-consumer or simply business-to-customer.

If you're like most firms in the industry, 70 percent of your customer service budget is staffing. Every day, your support knowledge goes out the front door and home. On a monthly basis you probably have to replace some portion of that knowledge that was lost as a support person leaves for a better paying job.

The biggest problem a company (regardless of the channel) faces today isn't competition from the infrastructure players who threaten to undercut your pricing, the breakneck speed of keeping up with technology or the struggle to balance income with outgo. It's creating and maintaining relationships. While people are pivotal in the relationship picture it is even more important to use our technology to cement and enhance that relationship.

While some industry "experts" will tell you that automating these processes and activities will be expensive and painful, we disagree. You don't have to jump into total CRM (customer relations management) with both feet. Following the recommendations of CRM suite producers who suggest you implement a solution that will manage all of your channels at the outset will yield nothing but chaos. These people recommend you integrate your web channel with your call center with the field force with service with outside partners.

Instead, focus on customer retention, then customer acquisition. Implement technology where you can produce immediate returns...at the help desk. Then add other capabilities and solutions.

For years the primary tool used by help desk personnel to address and track problems was a binder of problems/solutions. Next we evolved to a rudimentary cross-referenced database. Customer support has historically been labor intensive and stressful. Talented – and patient – people had to help the caller identify his or her concern, their level of sophistication, develop the right query and sift through the selection of options that would solve the problem. It was a time consuming, expensive and frustrating process for everyone concerned.

Fortunately, the Internet and Web are enabling us to shift from labor-based to knowledge-based support. An automated help desk solution that is available 24x7 to both customers and support people will produce the results everyone wants. The new solutions that are emerging help ISPs increase their response rate and efficiency. See the sidebar for a listing of resource locations.

According to Forrester Research, the average live agent customer support transaction costs \$5 but the average web support transaction costs only \$.03. With a robust Web-based support system organizations have found they can not only reduce call center costs by 53% but they can also handle 1/3 more inquiries at only 43% of the cost. Properly selected and used, the new applications enable firms to handle more calls more effectively. In addition, they can provide ISP management with better data about customers and enable them to improve the complete customer acquisition and management/support process.

The help desk or support solutions usually fall into two categories – automated self-service products and integrated knowledge management solutions.

The self-service products tend to solve the very specific and basic set of queries. The knowledge base can automatically provide solutions to common problems and will take care of the majority of queries so the help desk staff can focus on those situations that require in-depth diagnostics.

If the customer can't solve his or her problem, the support staffer can access the user's records, skim the procedures that have been tried and more quickly solve the problem without aggravating the customer by asking them to repeat their initial information and troubleshooting attempts.

Some of the newer help desk packages include artificial intelligence technology that was developed back in the 1980s called case based reasoning (CBR). By using these natural language searches potential solutions can be presented in a hierarchy of most probable solutions. Other products will actually guide you through the complete problem-resolution process.

Regardless of the help desk solution you start with it should incorporate a robust database that can be searched by an unlimited number of random word approaches. This is important because the words a seasoned Internet customer accesses the database to resolve his or her problems will be completely different from the words a novice or casual on-line user will use. The support area should be easy-to-navigate and informational to the point of guiding the customer through his or her problem/solution.

The problem/solution database can be rolled out with rudimentary information and then expanded by customer support personnel and users. Any experienced customer support representative will tell you that when a new customer comes on board or a new application is added that at the end of two weeks they will be able to answer 80% of the queries after the customer finishes his or her first sentence. Because the majority of the problems and questions are common in nature and they have been answered and solved. Adding the queries and solutions into the help desk relational database means that in short order the customer can access the customer support area, input the symptom or problem and immediately get the answer without having to place a phone call.

This allows the customer to feel he or she is in control of the situation. At the same time, it enables customer support personnel to focus on the unique or more challenging problems. The solution can be added to the database enriching your customer support area and the value of your service to your customers. Most support organizations find that at the end of three months 98% of the solutions can be found in the help desk database by customers or by newly hired support personnel.

A well-founded and well executed help desk/customer support program will enable customers to solve more of their problems themselves thus putting them in control of their own environments. Those users who can't resolve their problems can receive fast assistance from customer support personnel quickly before they become irritated because they have been on hold for 45+ minutes. At the same time your company saves time and money. The organization develops a proven database of workarounds and fixes that can improve the quality, speed and value of service the company provides to customers.

On a daily basis you're capturing the customer, support and service information you need to improve your business. The help desk database enables you to accumulate, process and disseminate information to remain competitive. As the quality and quantity of data is built it enables you to set down business rules so that anyone in the organization to make immediate decisions that are right for the customer and right for the company.

As more trustworthy customer information is collected, mined and summarized for you, it can be provided finance, sales and marketing to help the organization grow in a planned, more predictable manner.

This unrelenting focus on creating greater customer value makes it more difficult for competitors to eat away at your customer base. By automating the collection of the right customer information, you're in a much better position to analyze the data and use it to deepen the customer relationship because you have a greater understanding of the firm's/individual's present and future needs.

It enables you to run your business in real time. The information enables you to understand your most valuable customers and gives you a roadmap for acquiring more like them.

This means that you'll add some level of CRM solution or complimentary sales-oriented database that puts management back in control of their marketing and sales activities. By having your organization place all customer and prospective customer information in the database authorized personnel can help expand services to existing customers and ensure potential business isn't lost because of neglect. The customer database tracks all of your need to know information – contact (names, job titles, email addresses, phone, fax, etc), names of people associated with the account, account status and activity and any notes pertaining to the account.

While a lot of sales people still like the simple call management products team-based products are being increasingly used by firms because they enable management to synchronize data from various sales people and customers that may have multiple offices.

Going beyond a help-desk database and contact manager, the team-based solutions help firms manage all aspects of the client relationship in a proactive manner. Inside and outside sales people, deployment and installation teams, as well as service and support personnel can have accurate information on the customer's present and projected needs. By drawing data from like customer areas management can hone its marketing and sales messages to appeal to similar quality customers or can see application trends and shift services to satisfy these new requirements.

By becoming completely customer and support centric, the company can protect his or her present customer base from poaching and attract similarly profitable Internet and Web customers. The Web-based self-help customer support database empowers customers to put be in control of their Internet initiative while still having a live customer support representative as a safety net. It not only reduces customer frustration but it also lowers your customer support costs while enabling you to support more Internet customers.

As other customer relations tools are added you suddenly find that the Internet isn't a wild and unruly place but a flexible, adaptable and sustainable market where ISPs like yourself can actually sell an added value service...profitably.

By understanding the power and limitations of the technologies you're selling and using, management can more easily and more effectively institute core customer support values in their organization.

It's true that every firm in one way or another is arming himself or herself to win over your current customers. But implementing workable self-help help-desk and customer relations solutions doesn't have to cost a lot and it doesn't have to be painful. All it really requires is for you to be creative, innovative and constantly focused on retaining your best customers.

The good news? There is no bad news!

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