

## The Great Service Debate: *Can Online Support Match Phone-based Support?*

By Anna Frazzetto, VP of Technology Solutions, Harvey Nash

Online commerce is increasing by record-breaking leaps and bounds every year. As masses of consumers and businesses worldwide take their transactions (shopping, banking, communications and learning) straight to the Internet, the more frequently they are encountering online support tools and systems. Online support is a logical progression in the evolving digital marketplace, but is it a comprehensive solution for a business looking to care for its much-valued, much-needed customer base? It's a critical question to ask as more and more consumers are choosing Web sites and online stores as a primary way to interact with service providers. Should Internet-based support solutions surpass or even replace traditional phone-based support structures?

### The Growth of the Online Approach

Online support can offer some hip and creative ways of reaching end users in need of support and information. From e-mail responses to online support libraries and message boards to real-time chats, the Internet has created a broad, new avenue for addressing the support and educational needs of customers. Many online support tools, such as libraries of FAQs (frequently asked questions) and message boards, are a natural byproduct of today's technology-enabled marketplace. In the early days of the World Wide Web, technologists seeking information from other experts were quick to develop online resources, such as forums and list servers, where they could search for answers and share tricks of the trade related to the applications and hardware they were working with and building. These self-driven online tools allowed for broad information sharing and rapid knowledge gathering among a group with common interests.

### The Broader Audience

In an effort to bring more knowledge to end users with technology, questions and challenges, many of those insider "techie" support and research tools were introduced to the end user marketplace. The idea was to give individuals the opportunity to find answers to their questions before reaching for the phone to call help desks.

### The Good News for Businesses

End user support tools look great from the business side. The more support can be delivered online, the lower the support costs will be. The more end users are able to seek out answers on their own, the lower the demand is for support resources and investments on the business side. When quick-fix, like resetting passwords, can be automated into online solutions, more support personnel can be dedicated to bigger, more complicated challenges.

### The Bad News for Businesses

On the other side—the end user's side—online support often leaves much to be desired. In fact, the biggest challenges with online support solutions today can be broken into three simple categories.

#### The Online Pros

- *Lower support costs for a business as fewer help desk professionals are required*
- *Ability to share extensive information through FAQs, libraries, glossaries, etc.*
- *Simplified way to gather records of support issues (electronic files) and a log of the interaction between the help desk agent and the user*
- *Offers highly efficient solutions to common, quick-fix problems*

#### 1: I'm Not Sure What My Problem Is!

The same goes for online interfaces that ask users to fill out a form and select the type of issue or question they have. Many users don't know what category their support issues fall into and often their questions don't align to options given in a menu. Think of how many times you've encountered the same issue with an automated phone system. Your specific need does not match any of the options the system asks you to select so you just hit a number and hope to reach a person. With an online interface, that chance of just talking to a person is eliminated. Instead, many users give up, frustrated that they can't simply reach an individual and are forced to navigate a site just right in order to find an answer.

#### 2: Are We on the Same Page?

Then there is the real-time chat support option, which most closely models phone-based support. End users interact directly with a support professional by chatting computer to computer. It's personalized, one-on-one service, which is critical. Nevertheless, it is still hindered by technology limitations.

It is extremely hard to accurately convey tone and emotion in written form. A support staff member may underestimate the urgency of a customer's online request because of how it is written. A customer may misinterpret the tone a support professional uses and feel neglected or mistreated. While these same types of miscommunication can occur by phone, they are much more common when only the written word is used. Voice, intonation and the ability to interrupt and ask questions all help people to sort through verbal misunderstandings. When these conversational dynamics are removed, there is greater room for confusion.

### 3: Find it Myself? That's Why I Came to You!

First, there is the independence issue. Online support tools often first force end users to be more self-reliant, in finding answers to their questions. "Please see our question and answer section if you are having trouble logging in." "Please review our Common Query section to see if our support experts have already answered your question for another customer." "Please select the type of challenge you are encountering."

The first problem with static online support tools is that in seeking out support, end users are rarely concerned with, or even interested in, independently finding their own answers. They have sought out additional help because that is what they need. When directed to a static resource that asks them to work a little bit harder for the answer, many support seekers become frustrated. Instead of looking for the answer to their question, they are often just looking more intensely—and with a bit more exasperation—for a number to call and a person to talk to.

#### The Online Cons

- **Communication Factor:** *Complex problems are hard to communicate online and miscommunications often occur when you are unable to speak to someone directly.*
- **The Human Factor:** *Often customers simply want talk to a person. Speaking directly to a support professional can be reassuring—a benefit that can be lost with online support.*
- **Sidelined Factor:** *With e-mail based support response, customers can feel like their needs are not seen as critical to the service provider. All customer problems are treated equally; there is no way to assign urgency, priority or criticality. With phone support, you can assign severity to the call and a customer knows how quickly their needs will be met.*
- **Frustration Factor:** *Customers are more likely to give up on online support, frustrated at not being able to speak to someone in person.*

### Two of a Kind Always Wins

What help desk employers and managers have known for years is that in a support scenario you can never underestimate the power of personalized service and a kind, knowledgeable voice. Great support builds customers for life and it is next to impossible to recreate that personalized service level when only online options are available.

Today's world-class help desk and support solutions combine the resource-rich information of online tools with traditional, responsive phone-based support. Online support can be used to cater to the smaller percentage of end users who prefer to seek out answers for themselves and to address simple issues and quick yes-and-no questions. For example, automated, online support for password resets has proven an invaluable time and resource saver for help desks and call centers the world over.

Still, phone-based support must always be an option for businesses that are serious about maintaining and building lasting customer relationships. At one point or another, your customers will need to talk to someone. The issue may be big or it may be small, but the difference between keeping and losing a frustrated customer is often as simple and as critical as an understanding, informed voice on the other end of the line. Take away that ability to access a voice of reason and knowledge and you eliminate a critical point of customer access and satisfaction. So please stay on the line, both phone and Internet, in order to keep customers coming back.

#### About the Author

Anna Frazzetto, Vice President of Technology Solutions for Harvey Nash, is an IT executive who has architected, implemented and overseen managed services and outsourcing initiatives at Global 1000 as well as mid-size companies. A BPO industry and subject matter expert, she has been responsible for the development and implementation of technology practices in numerous organizations and held strategic responsibility for managing data centers, help desks and networking practices. An acknowledged leader in the managed services and infrastructure management industries, Anna spearheads the development and implementation of IT solutions for Harvey Nash's network of nationwide offices.

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