



Q&A with John Ragsdale

eService | Phone Support | Customer Experience

By John Ragsdale, Vice President of Research, SSPA

In the SSPA's recent "State of the Industry" webcast, Bill Rose and John Ragsdale presented their views on several important issues facing executives and management in the service and support industry. From eService to Translation, John Ragsdale has authored the following article based on the actual questions from webcast attendees. (*Didn't catch the live webcast? You can view it on-demand [by clicking here.](#)*)

Click on the questions below for John's perspective:

Q1 | How are technology companies able to measure the breakdown percentage of e-support vs. phone support? In essence, the success of web support that caused phone support to not occur.

Q2 | With less phone support we talk less with customers, does this play a role in less satisfaction when surveyed? Do they feel less covered?

Q3 | Are there "expert systems" available today?

Q4 | What is happening with "virtual agents" or electronic guides to knowledge bases?

Q5 | Chat is great for consumer support, but for enterprise support, not so much. Would you agree?

Q6 | How is the trend toward self-service options affecting the overall perception of the customer experience?

Q7 | What are your thoughts on the importance of translating self-service support offerings for customers outside the U.S.?

Q1 | How are technology companies able to measure the breakdown percentage of e-support vs. phone support? In essence, the success of web support that caused phone support to not occur.

in this issue

> [Q&A with John Ragsdale](#)

> [The Art of Customer Service](#)

> [Why We Love EMC's Total Customer Experience](#)

> [Improve Customer Experience: Design-Deliver-Operate & Optimize](#)

> [Selling Services Through the Channel](#)

> [Maintaining a Cohesive Team across Borders](#)

A | Accurate assessments of this situation are virtually impossible...at least I haven't figured out a way yet. That is why I tend to focus more on incident creation, since we can track the channel of origin for each incident. But actual issue resolution? That is harder.

One of my pet peeves about eService is that there isn't a good way to track if customers resolved their issue. Sure, you can prompt them "did this article solve your problem?" but the response rate for that prompt is around 2%. And, I imagine the 2% that *do* answer are irritated that they can't find what they need, so even that sample may not be representative.

One thing I have seen useful is tracking the volume of specific of questions customers ask via every channel. Typically, you should see some issues decrease for phone agents (normally the more common questions), while the content for those questions is accessed frequently via self-service. At least this can track the shift in what customers are asking, or what content they are consuming, by each channel. Self-service is becoming "level 0," meaning the FAQ type issues are mostly taken care of by self-service, and the issues coming to phone agents become more complex over time.

eService vendors have some case studies showing a drop in calls when self-service is deployed, though I would guess those are mostly consumer companies, where adding a widget on the website for "where can I find the product in my zipcode" can make a big difference. For most high-tech companies, I'm sure your average question is much more complex.

I will be publishing some best practices in this area later in the year. If any members have found methods to accurately track success of self-service, or know of ways to increase customer response rate to 'useful' prompts, please email me!

[back to top](#)

Q2 | With less phone support we talk less with customers, does this play a role in less satisfaction when surveyed? Do they feel less covered?

A | Personally, I think this is a big issue, but I don't expect to hear much agreement within the tech support community! Bill Rose [SSPA Founder and Executive Director] and I identified this as an area we could stage a debate on, as there are definitely two different views, and they both have merit. One argument is that if customers can easily find the right answer using self-service, they should be satisfied. The opposing argument (and the one I subscribe to) is that building relationships with customers is harder than just answering questions, and the personalization of a live phone conversation can cement a relationship with a customer more

than self-service ever can.

This is already a concern in financial services, and I've had VPs of service for consumer banking tell me, "We want to talk to the customer as often as we can! I don't want to deflect calls!" I should say, however, that the industries realizing this are totally consumer focused. In the B2B world, accounts usually have an assigned account rep to take care of the 1:1 relationship. But in the consumer world, zero live agent contact could be a killer.

I even talked to a large online insurance company about this a while back. Their biggest obstacle is that they don't have agents in neighborhoods so they have a much more difficult time building strong relationships with customers than, say, State Farm. They see phone as their best channel.

Bottom line, I don't think offering excellent self-service will negatively impact the customer, but if we keep throwing up obstacles to phone access (fees, taking phone numbers off websites, etc), I do think satisfaction and loyalty will suffer.

[back to top](#)

Q3 | Are there "expert systems" available today?

A | I first came across expert systems when I was managing tech support at JC Penney, and we paid a Big 5 consulting firm a fortune to build the system for us. It never worked. I consider expert systems to be the same as Cased Based Reasoning (CBR) systems. These systems use a predefined logical sequence to help agents or customers perform problem diagnosis and resolution.

The new CBR systems are more flexible, and are easier to maintain and use. Some of the best out there include Kaidara, ATG/Primus, and Knova (from their ServiceWare acquisition). For complex problem diagnostics, I think they will continue to be a place for expert systems for the foreseeable future.

[back to top](#)

Q4 | What is happening with "virtual agents" or electronic guides to knowledge bases?

A | Back in 2001-2002, there was lots of buzz around virtual agents, aka web robots or avatars. The buzz quickly died because early products worked so poorly. Unlike Web self-service that customers use to search an existing knowledge repository, robots use "answer pairs" to locate information on the Web site. When implementing a solution using answer pairs, every piece of content is manually assigned a series of keywords or phrases that customers may type in when looking for that data. When

a customer types in a question, the robot is not searching the content store for the requested information using full text search (FTS) or linguistic analysis, rather, it is searching the list of predefined questions for matches, and then it presents the customer with list of links to places on the Web site that match the question he or she asked.

Robots are primarily useful for high-level consumer questions, such as where are you located, where is the closest branch, who is your CEO, do you offer factory tours, etc. By helping consumers of any skill level find the information they need, an expensive call to the call center is avoided. One of the attractions of robots is the ability to give them a personality. Companies use a photograph or a cartoon to represent the robot, and since the responses are pre-scripted as answer pairs, the robot can be humorous, mischievous or dead serious. I used to cite two examples of this, "Ask Hank" on the Coca-Cola Web site and "Ask the Brewmaster" on the Miller Web site. I just checked, and Hank is still there, though you have to search first before he is given as an option, and Miller has booted the Brewmaster in favor of different pictures of support agents. Neither works better today than in the past. I asked, "Do you offer factory tours," and neither had an answer, advising me to rephrase my question and try again.

There is definitely ongoing administration involved when implementing a Web robot. The system tracks the questions asked by customers, and it is important to review this information to see what customers are asking, and how they are phrasing the question. Answer pairs must be updated continually to provide customers with the best match for their questions, and when the Web site is overhauled, with new data added and old information removed, the answer pairs must also be updated.

As evidenced on the Coke site, most companies now use an intelligent search engine instead of a robot, since the technology is stronger and the results more accurate. I only know of one vendor selling an avatar/virtual agent with a killer search engine; Q-go, out of Amsterdam. Great company and great product, and they accommodate more than a dozen languages.

[back to top](#)

Q5 | Chat is great for consumer support, but for enterprise support, not so much. Would you agree?

A | Quick and easy consumer questions make a lot more sense to handle via chat than complex technical support issues. But my point about finding a place for chat within B2B support organizations is that as consumers, we learn to use these newer channels, and then we bring those expectations with us to the work world. I know of a few examples of B2B companies using chat for technical support, one being a semiconductor company whose customers are engineers at large firms, and the engineers prefer text channels (email and chat).

As the web collaboration products become more robust, they create a fuller experience for the customer, and you have a lot more options to work with than just text chat. My long-term view is that full web collaboration (remote access, screen sharing, joint form fill, page push, etc.) can be as rich an experience as phone support. And when you add in a direct voice and video connection via Skype—you've just provided a much richer experience than even a phone call.

Bottom line, if business customers demand a chat channel, you need to provide it. But I don't think that is going to happen at most B2B hardware and software companies for a couple of years.

[back to top](#)

Q6 | How is the trend toward self-service options affecting the overall perception of the customer experience?

A | It depends on the customer, and the self-service options. Bottom line, the customer has a good experience if they have easy access to the correct information. However, some customers, particularly those over 35, require some personal contact to establish a strong positive feeling toward a company and its products. Using just electronic channels may solve their question or problem, but the overall experience is lacking.

Alternatively, there are so many bad self-service sites out there (or at least I find most of the companies I interact with as a consumer, particularly my cell phone provider and DSL service provider, have horrible self-service sites!) that few customers have a positive experience using them.

I believe that as technology advances, self-service will become a fuller experience, more closely matching the agent assisted experience.

Embedded analytics allow e-interactions to be highly personalized and accurate. Companies can even offer dynamic micro-sites for customers, complete with lists of 'also see' info and offers just for them. But there are just a few vendors offering this technology, and few examples of it being used well.

So I think all is not lost, in terms of offering a compelling experience without an agent. But it is going to take new technology adoption on the part of both customers and service organizations for it to happen.

[back to top](#)

Q7 | What are your thoughts on the importance of translating self-service support offerings for customers outside the U.S.?

A | I think more companies are realizing how important this is for multiple reasons, including:

- *Not just an international problem* . There are a growing percentage of North Americans who are not fluent in English, so translating content is important for companies, particularly consumer facing companies, operating in areas of the country with diverse populations. I'm also hearing this as a concern from B2B companies selling into the mid-market in North America.
- *Sales expansion into Europe and Asia/Pac*. Most technology companies either have offices established around the world or are working through partners there. Having a fully localized website and content is critical to their success.
- *The Web is the great "internationalizer"* . Even NA centric companies find they have customers all over the world buying their products online, and they need to offer self-service in the customer's language of choice.

I plan to publish some research on technology that makes creating and maintaining content in multiple languages less onerous, as well as share some best practices I've found from working with global companies.

[back to top](#)

Learn more about John Ragsdale and his new position as SSPA's new VP of Research by [clicking here](#).

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