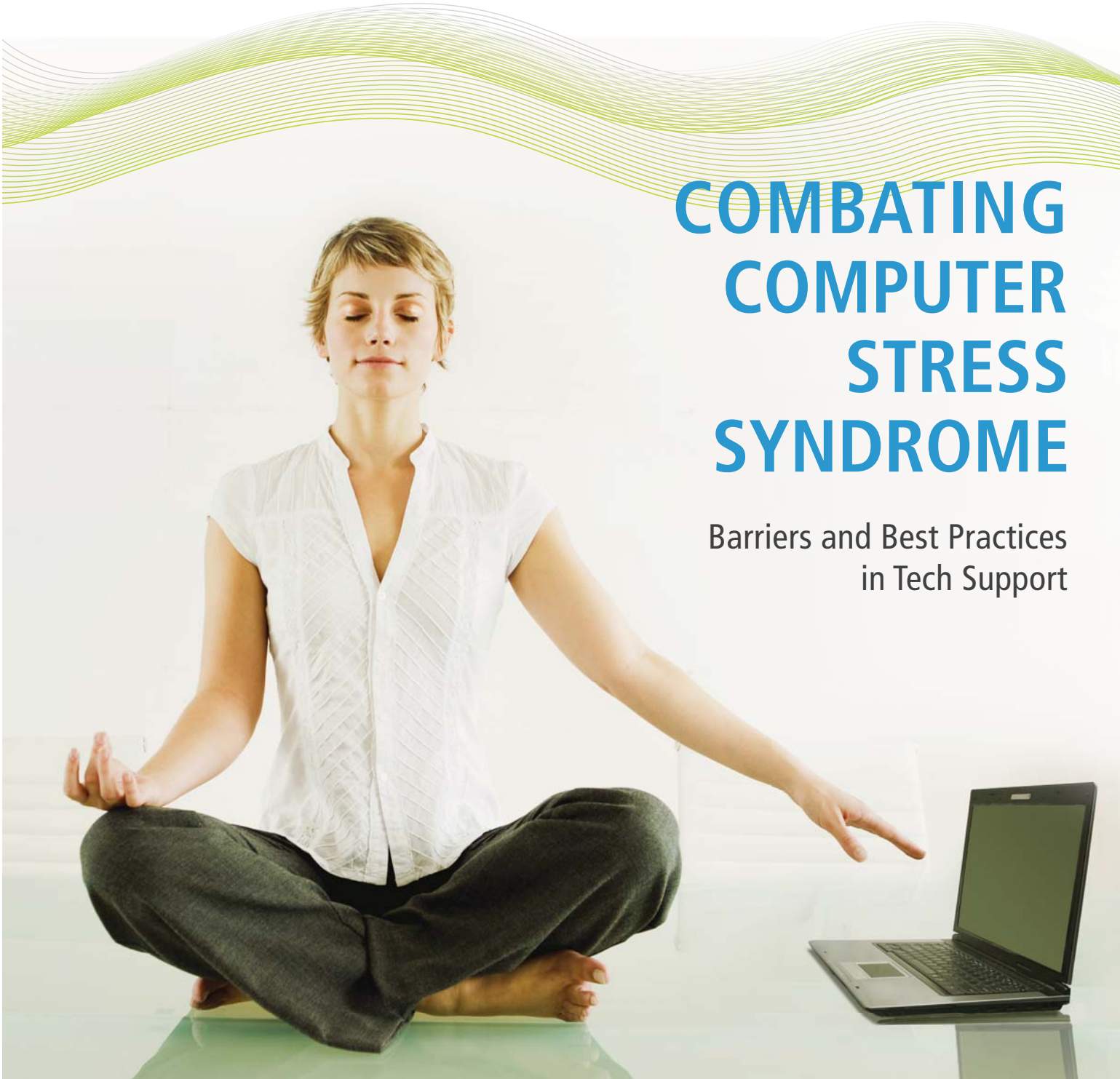




VARIANCE IN
THE TECH EXPERIENCE



COMBATING COMPUTER STRESS SYNDROME

Barriers and Best Practices
in Tech Support



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INTRODUCTION

Today's digitally dependent consumers are increasingly overwhelmed and upset with technical glitches and problems in their daily lives. The source of their pain: frustrating, complex computers and devices, technical failures, viral infections, and long waits to resolve support issues that disrupt the flow of their work and personal lives. These users face a continuous state of technical anxiety and challenge – such as setting up new computer products, keeping up with software upgrades and migrating to new applications and operating systems, as well as dealing with malware infections, web threats, identity theft and more.

According to the Pew Research Center, four in every 10 computer users suffer a system failure at least once in a 12-month period, and more than half require support to resolve their technical issues. More than 60 percent of users say they feel impatient, discouraged and confused by these technical problems and the resulting disruption of their digital lives. Millions more use computers that have been compromised by severe slowdowns and vulnerabilities that threaten both safety and productivity.

While the threats and complications with computers are on the rise, customer technical support has not kept pace to address the needs of a growing population of computer users that are highly dependent upon their device as part of their daily lives. Part of the issue is the need to change the mindset of consumers to be more accepting and trustful of outside technical support services. To date, many have attempted to try and fix the problem themselves with available software or just accepted a slower or poorly performing machine.

Thirty percent of consumers have used in-store or in-home technical support to solve a computer problem as of 2009, up from 10 percent in 2006, according to a Parks Associates study. While the adoption of technical support service is growing, consumers remain skeptical or reluctant to fully utilize all available resources. Users are simply not satisfied with existing support services, and client service models have proven to be insufficient, often struggling to handle the complexities of today's digital landscape.

A recent Forrester study on customer experience showed that only one major computer vendor had a good satisfaction rating of more than 80 percent, whereas all other major vendors averaged poor or barely OK ratings of between 50-66 percent.

"[A computer breakdown] necessitates calling the technician. Not so easy because the computer 'powers that be' would rather you not call them. After an hour of frantic search, you find the number and make the call. Your pulse quickens and your stomach churns as you wait yet another hour before a technician finally answers the phone. As you describe the problem, either due to your inability to explain the problem, or the tech's inability to understand what you are saying, little progress is made..."

– Dr. Murray Feingold

What's needed is a new "Resolution Revolution" to counteract the rising problem of "Computer Stress Syndrome" faced by users. Current computer vendor support solutions and models are aimed minimizing support costs and after-market customer handling. Live on-site support services offered by retailers take days or weeks to schedule, are costly, and don't fix the problem on time if at all.

“Because they are so important to us, computers are a two-edged sword. When they are functioning properly, they’re great. But when something goes wrong, we immediately go into panic... This is what I call the Computer Stress Syndrome or CSS.”

– Dr. Murray Feingold

Variance in the Tech Experience

In order to assess and address the challenges and opportunities associated with the current state of inadequate technical support, The Variance in Customer Experience program provides a much needed snapshot of the factors contributing to Computer Stress Syndrome as well as best practice tips and solutions that consumers and small businesses can employ to improve satisfaction and resolution.

The Customer Experience Board, in partnership with The Forum to Advance the Mobile Experience, and the Business Performance Management Forum, have engaged in an independent assessment of the variance in the customer experience for leading computer and software tech support operations. The Computer Stress Syndrome Audit tested and evaluated the resolution rates, proficiency and cost-effectiveness of leading technical support services provided by computer manufacturers, communications service providers, software vendors, retailers and third-party contractors.

The program gathered industry thought leaders, reputable organizations and resources together to examine this critical area of consumer help and need. The online audit examined satisfaction and performance criteria, service costs and effectiveness, time-to-problem-resolutions rates, availability and reliability of service, technician responsiveness and knowledge, caller wait times, and the caliber and courtesy of human intervention.

Research Overview

The Customer Experience Board, in late 2009 and into Q1 2010, conducted a comprehensive online survey of more than 1,000 North American consumers to assess and quantify the issues, challenges, and rates of resolution around computer tech support options. The results reveal perceptions, attitudes, and experiences with tech support along with the most common computer problems faced and the impacts that Computer Stress Syndrome has on daily life.

This report summarizes the findings of the audit, along with providing executive insights and best practices to improve the caliber of service offered and the understanding of consumers of the issues involved and the options available.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

High Degree of Proud, Computer-Dependent Users

The survey revealed a very high degree of computer dependency in daily life, with a vast majority of consumers relying on the computer to help them navigate through the day. In addition, more than three-quarters of these computer users consider themselves as capable and proficient on the computer, which might suggest that they are well-prepared to handle problems or issues that come up with the operation of the computer. However, further findings show that slowdowns, disruptions, viruses and connection problems trouble even these savvy users, driving the need for better means of quick, cost-effective remote issue resolution.

Computer Stress Syndrome is Prevalent

The reality is that numerous, persistent problems are troubling most computer users, creating unnecessary anguish and anxiety as a result. Whether the troubles be long boot-up times, slow processing, shoddy wireless or Internet access, or a host of spyware and virus threats, nearly two-thirds have needed to contact technical support assistance and/or have experienced Computer Stress Syndrome in the past year. Digitally dependent users are getting fed up and frustrated with the current state of computer related stress, and clearly looking for a better way to address and reduce it.

DIY / Cheap Route May be Costing Consumers

A majority of computer users are attempting to deal with the problem through a number of home-grown means. Whether through a do-it-yourself (DIY) or do-nothing approach or relying on friends or family for answers, almost two-thirds are not taking a methodical and consistent approach to relieving their issues and stress. Support cost seems to be a big factor. And almost half of those who have tried a support service are not happy with and/or are not satisfied with the cost of currently available service. They complain of long service wait times, lack of resolution and language barriers of the technicians.

Computer Downtime Detrimental

Users point to a variety of negative impacts that stem from unresolved computer issues, including undue stress, life interruptions, lost information and transaction disruption. The hours and days of wasted time toiling with computer troubles are taking their toll, causing people to rethink the value of alternative effective support solutions.

Early Signs of the Remote Revolution

Some signs are encouraging, however, as respondents say they are willing to pay \$50 or more for remote, always-on tech support. And they point to a variety of criteria with which they evaluate computer tech support beyond just cost to include skill, time, availability and flexibility of service, suggesting that they are getting more sophisticated and demanding in what they look for and expect in superior service. These early signs point to a "Remote Revolution" in which consumers begin to evaluate alternatives to address Computer Stress Syndrome and the root causes of it in a more effective, efficient and disciplined way.

KEY FINDINGS

- Ninety-four percent of consumers depend on their computer in their personal lives, and nearly two-thirds (62 percent) have a high level of dependency.
- A surprising 78 percent consider themselves self-supporting and savvy computer users, though most are saddled with problems and frustrations.
- Sixty-four percent say their computer has caused them anguish or anxiety.
- The most commonly cited causes of computer problems and stress are frequent slowdowns (51 percent) and lengthy boot-up times (36 percent), followed by issues with Internet access (15 percent), wireless connectivity (14 percent) and spyware (14 percent).
- Sixty-two percent have needed to contact technical support assistance over the last year.
- Yet nearly two-thirds (64 percent) are attempting a home-grown approach to solving computer problems through trying it themselves (37 percent), asking a friend or family member (18 percent), or doing nothing (9 percent).
- For those who have tried a tech support service, 41 percent are not highly satisfied with their experience.
- Two-thirds don't currently pay for computer support, which is in line with the percentage that are trying to fix the problem on their own.
- Almost 30 percent currently pay up to \$100 a year for computer support, despite the mixed reviews on service satisfaction.
- Forty-two percent of those that use an outside computer support service are not happy about the cost of it.
- Top sources of stress and frustration with the tech support experience are long wait times, inability to fix problems, the cost of the service and limited language skills of technicians.
- Users are experiencing significant computer downtime, with 75 percent experiencing hours of failure per year and 40 percent troubled with days of a disabled computer.
- This widespread computer failure has had significant impact on users' personal and work lives; top five ways include:
 - Increased stress levels (42 percent)
 - Interrupted valuable work or play time (39 percent)
 - Lost valuable data (21 percent)
 - Dropped network or e-mail connections (16 percent)
 - Hindered or prevented online purchases (10 percent)
- They are spending valuable time trying to solve computer problems. Eighty-eight percent took hours to do it, 39 percent spent half a day or more and 12 percent spent several days over the last year toiling with their troubles.

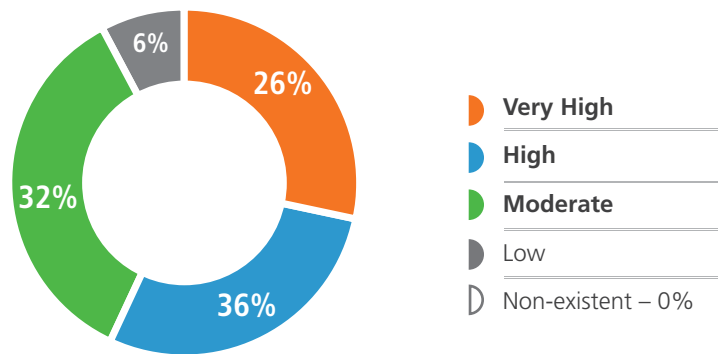
- Consumers use a variety of criteria in evaluating their computer tech support service. Top evaluation factors include:
 - Cost of service (43 percent)
 - Skill of support techs (40 percent)
 - Time to issue resolution (31 percent)
 - 24/7 availability of tech support staff (27 percent)
 - Wait times for service calls or appointments (20 percent)
- Users are starting to understand the value of effective service – one-third are willing to pay \$50 or more for remote, automatic, always-on tech support service.
- Respondents represent a cross section of demographics:
 - 55 percent are women
 - 77 percent are age 30-65
 - 48 percent are older than 50
 - Dell (33 percent) and HP (24 percent) are the most commonly used computer brands

DETAILED FINDINGS

Data Dependency Dominates

Consumers are more dependent than ever on the use of their computer as part of their daily home and work routine. A whopping 94 percent consider themselves dependent on the computer in their personal lives, and more than 60 percent have a high level of dependency. These large numbers would suggest that any computer problems, slowdowns, and issues could have a lasting impact on the day-to-day activities and the overall equilibrium of most computer users.

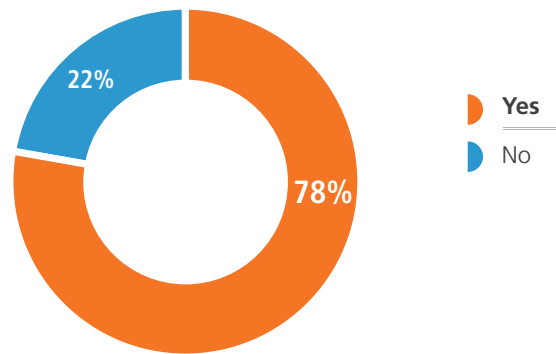
Q.01 How would you describe the level of computer dependency in your personal life?



Claims of Computer Confidence and Competency

A vast majority of respondents by and large are self-proclaimed proficient and capable computer users and problem solvers. Seventy-eight percent consider themselves savvy and self-supporting computer users versus 22 percent that admit that they are not very proficient. Yet additional survey findings reveal that there are plenty of computer support problems and issues that plague these “savvy” users, and that they suffer disruptions and stress as a result. Perhaps an inflated sense of ability and troubleshooting skills needs a reality check.

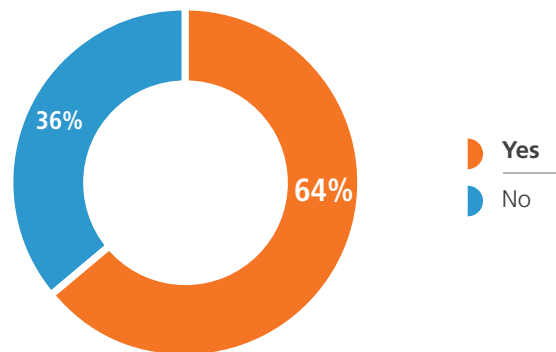
Q.02 Are you a savvy and self-supporting computer user?



Computer Stress Syndrome Surfaces

A two-thirds majority (64 percent) say that they get stressed as a result of their computer. This “Computer Stress Syndrome” is particularly troubling giving the high dependency on personal computer use to conduct daily tasks combined with the troubles that users seem to be having in operating them smoothly and efficiently. Apparently, even savvy users fall prey to computer-induced anxiety.

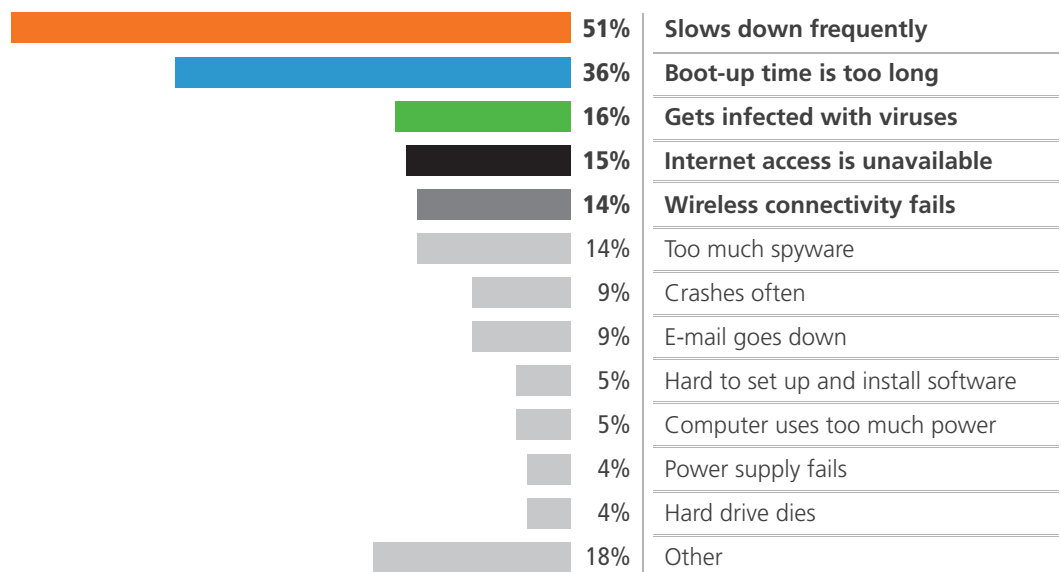
Q.03 Does your personal computer sometimes cause you anguish or anxiety?



No Time for Troubles

Users report a variety of commonly encountered computer problems, many of which require tech support intervention or hours spent on self-diagnosis and repair. Some of the most prominent and frustrating symptoms include frequent system slowdowns, lengthy boot-up times, virus and spyware infections, and Internet or wireless access problems. All of these issues can add stress and interrupt the flow of productive digital personal lives of the victims.

Q.04 What problems have you experienced with your computer? (select up to three)



Some of the free-form answers to problem areas included:

“Need assistance whenever a website makes changes. I usually phone Comcast for help. If it is not their responsibility I must wait for an acquaintance who is computer-savvy to help.”

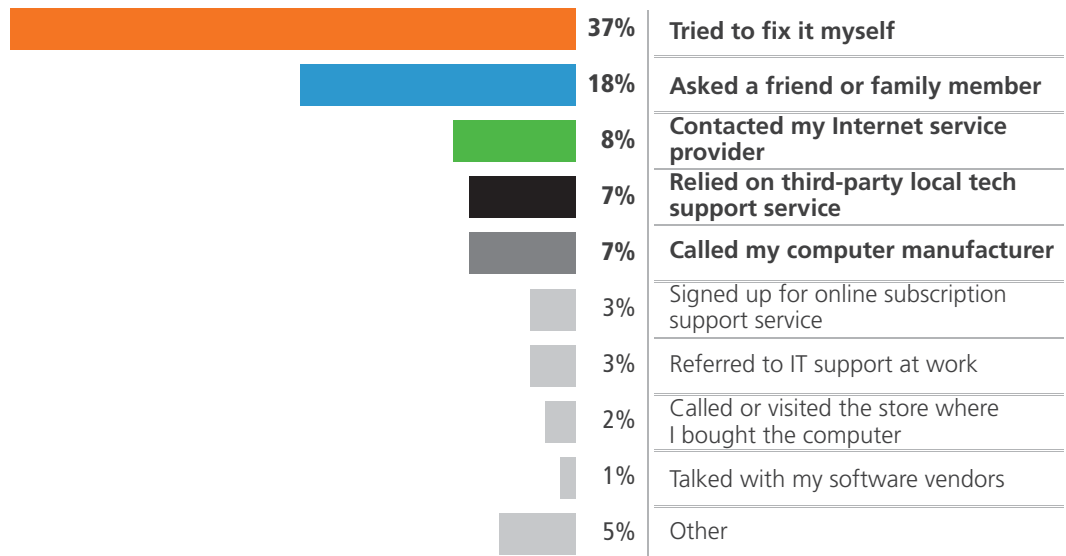
“Blacks out for 30-60 min at a time.”

“Windows 7 compatibility issues.”

The Do-It-Yourself Dilemma

Methods to try and solve computer problems varied widely, from trying to tackle problems on their own, to relying on a close friend or relative to help out in a pinch, to contacting the local service provider or computer technician. Perhaps the most surprising finding is that overall, many users are trying to solve their issues by leaning on relatively non-professional and inexperienced help, which may be contributing to delays, frustration and stress levels. Given the various common problems that afflict these computer users, perhaps there is a hidden call for help in these numbers.

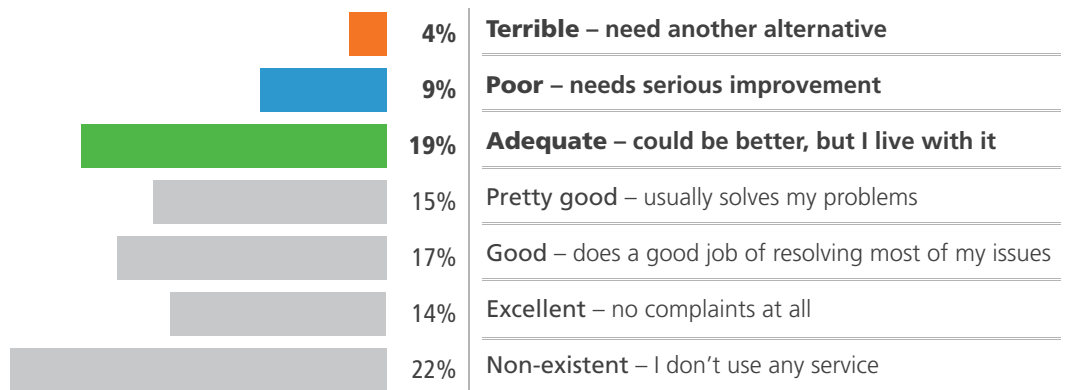
Q.05 How have you typically solved computer problems?



Mixed Reviews for Service Sufficiency

A large portion (41 percent) of those that have tapped into technical support help are not highly satisfied with the experience. Perhaps due to persistent computer slowdowns or complications or a lack of consistent problem resolution methods, these users are not convinced that what they have tried in the past is the best path available. Again, there seems to be a call for better ways to combat Computer Stress Syndrome and the problems that continue to plague a large portion of consumers.

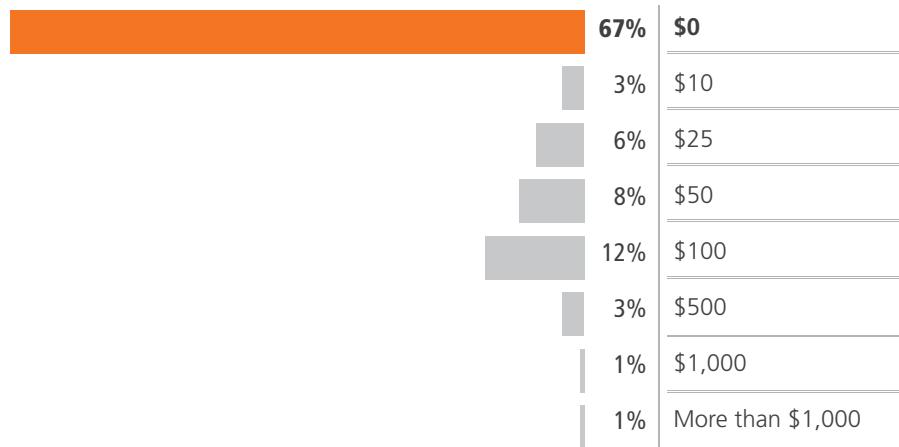
Q.06 How would you characterize your overall experience with this technical support service?



Getting What They Pay For (or Not)

Surprisingly, most respondents are not paying at all for computer support solutions. Two-thirds don't currently pay for support that they use, which is perhaps a result of the large number of consumers trying to solve their issues on their own or as a favor from a friend or family member. On the flip side, nearly 30 percent pay up to \$100 a year for computer tech support, suggesting that some are indeed investing in an improved and more efficient user experience and better customer satisfaction.

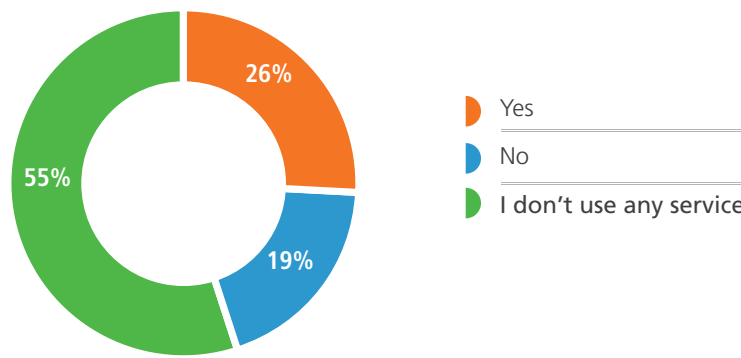
Q.07 How much do you think you pay for computer support each year?



Not Copasetic with Costs

Of those that currently use a computer tech support service, 42 percent are not happy about the cost of such service. This perceived lack of value may stem from a lack of understanding of the need for better and more comprehensive service, an unwillingness to invest in such preventative maintenance, or a frustration with insufficient traditional means of solving their issues. Regardless of the reasons, cost and value of tech support are clearly on the minds of computer users.

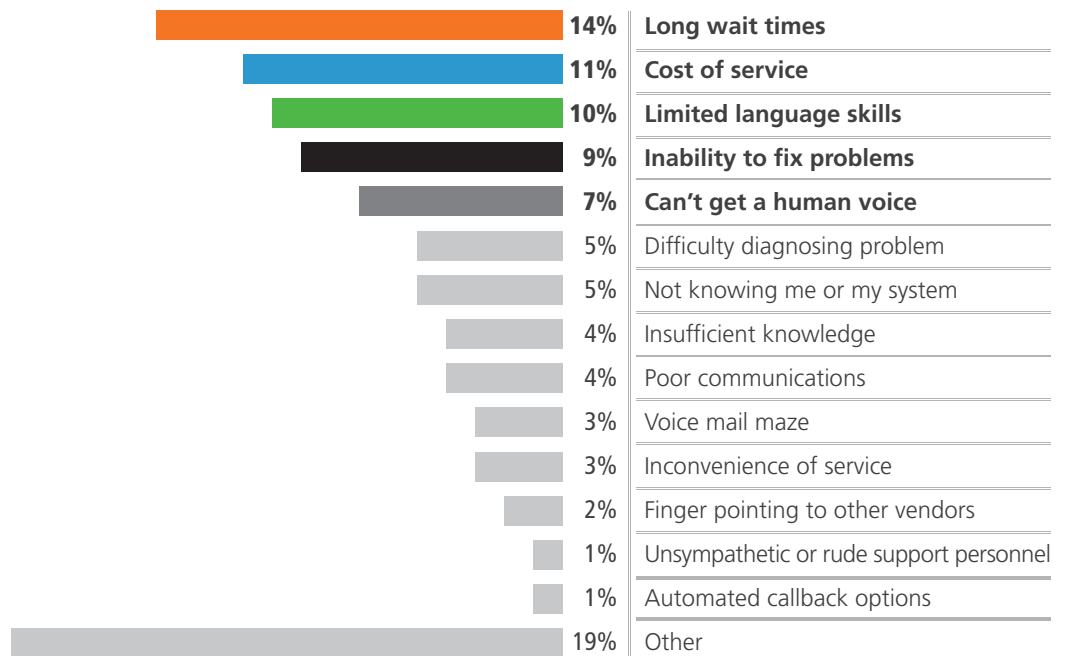
Q.08 Are you happy about what you are being charged for your primary outside technical support?



Fed Up and Frustrated with Persistent Problems

Consumers identified myriad common frustrating issues that concern them around support for their computers. The most prevalent of those issues include long service wait times, unresolved problems, service costs and limited language skills of support technicians. This stress and lack of control caused by several different issues is core to the fundamental issues that require better solutions for Computer Stress Syndrome.

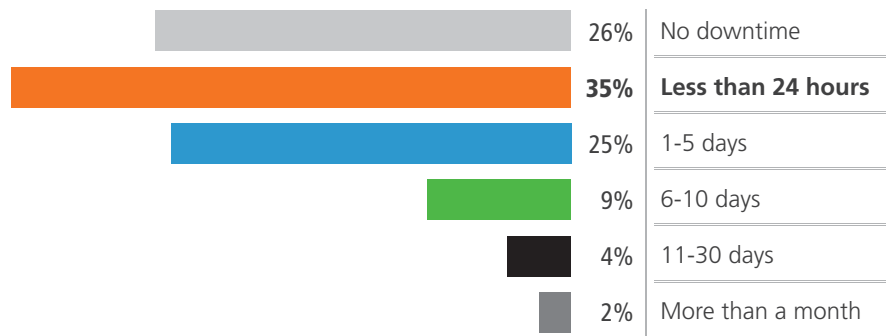
Q.09 What gets you most stressed or frustrated with the tech support experience?



Days of Downtime Due to Computer Troubles

Computer users complain of hours or even days of total downtime as a result of computer problems over the last year. Forty percent have experienced total downtime of a day or more, and some report being disabled weeks or months. Seventy-five percent have had hours of computer failure. It's these collective periods of outage that add up to unproductive, frustrated and stressed users that are struggling to combat the forces that are slowing or crippling their machines for extended periods of time.

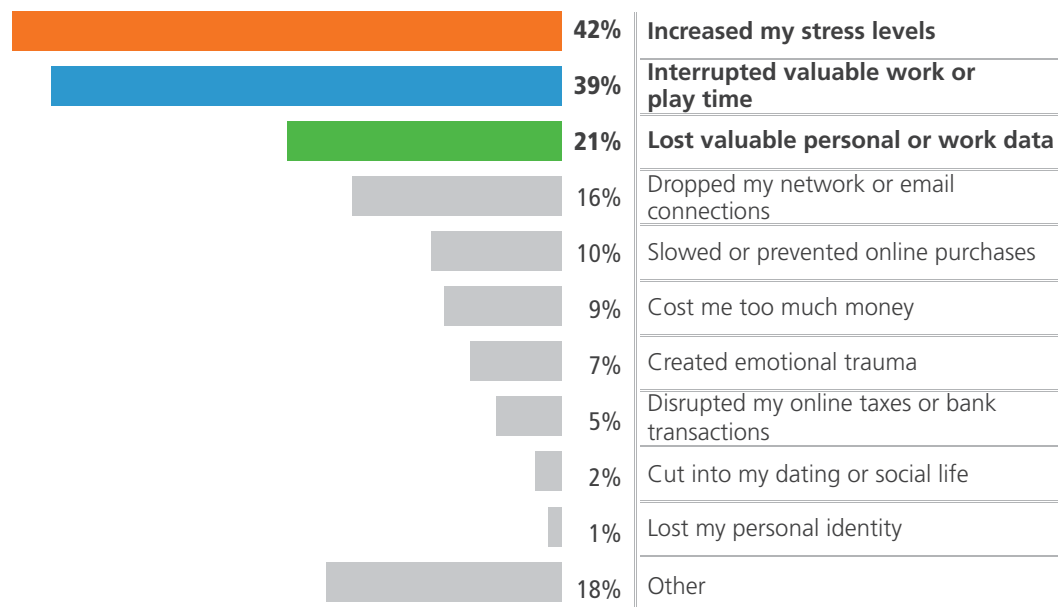
Q.10 How much computer downtime would you estimate you have had over the past year due to technical failure or glitches?



Stressed Out and Stretched Too Thin

Respondents say the number one impact that computer failure has caused is stress (42 percent), followed closely by disruption of valuable personal or work time (39 percent). This makes sense, as computer and digital connectivity have become a more vital part of daily life. As those mechanisms become broken or handicapped, then social and professional life suffers as a result. Given the distribution of the age group of respondents, that likely means that parents and grandparents have less time to spend with children and are adding to stress levels that may be intensified already from current work or economic pressures.

**Q.11 In what way has computer failure most impacted your life?
(select up to three)**



Some of the more interesting open-ended responses the question on how computer failure has impacted their lives include:

“Raised my blood pressure.”

“Required family member to stop other tasks & fix PC.”

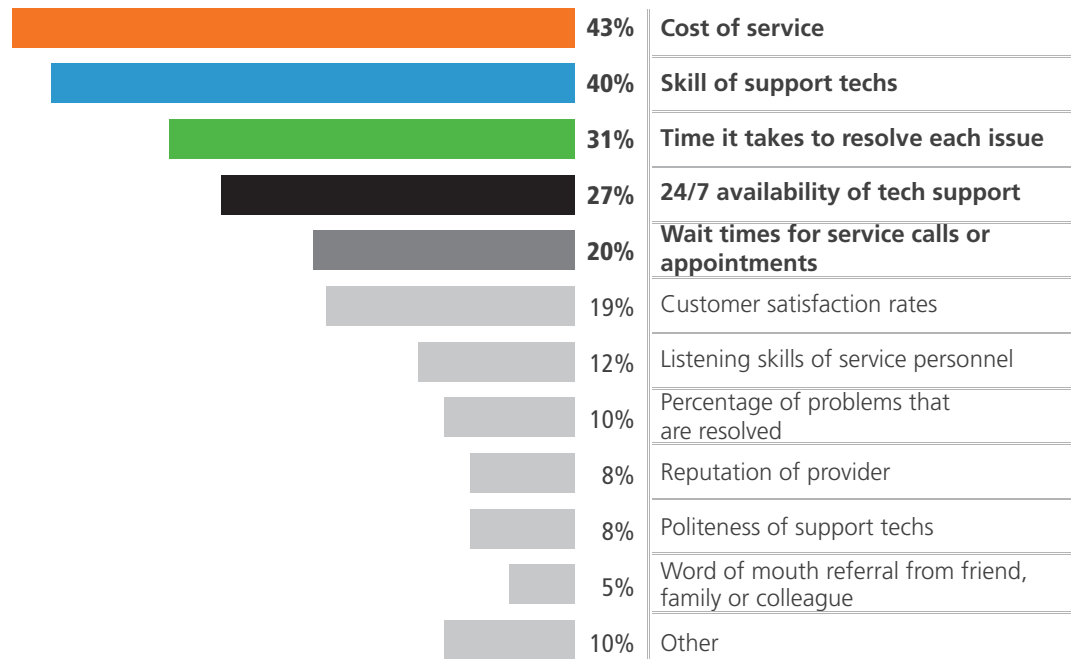
“Have missed deadline times.”

“I have had computer problems since I got the computer, this will be my last HP.”

Cost, Skill and Time for Tech Support Key Differentiators

Computer users pointed to cost considerations, the skill of technicians and the time it takes them to resolve issues as the top choices for what matters most in a tech support service offering. These findings are in line with the apparent value in terms of time and money that consumers are seeking based on other questions in the survey. To the extent that tech support services can get these three variables right – an effective service performed by skilled technicians in a timely basis at a reasonable price – they can provide a real service to reducing and eliminating Computer Stress Syndrome.

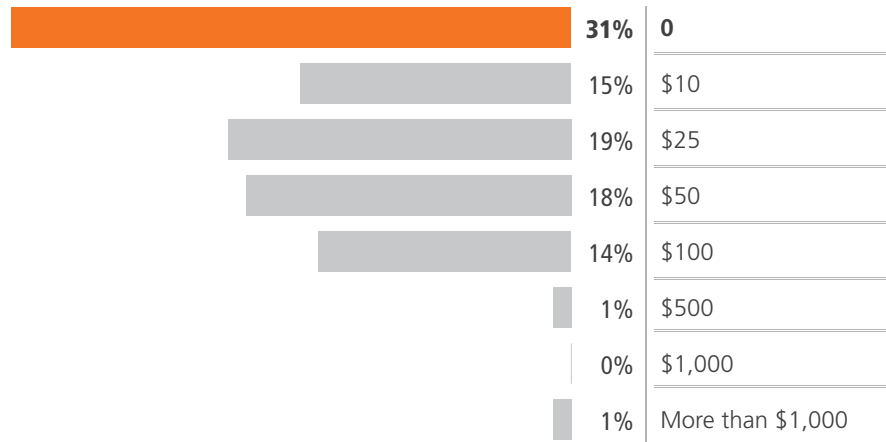
Q.12 Rank the criteria that are most important to you in choosing and keeping a technical support service. (select up to three)



Threshold for Paying Varies

When asked what people would be willing to pay for an always-on, remote tech support service, responses varied. About a third each would be willing to pay \$50-100, \$25-50, or nothing for such a service. Those expectations speak perhaps to an audience that is not aware of the time-savings and value that can be achieved through such a service, or a skepticism that the service is worth more than a few hours of their time. These valuations are in contrast with the disruption and frustration that they are experiencing by trying to solve problems on their own.

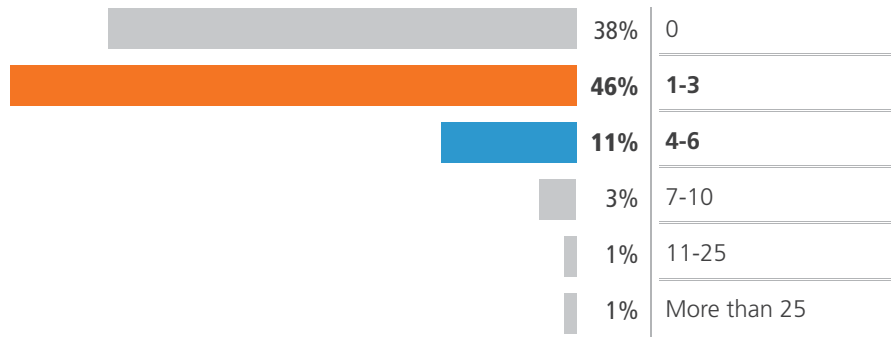
Q.13 What would you be willing to pay per year for a service that is always available and solves computer problems remotely and automatically?



Hello, Is This Tech Support?

Nearly two-thirds of consumers have had to contact technical support assistance for their computer over the last year. This is a high number, particularly given the tendency among about half of the respondents earlier in the survey to try and solve computer problems on their own. These trends suggest that even some of the stubborn that wanted to fix it on their own or save money by sticking it out had to resort to some outside help, many of them multiple times to try to resolve their issues. Some people contacted tech support many times – suggesting frequent problems or insufficient resolution of a few issues.

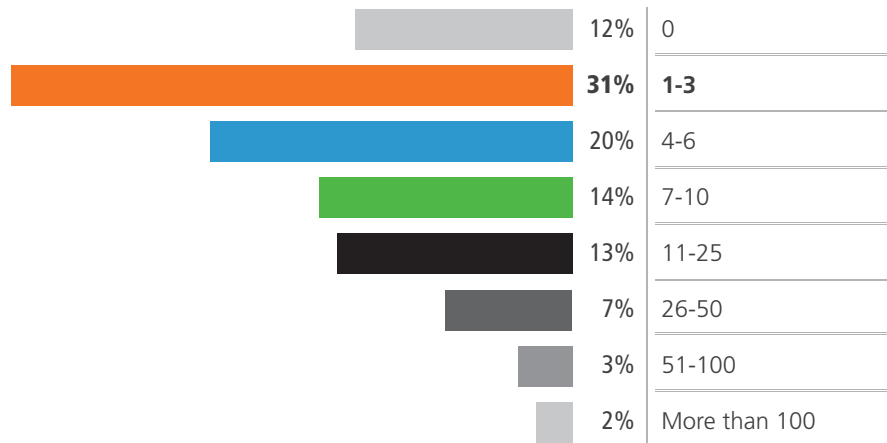
Q.14 How many times have you needed to contact technical support assistance over the last year?



Lots of Time Toiling Over Computer Troubles

Apparently, computer users are spending hours (88 percent) and in some cases days (12 percent) of time per year trying to resolve their issues. And there is no assurance that this time spent is productive. These extended time periods likely have a direct impact on the stress levels and the life disruptions that users cited as the impacts of computer downtime. Added to this is the lack of control that consumers have as to when this repair time will be required and the outside technical help that is available at that particular time. If users attached even a small dollar amount to what their time is worth per hour, they may reconsider the value of an effective 24/7 outside tech support service.

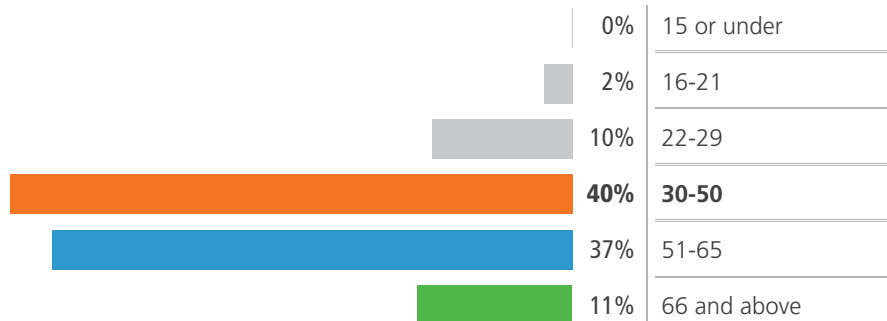
Q.15 How many hours have you spent trying to solve computer problems over the last year?



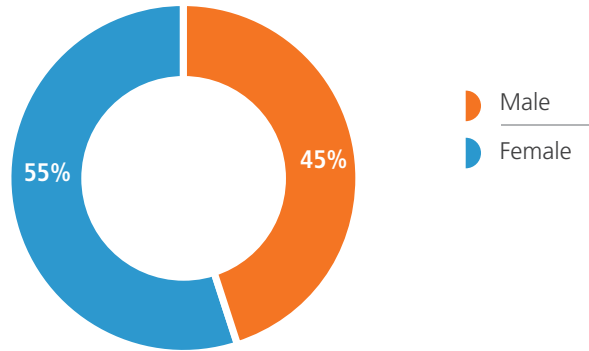
Respondents Represent a Cross-Section of Demographics

Survey respondents represent a broad range of ages, with a tendency towards adults in their 30's and older (88 percent) and women (55 percent). Most common brands of computers used were Dell and HP models.

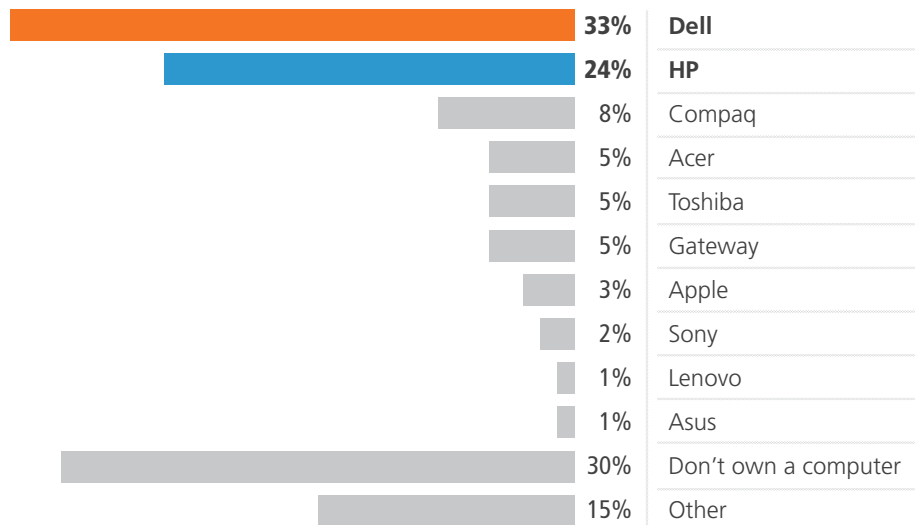
Q.16 What is your age?



Q.17 What is your gender?



Q.18 What type of computer do you own personally?



QUALITATIVE INSIGHTS

Jerry Adriano

Vice President of Customer Experience
Sprint



As the Vice President of Customer Experience at Sprint, one of the leading U.S. telecommunications providers, Jerry Adriano recognizes the strategic value and importance in delivering a great customer experience to his customers. "Since ours is a subscription industry, people are churning all the time because there are competitors with similar or different offers," says Adriano. "There's not much growth any more – most of the customers who switch providers are doing it just as switchers, not new business coming into the marketplace. It is expensive to acquire a customer in our industry, so it's critical for the customer experience to delight and satisfy the customer so they want to stay and tell others about their positive experience."

The importance of tech support has increased further with the advances in wireless devices, says Adriano. "In the wireless space, PDAs and smartphones – which are really just little computers that are portable – are continuing to gain market share. With that, we've introduced complexity into the environment. So while you have a tremendous opportunity to delight customers with its functionality, because there are so many things that can go wrong with that experience you also have the potential not only to dissatisfy them, but to cost yourself a lot of money. That's why it is important that we deliver a great experience around that technical support and customer service."

Adriano believes that there is an opportunity to set better expectations for customers through advance education. "We launched an in-store program in 2008 called ReadyNow. If you purchase a phone, we walk you through the device's features before you leave the store, which helps to avoid the most common issues that customers encounter in terms of setting up the device, configuring email and using the basic functions. We walk you through what to do, where to get more help, how to find tutorials. That is a big part of improving the actual tech support experience when you do contact us. Because we eliminate a lot of the basic issues, customers are more knowledgeable about how to work through things themselves like configuring the phone or setting up applications."

For those customers who do have to contact Sprint technical support, the company's solutions are multi-faceted, explains Adriano. "One is giving our representatives better tools to diagnose and troubleshoot. The second is to better understand what our customers are encountering and trying to guide them to the best place. The third area is continuing to expand the number of our representatives who have the technical support knowledge and background. We're changing how we route those calls to try to get them to the right place the first time. It's matching up training and skills to the influx of calls."

"The other area that I think is going to be extremely important moving forward is continuing to put tools in the hands of our customers, whether it's tutorials on just how

to use the device or providing them some basic troubleshooting and triage capabilities online. One of the very effective things we've seen this year is simply putting known issues out on our website so customers experiencing a problem with their phone can look and see the ideas and suggestions on how to resolve their issue."

Adriano points out that customer tech support calls can be generally distinguished in two ways: helping to fix what's broken and educating the customer. "It's important to understand what are real problems versus what are the things that are just driving more engagement. Engagement might not necessarily be bad – that's where you have the opportunity to potentially drive more self-service transactions. If we see that customers are repeatedly calling us because they want to know how to upload videos to the web, then we need to make certain that we have some very basic tutorials out there available for them to learn how exactly to do it."

In either case, Adriano believes that there are two dimensions to tech support interactions that customers should expect: hard skills and soft skills. "Number one, representatives need to be knowledgeable enough about how the products and services work to be able to zero in on the exact problem that the customer is experiencing. The ultimate test is whether they resolve your issue the first time you contact, because customers don't want to have to follow-up and they don't want to have to talk to eight different people. Secondly, customers want to be treated with respect and they want to see that there is real concern for their issue. It's an area that we are focusing on more: proving to customers that not only can we resolve your issue, but we can do it talking with you like a human being, empathizing with your problem, and showing that we really do value you as a customer."

Sprint has specific systems and processes in place to ensure that the individual support representatives are prepared to engage with customers, notes Adriano. "We look to hire people who have a more technical aptitude and background, but we don't throw our new representatives into tech support right away; we graduate them into handling those calls. Our reps get an opportunity to build a foundation of understanding the business and knowing how our enterprise works, and then they build on that solid set of skills with more comprehensive technical support training on top of that."

To measure the success of their technical support services, Adriano notes that Sprint uses a monthly comprehensive dashboard down to an individual representative level. "When you call our call centers, we have people who are listening, going through a checklist and evaluating the performance of the agents. They're listening to see: did the representative handle the transaction properly; did the representative give the right information; did they correctly troubleshoot; and most importantly, did they resolve the customer's issue."

Sprint also surveys hundreds of thousands of customers each month after they have interacted with any of the call centers. "We ask a series of seven questions to rate and evaluate their interaction, link them back to the representative who worked with the customer, and look at did they resolve the issue; did they do it the first time; et cetera," said Adriano.

This analysis of technical support interactions plays a central role in influencing the products and services Sprint offers, says Adriano. "We use our monitoring to pull out trends that we see with products. We look at what transactions are low issue resolution

or low first-call resolution. If there's a particular type of transaction that is presenting lots of problems, it gives us a heads-up that we need to go back and spend some more time on it. We've identified devices that had problems through monitoring the volume of what people are calling about."

Adriano points out that the analyses not only show what's broken, but reveal what's working well. "We ask ourselves, 'why does this type of phone, which is even more advanced than these other five, not seem to generate calls around email setup? Are we doing something differently? Is the user interface on the device better? Are our reps better trained on that device?' We go back and try to understand why things go well in certain cases and not in others. That informs us and drives us to zero in on where we prioritize our focus."

"What we're really trying to get is why people are contacting us in the first place," explains Adriano. "We do root cause analysis based upon all the customer interactions. For example, we remotely monitor tens of thousands of customer transactions every month to get a sense of what are we hearing from customers and what issues are consistently popping up. We have customer escalations that we research and review and root cause. We dig into those. We peel them apart. We review all the interactions and transactions, and we try to pinpoint what seems to be at the root. That allows us to then take some corrective action."

"It's really a multi-pronged attack," says Adriano, "whether it's looking at policies and processes, whether it's giving better tools to our frontlines, whether it's giving our customers better self-help, and ultimately, it's really getting at that root cause, trying to avoid the problems happening in the first place."



Customer Experience Manager

Large National telecommunications provider

Working for one of the leading Internet, cable and telephone service providers in the US, this customer experience manager notes that increased competition has required the company to make customer experience an even greater priority in recent years. "Now that we have other emergers on the scene, it has challenged us a bit more. We're changing our corporate culture from one where we take care of issues to where we are taking care of customers. Beginning in the last few years we've determined that customers – and treating them well – is something that we really need to focus on in the sense of building loyalty and having them select our brand over some of the other brands."

Ensuring a positive experience in the technical support function has value across many areas, explains the manager. "What we gain from it is a more loyal customer: a customer who's going to recommend us to their friends and family members and a customer who is happier overall. That's what we really want. If we take care of their issue on the first call and they don't have to call us again, it is always going to increase their positive experience. We definitely see value in reduced churn for customers who stay with us longer. We also see value in them purchasing more products."

There are specific challenges to ensuring an ideal customer experience in technical support or service, says the manager. "Probably the biggest challenge is just the culture change – making sure that every employee is aware of how they do truly affect the customers on every interaction. The other challenge is truly being able to measure what that means to the customer. Some customers may be satisfied with an 'average' experience. And for other customers, an average experience is really below their expectations and may upset them. So it's about trying to find that fine line between what customers require and what we can deliver."

"I would say that if customers hang up the phone and they feel satisfied, then it was a good interaction," says the manager. "We have representatives who are excellent at interacting with customers. When they hang up the phone the customer feels really good about what just happened, but they may have to call back in the next day because we really didn't take care of the problem completely. There has to be a balance of leaving the phone feeling good about the conversation you had, and not having to pick the phone up again."

This customer experience manager notes several ways that the company measures positive and negative customer experiences and attitudes. "We do a lot of after-interaction surveying, whether it be by e-mail, voice interaction or automated response system. We really do try to get our customers' feedback so that we can implement new initiatives and make sure that we are improving customer experience. We also have several key strategic goals each year which affect bonus payouts. One of the key points is improving our customer satisfaction score, usually by a significant enough number that it's a difficult goal to reach. We also have two more surveys that randomly audit customers to ask how we are doing and determine how consumers feel about the industry as a whole, whether they're our customers or not."

“We look at handle time, and all regular call center functions,” says the manager of measuring customer interactions. “The same thing goes for technicians in the field, we look at how many customers they’re servicing, how long it takes to service, what type of issue. We look at repeats – if they either have to call us again, how often they call us again, how many of them have to call us again. Or how many times we have to send a new truck out to a home. We measure customer satisfaction as well – that’s where the surveys come in. But there’s only so much that you can get from the hard data. You have to measure more intangible subjects to really know how you’re doing.”

At the same time, the manager notes the significance of analyzing data on customer interactions. “Right now, the company is rich with data. We have lots of information telling us what we should do. It’s really about getting in there and analyzing. We have developed what we call our Sciences Teams whose job it is to pull that data, look at it and analyze it. My job is then to look at some of those surveys that come in and develop strategies based on what we find. We’re still learning the best way to do that.”

This customer experience manager sees a shift in customer preferences and areas that have been more effective in technical support. “Consumers are wanting to have quality interactions either through text messaging, Internet use or online chats. We’ve paid a lot of attention recently to improving our Web presence and the experience that customers have. The next step is making it so that our customers can actually help themselves online, rather than having to call in. There’s definitely a shift, but there are still a lot of people who are tech-savvy but for the most part still like that phone interaction, or even going to a retail location. Whatever way the customer wants to interact with us, we are trying to reach them in that method so that we are easier to work with and do business with.”

In general, the manager notes that the biggest way for companies to improve customer experience is to simply listen to their customers. “There’s a saying that, ‘if someone shows you who they are, believe them.’ We want our customers to be shown the good side of who we are, so they can believe that. Customers are really going to tell you whether or not you’re doing a good job. I’m of the opinion that if you have a way of finding that answer and knowing what they really think, and you don’t listen, it is a failure on your part, because you have the opportunity to improve and you ignore it.”

From the perspective as a consumer, the manager does not give the overall technical support industry a high rating. “Some of the bigger companies have gone overseas, which isn’t necessarily a bad thing, but when there’s a communication breakdown, it’s not timely or cost-effective, because that consumer is now upset. If customers can’t understand when they’re speaking to you, it’s going to be a frustrating experience. They don’t want to do business with your company anymore. And it’s going to cost more, because they’re going to try to find some other way to get that service, or to find someone locally that they can truly understand and interact with.”

In the manager’s view, the customer experience is really about the true lifetime of the customer. “I think too many times we focus simply on a certain part of that life, whether it be the beginning, the middle or the end. And we don’t really take a holistic view of the life. That’s one thing that we are really trying to accomplish. We’ve implemented several key customer experience personnel within the company and across the nation to gain a better understanding of that lifetime – managing customers’ entire life with us.”

Araceli Gavilanes

Head of Consumer Experience Management, Global Customer Services
Sony Ericsson



At Sony Ericsson, one of the world's largest mobile phone manufacturers, Araceli Gavilanes is the Head of Consumer Experience Management, Global Customer Services – a relatively new function within the organization. Gavilanes explains that a recent shift in organizational philosophy spurred the formation of this group: “We have always been taking care of our customers, but for a long time we have been very product centric and were always focusing on how happy is the customer with the product itself. Now we’re beginning to understand that beyond the product, we need to have customers who are happy with the support experience. For a long time, Customer Services was a very repair-centric organization, so it was more about operational efficiency in repair and repair network management.

“Now we are turning the boat around to change the mindset, to change the culture, and to become more customer-centric,” says Gavilanes. “To get to the levels where we should be, we are also changing the way we plan for services and support experiences in order to create a mindset where our service planners and support planners are not planning solutions, but are planning experiences – the journey of the consumer when he comes to request any kind of support, even if it is just to enhance his experience with the product. We are changing the way we build services to make sure that while the technical solution is important, it’s the journey of the consumer with that service and the satisfaction with that service that is paramount.”

The impetus for this shift in Sony Ericsson’s philosophy was a better understanding of customer loyalty in an increasingly competitive environment, says Gavilanes. “Loyalty comes from satisfied customers and not only from passion for the product. Loyalty is about a relationship with the customer. It’s about building trust and building a bridge and building a long-term relationship, and the only way to do that is to walk in the customer’s shoes. We should be able to create a competitive advantage by listening, learning and delivering to their expectations. And if we fulfill their expectations, we can build loyalty because we can build trust.

“We increasingly see that customers and consumers are more and more demanding every day. They have higher expectations that we need to fulfill because otherwise they will go somewhere else.”

Gavilanes believes that the biggest challenge to ensure an ideal customer experience around technical support and customer service is to find the right people to deliver the right values. “It’s a very competitive world and we do a lot of outsourcing in terms of tech support and customer services. The right values, the right attitude, and the right behavior make the difference, and it’s so hard to find that consistency across the globe. We can technically train everyone very well, but technology or technical training is not enough. We need to have that human connection, that human intention to create the connection, to care for the consumer. And that’s not easy.

“Step by step, we’re trying to create a personal engagement,” says Gavilanes. “Not only technical knowledge as a rule for hiring new people, but also empowering them to

become more personal and friendly in the way they deliver support and the way they connect with the consumer. It takes training. It takes selection of the right people. It takes removal of the people who are not delivering according to the expectations or the requirements. So it's a long process. It takes a long time to create and develop certain attitudes and behaviors.

Gavilanes notes that one of the best benchmarks from which they have learned a lot has been Sony Ericsson's U.S. contact center. "Our operation in the U.S. is much more service oriented and much more customer centric. It has to do a little bit with culture as well because the U.S. is certainly one of the most service-oriented nations across the globe. There is an understanding of customer service. While we don't have the biggest market share in the U.S., the level of customer satisfaction is very high. From those learnings and from the success of this contact center, we have decided to take it as a best practice and start deploying that best practice across the globe."

Sony Ericsson primarily elicits feedback from customers on their tech support experiences by conducting a lot of surveys, says Gavilanes. "After a consumer calls, we have a quick automatic survey for one or two minutes. We can also call them back to spend a little bit more time and assess what we did right and what we did wrong. We're trying to find out which are the high points so that we can enhance the positives and identify the negatives so that we can eliminate them. The truth is that it's very difficult sometimes because not everybody is willing to participate in surveys, but it's probably the most accurate way of getting the information from the involved party."

Customer feedback stemming from tech support interactions has even directly influenced Sony Ericsson's products, explains Gavilanes. "There was one phone with a camera that was not positioned very well on the unit and people were having trouble in that they were taking pictures but nothing was coming out of it. We discovered through this feedback that it was because the camera was in such a position that most of the time the consumer would put his finger on it, but he wasn't aware of it. So it wasn't a technical issue, it was a design issue and we took it into consideration to never make the same mistake again."

At the same time, Gavilanes has noticed that the number of people calling contact centers is decreasing and the number of people going to self-support is increasing. "This means that we need to focus not only on good experiences with contact centers – the human factor, the friendly agent, solving the problem – but we also have to take into consideration that the online journey of the consumer with our services needs to be fantastic in order for us to fulfill the consumer's expectations. Our target groups that we're catering to are the Internet generation. They're not necessarily going to pick up the phone and call a contact center. The first thing they're going to do is go online, and if we can solve it online in a simple, clean way, straightforward and efficiently, we will build loyalty as well because they will trust that we will always be there to support them. We are paying a lot of attention to online support, self-support, and everything that has to do with the Internet generation and their wishes and wants."

Gavilanes points out that while consumers who call tech support should consider first-call resolution the most important indicator of a positive experience, there are other criteria to look for. "We believe that we should be able to address and solve their problem the first time they call. First time resolution is probably what the consumer perceives as,

yes, these people care and they resolved my problem. But we have also had customers with whom we have not been able to resolve the problem but they did mention that they were very satisfied because the agent tried so hard. Even though he didn't get the problem solved the first time, just the fact that the agent was friendly and caring was more important than anything else. In the end we're all human beings that want to have a human contact, not a machine. That's why we call contact centers because we want to talk to somebody. And when we do, we want to talk to somebody who cares."

Gavilanes recommends that executives make customer experience part of the culture of the organization. "It needs to be understood. It needs to be part of the values that are conveyed for the organization. And if it's not part of the culture, it's not part of the DNA of the organization. If it doesn't become part of the DNA, it's very difficult to deliver the right experience and to meet the expectations of customers. It's very intangible in a way because it could be considered very subjective, but it's not. It's a way of thinking, it's a way of delivering, and it's a belief. You have to believe that what you're doing is the right thing and you're delivering on the correct values to deliver on the experience."

 **Rick Germano**

Senior Vice President, Customer Operations
Comcast



At Comcast, one of the largest U.S. communications services providers, Rick Germano's role as Senior Vice President of Customer Operations has grown in importance and responsibility with the company's renewed emphasis in recent years on customer support. "Comcast, like a lot of companies, particularly in a growing competitive space in telecommunications, is focusing more and more on customer support than it did in the past. We have changed our internal mission statement to be very simple: 'Comcast will deliver a superior experience to our customers every day.' That's not a marketing message, that's a customer-centric message. We're revealing how we deliver service from root cause analysis to prevent the problem and then solve the problem in a better way. We're also correlating things like customers' perception of reliability to customer satisfaction, and then to financial results like churn or disconnect."

One of the particular challenges for Comcast is troubleshooting the exact problem, explains Germano. "We deliver a pipe into your house with Internet service, and then you as the consumer take over with settings in your PC or how you have your wireless router set up or software that you downloaded. But to the customer it just looks like the computer doesn't work: 'I can't get on the Internet, I'll call Comcast.' So one of the biggest challenges we have is sorting through what exactly is the problem. Is it our problem or is it the computer manufacturer's problem? It's about educating the customer so that they can get the quickest resolution with the least amount of effort and aggravation."

This education for both Comcast employees and for customers is a key initiative to improving the customer experience, says Germano. "We're developing better tools for our employees to troubleshoot and diagnose issues, and then ideally see issues as they degrade before they actually have a customer impact. From the customer point of view, we're trying to give them more information and self-service options – like a tool on Comcast.com that troubleshoots their most common questions. So it's developing tools for us to help diagnose, but at the same time sharing versions of those tools so the customer can do it themselves."

In terms of improving the management of customer interactions, Germano explains that Comcast focus spans multiple fronts. "The tools we're investing in include better architecture on our end, phone systems, IVR applications and more customer management training for the employees. This involves more training and then organizationally, more specialization so that if a customer has an issue about their router as opposed to their e-mail, a router specialist would handle it. We're a very decentralized company trying to become more standardized, so if we find there is a best way to troubleshoot a problem then we should do that all over the country.

"One area that we are investing in is called Voice of the Customer. We are now recording every single call that we take and we're using that in two fashions: to evaluate the performance of the agent or the technician, and to do data mining to get disposition types."

Germano notes that Comcast has two main approaches in place to ensure an optimal experience for its customers. “One is we have standards. We have a series of metrics – whether it is first call resolution or repeat rates – and then we stack-rank them. So out of our 30,000 in-house and contractor technicians, we can know statistically who has the best productivity or quality and compare them against each other.

“The second thing that became a focus last year and we’re ramping up this year is again, the Voice of the Customer surveys. We’re doing much more outreach. For example, if a technician comes to a home to fix a problem, within five minutes of that job being coded as complete, the customer will receive a call with a very simple questionnaire basically asking, ‘Did he fix the problem? Are you happy?’ If the answer is ‘No,’ he’s going right back.

“For the Voice of the Customer, we try to get anywhere from 25 to 50 customer surveys per employee per month. One, the employee now knows that we’re going to talk to a lot of customers that they’re interacting with every single month, so you have the overhang effect. Two, the customers are generally pretty honest and when you start doing this kind of volume, patterns emerge and you can find you know exactly what type of issue you have – whether it’s on the technical side or the interpersonal side. The pattern just jumps off the page and you can quickly address it with the employee.

“If they have a problem, I think most consumers look for whether it is easy to get help,” says Germano. “By easy I mean, is it quick? Is it painful? Can I solve it quickly and feel good about solving it? One of the things we measure in our customer surveys is whether solving the problem took a lot of effort on the customer’s part. The customer needs to feel confident that this isn’t going to turn into a painful experience. When they speak to support staff, it should be a positive and upbeat experience. It should be, ‘Don’t worry, I’ve got the problem now and I’m going to fix it.’ We should have first call resolution 80 to 85 percent of the time. The 15 percent that needs to be escalated, that too should be easy and seamless.”

Germano stresses that executives be sure that their view of successful and positive customer experiences is in sync with the perception of the customers themselves. “Look at what you are doing now and ask how you think that’s working. Then ask yourself, ‘Is what I think is working the same as what my customer is actually telling me?’ Because particularly in technical support for the PC and Internet, the customer expectation hovers around perfect and any deviation from perfect needs to be addressed quickly and professionally.

“The other recommendation I have is to be aware of the social media space: the blogs, Twitter, Facebook. What are people saying there? Customers now communicate with you in that space where the old days it was on the phone. Well now, there are a lot more outlets for them to communicate with your company than just over the phone and over time that’s going to become even more.”

Germano points out that because companies like Comcast can touch customers over a million times every day, any positive or negative incident has the potential to impact the brand. “If any one of these million goes bad, it can go on a blog and suddenly it will become a national news story and your company suffers. That’s the power of the digital world. Any individual customer has a very loud voice. After some very

public incidents, we began to take a harder look at what is customer service, what is customer support and what do customers think? How are employees interacting in this environment? What kind of tools do they have? What kind of processes do we have? What kind of standards do we have?

“Now I think we’re much more balanced and understanding that customer experience means customer loyalty and customer loyalty means growth in financials.”



Senior Executive, Call Center Operations

Large North American telecommunications provider

This senior customer experience executive is accountable for all call centers and supporting infrastructure to support Cable and Wireless customers at a large North American telecommunications services provider.

“We have identified three main pillars of strategic priority and importance in the organization, and one of them is customer focus. That’s far reaching across not just technical support, but focuses on the customer experience across all touch points. It’s really how we interface with any of our customers whether that’s in the life cycle model through first point of purchase through support through billing through collections through disconnection.

“From the technical support, customers don’t call us because they’re lonely,” the executive says. “They call us because they want a problem fixed. Our job is to ensure that we provide resolution and that we also create a positive experience to the customer that creates some kind of value. This value can be defined as educating the customer in self-help while ensuring the customer’s portfolio of products and services are aligned to their needs”.

The executive notes that there are a number of ways to measure the interactions of customers. “We overall would look at interactions from a relationship context where we ask customers about their view of the relationship. Then you can also look at it from a transactional level. As an example, we’ll use voice of the customer and reach out to our customers and asked them specifically about their experience in the call center with questions like, ‘did we resolve their issue?’ ‘Did they have to call back multiple times?’ ‘Were they satisfied with the with the rep’s attributes?’

“Our measurement is in many cases driven by the voice of the customer. We can do it through IVR and e-mail surveys but it’s really the customer interactions. We reach out to the customers and they become our judge.”

When it comes to analyzing and actioning on that information gathered from customers, “we look at the frequency of the current and the probability and linkage of the concurrence to deflection,” says the executive. “Our organization is set up in such a way that for what we identify based on customer inputs and feedback, we have a whole group that is charged with the development, design, implementation of solutions towards improving the customer experience.”

The executive speaks to the factors that are tracked and measured for tech support interactions. “In a call center, the big ones are speed of answer and problem resolutions. Speed of answer as in call wait times and problem resolution for first call resolution. What percentage of calls did you resolve the first time of point of interaction?

“We also measure the attributes of our reps. It’s really important that we provide the human element when our reps are talking to customers and it’s important that we portray the right kind of representation of our service delivery or service promise. Then

there's field dispatch where we would look at making sure that our technicians are arriving on time in committed windows. At the same time, we're looking at resolving the issue the first time with the customer – if it's bad enough that the truck went out, we have to make sure that we resolve the issue.”

When it comes to improving the customer experience around tech support, the executive recommends that voice of the customer has to be a primary contributor to shaping service strategy to be able to deliver with clearly defined success metrics.

 **Susan Forgie**

Director of Customer Experience
McAfee



As Director of Customer Experience at McAfee, one of the top security software providers, Susan Forgie reports into the support role and manages the relationship survey and the transactional survey programs. “We’ve been doing customer surveys for over 15 years and we understand the importance of the customer experience, customer satisfaction and customer loyalty. Support is one of the key touch points for our customers and by improving our support processes, we improve the customer experience.”

Forgie notes that the challenges of providing a high level of customer support have changed over the years to include delivering support from a global perspective. At the same time, the economic climate has its effects as well, including shaping some customer perspectives on outsourcing. “In the current economic times, that certainly has impact when you outsource any of your support or customer service. We certainly see the impact of that in our customer comments just because they feel like – at least North America – we shouldn’t give the jobs away. So we can provide the best level of service out there and still have some customers who are just not going to be happy because of that. The economy is certainly a challenge in today’s market.

“It’s one of those things that you’re not going to be able to change everyone’s mind, but our goal is to make the experience as positive as possible, offer them other alternatives besides telephone support if they’d like and then source as much as possible in the local countries.”

Forgie notes that McAfee has invested in a variety of methods for delivering support interactions. “We have chat and telephone support, but a huge component of our service is the tools that help the customers self-diagnose. While we’re investing in our Web capabilities which include FAQs, knowledge base and how-to videos, our tools and technology is one area that we’ve really looked at. On the consumer side of the business, when it comes to customer satisfaction, we’ve seen tremendous growth and improvement in the last few years.”

There are several approaches to measuring customer interactions, says Forgie. “When we talk about the technical support or customer service, we have a transactional survey program. So when an incident is closed, there’s an opportunity for a survey. We get great response right from the transactions, but we also have our quality initiatives including call monitoring, calibrations. McAfee is very strong in the area of accountability and action planning, so we have monthly operational reviews. We have a lot of different initiatives in place to ensure that the customer has the best possible experience and we take this feedback very seriously and build our initiatives and our imperatives off of the feedback that we get from our customers.”

Forgie notes that there are several different ways to measure online as well. “Not only the traffic but also pop-ups to resolve your issue. After some of our tools in the knowledge base, there is an independent survey on the site that a customer can click on and take the survey right then and there to answer questions about their experience on

the Web. We also have several different measures within our Web analytics tool. Just like measuring call deflection, we measure how many clicks that customers have to go through to get to the information that actually resolves their issue.”

Forgie lists some of the many factors used to track and measure technical support phone interactions. “There is average speed of answer, average handle time, open case aging, average resolution time, first call resolution. There are a lot of different programs around customer satisfaction. We have basic KPIs with it that includes the overall agent rep, and we analyze all of the key drivers that influence that particular metric.”

“Based on the scores either through the quality monitoring or through the surveys, if an agent is red flagged for possibly needing training then they go through a training program. It may be a renewal or it may be brand new training, but we look at that very closely. We also feed information on top issues back up to our engineering development group and product management group. If we have something that is recurring, we can have our engineering team actually build in improvements within the product to deflect calls that way.”

Forgie says that the customer promise is one of the principal tenets at McAfee. “This is a promise that we make to our customers that we will go above and beyond to ensure that experience is a positive experience. There are a lot of different areas it impacts throughout the organization. As a whole, we are bonused on some of our customer satisfaction metrics. Everyone from the CEO all the way down to the customer service agent has part of their bonus program tied to customer satisfaction.

Forgie explains how the company has changed the way it has tracked and analyzed the customer experience over the years. “We’ve been doing surveys for over 15 years now and we’ve come a long way from when we just used to report results to now having a program that is focused around actionability. When you look all of these different metrics, you know we’ve come a long way because of the hard work the team has put into taking that information and internalizing it to improve a process or a procedure or a product.”

In recent years, McAfee has also changed the way it engages customers for tech support, says Forgie. “When we look at the consumers, chat is probably our number one, then phone and then e-mail. But we also have all of those people that we were able to satisfy that didn’t have to contact support because of the online videos, knowledge base or tools. We put processes in place to encourage them to go through the Web and look at the different options there first. Obviously, they can bypass some of it and go directly to phone if that’s their choice, but we encourage through the methodology that we use.

“We believe that the most important thing is resolving the customer’s issue the first time, as fast as possible. So if that’s a top goal for us, then the technical expertise of not only the agents, but also the information and tools that we have available on the Web has to be a top priority for us.

Forgie’s first suggestion for other customer experience executives is, if you don’t have a customer feedback program, get one. “Whether you create one and start from scratch or whether you go out to a vendor, I think it’s very important to get that feedback. Then once you have it, the next most important thing is to

really understand what you have back. Just reporting scores isn't going to make a difference. You have to understand why your scores are going up and down, and you also have to be able to correlate those with other internal metrics that you already use. Then take an action, take accountability for what you're doing. Make sure that you're able to track the changes of the process to the changes of the scores. Because if you're not getting the scores going in the direction that you need it to, then you need to adjust your actions appropriately."

Another key element is executive buy-in, says Forgie. "You have to have your company senior management believe in this as much as you do because that drives it throughout your organization. It's one of our key imperatives, and so our executive buy-in is very strong. Our senior management wholeheartedly believes in the customer experience and improving that customer experience. They know that the customers that have a positive experience are likely to renew, and satisfied and loyal customers are the customers that you want to have in your corner. They're going to keep you going through these economic times."

Debra Fleig

Senior Director of Worldwide Customer Care
Adobe



Debra Fleig is the Senior Director of Worldwide Customer Care at Adobe, a global leader in multimedia and creativity software and platforms. “Our team has a very top presence to the CEO, so customer service and customer care is really critical, and customers and service excellence is one of our guiding principles from the top. It is a corporate goal and all of the business units for all of the products get involved in reporting how we’re servicing the customers and customer retention. The strategic value is in our customer loyalty programs and we know that customers who have a higher level of satisfaction are more loyal and will buy more.”

One of the company’s challenges is to provide support to its customers in the channel of their choice, says Fleig. “They’re looking at social media, Twitter, Facebook. We also have forums, we have communities, we have the Web portal. It’s the whole combination of how our customers want to be serviced and how we can do that in the best way possible and in the quickest way possible. Different channels and different kinds of customers want to see information and knowledge in a way that they do their job. When you have a broad group of products, you need to have your information in different ways. Some like to do it step-by-step, some like to look at things in video format, others like to call on the phone and have somebody walk them through it. We are upgrading our tools, our forums and our Web portal, so we do make significant investments in technology.”

While it gets much response from social media channels, Adobe primarily elicits customer feedback through surveys, explains Fleig. “Whenever we have an interaction, we survey them on a scale of one to ten, we take action on the negatives and we also look at the trends. We focus on the process, the support experience, their overall satisfaction and likelihood to recommend. We benchmark ourselves against the industry with TSIA (Technology Services Industry Association).

“We have customer forums. We have customer councils. Each of our product areas has regional customer focus groups that we get information from. And we like to get out from the support perspective at least once a year and ask customers how we’re doing, what they’d like to see for support, how would they like to be supported.”

Fleig emphasizes that first call resolution is the most critical measurement when it comes to tech support interactions themselves. “Our goal is to try to resolve the technical issue as quickly as possible. So we have a very comprehensive training program, we have knowledge bases, we have the typical tools that you know any large technical support organization would have.”

To track and measure support interactions, Fleig says there are dashboards upon dashboards. “Supervisor dashboards watch the calls in terms of how long the calls are in the queue, how quickly you respond, first call resolution, call wait times. We link all cases to a knowledge base and if we see that we have a number of customers who are having a particular problem, we’ll prioritize that and we’ll work with our development group to have that fixed. We do a lot of analysis with a lot of dashboards,

so it's operational metrics that we measure. Customers don't mind waiting a few extra minutes, but most of the time they don't want to wait. The key thing is follow up and getting their solution as quickly as possible. So we have multiple levels of support and a lot of people in our escalation team who they work with mentoring the broader technical support organization. If they're on the phone with a customer they can get additional help."

In order to act on this feedback, Fleig notes that specific policies are put in place. "We set some thresholds on what's acceptable from a customer satisfaction level or particularly around product issues. When we see a certain threshold, we take action and either work with the product groups to get a resolution to the issues or we look at our processes, our procedures to try to improve."

For its consumer tier of customer support, Adobe outsources to a services provider in India. Fleig notes that they work closely to ensure an optimal experience. "We communicate every day and have service delivery managers that are on site with them. They're Adobe-badged people that are on site to ensure that they're following all the proper practices, quality measures and processes that we've set in place. We're constantly looking at training.

"We have multiple support questions in our survey about the agents, and one of them is their training, their manner, how the case was handled. We have an expectation in our contract with our vendors that they have to reach a certain level of metrics or there are penalties."

On improving tech support, customer service and customer experience, "what's really critical is you survey, survey, survey," says Fleig. "Ask your customers how they want to be supported and what they want versus trying to figure out and tell them. What I really recommend is listen to your customers, talk to them and, in general, you'll begin to see the pattern. There's also monitoring your support organization and looking at your number. If things don't look right, take action against it. You have to look at it objectively and try not to take it too personal."

When comes to the overall tech support industry, Fleig believes there is still room for improvement. "If you look at some of the companies who really emphasize service, it's about their people. With social media, I think we'll see a trend change with companies who let their employees get more engaged and more involved, on the Web in answering customer questions. But it does take investment, and unfortunately support has a tendency a lot of times to be not at the top of the pecking list for money. But customers pay for support and service, and I think they should get what they pay for. From a consumer perspective, if they have an issue, they should expect service."

Fleig elaborates that companies must be active in the social media landscape to counteract customer complaints that are out in the open. "The only thing you can do is be out there listening, which is why we set up an Adobe Care account on Twitter and we have a Facebook account. What we're finding is some customers have had a bad experience and haven't been able to get through our normal support channel, so they'll complain, and we'll reach out to them to help. I think customers appreciate that, they're just trying to find a way to get help. Different people are going to use different forums. At the same time, it's hard to be everything to everybody, so

you've got to figure out how you balance and how you effectively do each channel. Social media is not a substitute for your normal support channels. I think it's just augmentation to them.

"By listening to these customers you can build a better relationship with them and you can better understand what their needs are. It also helps you understand how they're using the product. Are there things they'd like to see in the products? Overall, it's just the new way of the world. It is not just a one-to-one; it can be a one-to-many. It helps you become closer to your customers."

Michael White

Senior Manager of Customer Experience
and Business Development

Office Depot

Office DEPOT.
Taking Care of Business

Michael White is the Senior Manager of Customer Experience and Business Development at Office Depot, a leading global provider of office products and services. White is in the direct marketing arm of the organization, and is directly involved with scoring and measurement as well as affecting customer experience with regard to customer satisfaction, the policy process, the fulfillment process and their overall experience online.

White says that the easiest way is to ensure a customer-centric organizational focus is to evaluate and value customer retention. "We engage our analytics team to dig to the bottom of what is the value of one retained customer and tie that back to financials. Putting a focus more on relationship management and transaction management is a clear winner when trying to retain customers. Explain to executives what is the value of a retained customer and they will react accordingly."

White believes there are two lines of thought when it comes to the value of providing a positive technical support experience for customers. "One is that you are dealing generally with benevolent people who want us to do the best for the next human being and they are interested in happy, satisfied people because that is just generally the right thing to do. They intrinsically get that. On the other hand, a business exists to make money and it exists to forward the profit goals of the shareholders and the directors of the business. In either school of thought, mountains of research exist to show that one of the best ways to create a relationship with your customer is to wow them on any of their personal interactions. You are ensuring a more stable, more profitable revenue stream over time. And for folks who just think it is generally the right thing to do, you end up with happy people on the other end of the line."

Office Depot uses third-party services to provide certain elements of customer support and services. "When we talk about tech support with regard to helping our customers, it takes on different hats once it's reached our doors," says White. "In certain circumstances, they are really just curious about a product that they have bought. And a lot of times as I manage our online chat process, there are routing processes that we have in order to make sure that somebody can answer a technical question about a product. Separately, if we're talking about a call in, then our customer service team is an independent arm. We're definitely highly involved with our providers because every customer contact is another opportunity to present the brand in a positive light."

One of the most direct ways that Office Depot is shaping and managing the support experience is its recent investment in online chat, says White. "Chat is growing and not just because we have made it more prevalent. It is growing because people are finding it more useful, and we have been taking steps to qualitatively improve it. Rather than say to our providers that they must resolve a question in X amount of time, or they have to manage average talk time rather than their average hold time, what we're really trying to manage toward is rep education so that they are able to answer more questions more directly.

“We’re also giving them the resources that they need in order to answer questions that perhaps they weren’t prepared for in the past. As we open up chat more and more and people want to use it more and more, obviously the ends of the bell curve have newer and different types of questions that come along, so we’re trying to learn with them and teach our provider to address things in a way that are going to appropriately manage towards retention and relationship management rather than simply solving for a transaction.

“The oversight of customer service can happen in a number of different ways, one of those ways is chat monitoring by folks not just within our organization but also with our partners,” says White. “When it comes to calls, we have systems that record and review every phone call. So if we want to go back and review anything, that is feasible for us and we do it all the time.”

Regarding actions or initiatives to improve customer interactions, White describes a scenario. “Say there are thousands upon thousands of chats daily, and a portion of those are randomly selected to be reviewed by human beings. We need to ask ourselves, ‘how could we have helped the rep to do a better job here and what can we do to prevent the need for this chat?’ There are two pieces to this: one is prevention, and one is better care. When you address it that way, you immediately see benefits.

“We continue to make more progress on that method to say, ‘here are the things that we could do to improve addressing these customers’ needs after they have initiated a chat or a call, but here are the things that we could do to prevent that in the first place.’ As a result, we have noticed that the bell curve is flattening. The things that used to top the list of reasons for people to call in or contact us have gone down dramatically.”

White explains that there are multiple external measurements that Office Depot uses to gauge customer sentiment based upon their experience, which can be tied back to individual transactions. “This means we can root-cause analyze anything that blows up. If a customer had a wonderful experience when they bought but came back and reported us as awful after delivery, what happened? We are able to analyze that very readily and at a singular level. You would think that for a company of our size, it wouldn’t necessarily make sense to go after individual transactions, but that actually makes the most sense. Once you have done 10 transactions and three of them have the same basic root cause, you are able to make some pretty easy guesses as to what to go after on a sample that is a small fraction of what you have for the week. We are able to go after the singular transaction in order to understand more about the greater parts.”

The factors he uses to track and measure tech support interactions are standard, but White points out that he is able to dig much deeper. “Average speed to answer, talk time – the simple quantitative measurements are there. When we look, I use a mining function to go through a bunch of these, so some of the other ways that we are able to measure not just performance but also trend is by locating a specific product within there. As an example, I can do a search on a printer and see how many different interactions we had on that. If it is my top product specification inquiry, then I know I have a problem somewhere, wherever they purchased it. So either the documentation is insufficient or my information on the Web is insufficient, either of which I am able to help to upgrade.

“And then insofar as resolution goes, one of the ways you can track how well you’re doing with that is by relating it back to customer loyalty. For the folks who had initiated chat or placed phone calls or answered our surveys and had negative experiences, we’re able to check that back to a singular ordered, and then determine whether or not there was a difference in loyalty.”

White explains how he actions on information taken from customer feedback. “The quantitative part is easy; I can set up a report card on anything if I want. But really the best part when we work on calls is that I have somebody who goes through 300 random chats a day and says things like ‘here is what we messed up here, here is an opportunity’ or ‘this is a great answer to this question, let’s post this.’ There are many things that we can do. In a lot of ways, the quantitative stuff satisfies the check writers, but the qualitative stuff is what really moves the needle for us.”

Customer feedback also enables the company to improve resources for the tech support representatives, says White. “So one person says, well, this person didn’t know anything and I am not going to get too upset. But if I have 10 or 15 different folks who say that a rep clearly doesn’t know what they’re doing, then we get to the bottom of that pretty readily.”

White also explains that Office Depot is leveraging social media to further communicate with its customers. “We have a Facebook account, we have a Twitter account, and we have opened them up for people to tell us things. That’s been beyond fantastic. When you have folks who are not shy and are ‘quasi-anonymous,’ it allows for a lot of really honest and open communication with our customers, some of which has influenced our activity. It is not something that we are afraid of, it is something that we embrace and we thank our customers for it.”

Consumers should judge tech support services simply based on whether or not they can accomplish what they want to accomplish after the call, says White. “Most people don’t have the opportunity to compare tech support services side-by-side. I don’t know that most customers look up net promoter scores, but I know that most customers look up the JD Power assessments of customer support. In the end, if they are able to do what they wanted to do after the call and they leave the call educated and satisfied, then that is usually pretty good indicator.”

White recommends that customer experience executives view every interaction with the customer as a gift. “If they’re having a tough time, it is incumbent upon you to be able to embrace that and thank them kindly for calling in instead of just throwing your product in the garbage. Work with them to make sure that A: they know that you are a good partner to them, and B: you have their best interest in mind and want to see them succeed. Remember that your product is not what they are buying. What they’re buying is what your product does for them and what they’re able to accomplish as a result of it. Seeing through their eyes and being able to talk to them in a way that shows them that you know what they want is an opportunity. In effect, you’re marketing to them at that moment when you’re helping them. You are letting them know that your brand is strong, that you care about them and that you are interested in a relationship, not a transaction.”

Soft skills are crucial, says White, and are not terribly hard to teach to the support representatives. "I think that it is a matter of saying the right words, unlocking that piece of the mind that says to always imagine yourself in the customer's shoes first. If you can do that, you're going to do amazing things for us and you will feel better going home at night knowing that you helped 100 people solve problems that were keeping them from doing business, that were keeping them from having a good day. You make people's day when you get things right for them. That is not going to go for everybody – some people are going to call in hot and are going to be extremely aggravated. But you can at least ease their stress for one moment. Tell them, 'I understand, and I'm going to do everything I possibly can to help you, so let's get started.'

"If companies view this the right way, it is a competitive advantage. I think that if people really embrace this and they take it to heart and they understand the value of everything with customer interaction and if they can make that part of the culture, they will win on it. If the competition is not doing it this way, over time this will make the difference. Two providers of identical products: one with average technical support, and the other one with superior technical support? It won't take long; it won't take long at all."

Kate Hare

Director of Customer Experience
Webroot



As Director of Customer Experience at Webroot, a leading Internet security provider, Kate Hare's department has elevated to manage all customer experience across the entire company. "That will include user experience, Web customer experience, all product user and customer experience, customer support. Any area that a customer has an interaction with Webroot, my department will ensure that we reinforce our brand promise, that we have consistency and that we create the best customer experience in the industry."

Webroot has several initiatives that help make customer centricity a guiding organizational principle, says Hare. "One in particular takes an audit of the current customer support/customer experience, understanding the entire process soup-to-nuts, and then identifying where are the areas that we are excelling and where are the areas that we have opportunities for improvement. We then come up with recommendations, and hand those off to the customer support department to allow them to put together a roadmap for implementing those recommendations. We will be doing that companywide."

"We are expanding my department purview in the company, so customer experience and customer support is a huge strategic initiative for us. We have opportunities to have customer experience to be a differentiator for ourselves in the market."

Hare says Webroot has had a long history as very user-friendly with its products and for having very good U.S.-based customer support, but believes that customer experience as an industry practice is in its infancy. "That's really where this renewed focus is coming from. There are not a lot of companies that have really embraced it and adopted it, and made it a part of the fabric of the company's culture. You can be in a state of crawling, in terms of user and customer experience with so much room and opportunity to take it to that next level of being able to walk and then run and then be that marathon winner. That's really where we want to go with this – we've been crawling in terms of user and customer experience, and we want to take that to the next level and be the ones who are really leading the charge from an industry perspective with everybody looking to us as innovators and leaders."

Hard explains that Webroot primarily leverages customer surveys and market data to measure positive versus negative customer support experiences. "We have a whole department where all they do is market research and surveys. We use the Net Promoter Score. We look at the customer support wait times. We look at our customer retention."

At the same time, Hare believes there is a need for a more consumer-friendly gauge to rate customer experience. "A customer would want sort of standard, like a gold medal standard in customer experience – something that would relate to them. I think that's what a customer's going to look for, and that's what industry experts and evangelists in the industry are going to use to start to get the word out about what I see as this practice in it's infancy. There aren't a whole lot of standards out there that people talk about with regard to customer experience."

Without that industry standard, Hare says there are specific indicators that customers should look out for to measure the quality of their tech support experiences. “Call wait times, whether there are easy ways that they can do self-help. Being able to understand the person that they’re talking to on the other end, and having them be helpful and friendly, and be a customer service type of person is very important. I think that they should be surprised and delighted by their experience, because most people have bad expectations and low expectations about it – they dread calling support. So to actually come away with the feeling of, ‘wow, that was really easy and really incredible, and I got the answer to my question,’ that’s the kind of measure that I would be looking for as someone calling into support. If we could come up with a way to measure that and provide awards for that measurement, I think that would be ideal.

“Because we’re just kicking off this initiative to really take our customer support to the next level, there’s some other things that we’re going to be putting into place through this process that we hope will also ensure an optimal support experience,” says Hare. “Some of the thoughts that we’ve had is having a regular audit of the phone conversations, and training to help improve any of our customer support staff and their dialogues with the customers. We have a huge initiative just to continue to reduce our wait times. We have free and pay customer support, but that’s one of our differentiators, that we do provide free customer support.”

To achieve their goals, Hare says the company is closely examining myriad ways to improve the customer support experience. “We’re streamlining the entire phone process of how customers get routed. We’re looking at improving when they are on hold: What kind of experience are they having when they’re on hold? What kind of music are they hearing? What kind of things are they doing, or having access to? Self-help. Live chat. Features within the product. Pretty much you name it, and we’re looking at it. We’re taking the best practices and latest and greatest in customer support, and seeing what we can leverage, and how fast we can leverage those things.”

Hare says even executives themselves are getting involved. “Our VP of Support will actually regularly pick up the phone and answer the calls himself, just to get the pulse on the customer.”

To fulfill Webroot’s brand promise, Hare recognizes the need to also have strong self-help capabilities for more knowledgeable customers, in addition to those who need personal help. “Some people who want their hand held, they want to call in. We have a huge number of customers who are afraid of technology. They don’t want to deal with it, and they just want someone to help them. And there may be a little bit of wanting to talk to someone on the phone and hear another voice.

“Then we have a different segment of our customers who are very tech-savvy. They’d much rather help themselves, and so they don’t want to deal with calling in. They just want to go and get the information that they want to get, and they fix it from there. They just need a couple of details. We really need to address all of our customers, and their specific way that they want to receive support.”

Hare has specific recommendations for other executives seeking to improve customer experience around tech support within their organizations. “Number one, get the company onboard with understanding what customer experience really means, because it is something of a new practice and a lot of people don’t really get it – they

don't really understand what it means, and how to implement it. For customer support, you really need to have experts on what are the best practices in customer support, and you need to understand who your customers are and what their expectations are in order to implement the best experience for them, because it really does need to be tailored to the specific customers. The key is understanding who your customers are, what their fears are, what they're looking for, and then tailoring the experience – whether it's product customer experience, whether it's Web site customer experience, or customer support customer experience – around those specific customers.”



Senior Executive, Customer Service Call Center Operations Large National Communications Provider

This senior customer service executive manages customer service call center operations for a national telecommunications services provider. "I'm directly responsible for the technology in the call centers, the platforms for all of the call center department's corporate telecommunications, and the customer service and technical support areas."

The emphasis on customer experience is a recent development, says the executive. "We're a traditional utility, and customer centricity is a focused change for utilities. We're starting to develop all of our tools, all of our quality measurements, and everything else around the voice of the customer. So instead of corporate rules like compliance-based evaluations, everything's moving toward the customer: what they think of the transactions, how successful those transactions are, and their responses and comments about their interactions with us and our products. All of this is in the middle of being changed right now. This is a pretty big paradigm shift for a utility-type company."

The executive explains that the competitive landscape is primarily sparking this shift. "The bar is not set that high in cable in general and we want to be the top of that bar. If you really look at what we sell, especially if we start talking about the Internet side of the business, most of it is pretty commoditized. So you can differentiate yourself through customer service – and on how you deliver that – much faster than you can through product, because the product is pretty much the same. It has to be a total value proposition and the way you start to increase value is through your actual interactions and service for the company."

One of the challenges the executive faces is in creating structure and flexibility at the same time. "Right now we're a centralized support organization, but we're a regional service provider. So there are some differences in how the services are offered, what the services are. The centralized agents can easily stay consistent, but still be able to provide that market-level type service. Also, if you look at the technical end of things, especially when you talk about the Internet and supporting equipment, it changes very rapidly. Staying on top of all that is quite challenging as well."

To improve customer interactions, the executive describes a change to the organization's quality assurance program. "We're initiating customer surveys off of every recorded interaction to match our own internal measurements. We want to more closely align what the customer thinks of an interaction versus what we think, so these things can come together. Our surveys measure both the company and the interaction with the agent. So we ask them how satisfied they are with our services, the pricing of our services, the reliability of our services, the value of our services, and then get into the interaction with the agents. How proficient were they? How polite were they? Was it a positive interaction?"

"We measure both ways to make sure as a company we're providing the services that people want, that we're meeting the expectation of the service, and also when they have an issue, a problem, a question, we're addressing those in a fashion that they expect us to."

The executive points out that in measuring the success of support interactions, the most important time is early in the customer lifecycle. “We know our most volatile periods are early on in the relationship, and we want that early part in the relationship to be very positive. We look at calls within the first 30 days of install, wait times, how many calls per customer, how many repeat calls per customer, how many repeat truck roll-outs – all the measurements you can think of. There are also post-install surveys. Right after the install, we try to talk to the customers to ensure that they don’t have any problems, that they know how to use everything.”

The way customer service is tracked and analyzed has also changed significantly, says the executive. “When somebody asks me how many times did this customer call, or what do they call about – we weren’t even able to accurately track that information until about two years ago. There was no true customer relationship management or interaction tracking system even in place. Everything was done on spreadsheets and anecdotal data. So we really needed to work hard to be able to get good quantifiable data around what was going on with our customers.”

With this change, the executive recommends that tech support organizations make sure to react to quantifiable data and not anecdotal data. “The thing that you hear the most complaints about is not necessarily your biggest problem. We are in the customer service business. Most people that call us have a problem if they’re not happy. Complaints are going to happen, so don’t overreact to what you hear. Take time to ensure that you’re not going to start managing an exception. I see a lot of folks reorganize their business to manage exceptions, and end up with a business so complex they’ll never be able to manage it.”

Customer feedback from tech support interactions can directly influence the products or services offered, says the executive. “If I see a certain product or a certain feature of a product that has an abnormal amount of questions, dissatisfaction or problems, that’s something that’s going to lead me to go say, ‘we need to look at this product, or look at this process around this product, or the documentation around it to see what we can do to either make it better, or is it even a viable product.’”

The executive explains the difficulties for consumers to receive successful tech support in cases where they themselves do not know what the problem is. “If you buy a computer, you can’t even tell whose fault it is. ‘It’s the PC. No, it’s the operating system. No, it’s the peripheral they put into it. It’s the software you bought.’ It really depends on trying to establish where the fault is. There are a lot of variables now that may have nothing to do with the company that you’re dealing with at the time. You’ll see a lot of customers who call and they don’t even know who to call for what problem. If they just try to log on to the Internet, the first person they’re going to call is us, even if it is a computer issue. And they’re very dissatisfied when you tell them it’s not your product. They expect you to be able to help them with a product you didn’t sell.”

When it comes to managing customers who demand help but don’t fully understand the service, the executive shares his advice. “Spend a lot of time with those customers, and educate them when they call in. Take the time and teach them how the service works and how it can work best for them. Interview them and ask, ‘How do you use this? What are you trying to do?’ to make sure they’re using it the right way, and they actually purchased the right level of service. Whatever we do, we have to show the customer the

value of what they've purchased, and if that value doesn't exist in their lifestyle, we got to get the product resized, or resold, to fit that value proposition for them. You see a lot of that happen after-the-fact in customer service and tech support.

"Customer service is fulfilling a need. It's not rocket science; it's just making sure that you are doing what you need to do to satisfy that expectation. And the expectation of the customer needs to be realistic, and oftentimes we are the ones that set the unrealistic expectations, not the customer."

While the executive believes that there is room for improvement for tech support overall, most of the time there are competing goals. "Look at most customer support/tech support organizations – it's a huge cost center for most companies. And it's really hard to quantify the value of spending a lot in service. Some companies get away with giving very bad service because the product is necessary enough that people will put up with it. So you really have to measure how much effort you put into it to what you get out of it. It's really a product of necessity versus value. There's a law of diminishing returns of how good you get, and it depends on your business. If your business just requires you to get it working and whether it works well or not and it's something they have to have, you can get away with not having great service, because they can't leave.

"But when you start getting into competitive environments and the service is similar, then it matters."

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