

Online Customer Support Communities

Customers Helping Customers

“LiveWorld’s Best Practices to Increase Customer Satisfaction While Reducing Support Costs”

Many companies have attempted to implement self-help and customer-to-customer interactivity on their web sites. With a few exceptions, these companies’ efforts have largely been unsuccessful or are used by a small minority of customers—not because these strategies don’t work, but because these companies have failed to understand their customers. In this paper, learn the Top 10 Rules and the best practices followed by successful companies.



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The Benefits of Customer-to-Customer Support

Customer support demands continue to escalate for most companies, and delivering support is becoming more complex. The cost of support continues to grow—averaging between \$25 and \$50 per call and \$4 to \$15 per email. Avoiding costly contacts should be top on every customer support executive agenda.

Few companies, however, successfully leverage one of the most valuable company assets—the loyal, dedicated, and expert customers in your installed base. Your customers represent a huge, untapped, and virtually free support resource. Often they are also your strongest advocates. Among the few firms that recognize this resource and attempt to leverage it by creating an online support community, precious few implement appropriate plans. Ignoring the customer support community opportunity may cost your company such benefits as these:

Cost Avoidance

For many companies, a 5% improvement in call avoidance can save \$1 million or more in expenses a year. You gain huge leverage when you understand how to use your own expert customers to help answer questions. Achieving such improvement requires very little investment on your part.

Increased Value

Customers now demand service in Internet time. Where companies once prided themselves in handling 99% of all questions within 24 to 48 hours, even an hour wait can become an eternity in today's world of instant communication. Most companies can't afford to deliver such support without "breaking the bank." Expert customers allow you to deliver faster support without significant increases in cost. Plus, customers are often available when your team isn't—24 hours per day, 7 days per week, 365 days per year.

Greater Customer Satisfaction

Most companies measure the performance of their support reps by how many calls they handle per day, as well as the length of time of each call. These metrics encourage reps to spend as little time as possible with each customer. By contrast, expert customers will often spend as much time as someone needs. Those seeking help often get a more complete solution from your customers while being taught to be more self-sufficient. Moreover, expert customers have real world experiences that your support reps don't have—offering better insight and understanding about customer problems.

Increased Revenue

A vibrant online support community allows new and prospective clients to gain greater confidence with your products more quickly and easily. Customers have an easy way to network with each other, getting answers to questions, along with advice and recommendations. From whom would it be better for your new and prospective customers to learn than your most loyal, dedicated, and expert enthusiasts?

What is an online support community?

An online support community is generally a discussion board for questions and answers. Ideally, it's specifically designed to allow users to easily and quickly find answers to questions already asked and answered by others or, if they can't find an answer, to ask (or post) their questions for expert customers to answer. A good board allows quick escalation of more difficult issues to your own support reps. It's also designed to motivate other (expert) users to answer questions fast and accurately. The point of an online support community is Q&A—not opinion, not commentary, not gossip, and not personal conversations. It's about solving problems, learning, and sharing ideas.

Best Practices

Online support communities don't just happen. A number of companies have seen the value of self-support and interactivity among customers but received disappointing results because they supposed the capability itself would deliver results: "If you build it, they will come"—but they don't. Or they do, but in a context that neither supports the companies' values or goals. Or, only a fraction of the total customer base uses them. Our research and experience shows that online support communities need deployment of the right mix of features, seeding to get them started, and ongoing management to keep them on track toward fully achieving their potential leverage. We have summarized here the top 10 rules and 20 best practices that in our experience achieve the greatest results:

Rule #1: Make the support board easier to use than making a telephone call!

Best Practice #1: Make it easy for users to find and use your online support community.

Just as it is true in science, it is true with human nature that users will follow the path of least resistance. The easier you make telephone support, and the harder you make getting to the support board, customers will opt for telephone support.

Give visibility and access right up front; don't bury it seven layers deep in your site. On your web site, give the board at least as much visibility as your customer support telephone number. And, while users are waiting in your phone queue, play a recorded message telling customers that faster help can be found on your web site.

As obvious as all this sounds, it's amazing how few companies follow this practice. As of this writing, one company, HP (which has a great online support board), buries it seven layers deep on their site. This is tantamount to having an unlisted customer support telephone number for your support board.

Rule# 2: Call it what it is – a place to ask questions and get answers!

Best Practice #2: Make it obvious that the board is about Q&A.

Users need to know what to expect; otherwise, unintended behaviors can create "noise." A noisy board with lots of gossip, flame wars, opinions, commentary, and the like makes it difficult for users to know what to do, what to expect, or how to interact. Don't make it difficult to know which message is an answer and which is a question.

Tell users what it is—a place to "ask questions." Make it inviting. Use common language that anyone can understand—*forum*, *message board*, and *discussion board* are not necessarily words that most users understand. An even worse practice is to label your it a *community*—which doesn't mean much to most users. Instead of asking users to post *messages* tell them where to *ask a question* or *search for answers*. Instead of asking users to *post a reply*, ask them to *answer this question*.

Best Practice #3: One question, one answer.

We don't mean only one *reply*, but we do mean the replies should stay *on topic*, that is, focused on the question. We believe that the best practice is to keep the Q & A thread in conversation mode. Don't allow sub threads; it just gets too noisy for everyone. And as we've said, too much noise, too much confusion.

Sometimes conversations develop that are not directly answering questions or are based on generalized topics. This can be good if you set up a separate discussion oriented area of the board. Provide good, active moderation; it's a different game with different goals.

Rule #3: Make it easy for users to find the answer to their questions.

Best Practice #4: Provide an option for receiving answers via email.

Allow a user to be notified as soon as an answer to his or her question has been posted in the board. Don't force users to remember to keep coming back to see if an answer is there—or worse yet, make them search through hundreds (if not thousands) of questions that came in after they asked their questions.

Best Practice #5: Provide an easy way for users to see all the questions that they have asked.

Users typically have several questions that they may fire off in rapid succession. Make it easy to see them all. As they see the list grow, users begin to equate real value to the board.

Rule #4: Be clear who is answering questions.

Best Practice #6: Let the users know it's a peer-to-peer, or member-to-member support system.

Let users know that other "expert" users are answering their questions; this is key to creating a viral effect, encouraging other users to begin participating in answering questions. In this way too, novice users are encouraged to answer questions as they become more expert.

Best Practice #7: Clearly indicate how your own employees will engage in the board..

Let users know when, if ever, your own employees will engage in answering questions. Don't let customers wonder, "Where is the company support rep?" Just set clear expectations. It's also important for users to be able to separate "official" company answers from those of other community members.

Rule #5: The board should be a rich source of answers; give users the right tools to find them.

Without good tools, users will ask the same questions over and over again. Repetition contributes to noise and causes some users to opt for telephone support. Good tools allow users to quickly and easily find answers to their own questions.

Best Practice #8: Display, right up front, the most frequently read, highest rated questions.

If it's being read frequently, it's probably important. If it's important, the call rate will go up. Head off calls by putting the answer right in front of users, before they have to search or browse.

Best Practice #9: If a question has been answered satisfactorily, mark that fact.

At the question list level, note with a mark or icon that a particular query has been answered, and whether it was answered satisfactorily. Include this capability in your search engine, and allow searches for questions that have answers and/or high ratings.

Best practice #10: Use an outstanding search engine.

Users should have the flexibility not only to do a keyword or natural language search by subject or questions text, but also to search by date, user name, expertise, and other useful data fields. The search engine should allow searches of the complete board or just selected folders/topics.

A search engine should rank order results for best matches. If the ranking system is based on the match in the number of search terms plus the proximity of those terms to each other, then you get the best of all worlds. Users then can avoid their most hated college math term—"Boolean logic."

Best Practice #11: Build a quality knowledgebase.

Don't lose your archives; keep them searchable. The archives are money in bank. The use of the existing knowledgebase is THE major leverage point for any support board. A high percentage of questions that users ask have already been answered and are lying around in the board ready for use—if the user can find them.

Rule #6: Rate answers.

Best Practice #12: Facilitate user-generated ratings.

Users who ask the questions are the ideal people to say if the answers worked. A rating capability leads to greater credibility and quality for the support board. It is then also easy to see if users are still waiting on a “correct” answer, which then can be escalated to one of your own reps.

Best Practice #13: Allow ratings of searches too.

More people will search for an answer than ever ask a question (10 times more is not unusual to see). This is where the real leverage of a support board is found. Knowing that a search resulted in finding an answer allows you to estimate the leverage factor of your “knowledgebase.”

To prevent abuse of the rating system, the user (not the original author of the question) should tell you only when a particular answer actually works.

Rule #7: Reward authors.

Best Practice #14: Rank authors; then reward them.

Don't only rate answers; also allow users to assign points for the quality of the answer. Then based upon the points they've earned, give contributors special status, identifying them with unique colors or icons. You may also reward contributors with company logo items, and so on. Recognition is

among the best methods that encourage volunteers to contribute, as well as a self-correcting system for quality control.

Best Practice #15: Encourage use of rating system.

A reward system is one of the single best ways to encourage well thought out, clear answers, and to give recognition that supports strong participation from your experts. Not everyone is going to take the time to rate an answer and assign points to your volunteer contributors, so make it very easy to do—and motivate people to provide ratings at the same time you're motivating people to provide quality answers. This data becomes essential to the vitality of the community and to determining the ROI of the support board.

Rule #8: Leverage internal resources.

Best Practice #16: Involve employees.

Given the potential leverage of the support board, consider dedicating a small number of support reps to help answer questions. You can increase your company's responsiveness by heading off real critical problems with quick responses.

Encourage your internal gurus from engineering and product marketing to participate along with the support organization. However, before any employees go online to answer questions, make sure they've been trained in online dialog techniques and identify their employee status with special icons.

Best Practice #17: Escalate unanswered questions.

Don't expect every question to be answered by your customer volunteers, especially since some of them may be solvable only by internal people. But the worst thing to do is let those questions hang around unanswered, so make sure you have a filter to escalate them to your internal people. And let question posters know when their problems have been escalated.

Rule #9: If you can't prove it, no one will believe it.

Best Practice #18: Measure the right data.

The importance of measuring the results of your online support community can't be overstated. Collecting and reporting results will guide you in how best to grow and manage your resources.

Collect metrics such as how many questions are asked and/or answered, quality of answers over time, numbers of answers provided by your employees versus customer volunteers, time to reply, and other similar metrics. Measure search results too, especially if you capture ratings on searches; this gives you a measure of leverage—the number of questions answered without needing any assistance.

Best Practice #19: If you can't measure it, then sample it.

Some things simply cannot be answered without simple polls or surveys—for example, understanding whether users are checking the online support community first before calling.

Rule #10: Listen & learn.

Best Practice #20: Regularly cruise the board.

Listen carefully to the questions customers are asking and the answers they are getting. You can learn from this information how to build a better product or service. You may also learn how customers are using your products in unique and interesting ways. Perhaps more importantly, it's a chance to gauge the pulse of your customers (whether for good or bad) and have your marketing & sales organization respond accordingly. In the final analysis, reports alone won't tell you about all the subtlety of human behavior.

Find the current hot questions and their context as well as other nuances. Good reporting will help. Good administrative tools will help too.

Bottom line, don't build your online support community and then ignore it. While it offers huge leverage in saving money and improving your business, as with most things, your online support community may need some upfront time and resources to get it going or keep it from declining.

About The Contributors

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Trevor Griffith is LiveWorld's Solutions Development Vice President, responsible for specifying, researching, and developing targeted solutions for LiveWorld's markets. He has directed web collaboration, customer support, community, and market research solutions development. Prior to joining LiveWorld, Griffith was VP of Engineering with Nickelodeon Networks, developing and launching its highly scalable web-based children's community. He spent a number of years at Apple Computer, pioneering eWorld, Apple's online community for Apple users, and AppleLink, the first online system using an easy to use, graphical interface for Apple dealers, developers and employees. He also drove the creation of AppleLink Personal Edition, an innovative online support system targeted at Apple consumers, and which later became America Online.

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Jay Friedman is a member of LiveWorld's advisory board and previously was LiveWorld's Sr. Vice President of Sales, Marketing, and Client Services, directing the company's business strategy and client relationships. Prior to joining LiveWorld, Friedman was Vice President of Operations at NFO Prognostics, the IT division of NFO Worldwide, a research-based management consulting firm, where he focused on helping information technology companies improve customer knowledge, customer loyalty, and relationship management. He has consulted with such companies such as eBay, Cisco Systems, Sun Microsystems, Novell, Turner Broadcasting, and numerous others.

A 20-year veteran in the information technology industry, with substantial business-to-business experience, Friedman also spent seven years at Sun Microsystems as Director of Worldwide Marketing for its customer support organization. In this position, he directed programs that helped Sun build long-term customer relationships through services such as consulting, professional services, and customer support. Prior to joining Sun, he served as Hewlett-Packard's Product Marketing Manager to Customer Support.

*** Jenna Woodul**

As Executive Vice President and Chief Community Officer for LiveWorld, Woodul began her online career in 1984, heading up a group of editors for AppleLink. She was a core member of the AppleLink Personal Edition team, the project that eventually evolved into AOL.

While at Apple, Woodul created the eWorld Community Center, which housed the heart of eWorld's interactivity. She directed the community team, including producers, trainers, online hosts and 24/7 staff for enforcing community standards. Woodul's team brought celebrities online and created differentiating online cultures and programming, which received consistent positive attention from industry and consumer press. She continued to evolve the model with millions of users at Talk City which became know as the highest quality and one of the largest Internet community sites, developing talent that now hosts communities for LiveWorld's major corporate customers. The LiveWorld culture and vision of community management solutions evolved directly from her past accomplishments.

About LiveWorld, Inc.

LiveWorld (OTC BB: LVWD), www.liveworld.com is a leading interactive marketing agency specializing in private label online social networks and communities for Fortune 1000 companies. LiveWorld designs, builds, hosts the applications, moderates and community manages social networks, blogs, user video and community sites for its clients. Additionally LiveWorld provides overall social network strategy and brand consulting. Among the unique benefits LiveWorld offers its customers is a team of experienced moderators, who oversee the activity and user content on LiveWorld, client and third party provided sites. LiveWorld deploys its services in over 60 country-language combinations.

With twenty years of experience, an extensive applications hosting platform and a track record of delivering over 1 million hours of moderation services, LiveWorld is the trusted partner of leading brands worldwide, including: America Online, A&E Television Networks, AOL UK, The Aspen Institute, BBC Worldwide, BEA Systems, BlogSafety.com, Breast Cancer.org, The Campbell Soup Company, Discovery Communications, eBay, HBO, IDG, The Hillary Clinton For President Campaign, Intel, JumpTheShark.com, Kraft Foods, Match.com, Mattel, MINI Cooper USA, MTV, The NBA, QVC, Tulane University, TV Guide and Verizon. Agency relationships have included AKQA (consumer packaged goods client), AOL Media (Dove, Holiday Inn Express, Target, media clients), Beam Interactive (MINI Cooper), Burson-Marsteller (Hillary Clinton For President Campaign), Digit (BBC WorldWide), Digitas (financial services client), Euro RSCG (Campbells, MINI Cooper), Hill, Holiday, Connors, Cosmopolos (financial services client), Ogilvy (Dove, Mattel), Questus (Verizon), Wildfire (consumer packaged goods and pharmaceutical clients) and Wunderman UK (Land Rover).

Our Experience: Online Communities

Founded in 1996 by executive management of Apple's eWorld and AppleLink, LiveWorld has been developing and implementing online communities since the mid-80s. Leading edge technology underpins our services. Our extensive experience with the management of online communities differentiates us from other providers.

We work closely with clients to help them create the kind of interaction they need for their objectives. Our hands-on account managers are experts who have managed online communities from the ground up, dealing regularly with the challenges of building participation levels, creating a sense of place, recognizing contribution, identifying leadership, encouraging consistent user engagement, and reporting to company goals.

For more information on Customer Support Communities and other LiveWorld services contact:

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LiveWorld is headquartered in San Jose, California.