

WHITE PAPER

**Multi-channel Service:
Enhancing the Customer Experience**

PARATURE®

There's no question: As consumers, we're spoiled. We're accustomed to numerous and varied ways to purchase our products and services, not to mention abundant incarnations of those products and services. It's no wonder, then, that we've taken those same expectations to the support realm, where we likewise demand choice in the way we receive customer service.

From snail-mail correspondence, to the telephone, to self-service knowledgebases, to social communities, customer service continues to evolve and expand its footprint across a range of delivery channels. Channel choice is best determined by a company's business model, but most successful businesses today offer a multi-channel approach that gives their customers options in seeking service. Companies don't need to offer every possible channel to their user base — just the ones most effective based on their constituency. Determining which ones will be most effective remains a leading challenge for service executives today.

Customers are increasingly comfortable with not only supplementing their use of traditional phone channels when seeking support, but when possible, eschewing the phone altogether. They're opting for email with autoresponse, self-service knowledgebases, chat, remote support for break/fix and proactive IT services, video, and social communities ranging from Facebook to Twitter to homegrown forums. Each has its strengths and weaknesses, both in service delivery abilities and costs, but when combined properly, can be a compelling business differentiator.

"Customers today get to choose the medium they want for receiving support and they want first-contact resolution through that channel," says Rosanne D'Ausilio, PhD, president of Human Technologies Global Inc. "Support organizations have to make sure that the channel chosen resolves whatever the issue is, because if a customer has to try three different channels and hasn't resolved their problem, they're not going to bother anymore — they're going to get frustrated and tell several people."

The advantages that stem from offering multiple channels are numerous, but support organizations face a number of challenges if the effort is to succeed. Success has many facets in this context — reduced costs, streamlined transactions, call deflection, improved customer satisfaction, better data for mining and reporting — but there's a significant point often overlooked by many companies trying to go multi-channel. It's this: A multiplicity of channels alone is by no means an indicator of success. Without the proper channel choices, streamlined processes, and channel integration, a multi-channel initiative can even be damaging to a company's reputation.

MIX AND MATCH

According to a recent survey conducted by Supportindustry.com, the telephone is still the most oft-used channel for both B2C and B2B companies, with 95% of respondents providing it. Though companies may prefer their customers use less resource-consuming channels, they still don't typically have the luxury of eliminating phone-based support. However, support organizations have made good headway complementing more-established channels, and in many cases, have made driving customers to these newer channels their prime focus, ensuring that the phone is used only when cases cannot be solved via other measures.

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Rosanne D'Ausilio
Human Technologies
Global Inc.

Following the telephone as a support channel are self-service knowledgebases, says the survey. Support organizations are also increasingly deploying such self-service channels as dynamic FAQs, forums, and Webinars; such delayed-assist options as email autoresponse and case submittal via the Web; and such real-time assisted options as screen-sharing and remote control.

SUPPORT CHANNELS OFFERED TO CUSTOMERS	
Choice	% of Respondents
Phone	95.2%
Knowledge management/knowledgebases	62.5%
Dynamic FAQ	22.1%
Email autoresponse/suggest	61.5%
Text Chat/Instant Messaging	26%
Screen sharing	45.2%
Remote control	43.3%
Remote diagnostics	26%
Electronic case submittal on web	50%
User Forums	30.8%
Webinars	32.7%
Other	5.8%

Source: SupportIndustry.com

“CALL ME” ANYTIME

In Blondie’s 1980 chart-topping hit “Call Me,” the star blithely suggested it didn’t matter what time of the day or night her paramour reached out over the phone lines – she’d be there waiting. Many support departments might twist the sentiment of those lyrics a bit, preferring to offer phone support only when it makes business and fiscal sense. Even then, they often offer at least some alternatives for first contact — options requiring less real-time assistance and at lower cost-per-transaction — in hopes visitors will find answers and information there.

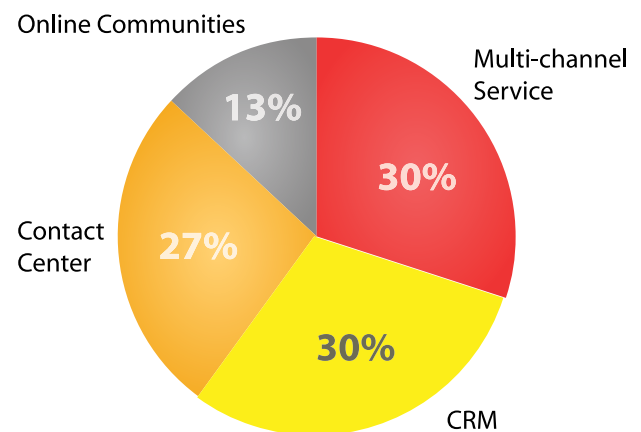
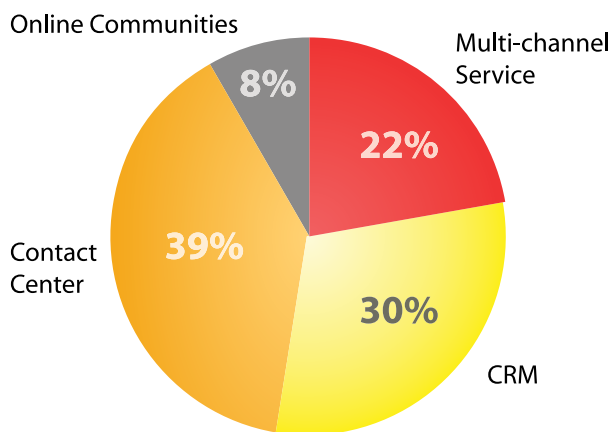
Nonetheless, the channel mix has evolved dramatically in recent years and continues to do so. Other channels with strong and/or growing entrenchment:

- **Self-service knowledgebases, FAQs, and other customer-leveraged services:** Self-services capitalize by addressing simple, repetitive problems, thereby deflecting calls and driving down service delivery costs. To be effective, they require ongoing investment in content, search, and marketing to encourage use and customer satisfaction.
- **Chat:** Like the telephone, chat provides customers with assisted service, but can be used more efficiently by agents, many of whom can juggle multiple sessions simultaneously. Not only has chat made solid inroads into support organizations for post-sales service, it's gotten a nice foothold in pre-sales situations, increasing the likelihood that customers will buy. Because chat is text-based, agents require different skillsets than phone-based support demands, so hiring and training should be tailored accordingly.
- **Email:** A long-used alternative to the phone, email has been a very effective channel, but only when backed by response-time guarantees. To streamline email transactions, support shops take advantage of autoresponse capabilities, pass-thru authentication, and other features.
- **Social networks:** Social media in various incarnations — Facebook, Twitter, homegrown forums, and dedicated third-party communities bring users together to praise, complain, and offer suggestions about their providers' service performance. When companies leverage that, they can dramatically improve products and service delivery.

CUSTOMER SERVICE TECHNOLOGY SPENDING BY CATEGORY

2008

2009



Source: TSIA

UNDER ONE ROOF

With the difficulties associated with integrating multiple channels across a unified infrastructure, it's not surprising that support executives explore purchasing an integrated platform that brings together such channel options as email, chat, and self-service knowledgebases, and provides hooks into telephony systems. Support organizations are particularly likely to look at integrated systems — and increasingly, at those based on a software-as-a-service (SaaS) model — if they don't have the IT expertise in-house to perform costly and difficult integrations themselves.

The problem is, they often ultimately choose individual products from different vendors and put off integration, says John Ragsdale, VP of research, Technology Services Industry Association (TSIA).

"Requests for proposals [for customer service applications] often state that companies are looking for preintegrated modules from a single vendor, but they end up getting one vendor for one channel and another vendor for another. The purchaser keeps pushing out the integration to phase two or three of a roll-out," he says. "We continue to create individual islands of technology."

Stories abound where, instead of choosing an integrated CRM system that standardizes on delivery processes and data capture cross-channel, the call center ends up using a telephony system from one provider, the agents handling email use an application from another, and those using chat have a system from a third.

"There are a lot of disconnects like that," says Ragsdale. He recommends that companies ensure that integration among channels be addressed in first-phase implementation efforts, so that they can, for instance, report on incidents and analyze issues across channels.

LET CUSTOMERS IN ON THE SECRET

Whatever channels a company chooses to offer, they have to find a way to improve the customer's experience as they transition between channels. While businesses may be doing a reasonable job of understanding multi-channel and cross-channel traffic from an internal viewpoint, the same courtesy hasn't been extended to the customers themselves, says Michael Maoz, a VP with Gartner Inc.

"Businesses have done a good job internally of tying systems together so support organizations can see, for example, email and phone trees and chat traffic. From the business side, we're tracking and reporting on IVR traffic, phone volume, and Web traffic so we think we've got it nailed," says Maoz. "But we're missing the customer-centric view of multi-channel support."

Customers don't care which channel they choose to interact with a provider — if they move to another channel, they expect the business to understand where they've been.

Why aren't more companies able to provide this experience? Because it's hard work, he continues. "They've done the easier work in multi-channel and saved the customer experience piece for last because it's difficult. It requires people and process change, and that's why [multi-channel service] is so often disjointed and compartmentalized."

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Indeed, the customer is often the component left out of the service equation, says D'Ausilio. "With all this multi-channel effort, an important question is being ignored: What does the customer want?" she says. "All the technology may be perfect, but if it's not what the customer wants, they're not going to be satisfied with the experience."

Ultimately, Ragsdale says, support organizations get the most out of multi-channel deployments when they

remember they're in the "customer engagement" business for the long term, and not to obsessively focus on metrics like call deflection over satisfaction.

"Even with the huge success of [social networks/forums], phone calls don't really drop. These additional channels don't really deflect; they allow customers to ask questions they wouldn't bother to ask, thereby increasing customer engagement," he says. The exception is SMBs, who, because they have little or no IT staff in place to handle support contacts anyway, might leverage forums as a call deflection channel. Customers on larger forums, he adds, are making recommendations, driving additional sales, and creating loyalty.

CHAT 'EM UP

A channel having one of the biggest impacts these days is chat, both for pre- and post-sales service.

"There's a lot of interest in chat," says John Ragsdale, VP of research at TSIA. "Not only is there increasing consolidation of chat in remote control applications and in service overall, but there's proactive chat in e-commerce transactions, which is a very hot topic in the consumer world."

Not only can chat be a less-expensive channel than the phone, enabling agents to handle more than one transaction at a time, but during slow call center times, phone staff can be switched to chat channels to proactively help customers who might be shopping or for after-sales service.

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Chat delivers other significant potential benefits as well. For instance, chat transactions can be outsourced offshore to agents who don't speak English as a first language. Unlike on the phone, where linguistic issues can cause customer frustration, agents using chat can provide support without the same level of communication breakdown, says Ragsdale.

ROSETTA STONE: SERVICE SPEAK

Open dialogue isn't just the key to Rosetta Stone and its vast success in immersive language learning; it's a characteristic that drives their support strategy as well. A customer base working from among more than 30 language programs, and living and traveling all around the world, translates to this: a multi-channel approach to service that's based on timely access to the right support content and professionals.

"The nature of our products means a customer base that travels. From a success perspective, our customers need to be conversationally proficient in whatever language they learn, so we need to be able to help them achieve their goals in any language — anytime, anywhere," says Nilofer Saidi, director of customer success services at the Arlington, Va.-based company.

Rosetta Stone's goal is to create a support infrastructure comprising language-proficient specialists in countries around the world, connected to a centralized CRM database and accessible through a range of channels. If a customer buys a product in the U.S. to learn Japanese, for example, and has any issues during the initial learning phase, they'll receive help within the U.S. Then, if they travel to Japan, and have additional questions or require a follow-up conversation, they'll be connected to a localized agent there.

Says Saidi, "The success agent they connect with locally should understand what the Rosetta Stone relationship with the customer has been. Our goal is to have a streamlined global customer experience."

To help them reach these customer goals, Rosetta Stone has deployed a customer service suite from Vienna, Va.-based Parature Inc. The language-learning solutions provider is currently using Parature's support portal, with integrated self-service knowledgebase, chat, download, and ticket modules, and is considering the vendor's forum product for social media interactions.

A TOTALE Package

Streamlining the global customer experience has become an even more important objective with the release of the company's new online solution, Rosetta Stone TOTALE. With online solutions, particularly one that's so intensive — encompassing course content, online studio sessions that are time-sensitive, interactive

games that network with other learners — a customer's tolerance for a less-than-stellar support experience is lower, according to Saidi.

To ensure high satisfaction with the new solution rollout, Rosetta Stone offers a multi-channel support experience through the phone, knowledgebase, online trouble ticketing, and chat, among other options. With Rosetta Stone TOTALE, the company is seeing strong uptake on chat, which is embedded through the Parature offering in the product set. Saidi points to such benefits as lower costs, more effective support delivery, increased agent productivity, and improved customer satisfaction through chat usage.

With chat, if a customer is trying to get into an online studio session and is having trouble, they need merely to click a button to be connected to a live event support agent. "Depending on where you are and what your native language is, you'll be routed to the appropriate person who can help you in a very time-sensitive way," says Saidi. The company has thus far made this capability available in their English and Spanish-Latin American solutions, and will be rolling it out for their Japanese, Korean, German, French, Italian and Spanish-Spain solutions over the next several months.

The appropriate people might be in the UK, Japan, Korea, or the US, where Rosetta Stone has offices, or in outsourced call centers in India or the Netherlands. Each of these locations is either already using Parature for support or taking part in a continuing rollout over the next few months, accessing the global customer database.

In addition to technical support, the TOTALE service portfolio also includes proactive customer outreach through a dedicated "Customer Success" team. These agents currently use phone and email for interactions, and will soon use the Parature Chat module, to determine and document individual customers' language goals and helping them map a timeline for reaching them.

Saidi expects to gain huge efficiencies through the centralized global database and standardized customer service application use across support centers. Even though every language program they offer has its own support team, they're now able to

communicate and escalate issues across teams. They're also much better able to distinguish customers, type of support need, and live event issues, which have higher service-level agreements associated with them.

SaaS and the Speedy Start

Rosetta Stone selected Parature in 2008 after an intensive CRM process definition phase and RFP, ahead of another leading vendor and their incumbent CRM system. At the time, a big driver was the fast deployment and ROI that Parature, with their SaaS-based software model, promised to deliver.

"We didn't want to spend a long time on our implementation and we couldn't count on our incumbent data," says Saidi. Within two months, she adds, they had their sales team, tech support team, customer care team — including a new tier one call center in India — deployed on Parature. Following an initial process and system adjustment period, they were quickly gathering valuable data on customer behavior.

"We learned a lot more about our customers within the first month," she says.

Choosey Customers, Proper Channels

In the coming months, Rosetta Stone plans to enhance and optimize their support portal, and is considering adding interactive video, tutorials and other content to their knowledgebase for customer support. They'll increasingly explore social media options, including forums and microblogging.

They also plan to make their portal easier for customers to navigate. They want to map processes that will, for instance, allow a customer trying to activate their product to push a button and be taken straight to relevant content. If that doesn't serve their purpose, they might be able to click a button and escalate to a video, or be automatically routed to an agent through chat, or hit a click-to-call request.

"We want to enhance the portal experience to enhance customer satisfaction, and make the customer experience really fast and seamless and comfortable," says Saidi.

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ABOUT PARATURE

Parature enables organizations to better serve, support, engage with and retain their customers via the Web. Industry-leading, on-demand Parature Customer Service™ software provides customer service organizations with a comprehensive, multi-channel way to meet the growing expectations of their customers. With more than 10 years experience, Parature serves organizations in a wide variety of industries worldwide and helps support more than 16 million end users. Parature is among Inc. Magazine's Top 100 Fastest Growing Private Software Companies and is the recipient of numerous product, technology, and leadership awards. Today, the Parature name is synonymous with innovation and value in Web-based customer service software, strategies and best practices. Parature is headquartered in Vienna, Virginia with offices in San Francisco and the U.K. For more information, visit www.parature.com or follow [@parature](https://twitter.com/parature) on Twitter.

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