



Conversations: Support in a Web 2.0 World

By Becky Carroll, President and founder Petra Consulting Group

There is a new dynamic taking place in support. Customer service is becoming very public. The world now hears the details when a consumer has a poor customer support experience as it is bantered about on blogs, parodied in YouTube videos, and finally picked up by the mainstream media. The effects are spilling over into technical support as well. Customer expectations are higher than ever. The need to engage with customers in an honest and transparent way is becoming a business necessity.

As the support industry makes the shift from break-fix service and support to providing value to customers beyond the product purchase price, there is a need to practice the ancient art of conversation. This art has two components: listening and talking. In order for the conversation to be successful, the first component, listening, is really more important than the second. Support organizations have become very good in the art of talking at customers; the art of listening to customers is often less practiced.

The Self-Service Conundrum

While customer self-service is an important aspect of providing support when and how customers want it (in addition to potentially reducing support costs), there is a side-effect. Customer self-service takes away the human touch to the customer, the face of the company. Rather than a back-and-forth conversation about a support issue and its resolution, customers spend time on their own trying to figure out how to get the necessary answer. If they are successful, this can be a great model. If they are unsuccessful, the level of frustration mounts, only to be unleashed on the next unsuspecting CSR that answers the phone or the chat.

Value-added support is about people and continuing to build trust so that long-lasting customer relationships form. Value-added support is not about technology. Technology can be an enabler, and Web 2.0 technologies and social media help put *people* back into support. These technologies are facilitating conversations: customer to customer and

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also customer to company (and back).

Reluctance to Embrace

Some support organizations are part of companies that are quickly embracing Web 2.0 and social media. They have built large communities in the past and are re-engaging with those communities through blogs and wikis. Other organizations are starting to dabble in these new methods of communicating with customers. Many are still watching from the sidelines and a little leery of getting involved. At the recent SSPA Best Practices Conference in San Diego, I moderated a sharing session on web self-service, and the conversation turned to Web 2.0. Most of the companies in the room were considering how they wanted to use Web 2.0 technologies in support; only a handful actually had a blog, wiki, or similar social media in use with customers today.

Part of the reason for this reluctance to embrace social media is fear. There is a concern that customers will use this forum to start talking publicly about their issues with the company and all will turn sour. Guess what? These conversations are already taking place on the internet, with or without the company! One just needs to decide whether they want to be part of those conversations, even managing them from the company's website.

Customer Support as a Conversation

If we are to truly transition support to a value-added model, a key ingredient is building customer relationships. This cannot be done through one-way communications. An ongoing conversation with our customers is necessary, as trust and relationship only take place over a longer period of time than one support interaction. If we just focus on the support transaction, we miss the opportunity for the relationship. If we view each support interaction as one part of an ongoing conversation with our customers and are willing to listen to them, we begin to look at the customer in a different light.

Customers want their immediate problems solved, but they also want proactive support. While the basics of providing customer support are still important, Web 2.0 and social media tools enable a conversation which goes past solving the problem at hand.

Tools such as blogs, wikis, tagging, social networking, and even forums begin to create a sense of community and belonging as they facilitate proactive communication with customers. The potential return for the company is enormous. Transparency and honesty are required to play the game.

Using Blogs to Engage in the Conversation

Business blogs are becoming more common, and they can be leveraged very nicely for product support. The biggest potential with support blogs is to proactively share information with customers about upcoming

releases, new functionality, and product plans. Customers can subscribe to blogs, so they can become a quick and easy way to get the word out when a fix to a common problem is available. Some organizations with this type of blog are the following:

- Novell (<http://www.novell.com/coolblogs/>), used strictly for support
- Dell (<http://direct2dell.com/>), used for general company info, customer feedback, and directing specific inquiries to the support site
- Macromedia (<http://weblogs.macromedia.com/mxna/FeedList.cfm>), which uses blogs as a quick way of getting hot topic information out to their communities on a daily basis as well as a way to get customer feedback on upcoming product features. Macromedia includes links to both employee as well as customer blogs on their site.

Blogging can be a very powerful tool for customer support to use with its customers. There are a few areas which should be addressed up front, before starting a support blog.

Authors: It should be decided how many authors will be part of the blog and who will do the writing. It is best to choose authors who have good written skills in addition to a passion for communicating with customers. A product support blog can be written by one author or could have many contributors. It is great to get product development engineers involved in guest posts on occasion, as this is great for customer trust.

Commenting: It is optional to allow comments on blogs. However, the only way a blog can be used as a conversation is when customers are allowed to leave their feedback or questions. That said, it is recommended to refer customers with immediate technical issues to the proper support channel. It is also important to respond to customer comments. Get engaged, be open, and invite feedback and even assistance from your customers!

Simplicity: The best blogs are often those which are the most simple in structure. Blogs with too much information in the sidebars can become confusing. Likewise, support blogs should not be the medium for the marketing department to advertise constantly, although they can be carefully used to educate customers on new offerings in a relevant manner.

Personal Touch: Blogs are a great way to keep the personal touch in conversations with customers. Including photos of bloggers, as well as the right amount of personal information, helps customers put a face with the company and encourages interaction.

Other Tools to Engage

Communities

Microsoft has created many different communities which incorporate the use of blogs, forums, and wikis. Sean ODriscoll did a wonderful presentation on this at the SSPA Best Practices Conference, and I highly recommend getting a copy of his slides (available to SSPA Members through the SSPA website). One of their developer communities, Channel 9 (<http://channel9.msdn.com/>), incorporates video casts, wikis, forums, as well as a “playground” to engage customers in conversation.

Large communities such as the one outlined above are a great place to find create a strong customer-to-customer support forum. In this case, a majority of customers “lurk”, or only read the online material and don’t actually write any of it. Another idea is to create small communities where customers are more likely to contribute. These “neighborhoods” could be around specific product lines or even better, around the needs of your customers to help them more quickly solve problems in a way that is relevant to how they do business.

Tagging and Context

Customers are looking for fast ways to find what they need on a product support site. Technology available to implement search results is becoming more commonly based on communities. For example, Lithium has technology using the “wisdom of crowds”, where crowds may know the best answers. It is how the community votes that will influence the order and content of search results. Other technology, such as that from Baynote, creates new keywords for articles as it tracks the terms and phrases customers are using to find their results. They are tagging articles using this “wisdom of invisible crowds”, hence creating community-guided support with little effort from engineers.

Start the Conversation

Social media has pushed customer service and support into the spotlight. Customer expectations are high and budgets are strained. Making the most from each customer interaction is critical to understanding customers but also to creating a great customer experience. I think the last point of the Channel 9 Doctrine (<http://channel9.msdn.com/about.aspx>) speaks volumes about this very topic. I encourage you to take it as your own as you begin to engage in the Web 2.0 support world:

“Commit to the conversation. Don't stop listening just because you are busy. Don't stop participating because you don't agree with someone. Relationships are not built in a day, be in it for the long haul and we will all reap the benefits as an industry.”

About Becky Carroll.....

Becky Carroll is President and founder of Petra Consulting Group, a strategic consultancy helping companies focus on building strong customer relationships. She is also the author of **CustomersRock!**, a

recognized marketing and customer service blog about companies with great customer experiences and how they achieve them. Recently she was a co-author on the collaborative book *Age of Conversation*.

An accomplished international speaker with more than 20 years of experience in the industry, Becky has helped her clients bring about success in their customer experience and support strategies, including companies such as HP, Fujitsu, Electronic Arts, and Ford Motor Company. Prior to founding Petra Consulting Group, Becky was a Senior Consultant with industry-leading Peppers and Rogers Group. Previously, Becky worked at Hewlett Packard for 14 years including roles as Director of Marketing, UK and Ireland and Worldwide Customer Loyalty Marketing Manager for HP Services.

For more information, visit Becky's blog at <http://customersrock.wordpress.com>, and join in the conversation! Becky can also be reached at becky@petraconsultinggroup.com or via the website www.petraconsultinggroup.com.

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