Why Your Best Salesperson May Be a Customer Support Rep

With rich data, powerful analytics and integrated toolsets, support organizations in the communications and technology industry can achieve a real-time understanding of customer challenges, enabling them to convert lackluster troubleshooting exercises into rewarding experiences, and transform dissatisfied customers into enthusiastic brand ambassadors.

Executive Summary

In the last 20 years, the business world has experienced the advent of many customer support innovations, including phone trees, voice recognition software, auto-dialers, integrated CRM applications, skills-based routing and community support, to name a few. These processes and technologies have helped drive impressive efficiency gains in support organizations and have led to rapid, on-demand, higher capacity support systems.

However, the philosophy behind these innovations is tied to the notion that customer support is a cost center to be optimized and made ruthlessly efficient. Sadly, the efficiency gains resulting from the advance of new and novel technologies and techniques have come, in many cases, at the expense of customer experience. “Call avoidance,” “time to resolution” and other metrics have created a near adversarial relationship between the support organization and the customer.

This white paper proposes a reframing of this critical customer touchpoint, one that repositions the product support organization in the communications and technology industry as a low-cost sales channel. We believe that while new technologies should be harnessed to efficiently route calls, provide a multi-channel engagement model, allow for customer self-service and anticipate customer challenges, the support team should be reorganized around customer experience. The goal: Transform customers into fierce advocates after a particularly satisfying support experience. Apple, Southwest, Nordstrom and many other consumer-facing companies have turned the support function into a source of competitive differentiation and brand equity. But for most companies, these experiences remain exceptions rather than the intentional result of an experience-focused support model.

With rich data, powerful analytics and integrated toolsets, focusing on a meaningful customer experience does not need to impact the bottom line. A detailed, real-time understanding of customer problems, behaviors, likes, dislikes, churn, timing and other factors must be relentlessly pursued and leveraged at each touchpoint to achieve this goal. Taking the time to identify...
root causes in first calls will ultimately drive higher satisfaction and better customer support economics. This will require a shift in the way communications and technology businesses think about support and the opportunities it provides.

Against this backdrop of customer support, our Customer Care Transformation Framework helps practitioners organize all of their competing demands and solution elements into a consistent, structured and actionable model. The framework examines all common engagement models, including “Do it for me,” “Do it myself” and “Built-in care,” to help customer support organizations optimize their responses. Understanding and implementing this framework can help communications and technology organizations turn their customer support function into a powerful branding and customer retention tool.

Making Customer Product Support a Priority

The following statistics vividly portray the state of support organizations today:

- **Poor customer experiences result in an estimated $83 billion loss by U.S. enterprises annually due to defections and abandoned purchases.¹**
- **Two-thirds of consumers (67%) have hung up during service calls before their issues could be addressed.²**
- **Roughly 71% of consumers were “tremendously annoyed” after being unable to get a real person on the phone.³**
- **Approximately 56% were just as annoyed after having to jump through multiple phone hoops to get the right information.⁴**

Transforming the support function from a cost center into a profit center requires communications and technology businesses to move from a reactive (i.e., ticket resolution) model to a proactive (i.e., advisory-based, holistic problem-solving) one. In this journey, technology plays a critical role, as a digitally transformed product support model will ignite game-changing ways of working for many years to come.

Customers of communications and technology companies are increasingly turning to mobile and social technologies for more intuitive and accelerated ways of resolving customer support challenges. It has become critical for these businesses to gain a deeper understanding of customer product usage scenarios.

The Criticality of Tracking Usage Patterns

A clear understanding of customers’ product usage scenarios can be achieved by harnessing the information that surrounds people, organizations, processes and products, or what we call a Code Halo.⁵ With Code Halo thinking, product support teams decode the metadata contained in product usage activities by mapping patterns in customer support processes to understand and even anticipate the customer’s preferred way of resolving issues. This approach helps communications and technology companies achieve meaningful user insights and use them to build or enhance products. This forms the origin of the Code Halo-based support paradigm,⁶ which signifies a shift in how products are built.

Transforming the support function from a cost center into a profit center requires communications and technology businesses to move from a reactive model to a proactive one.

Based on these insights, product development teams can focus on reducing or eliminating customer pain points, thereby providing a more satisfying customer experience. To achieve this, service reps must be empowered with the right tools to proactively provide first-time resolution. This will ensure that satisfied customers not only continue to use the product but also become trusted brand ambassadors and promoters.

Even with this change in the support model, three key performance metrics continue to be crucial for measuring customer satisfaction: response time, resolution time and status updates. Moreover, first call resolution (FCR) remains the single most important result that creates delight in the customer’s mind.
How the Care Transformation Framework Ensures Customer Delight

Our Care Transformation Framework offers a seamless experience and delivers proactive guidance and suggestions to customers. It reduces customer pain points by identifying and eliminating the root cause of their issues.

This framework helps support organizations better understand customer challenges by gathering insights from product usage patterns and issues that customers face while using the product. In order to analyze real-time business scenarios, the product engineering team listens in on support calls and analyzes the use cases under which the problem is reproducible. This is a huge step toward replicating customer behavior.

The insights gathered are evaluated in detail to identify common issues. Once the product engineering team detects the root cause, it can devise approaches to create concrete solutions (see Figure 1). The immediate focus, however, is to reduce specific customer pain points, either by providing a self-help solution or empowering care agents with the right solution. If the solution is successful, it will be built into the product, subsequently eliminating the problem at its source. This paves the way for a more rewarding customer experience.

During the resolution process, communications and technology companies decode the fields of information from the following:

- Voice of the customer inputs collated from a multitude of channels, such as online communities, social channels and feedback provided to the care team.
- Beta feedback or early input on how product functionality is aligned with the defined scope.
- In-product feedback surveys.
- Voice of the customer on multiple social networking channels.
- Top-call driver/call volume analysis.
- Fix resolution approach.
- Scenarios leading to business-blocking issues.

User Insights-Driven Product Engineering

- **Support call**: Online discussion forums, Voice of the customer
- **Issue analysis and resolution**: Issue fixed
- **Fix analysis**: Fix resolution approach
- **In-product fixes**: Proactive monitoring and fixing
- **In-product enhancements**: New features, Software metering
- **In-product fixes**: Hardening
- **Top call driver analysis**: Fix analysis
- **Ideation**: Improve first user experience
- **Improve first user experience**: “Do it myself” tools, “Do it for me” tools
- **Tools**: Self-Help Tools, Care Agent Tools
- **Empowered agents**
- **Better customer satisfaction**
- **Delightful user experience**
- **Deep understanding of customer usage patterns**
- **Major customer issues resolved**
- **Product Innovation**

Figure 1
To enable this, our Care Transformation Framework offers three tracks:

- **Track 1**: “Do it for me” (empower the care agent): In this scenario, the customer reaches out to the care agent to resolve an issue.

- **Track 2**: “Do it myself” (empower the customer): This mode provides customers with a host of relevant solutions to their immediate problem. One of the primary outcomes of this mode is to reduce the contact volume, thus reducing product support costs.

- **Track 3**: Care is built in (empower the product): In this context, the customer would not feel the need to contact the care team, as support is built-in; the product just works.

We deliver multiple tools to empower care agents that efficiently identify, replicate and simulate customer-reported problems.

The multiple ways in which agents are empowered include:

- **Creation of a knowledge base (KB) repository** to help provide fact-based customer service. The repository is essentially a collection of historical call data, top agent responses, agent recommendations, etc.

- **Building a first-line response agent** capable of providing efficient and accurate responses to user problems through:
  - Virtual agents.
  - Robots.
  - Artificial intelligence (contextually aware responses based on analytical data).
  - KB-based quick responses.

In this era of contextually-aware virtual assistants, intelligent personal assistants and smart advisors, it is not surprising that self-service is also undergoing a sea change. The main objective is to provide an intuitive and proactive diagnosis, guidance and suggestions platform that delivers automated alerts and helps users avoid problems before they occur.

Post-diagnosis, the platform also provides self-healing. The proactive alerts could be related to maintenance or business and, when presented to the user at the right time, could help them run their business efficiently. This approach is primarily used to reduce the number of calls to care agents.

This is the ideal state. To succeed here, it’s important to thoroughly understand customer usage patterns and analyze customer feedback about the product across multiple channels. The insights are provided as inputs to the product engineering team, which in turn conducts proactive diagnosis and repairs issues at the source.
Core Building Blocks of the Care Transformation Framework

In addition to analyzing business workflows, categorizing issues and identifying recurring patterns that lead a customer to reach out to the customer care team, our Care Transformation Framework enables users to ideate on top-call drivers and then create a solution spectrum to reduce or eliminate challenges that consumers typically encounter and that result in support contact.

Proactive Diagnosis and Repair Framework
This framework gathers fields of information, called user insights, diagnoses the problem and offers fixes by rolling out a suite of diagnostic tools to capture and eliminate the most common causes for recurring issues.

Proactive Notifications and Support Framework
Timely, business-critical notifications and alerts about payables, receipts, reminders, etc. can help with preemptive resolution of customer issues, thereby reducing the load on the support team. These can either be one-way messages that offer customer updates or two-way messages that require them to respond.

Proactive Alerts and Notifications Platform
This framework monitors the product’s vital parameters that impact non-functional requirements (NFR). The goal is to provide end users with a centralized view of business and non-business alerts. In addition, it organizes notifications by due date, criticality and type, and establishes a pattern that makes it easy for the user to take action.

Potential monitoring conditions are built on a set of predictive rules that are automatically generated by a rules-based learning algorithm.

- A proactive engine gathers information from the vital parameters, scrubs the data and creates messages and notifications.
- An alerts engine then pushes these notifications to users.
- Together, these engines enable the notification platform to deliver maintenance alerts, warnings and suggestions that help maintain and improve business efficiency.

These alerts also ensure data safety, remind users to submit invoices to get paid on time, and pay bills within the window period and avoid penalties.
**Quick Take**

The Care Transformation Framework in Action

**L3 Product Support for Banking Products Hosted on a SaaS Platform**

We worked with a banking software organization whose software-as-a-service-based (SaaS) data aggregation platform supports seven products for 21,000 banks across 14 countries, including 115 million accounts serving 18 million customers. The Level 3 support team was tasked with supporting a total average inflow of 12,000 incidents per month, with a turn-around time (TAT) of 24 hours.

We needed to help the company verify that all required information about a reported incident was available, and that an auto-response of known issues (pulled from the knowledge repository) was made available to the customer.

The non-functional requirement (NFR) was that the auto-response should reach end users within two hours of logging the incident. The number of incidents reopened needed to be less than 5% for incidents sent back by the robot integrator, a software bot that filters out duplicate or redundant messages, validates the incidents for existence/replication and calls out known issues.

**Robot Integrator: A Logical View**

The robot integrator offers the following capabilities:

- **Pulls** customer-reported incidents from the CRM system.
- **Pushes** updates on incident details, once resolved.
- **Processes** verification of the rules for defect incidents and known errors, and checks for issue persistence.

The system operates using Mule ESB, which functions as a gateway for accessing systems outside the ticket workflow application.

**Outcome**

By using our framework, 72% of trouble tickets were resolved through the robot agent, and as a result, only 28% incidents were pushed to the Level 3 support agent (see Figure 4).
Helping a Small Software Company with Accounting Functionality, Bookkeeping and Business Management

For a financial and tax preparation product to function as desired, it needs to help customers save time and grow their business. When the software does not provide complete control of pending payables/receivables, overdue invoices, pending bills, etc., it results in the user calling customer service, which in turn increases product support costs.

We helped a financial and tax preparation software company that serves the small business and consumer tax segment by creating a diagnostic framework within the product, as well as a suite of diagnostic tools to capture and eliminate the most common causes for recurring issues. Our framework consists of repair, recovery and early warning modules integrated within the product ecosystem, as well as external tools that run independently to monitor and fix issues around the product’s vital parameters (business/application critical).

We verified this design by providing a “do it for me” care agent tool, which provided greater visibility into various customer scenarios. The incidents were resolved based on the order of priority and the impact on business usage.

The next step was to centralize these distributed alerts and provide a global view to customers. Through a centralized alert engine, a mechanism was built to deliver notifications and alerts triggered by proactively monitoring the product’s vital parameters. Through a focus on product quality and usability engineering, an enhanced customer experience was achieved (see Figure 5).

Outcome

Our client saved $2.8 million in product support costs (equivalent to resolving 170,000 calls). This resulted in satisfied customers who are now able to run their small businesses through an appropriate notification ecosystem.
Looking Forward

To provide more timely and cost-effective product support, technology organizations need an automated platform that is powered by user data gathered through software metering. The quintessential product will monitor usage patterns and provide predictive analytics and reports to product support teams. The platform will collaboratively use in-house systems such as a diagnostic framework, proactive notification framework, social analytics and device analytics data derived from the Internet of Things.

Predictive analytics will form the backbone of the platform. The power of predictive intelligence will facilitate preemptive and strategic decision-making, with minimal room for incorrect assumptions. Product support will take a giant leap from proactive support to predictive analytics-based support.

Note: Code Halo is a trademark of Cognizant Technology Solutions.

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Footnotes


4 Ibid.


6 Ibid.
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