3SIXTY INSIGHTS

The Importance of Customer Support to Keep a Business Financially Viable

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We recently wrote about <u>the importance of delivery in keeping businesses afloat</u>, arguing that maintaining your current customer base is in many ways even more important than winning new business. After all, you have already put in the work to win your clients over, and if you disappoint them now, you risk losing them. While your leads represent potential, your customers represent an investment you have already made. Maintaining the good will of your current customer base should always be your top priority, and support is a critical component of customer satisfaction.

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We have seen many organizations prioritizing outsourcing and automation in recent years, and we agree, efficiency is great—unless it comes at the cost of customer support. As customers of other organizations ourselves, we all know that there is nothing more frustrating than automation gone wrong. Dealing with automated operators can quickly become a special kind of hell: painstakingly entering your information to "confirm your account" only to have a customer service rep ask you for that very same information the minute they pick up, getting transferred to someone else who requests the very same information, or worse, being accidentally disconnected during the transfer process and having to navigate the system all over again.

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Unfortunately, this situation is all too familiar, and it's growing more and more common as businesses aim to cut costs and reduce their representatives' call times through automation. When those perceived savings sacrifice customer support, they actually come at a huge cost: brand reputation, which has an immeasurable impact on your business. In competitive industries, reputation is the crucial differentiator which sets you apart from your customers' many other options. A consumer faced with enough frustration will simply find an alternate provider, leaving the original provider unaware of the reason for the departure and unable to learn from its mistakes. Furthermore, <u>abundant social</u>

media and online forums provide angry ex-customers a ready outlet to share their experiences. One unhappy customer can nuke a business's reputation in far less time than it took to build, undoing years of careful reputation management in one fell swoop.

With so much competition in every industry, it is vitally important that every organization understand how to protect its reputation: by making customers as happy as possible. No business is too big to fail these days. Below are a few strategies for implementing a better customer support experience.

Integration and proper use of technology

Most organizations do not need to invest in additional software and technology in order to provide a better customer service experience; they most likely already have the tools they need. What we typically find lacking is the integration. If your tools are not properly deployed, or if your platforms are not effectively integrated, you're simply not getting the best value out of the available technology. If, for example, an organization already has an automated operator collecting data on an incoming call, that data should be front and center on the screen for the customer service representative who takes that call. Other simple integrations should also be put in place, such as pulling up a customer's profile, purchase history, support history, and accounts payable details automatically. You know your representatives will need this data for the phone call, so make sure it is at their fingertips. Do not leave money on the table—make the tools you have, work together for you.

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Proper training

This should go without saying, but since we are not sure it does, we will go ahead and say it: ongoing training is an absolute must for front-line representatives. Ensure that all of your customer service reps are completely familiar with the full range of tools available to them. As we said above, most organizations already have the right tools in place. Integrating your disparate tools into smoothly functioning systems is a crucial step, but the core challenge really lies in proper training. Customer service representatives should not only be fluent users of those systems, they should also receive ongoing training on customer interactions and on your services and solutions. As your business grows, your offerings evolve. As you continue to invest in growth, your capabilities expand. Your customer service representatives' training must keep pace.

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Eliminate language barriers

If a customer is calling in, they are likely experiencing some problem with your company or product. This phone call is your opportunity to salvage the relationship. It is a make-or-break moment, and one surefire way to break it is to greet your customer with a language barrier. It is crucial that they have a good experience when they do get someone on the phone.

If your business deals with English-speaking customers, your front-line team members need to speak English as a first language. Likewise, if your client base speaks Italian, or Mandarin, or Swahili, everyone manning the phones should, too. Your customer service representatives are the face of

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your organization, and they need to be capable of meeting your clients on their level. Communication issues are only going to frustrate your customers (and torpedo your call times if you are tracking). Remember, when a customer is calling, it is most likely due to an issue they are having. Nothing is going to make things worse than dealing with someone whom they do not understand or who does not understand them.

Skip offshoring

Offshoring has long been a controversial topic, and our take builds on the above: support representatives should be located within the region they are primarily supporting. Offshoring as a philosophy makes cost the top priority, but our guiding principle at 3Sixty Insights reminds us that "the customer is everything." You cannot save your way to success as a business. You have to put your customers first, even if it means spending more to provide better service.

Keep it in-house

This is another oft-debated topic, but we believe the answer is clear: anyone supporting your company should be a true part of it. Many businesses rely on third-party organizations for technical and customer support, which are often seen as secondary rather than crucial operations. This is simply not effective, for several reasons.

First of all, outsiders will never know your business as well as you do. In fact, many third-party representatives juggle multiple organizations. Their business is to field as many phone calls as they possibly can with reasonable success—not to know your business inside and out. They may be supporting as many as 4 or 5 other companies. And even if you are lucky enough to get third-party reps who are

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dedicated solely to your organization, they just cannot pretend to possess the kind of thorough knowledge your own employees have. That can only be born of experience. Scripts and workflows are not enough, and your customers will pick up on that.

You also typically have zero or very little control over how these individuals are trained and managed. What motivates them will depend on which elements of their job performance are

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incentivized, and their employer's priorities are not your priorities. Third-party representatives may be paid to support your brand, but their investment ends there. They are not as invested as you are on ensuring your brand is successful, nor are they aware of the downstream effects an unhappy customer can have on your organization. A negative client interaction that may feel like an isolated

incident to your third-party support representatives could leave you and your internal team scrambling to manage the fallout indefinitely.

Ditch the call times

Again, keep in mind that calls to your customer support team will typically come from your unhappy customers. Your customers need to feel that you care about them, especially when your company is not living up to their expectations. No one wants to be hurried off the phone when they are asking for help. Customers who call in are giving you an opportunity to resolve their issue before they switch providers or take to the internet to badmouth you, so do not make the mistake of motivating your customer service representatives to rush through support calls. Speed is not a good indicator of success for this role. Customer satisfaction is the only appropriate metric, and staff members should be well aware of the standards by which they'll be measured.

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Play "Undercover Boss"

Management call shadowing and monitoring is a fine start, but do not leave it there. Leadership should routinely make calls to customer and technical support. It is an honest way of finding inefficiencies in your support systems. We are willing to bet that if more companies did this, many of the points above would be truly unnecessary. Anyone would be mortified to discover that common customer service horror stories apply to their own business, and yet we have all had those frustrating experiences with customer support. Leadership regularly stepping into the

customers' shoes is the only way to know for sure whether your support team is perpetuating the negative clichés or providing a pleasant departure from the norm.

Case in point

Founded in 1974, and eighteen time winner of BizRate Insight's Platinum Circle of Excellence Award, Crutchfield has taken stellar customer support to a whole new level. Inc.com published a case study on their customer service back in 2011, and they have only continued to up their game as they integrate new technology.

Crutchfield has one of the best customer service profiles that 3Sixty Insights has ever seen. Their front-line customer service representatives, or "Advisors," as Crutchfield calls them, are extremely knowledgeable technical support staff. Each Advisor starts their career at Crutchfield with 14 weeks of product and skills training before they ever hit the phones, and the company conducts continuous training efforts. This ensures that anyone answering the phone will be prepared to offer expert advice and provide a workable solution to any customer, no matter the circumstances.

Crutchfield truly wants to make a connection between their team of Advisors and their customers, breaking the barrier to traditional customer support. They do this by making their Advisor team the face of the company. Anyone that has picked up Crutchfield's magazine (yes, they still have one) or visited the website will see the Advisors' faces and their own experiences with the products profiled throughout. This not only creates a connection; it also establishes trust in the Advisor team, and Crutchfield ensures longevity by prioritizing employee satisfaction. They know that happy employees will always outperform unhappy ones, and they recognize that a positive employee experience translates to a positive customer experience.

And it does not stop there. Crutchfield takes their level of customer service much further than a courteous and trained staff. Each and every product purchase comes with free lifetime support, meaning their Advisor team will help anyone, with any issue, anytime. This goes far above and beyond most retailers' support policies. Apple, for example, only accepts phone calls from customers whose warranties have expired if they have purchased AppleCare.

Crutchfield also takes the team's knowledge and service to another level. Over the years, the company's Vehicle Research team has amassed a database of over 25,000 vehicles. This team does not simply create vehicle profiles; they actually install their very own products into each vehicle and document the process, allowing them to provide clear and accurate step-by-step instructions to their customers.

Crutchfield knows its client base and pre-emptively creates support systems for its many DIY customers. They have also invested in sustainable packaging, knowing that their customers prefer it, just showing that they focus on the smallest of details. How many times have we received a package and just stared in confusion at the size of the shipping box compared to the actual items, or received a box of full of packing peanuts and thought what a waste?

Finally, Crutchfield does not limit its focus to the people of the organization, though their approach shows that they recognize how important people are to a business's reputation. They focus on the process and the technology, too. Crutchfield has done a wonderful job of integrating all their backend systems so that they truly work as one. The minute a customer calls customer support, they are greeted by an Advisor who is already familiar with their profile and purchase history. This skips that uncomfortable phase of a support call, asking for account details and past purchase history. They have also gone to great lengths to integrate their website experience and customer support: each customer browsing session has a unique browsing token number. A customer only has to provide that number to their Advisor, and the Advisor will be able to see exactly what the customer has been viewing on the website, eliminating any room for confusion.

Crutchfield has created a customer experience that remains unparalleled in 3Sixty Insights' experience. The many awards the company has earned as a result are certainly well-deserved.

Truly, the value of quality customer support cannot be overstated. Your brand is at stake any time your customers are evaluating you. If your business treats customer support as an afterthought, your clients will notice. You will risk losing them to your competitors and damaging your reputation. Make support your top priority, and you'll find your business is the one clients are leaving others for.