Best Practices in Digital Customer Support

ABSTRACT In today’s highly competitive environment, where customers are king, brands are expected to maintain high standards in all their endeavors to differentiate themselves from their competitors. Customer support services offered by brands, has become one such factor that has helped customers identify the best among the competition.

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Customer support is an evolving concept. Traditionally, consumers would either meet brand representatives face-to-face or call the company for support. The scope then expanded to include other channels like email, call center support, etc. Today, customer support is offered through multiple platforms, including channels like social media, online communities, online help centers, learning centers, etc. – a clear transition from 1-to-1 (1/1) channels of communication to higher outreach platforms where brands offer 1-to-many (1/many) support.

It comes as no surprise that voice support continues to be the most popular medium for providing customer support. Today, digital customer support is provided through many channels, some 1/1 and other 1/many. Channels such as the help center, online chat, email, FAQ’s, etc. have been recognized as the big players in this space, but the two channels to watch out for, due to the tremendous potential they have, are online communities and social media.

My colleagues and I studied the evolution of digital customer support practices from its traditional 1/1 avatar to its more complex 1/many form. We conducted extensive primary and secondary research, and looked at over 40 companies from 9 different industries from around the world, to understand what customers look for when seeking customer support online. We went on to develop a proprietary grading system to fairly analyze each company’s digital customer support capabilities.

We segmented users of digital customer support into two primary categories: Solution Seekers and Learners. Solution Seekers are primarily interested in solving a specific problem and require immediate assistance. Thus, the digital customer support experience needs to enable the customer to get a specific solution quickly and as easily as possible.

Learners, on the other hand, seek a more predictable and continuous customer support experience, whereby they learn about a specific product or service over a period of time. The digital customer support experience for a Learner is more aligned with a more formalized education program. Learners can become great brand advocates, if the digital customer support experience enables them to become a proactive participant in a branded community; whereby they, in turn, provide digital customer support to others on behalf of the brand.

Based on the research and our benchmarking exercise, we were able to identify common practices among the most successful companies providing digital customer support. From these practices, we created a list of best practices for digital customer support under each category.

**User Experience Best Practices:**

- Clear Customer Journey Map: The website must have a logical structure, making it easy for the user to find relevant content. From our research, we found that self-help is the preferred form of customer support. The help center website is one of the first points of contact; therefore, it is important that it must be easily navigable for both a first time user as well as a seasoned user.
- Multiple channel Integration: The brand must offer customer support on multiple platforms, as different types of users have different preferences. We would like to emphasize here that it is not necessary to be present on all platforms, but instead have a strong presence across three or four platforms so that your users always have a choice.
- Personalized experience: A brand can improve the customer’s engagement level on the help page by providing a personalized experience. The most successful brands provide personalization either on the basis of the users’ needs, or their level of understanding of the product/service.
- Easy content accessibility: The website’s content must be laid out in such a manner that the solution should be accessible to the customer in no more than three clicks.

On the basis of our evaluation of multiple brands across various industries, we identified the following brands as the top performers who successfully provided their customers with exceptional user experience:

- UPS
- Salesforce.com
- Sony

**Educational Best Practices:**

- Clear and organized learning path: Provide a clear path so that learners know what they need to learn and what they can achieve by learning it.
- Incentives and checkpoints: Conduct quizzes, mock exams to help learners evaluate themselves as they learn. Providing learners with badges or ranks as they reach each level will help keep them motivated through the learning journey.
- Quick and instant feedback: Provide an internal platform
or create a forum on the brand community for learners to interact with each other, and with brand experts. This will enable learners to get instant feedback or comments not just from the brand, but also from other users.

- Simplification of learning process: Hide optional or unnecessary materials according to different levels of learners. Provide only relevant information to the user, based on the user’s needs.

On the basis of our research, we identified the following brands as top performers in providing best platforms for educational content:

- Oracle
- Qualtrics
- Lynda.com

Content Strategy Best Practices:

- Content Personalization: Content should be personalized for users, so that they continue to get a 1:1 feel on a 1:many support platform.
- Effective Use of signals: A good customer support website will read signals and provide personalized recommendations to the user, based on their location, needs, etc.
- Consistency of Content Structure: Content on the website should be structured similarly across the site, so that users feel comfortable navigating through the articles without feeling overwhelmed. The familiarity works in the brand’s favor, as it is one of the key factors that bring users back to the site.
- Linked & Organized content: Articles under a common umbrella topic should be linked so that it becomes easier to navigate through the topic. Providing links to similar articles below will also help users access all information related to the topic in a simplified manner.
- Content Integration: An effective website will provide an integrated flow through the content for its users, allowing them to easily access similar content across platforms, be it the help center, social media or communities.

On the basis of our research, we identified the following brands as top performers in content strategy:

- Adobe Marketing Cloud
- Adobe Photoshop

Metrics Best Practices:

- Use ROI KPIs linked to a business goal: Metrics adopted by a company must always link back to the business goals of the organization, so that it is easy to evaluate the company’s progress over time.
- Data Visualization: Effective metrics will always provide information in a visual and easy to comprehend format, so that it can be understood without any further analysis.
- Use customer-oriented KPIs: Customer-centric KPI’s will make the information more relevant to users, and will help the brand identify areas where they need to improve.
- Data Integration: Pulling data from not just one channel, but from across channels, will always provide a complete analysis of the situation.

On the basis of our research, we identified the following brands as top performers in metrics and measurement of digital customer support practices:

- Oracle
- Facebook
- IBM

Social Best Practices:

- State “Office Hour” & “Rules:” Clearly stating office hours will help set expectations with users. Rules for interaction, for both brand representatives and users, should be clearly stated online.
- Cross-Channel accessibility & contact information: Users must be provided with links to all other customer support channels on the social media page, so that they can escalate to another channel when required.
- Allow users to comment: Social media channels should be used for interaction, and not only for promotional, one-way conversations. Allowing users to comment will make the brand seem more approachable and will help build trust in the minds of the users.
- Provide timely responses: As seen in our research, users expect a response in less than one hour of posting a query. However, this is not always possible, so it is the responsibility of the brand to respond within an acceptable time frame.
- Unique respondent signature: Encourage all brand representatives to use their initials with their responses. Users need to feel assured that responses are not mechanical, pre-recorded messages.
On the basis of our research, we identified the following brands as top performers in providing quality customer support on social media platforms:

- FedEx
- Samsung
- HP Support
- Dell

Community Best Practices:

- High & Accurate Response Rate: The most successful communities rarely have unanswered threads for more than an hour. Users and representatives alike are engaged and respond within one hour. Accurate responses are always highlighted to make searching easy for new users.
- Joint ownership: Equal ownership by users and the brand is a must for a successful community. It creates a synergistic environment, and increases credibility as well, especially for tech-savvy users.
- Encourage offline interactions: Successful communities hold regular offline events for their users, where they have the opportunity to interact with brand representatives and other users as well.
- List rules for the page: Expectations from users and the guidelines must be clearly stated so that there is no opportunity for confusion.
- Link to all channels & contact information: Escalation from community to other channels can be expected, so it is the brand’s responsibility to make this a smooth process and provide users with the contact information for other 1/many channels as well as 1/1 channels.

On the basis of our research, we identified the following brands as top performers in providing exceptional customer support on their online communities:

- Adobe
- Microsoft
- SAP

In summary, we discovered throughout our research that digital customer support is becoming less tactical and more strategic among best practices firms. It is now more integrated with brand building activities, market research and sales. As customers engage with brands through digital customer support channels, successful companies are discovering ways by which to tie their digital customer support initiatives to broader customer engagement strategies that build the brand via a positive customer experience. In addition, best practices companies are mining data captured via the digital customer support channels to conduct real time market research and even discover new product ideas and innovation. Finally, digital customer support can be effectively utilized to convert both prospects and existing customers to new products and services, and positively impact the bottom line of the company.

about the AUTHORS

Prof. Frank Dudley is a digital marketing and management pioneer, practitioner, analyst and thought leader. He is a prolific speaker and author of research studies on marketing management, marketing accountability, brand building, integrated marketing communications and digital marketing and media. Mr. Dudley is currently a Professor at Northwestern University, where he teaches graduate and undergraduate courses in Marketing Management, Integrated Marketing Communications and Digital Marketing, Media and Innovation. He has developed and authored numerous research studies in collaboration with the ANA, the PMA, Northwestern University and many Fortune 500 firms.

Shreya Rai is the Editorial Director of JIMC 2014, and a full time student pursuing a Master’s of Science in Integrated Marketing Communications at the Medill School, Northwestern University. She, along with her colleagues from school, conducted extensive research to identify best practices in digital customer support during their summer project with Google AdWords. Shreya was recently invited as a speaker to Cracking The Code - a leading digital marketing conference organized by Brand New Media in New York to share the research findings with industry professionals.

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