



Rock

**YOUR
SUPPORT**

The little book of tips, secrets and advice
from top support pros

These are busy times in the world of customer service.

With a fast-changing landscape, our community of customer support professionals are approaching customer experience in more creative and resourceful ways than ever.

That means most support teams are not only busy creating and iterating on brand new ideas and processes, they are also redefining the role of support while they're out on the frontlines with their customers.

Knowing this, we posed this one simple question to a handful of support pros at some of our favorite companies.

What is the most important thing you've learned in customer service?

Our bet was this: everyone would have a different answer to the same question.

We were right.

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The Support Pro Roll

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Making customers happy requires making trade-offs.

The truth is we can't delight all of the customers (and potential customers) all of the time. As a small team, there's the finite amount of time we can spend answering emails, and a finite number of useful features we can build into our product. Pretty much every feature request makes perfect sense for the customer requesting it, but a product comprised of all of those features would be completely unusable.

At Wistia, we have a clear sense of the type of customers our product is built for. And if our product is not a good fit for certain potential customers, that's OK! It's better to help them find a different service that better suits their needs than to try and make them happy with Wistia. If we worked tirelessly to serve all the people interested in Wistia, we'd end up having a customer base comprised of people with extremely disparate needs, and we'd be dead in the water.

Ultimately, it's important for us to not just help our customers by providing great service in the moment, but by making our product itself better over time. The time and energy we spend answering emails (to provide fast, helpful support) gives us quick wins for customer happiness. But if we don't specifically shift some focus away from helping customers with their immediate problems, we'll fall into a trap of customer experience debt.

Customer experience debt is what happens when a support team (somewhat ironically) gets too good at helping customers. It grows over time when we run "interference" between our customers and our product (that is, the work we do to keep customers happy using our imperfect product).

Ultimately it's important for us to not just help our customers by providing great service in the moment, but by making our product itself better over time. The product must evolve with the needs of our customer base. Talking to customers to help them through the friction points is a temporary (and essential) solution to customers' problems, and can only get us so far.

The tradeoffs we make - both in terms of choosing which customers to make happy vs. which potential customers to intentionally not serve, and sacrificing the quick wins of great support today for the long term improvement of our customers' experience - are key to the sustainable growth of our business.



Treat your customers that way and they'll do the same for your team in return.

That means everyone enjoys a good GIF or a funny joke within an email. It also means everyone makes mistakes - you as well as the customer.

With customer service, it's easy to forget that it's two humans interacting with each other. Because of horrible experiences in the past, people expect automated emails from robots or phone trees that leave you on hold with horrid elevator music for the last 30 minutes. In that kind of atmosphere, it's easy for a customer to forget that the support team are all actual humans with real lives (and hopes and dreams...).

From the support team's side, it's easy to see the same question day after day and get frustrated. That's when you have to step back and remember that there's a human on the other end of that email that has never encountered that situation before. Or you might be having a bad day and need to remember not to take it out on the customer.

3 AdRoll

Mike Rappaport



Empathy and emotional intelligence are the most important elements of world-class customer service.

Customers can usually tell if an agent cares about them and their business or not. It comes through subtlety, yet noticeably, in every customer interaction. So, we must genuinely care about our customers or it will be nearly impossible to delight them!

All customers have different backgrounds, strengths and weaknesses. Get to know your customer. Value their time, their perspective and effort. Do not simply provide robotic canned responses to their questions. Consult with them, learn about their business and their needs, and provide them with tailored assistance.

When service agents take this personal approach, they will find not only that customer satisfaction increases, but that they enjoy their jobs more! We are all in these roles because we have a passion for helping people.

When volume skyrockets it becomes all too easy to neglect the fact that customer service is about two humans getting to know each other, and working together to achieve a goal or resolution. It is not a one-way street, but a dance that depends on both parties.

4 WISTIA Mercer Smith-Looper



Customer service is no different than a friendship.

You can fix even the most damaged of relationships by acknowledging the issue that is happening, aligning your goals with the person you are speaking with, and assuring them that you want to fix it. This applies both in support and in real life—most of the skills that I've learned in the inbox are applicable in my marriage!

Once I learned to apply these tactics to difficult customers in the inbox, I realized that there is something inherently valuable in feeling like someone understands and agrees with you. If you can make a customer or even just another human feel that way, you have both won half the battle.

In fact, most of the approaches that many of us take in the inbox just make sense. We talk about how to support effectively, the appropriate language to use when talking with someone, and how to make a bummer of an experience better, but really if we just looked at how we would, say, treat a close friend when they were upset, it's all the real training we need.

A good friend of mine once said, "Is this something that you would say to your best friend when she was feeling upset? No? Then you shouldn't say it to yourself or anyone else either." Following that guidance, and treating everyone like a human being that you would want to be friends with is the best support handbook you can go by.

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hasmetrics™

**Adam
Herscher**



While everyone aspires to go "all in" on creating customer happiness in theory, getting commitment in practice can be a really tough sell!

The first big customer service effort I ever kicked off was for a major Fortune 500 company. And as many leaders out there do today, I found myself back then taking inspiration from brands whose stories we all know quite well - Zappos, Nordstrom, Ritz-Carlton and other shining stars of the customer service world.

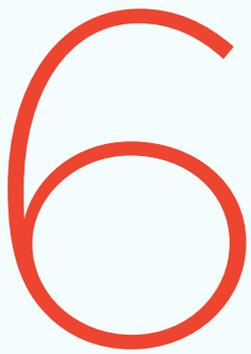
We sent our people on tours to learn how other companies delivered service, wrote out new customer service principles based on the way other companies were thinking at the time, and revamped policies & procedures based on what we saw other companies doing well in the market.

Ultimately though, as you can imagine, this didn't work out too well. Every exec very much wanted to be like Zappos... until they were asked to actually stop measuring call times, stop upselling, eliminate supervisors, and begin firing customers (all of which jibe well with Zappos's culture, but not particularly with larger organizations!).

What I did next and what I recommend business leaders do today, was to focus deeply on understanding 1) the specific unmet needs of your customer base, 2)

the potential value of your customer relationships, and 3) the financial impact (in dollars!) that delivering on those needs with excellence will have on customer lifetime value and your business bottom line. It's easier to get your business on board when you're able to show the benefit of a customer service investment as a clear financial return to the business.

That's what it takes to take your business where you want it to go and champion your customers every step of the way.



iDoneThis

Chad Stovern



Always solve the problem, even if it isn't stated.

Of course there are very good, more obvious answers about setting expectations, quick response times, and communicating in the slightly informal, conversational manner in which people like to be helped. To me those are all methods and tools to help support solve a problem.

The key to solving a problem is threefold:

- Make sure you read or listen carefully to what is being stated or asked.
- When you're unsure, ask for clarification and invite the person you're helping to tell you one thing they like and one thing they don't about your product or service. I've had people tell me everything is great. Then when I follow up with that question, it prompts them to give some *great* feedback on product features that just weren't quite working for them.
- Before you say, "No, sorry we can't do that!", see if there's a way you can. Come up with a workaround, offer a different way to look at what they're trying to accomplish, get a bit creative. This can be a bit of an art, as sometimes you need to read between the lines to get to the real core issue.

When you get this right, customers light up. They feel heard and believe you actually care, and this sets you apart from the sea of other competitors.



Customer service is the cornerstone of the Holy Trinity: users, product and support.

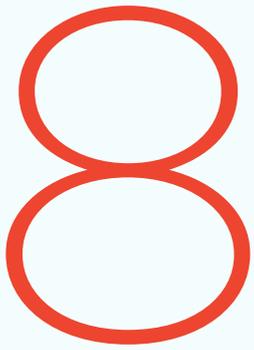
This Trinity is completely interdependent; one does not exist without the other.

Users communicate with Support. Support listens, helps and collects accurate information from their interactions with users. But how does Support team ensure that Product considers their input when making product decisions? By flagging certain issues and assembling feedback reports for the product team. Product managers then use those reports to make decisions that have a higher likelihood of raising User satisfaction. That completes the Holy Trinity.

Most customer service organizations focus on basic metrics like satisfaction score, first response time, number of tickets handled and average handling time. But are these really the ones that determine the effectiveness of customer service?

Customer service is much more than a daily whirlwind of answering emails, phone calls, and calming down angry users. It's essential to channeling user feedback back to the product team and the company as a whole.

My biggest learning about customer service is that no one gets closer to the customers than the support team. No one else goes through the same pain, relief, realizations, and triumphs that as the support team does daily with customers. That makes it our responsibility for all this information and feedback to be channeled back to the rest of the company so we can all work collectively to make our customers happy.



AUTOMATTIC

**Dennis
Hong**



Kindergarten steered us wrong.

What's the first lesson we all learn as five-year-olds? Why, the Golden Rule, of course. The rule that says that we should do unto others as we want them to do unto us. Well, as I realize now, the Golden Rule is a crock pot of steaming baloney.

No, we shouldn't do unto others as we want them to do unto us. We should do unto others as they want us to do unto them.

As customer service reps, we're trained to be professional. We value communication that is clear and concise. We're solutions-focused.

And that's how we treat our customers.

Problem is, our customers don't always want someone who's professional, clear, and concise, and who only offers solutions. Sometimes, they want someone who's warm and understanding, who's anything but concise, and who focuses not just on the technical issue, but also on personal feelings. If customers get frustrated with our product, what they need isn't a support rep to explain the product to them, but a human being who will empathize with their frustration.

That's the secret to amazing customer service (and being an amazing human). We must learn to recognize what someone needs from us, and we treat them how they want to be treated, not how we want them to treat us.

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 Campaign Monitor

**Mathew
Patterson**



Customers are people, and people just want to be heard.

Sure, they want their problem fixed and they want your answer to be accurate, but before any of that, beyond all of that, they want to be heard. Learning how to listen effectively has been a hard lesson for me, and it took me years to get decent at it.

Developing the skill of active listening, of making sure that the person you are talking to, or emailing or chatting with feels heard and understood—that's something that is worth spending time on. There are some customer interactions where you can't solve the problem, or where there really isn't even a problem to solve, but if that customer knows that they were listened to, and validated, you'll have their respect.

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MOZ

Chiaryn Miranda



Always keep the lines of communication open.

Anticipating their needs and responding with a detailed what and why answer is only half the battle for a good customer experience. Your customers should know they have every opportunity to come back with new concerns if and when they come up.

At Moz, we always follow up before we close an email to let our customers know that they can always feel free to reach back out if they need more assistance.

We also send out a survey at the end of the interaction so they have the opportunity to leave us feedback. It is so important to make the customer feel you are easy to talk to and you care what they have to say in response.

11 sproutsocial

Carolyn Breit



I've learned how to BE a good customer.

Every day, I work with customers who may not know how much information we really need in order to resolve their question. I know it's terribly frustrating for them when we go back and forth via email. I wish we could read minds, but of course we can't. We try to anticipate the information we'll need, but when that information isn't readily available, it can still cause delays and headaches.

Knowing this, whenever I contact customer support in my personal life, I prepare myself with as much information as I can. I'm also patient if a customer support rep isn't able to help me right away. I assume that they are there to do right by me, not be combative.

Customer service jobs have had a bad reputation over the years because for so long, companies have expected their employees to be on the company's side, not the customer's.

I truly believe that is changing and customer support is out to help the customer now (at least that's how it is at Sprout Social!). So when I contact a company, I work with the customer service person to reach a positive conclusion for both of us. I do this by providing as much information as I can, as efficiently as possible, knowing that they're there to help me out.

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**Mary
Jantsch**



People are incredibly generous and so stinkin' understanding.

This has been my biggest takeaway since joining Buffer - both the people of the world who use Buffer and the team that creates and supports it. Even through computer screens I'm blown away by every one I have the chance to interact with and I think that's a bit of what Buffer is all about -- helping people connect and create authentic relationships on social media.

When a support email or tweet comes in, I see it as a chance to make a genuine connection and hopefully bring a smile to someone else's face. Support doesn't have to immediately trigger an image of a huge room with people holding down the call lines (though there's nothing wrong with that :)). It's exciting to think about where support has come the last few years and where it will go in the next few!

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Customer.io

**Diana
Potter**



You have to get outside your own little bubble.

The curse of knowledge is very true. People tend to get bogged down in their own knowledge and you lose sight of a world outside of that knowledge. If you know something and you know that it's easy (for you), it simply must be easy!

You have to get past that and put yourself in the customer's shoes. How could someone get hung up on this? If you were seeing this for the first time, would you understand it? How would you explain it? Even if a concept is the clearest thing to you, it might be clear as mud to them. Something as simple as asking, "Could you send me a screenshot" might be a difficult thing for someone to grasp.

You have to get outside your own little bubble, even if means sometimes deliberately using software you're less comfortable with (so that you're constantly feeling a little uneasy) or constantly learning new things so you can remember what it's like to maybe be a little bit lost. Sometimes the hardest part of support isn't finding a good solution for someone, it's figuring out the best way to communicate it.

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Emerald Maravilla



The customer isn't always right.

Believing that the customer is always right is a mantra that can be limiting for your customer engagement team and it can lead to a situation where the customer finds themselves in a position that doesn't always meet their goals.

Empowering your team to determine what's best for customers drives great results. Helping your team understand the business' goals positions them to be experts in delivering awesome customer experiences. When you have happy team members, they want to spread that happiness to their customers, and happy customers means business goals are met. What's good for the customer is almost always what's good for the business.

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HubSpot

Michael
Redbord



Be human.

Customer service is an entirely human endeavor. On the vendor side, you have people. On the client side, people, too. Each side plays a different part of the equation but both components are just human beings playing certain roles at work. Between the human factors you have some organizations, technology, process, expertise, operations, etc. But at its most core, it boils down to just people.

The most important thing I've learned professionally about working with people is that if you adapt and accommodate while helping people, you'll win in the end. There are some business guardrails that you need to keep in mind as you work through this in practice, but the core is to be the most human you can be as an individual and as a customer service organization.

As an individual in customer service your day-to-day core skill is to accommodate the huge variety of goals, viewpoints, and circumstances that you'll encounter working with so many different people. As a customer service organization "adapt and accommodate" applies a little differently but to the same end goal of helping people. The organization should be hiring the very smartest and most human people it can, and should be an enabling factor day-to-day (basically, stay out of the way of its employees whenever possible). In practice, I've learned that if you view customer service as a fundamentally people-based and not operations-based endeavor, things tend to go pretty well. So, be human.

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kayako

Jamie
Edwards



There's no need for speed.

For a time, it seems the world was convinced that response speed was the key to cracking customer service. Of course, this didn't do much for customers with increasingly complex, real world and urgent business problems to solve.

What we know now is that this "need for speed" can be a dangerous vanity metric that comes at the expense of quality. Speed alone doesn't create value for customers. In fact, focusing on too much on speed can leave no room to build relationships and loyalty.

However, there is immense, measurable value in helping individual customers succeed. When agents are empowered they can set off on working towards real, tangible and timely customer success. With autonomy and the right organization objectives, speed will solve itself.

We need to measure better things. Sometimes, the right question might be: are we doing right by our customers? Are we delivering on our promises? Are we helping our customers get real value out of what we're providing them? None of these are possible by focusing only on response times.

Look for the best way to be part of your customer's success story. It is often worth taking the longer, scenic road to customer success.



**KEEP
CALM
AND
KEEP
ROCKING
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SUPPORT**



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