

Raising the Bar for Customer Care ***Problems and Solutions in Technical Support***

For computer system vendors and resellers today, providing quality technical support is:

- (a) becoming more complicated and difficult all the time
- (b) an opportunity to differentiate your company from competitors
- (c) an issue you can address with powerful new technologies
- (d) best approached as part of a total customer care solution

As you may have guessed, the answer is "all of the above."

Spiraling Complexity and Difficulty

There's no question that technical support is becoming more difficult each year. Today's customers typically run client/server systems, often with mixed networks, using multiple components from different vendors. Increasingly powerful and complex desktop applications must work together and share data over these networks. Each customer's computing environment is unique, so a configuration that works perfectly in most instances can be "broken" by a single variable. Finding the right answers is an ongoing challenge.

So too is finding and keeping good people. Technical support is a difficult job, and often viewed as less prestigious than systems development. Too often, support organizations invest much time and money training support agents, only to have them leave for other jobs. Add to all of this customers who are increasingly demanding and impatient for solutions-since their business success depends on it-and you can see why the call center is often a crisis center.

A Market Differentiator

But vendors and resellers who recognize the opportunities in this thicket of difficulties can shine. According to Bruce Benesh, Corporate Marketing Manager for [Dickens Data Systems](#) in Dallas, companies that provide excellent customer service have a strong competitive advantage. "Support is a differentiator. If many companies are offering the same hardware and software, support is a way to separate your company as the solution."

But Benesh warns that this arena too is competitive. "Just satisfying today's customer isn't enough. They expect that. To make an impression on a customer today, you must exceed their expectations. As companies improve their call centers, the bar gets raised, and you must improve your support or get left behind."

New Technical Solutions

One of the main avenues for support organization to add value and improve quality is by investing in new software. The accelerating advances in technology, which are largely responsible for creating the state of crisis in support, also offer many of the best hopes for improvement.

Most support centers have at least a basic call management system, which logs calls into a database, issues a trouble report or "job ticket," and can be used to record the resolution. Many support organizations use dedicated help desk applications, which also feature automated workflow for escalating calls and tracking resolutions. These applications usually also offer some sort of solution management process, in which the answers to problems can be stored in a knowledge base, which is then accessible for searching in the future. Another, innovative solution is remote management software, which allows a support agent to remotely access a customer's network to diagnose problems. This can save not only time, but significant expense, since it reduces the need to send support agents to customer sites.

Joe Longoria, Senior Vice President of Information Technology for Dickens Data Systems in Dallas, stresses the importance of full-featured customer support software. He believes there is an often-overlooked advantage in commercial help-desk applications. "External tools and expertise can be very useful," says Longoria, who has in-depth experience with support systems. "Support organizations should look to commercial applications to provide a competitive advantage in this category of software."

Dickens utilizes SCM software from ProAmerica (a wholly owned subsidiary of Dickens) in their customer support organization.

Another promising trend for improving technical support is to integrate help desk software with the world wide web. Through "web self-service," customers can search a support knowledge base for solutions, access version information relevant to their systems, and perhaps download a maintenance release or software patch to address their problem. If their answer is not found in the knowledge base, customers can log their own trouble reports through an HTML form. Some systems also let them track the status of their support requests.

Web self service is particularly promising because it can sometimes prevent calls in the first place, reducing the burden on call centers and letting them leverage staff more effectively. Key to making it work is to capture and maintain a significant body of useful information in the knowledge base, and make it easily accessible and understandable to the users.

Total Customer Care

With the problems of call centers today and the solutions offered by new technology comes another opportunity—that of viewing support in the larger context of total customer care. In this model, the help desk application is part of a global customer management system. A "customer-centric" database stores all information about

customers, and is available to everyone in the company to help achieve customer satisfaction.

"This is beyond a doubt the way it should be done," says Longoria, who has written on the role of technical support in the customer care model. "It's very important for a business to look at their customer base in that way. Sales, marketing, technical support, accounting, product development—all the groups that touch a customer—should have access to this shared repository of information."

Benesh is also enthusiastic about the opportunities offered by the customer care model. "Companies should be integrating all sorts of customer information into a central database," he says. "This is also a way to look for incremental revenues, by knowing the customer better, what they do and what they need."

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