The Startup's Guide to Customer Service

Grow your business with customer service

> 66 To be successful in today's marketplace, it's essential that you have awesome customer service. 99

Kraig Swensrud
Founder, GetFeedback

It's hardly surprising that half of small businesses fail within the first 1-5 years. It's not easy to launch a new product, single-handedly manage everything from IT to accounting, fend off the competition, and grow a customer base — all at the same time. A great concept, capital, passionate employees, and a private chef can only get you so far. Offering awesome customer service can make the difference between a startup that flies and a startup that dies. Here are nine ways customer support can help you beat the competition and grow your business faster.

Meet the experts

Fast, helpful customer service is table stakes in today's business world. Learn from nine of today's most successful small businesses how to optimize your customer service operations so you can grow your business faster than ever.

asana:

Tools to help businesses manage tasks and projects more productively

Founded in 2008

getfeedback

Engaging, mobile ready online surveys

Founded in 2013

JWPLAYER

Advanced media player live on 2+ million sites

Founded in 2007

ONE KINGS LANE

Luxury online marketplace

Founded in 2009

Shoes of Prey

Global retailer that lets consumers design their own shoes

Founded in 2009

Dot & Bo

Curated furniture and home décor shopping service

Founded in 2013

Formstack
The Smart Way to Collect and Manage Data

Web-based interface for building advanced forms

Founded in 2006

Giveforward

Online fundraising and donation platform

Founded in 2008

susty party

Compostable, sustainable, disposable party tableware

Founded in 2012

Make customer support part of your DNA

asana:

Making sure customers are taken care 24/7 shouldn't just be your support team's responsibility. Everyone in your company — from the CEO to the receptionist — should play an important role in helping customers. Some startups train new employees in customer service as part of their onboarding process. Not only does time on the front lines help new employees learn about products and customers more quickly, but it also ensures that they will always keep customers at the center of everything they do.

" It's really important to have as many people interact with customers as possible. "

HOW IMPORTANT IS IT FOR A STARTUP TO MAKE CUSTOMER SERVICE PART OF THEIR DNA?

It's really important to have as many people interact with customers as possible. Not only does it help our support be more efficient, even in times of extraordinary growth, but it gives us the feedback that we need to make a better product. It's so important that our support team has always been an important part of helping to drive product strategy. We keep our product management counterparts updated on the latest feedback to make sure Asana is always building features and products that customers actually want.

WHAT'S THE BEST WAY TO RALLY YOUR COMPANY AROUND CUSTOMERS?

Don't silo customer support as a company cost center. A great sign of superior service is when it is integrated as a mindset across. At every all-hands meeting we share information about new customers, success stories, and a snapshot of any outstanding issues or trends.

WHAT ADVICE DO YOU HAVE FOR NEW STARTUPS THAT WANT TO PUT CUSTOMERS AT THE CENTER OF EVERYTHING THEY DO?

We truly believe that everyone in the company benefits tremendously from ongoing, hands-on experience with the product and our customers. Start by hiring people who are passionate about solving problems and educating customers. Then make customer service a team responsibility, starting in the new hire onboarding process and continuing on a regular basis.

Brian Boroff
Head of Customer Success and User Operations

Learn more about Asana>>

Build a customer support dream team

When your company is big enough to hire dedicated agents, you need to make sure you hire the right ones. After all, you can train on the product and on the tools but you can't teach the desire to help people. Before you build your team, think about what's most important to you. Some startups prize good writing skills more than anything. Others want a great phone presence. Whatever's important to you, make sure they are energetic, caring people who want to help customers.

ONE KINGS LANE

> "It's essential for us to have the right support team. We sell one-of-a-kind luxury items that need to be backed by white glove service."

HOW IMPORTANT TO YOUR BUSINESS IS HAVING THE RIGHT SUPPORT TEAM?

It's essential for us to have the right support team. We sell one-of-a-kind, luxury items that need to be backed by white glove service. We want every customer to have every issue satisfied to their satisfaction. We don't want to cut corners, especially not where support and customer happiness are concerned.

WHAT DO YOU LOOK FOR ON A CANDIDATE'S RESUME?

Personalized service is a big part of our offering. We don't use form responses. We want every response to be personal and to be in our agent's own words. It's really important to us to have the right people with strong communications and writing skills. We never settle for second-best.

WHAT'S YOUR ADVICE TO A STARTUP THAT WANTS TO BUILD A CUSTOMER SUPPORT DREAM TEAM?

You need the right people. If you don't have a passionate, strong, dedicated team — no matter what tools you have — your customer service department will suffer daily, not only in customer satisfaction but with daily morale as well.

Alexis Chapman
Director, Customer Operations

Learn more about One Kings Lane>>

The Startup's Guide to Customer Service 4

Choose the right customer service solution

Many young companies start out by managing customer service through email, but all too often that system doesn't scale. Messages are lost. Multiple people respond to the same questions, sometimes with different answers. And, while folders can be used to categorize requests, they don't give you a way to assign emails to agents, show a priority level, or run reports. Implementing a customer service solution early in your company's lifecycle can have huge benefits later. Look for a solution that's cost-effective, easy to implement, and can grow with your business.

" There are a lot of support options available, and you need to be sure that you are getting the ones that will move the needle for your business. "

HOW IMPORTANT IS HAVING A CUSTOMER SUPPORT SOLUTION TO YOUR BUSINESS?

Having a customer support solution is not so much a matter of importance as a matter of necessity. It's essential to have a solution that is efficient and easy to use, both internally and for our users. Our goal is to provide inspired software, so our customer experience and support solution must inspire as well.

WHAT ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT THINGS TO LOOK FOR WHEN EVALUATING A SOLUTION?

The initial question is, "Can this solution make us better for our customers?" We want to know if a solution has the tools and features to help us improve response times and the quality of those responses, as well as provide an easy-to-use help center and make the customer-facing experience effortless. Scalability is also important. We have a fast growing user-base, so it is encouraging to know our solution can grow with us.

WHAT DO YOU KNOW NOW THAT YOU'D WISH YOU'D KNOWN WHEN YOU WERE STARTING OUT?

Before you dive into a solution it's important to take a step back and think about what features you need to be successful. There are a lot of support options available, and you need to be sure that you are getting the ones that will move the needle for your business. Through this process we learned what is essential for us to operate, as well as what is important for ticket handling, our help center, and reporting capabilities.

Duane Hunt
Vice President, Operations

Learn more about Formstack>>

Have screaming fast response times

Remember back in the 1990s when you had to call a company between 9-5 Eastern Standard Time to get help? Today even small companies need to offer self-service so customers can find the answers they need, 24/7. But sometimes customers still need to reach a real person. And they want to reach that real person fast. It's important to get a customer service solution that's easy to use and optimized for mobile so you have screaming fast response times, even during the middle of the night or on the weekend.

> " We believe that when we can solve a customer problem faster than expected, that customer becomes a promoter of our brand. "

HOW IMPORTANT ARE RESPONSE TIMES TO YOUR BUSINESS?

At GetFeedback.com, response time is critical to our business. We're in a crowded market with heavy competition, and the reason that we are able to attract new customers is that we have both a superior product and superior customer support. In today's world, customers don't want to wait for an answer, and it's our responsibility to provide an intuitive product, simple self-service support, and lightning-fast response times when customers have a question.

WHAT'S YOUR AVERAGE RESPONSE TIME? WHAT'S THE COMPETITION LIKE?

Our average response time is 15 minutes. Some customers say "wow, thanks for getting back to me so quickly," and while that's great, we still think about how we can respond faster. Maintaining rapid response times is even further complicated by the fact that we serve a global, always-on, customer base. We have a mobile solution for all of our support agents, and provide incentives for them to solve customer problems around the clock, from any location.

HOW DO YOU KEEP RESPONSE TIMES SO FAST?

Lightning-fast response times are core to our strategy. We believe that when we can solve a customer problem faster than expected, that customer becomes a promoter of our brand. So we provide incentives for our agents (and some healthy internal competition) to respond to customers quickly — and solve cases quickly — while maintaining a high customer satisfaction rating and Net Promoter Score (NPS).

Kraig Swensrud
Founder

Learn more about GetFeedback>>

Personalize every response

No one likes to get a canned response. Whether your customer is your mother-in-law or a Fortune 500 company, everyone wants to know that they're heard and that you care about their needs. Support is often an untapped channel for creating a closer connection to customers and for building a unique brand personality. Some of the most successful startups blend standard responses with personalized communications. You can build your brand personality and strengthen relations with every correspondence.

HOW IMPORTANT IS IT TO YOUR BUSINESS TO GIVE CUSTOMERS PERSONALIZED RESPONSES?

Most see customization as a service for special occasion and mass-production as the norm. We believe mass customization is the future of retail and we intend to be pioneers in this movement that will change the way people shop forever. This means essentially asking our customers to commit to a product they have formed a personal connection to, but have never seen in reality. Customer confidence is the biggest roadblock and our greatest tool to break down that barrier is offering a service as personalized as the product. Every customer should feel heard, valued and confident.

HOW DO YOU ENCOURAGE AGENTS TO GIVE RESPONSES PERSONALITY?

We integrated our customer support tool with our customer order system so all of our employees can have immediate visibility to historical order and payment information so they can provide totally personalized service. Everyone in the company from the management team to retail associates to engineering has access to the tool so they can quickly take a pulse on the business and be knowledgeable when helping customers during busy times.

WHAT ADVICE DO YOU HAVE FOR COMPANIES THAT ARE JUST STARTING OUT AND WANT TO MAKE SURE THEIR SUPPORT REINFORCES THEIR BRAND?

You need to have a strong brand from day one of your company, and you need to reinforce it with everything you do. Identify early what your "north star" metric is - the metric that drives decisions across all departments - then let data drive your scaling efforts. This means ensuring every process is geared towards empowering your staff to keep your finger easily on the pulse, respond quickly and appropriately, and in a way that does your company proud.

> " Every customer should feel heard, valued and confident. "

Dione David
Customer Happiness Manager

Explore different ways to measure success

Although many companies evaluate agents based on what percentage of cases they can close after the first email or phone call, or how quickly they can close them, you might want to consider other ways to measure the success of your support team. What if you encourage your agents to spend time with customers? Will they become more loyal? Will they be more likely to recommend your company to others? Many successful startups are using non-traditional measurements to ensure their teams are driving toward success.

> " Those above-and-beyond experiences will make our users tell their friends about GiveForward, come back 3 months from now, or stick with us for years to come. "

WHY DON'T YOU USE TRADITIONAL MEASUREMENTS OF CUSTOMER SERVICE SUCCESS?

Traditional levels of expectations of customer service are not the "wow" moments that will stick with our users and create a memorable experience. Those above-and-beyond experiences will make our users tell their friends about GiveForward, come back 3 months from now, or stick with us for years to come. Those experiences aren't measurable as traditional customer service because they transform into a marketing spend that keeps our brand alive. And that's priceless.

IF YOU AREN'T MEASURING AGENTS BASED ON HOW FAST THEY CLOSE CASES, HOW ARE YOU MEASURING THEM?

Instead of measuring fastest handle time, we have an ideal range that we prefer our agents keep their personal average between (4-8 minutes). This allows them the flexibility to have meaningful interactions when they feel that it is beneficial to our high-potential or high-profile fundraisers, but also factors in the tools that will let our coaches respond to cases within 1 minute. We focus on an average, as we know that every case and every customer is unique.

IF YOU ARE NOT MEASURING CLOSE TIMES, HOW DO YOU KEEP CUSTOMER SERVICE COSTS DOWN?

We measure how each individual agent is performing on each individual interaction with our users. We have been able to exactly pinpoint the (rare) sources of frustration for some of our users, as well as celebrate the successes of our amazing team, and that is something that keeps morale and friendly motivation amongst team members high.

Erica Alhorn
Director of User Relations and Fundraising Coach

Learn more about GiveForward>>

Use customer service to guide product strategy

Many startups spend a lot of time and money building products that ultimately customers don't want. Remember Pepsi A.M.? Heinz E-Z Squirt purple ketchup? Microsoft Zune? Your customer support team talks to your users every day. They can be your best source for feedback and a key driver of product innovation. They can tell you what modifications and features customers would like to see in your product. They can help you understand how customers interact with your product and track trends over time.

> " Listen to your customers. These are the people who are buying your product and often have their ears closest to the ground of the industry. "

HOW IMPORTANT IS CUSTOMER SERVICE IN HELPING YOU BE SURE THAT YOU'RE PRIORITIZING THE PRODUCTS AND FEATURES THAT YOUR CUSTOMERS REALLY WANT?

Customer feedback is definitely one of the biggest drivers for our product roadmap. Our product has so many features and is so broadly used that we need to be very methodical about how we plan upcoming changes and additions. Customer service is key to helping us see how our product is being used, what could be better, and where to invest our development time so that we're always working on the things that will do the most to move the needle.

WHAT'S THE MOST EFFECTIVE WAY TO BRING CUSTOMER SERVICE INTO THE FEEDBACK LOOP?

Witnessing your product from a customer's perspective is incredibly powerful. Since we can get immediate feedback, label it, and track it, we are able to catch either small site issues or demand for new functionality. We share this feedback immediately between our customer service, product, and operations teams so that everyone is on the same page and we keep customers at the center of everything we do.

WHAT'S YOUR ADVICE ON MAKING CUSTOMER SERVICE A PART OF YOUR PRODUCT STRATEGY FOR COMPANIES THAT ARE JUST STARTING OUT?

Listen to your customers. These are the people who are buying your product and often have their ears closest to the ground of the industry. Likewise, tracking repeated asks over time is a great way to see upcoming momentum in a particular area. If you get 5 people requesting a particular feature in one month, 10 people the next month, and then 20 people the following month, you should probably start paying attention. If you make this part of your process from day 1, you'll have a much better chance of building the products that customers really want.

Andrew Prelusky
Client Engineer

Learn more about JW Player>>

Connect customer service to all your apps and systems

Every aspect of a business is interconnected, but all too often companies develop islands of siloed data as they grow. If you start out by connecting all the apps you use to run your business, you can increase productivity and avoid costly integration projects down the road. And, you'll avoid costly integration projects later on down the road. Sharing customer information, product data, and support metrics across your entire company will give everyone more insight into customers so they can sell more, service faster, and deliver an outstanding experience every time.

HOW IMPORTANT IS CONNECTING CUSTOMER SERVICE TO YOUR OTHER BACK OFFICE SYSTEMS?

We aren't just trying to build a service, we're building lasting relationships with customers, and building an exceptional customer experience takes more than just support. It's about having an actionable view of our customer from pre-purchase to delivery to repeat visit. We knew early on that we needed the power of a service platform that would be connected with our CRM.

WHAT INTEGRATIONS DO YOU HAVE AND WHAT KIND OF INSIGHTS DO THEY GIVE YOU?

Most of our team uses the Desk.com helpdesk solution, including customer support, operations, merchandising, finance, as well as our executives. It's easy for these teams to collaborate and answer questions ranging from product functionality to billing updates, as everyone can easily view customer information in one place, and more seamlessly analyze the data.

A good portion of our sales start from customer questions so one of our most important integrations is sales and service. By connecting support and CRM, we're able to share data between our customer experience and sales teams to ensure we're directing customers to the appropriate responses, and do a better job of managing opportunities. It also ensures both sales and service teams always have 360-degree customer views and can personalize every experience.

WHAT'S YOUR ADVICE ON CONNECTING CUSTOMER SERVICE TO OTHER APPS FOR COMPANIES THAT ARE JUST STARTING OUT?

As the CEO of a company that is monetizing through commerce, my number one job is to manage the customer experience across the board. It's like directing a symphony: coordinating between various teams from operations to marketing, to ensure our customers are having the best possible experience. Anything that you can do that fosters collaboration and information-sharing early on will help your company provide better experiences and grow faster.

> " It's like directing a symphony: coordinating between various teams from operations to marketing, to ensure our customers are having the best possible experience. "

Anthony Soohoo
Co-founder and CEO

Learn more about Dot and Bo >>

Engage on every channel

"Meet customers where they are," is one of the biggest clichés of modern marketing. Anyone can set up a Facebook page or Twitter account and market to their customers. But to move the needle you need to offer content that educates, not sells. If you meet a customer online, offer fast, personalized service, just as you would if they called you on the phone or walked into your store. Everything on social channels is amplified, so it's important that you show customers (and their followers) that you care. Done right, social offers an unparalleled opportunity to build and extend your relationships.

susty party
Born in Brooklyn | RESPONSIBLY MADE PARTY SUPPLIES

" No matter what medium customers are contacting you on, they want to be heard. "

HOW IMPORTANT IS A SOCIAL PRESENCE FOR BUILDING YOUR BRAND?

Staying connected with our customer community is really important to us, so having a social presence is vital. People feel a more personal connection via social networks than they do when they call you on the phone, not to mention it is much faster. We use Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram to constantly connect with our customers, answer questions, and let them know that we care about them. When we show appreciation to people who mention us on social networks, and even if it's just a simple "Party On!", they get very excited.

WHAT COULD COMPANIES BE DOING BETTER ON SOCIAL?

The most important thing is to keep your content fresh. You want to give your followers new content regularly, otherwise they will start to look away. A good tip is to keep a collection of great images so you always have something ready. The other thing that a lot of companies could do better is to respond more quickly. No matter what medium customers are contacting you on, they want to be heard. They may not be calling you on the phone but if they are trying to get service, you need to respond right away.

WHAT ARE YOUR TIPS FOR COMPANIES THAT ARE JUST STARTING OUT AND WANT TO USE SOCIAL EFFECTIVELY?

It's very effective to shout out to other companies that you like and that have similar missions. When you align with the brands you want to be associated with, you can reach more people together. And, don't forget how valuable this medium is for having a casual conversation with your customers, more like a friend. We regularly share photos and information about our employees at work – that helps us build a connected stream of emotion with customers and make them feel like they are part of our team.

Hailey Hayman
Community Manager

Learn more about Susty Party>>

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Don't be part of the half of businesses that go down in the first 1-5 years. Try Desk.com today for free and see for yourself how fast, awesome customer service can help your business grow faster than ever.

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