

Ten Reasons Your Ecommerce Website Needs Live Help

Executive Perspective

Is live web-based help really a good way to drive online sale and deliver better customer service? Or should your company stay with tried and true methods¾like the phone and email? The answer is yes. To deliver the “right here, right now” service that today’s customers have come to expect, your company needs to provide customers with multiple communication and service options. An integrated suite of sales and customer service channels sets your company apart in the marketplace as a service leader.

There are three major channels to online customer service: self help, email, and live help. While most companies see value in the first two, the live help option is often neglected. But, for truly superior web-based service and support, the live help channel is vital.

1. Put Help Where Your Customers Are

If your customers are online shopping or looking for information, they should be able to get assistance in the same medium. Online customers are easily deterred, and any impediment to immediate query resolution is a quick way to frighten customers or send them surfing to another site. Robust self help options coupled with the option to escalate to live text conferencing allows customers to get assistance when they need it, without leaving the website or interrupting the shopping process. No company would ask a customer who has visited their store to send a letter or phone for more information: disconnecting from the Internet to make a call or sending an email makes about as much sense.

2. Turn Browsers into Buyers

“Shoppers who can’t find desired items will leave—an underlying cause of today’s pitiful 2.7% rate of converting lookers into buyers,” says Forrester Research (January 1999). But with live help, agents are on call to help a customer find items, answer questions about the order form, etc. Think of live help as staffing your online store—all customers have to do is initiate the conversation, and your online reps can help them with decisions and walk them to the register.

3. Help Customers to Help Themselves

Online customers usually prefer to help themselves: they are convenience-focused do-it-yourselfers. This is a primary reason why they are on the Web instead of driving around to stores or calling your company on the phone. (According to a 1998 article published by *USA Today*, 71% of adults cite convenience as the number one reason to shop online.)

Providing a robust source of online assistance helps customers to help themselves. The ability for customers to actually find what they are looking for “trains” them to try the website first. When coupled with the availability of web-based live help, a substantial number of queries become “one and done” contacts.

With robust web-based help, companies find a substantial decrease in 800 number traffic, reduced email volume, and greater agent productivity (since agents are freed from answering routine questions). The customer perceives the availability of online help as better customer service. The company, in turn, realizes greater efficiency and cost savings. Everyone wins.

4. Customers Like the Live Help Format

The availability of live online help greatly enriches the customer experience. Online customers understand and like the format: the popularity of online chats and newsgroups proves this. Plus, it’s important to provide an escalation path to those customers who are not able to resolve their queries through self-help channels. Once customers have tried to help themselves, their patience may wear thin. Asking them to call up and navigate a frustrating IVR system or wait for an email response may push them over the edge—and right to a competitor.

5. Deliver a Personal Touch

Although online customers tend to be do-it-yourselfers, sometimes they need help. Unfortunately, most websites make it impossible to get help at the point of sale. Providing easy-to-find links and an easy-to-use help interface reassures customers and makes them more comfortable with the online shopping experience.

Additionally, the ability to communicate directly with a sales or service agent puts a personal face on the potentially sterile ecommerce experience, reassuring customers that they are dealing with a real company staffed by live people.

6. Instant Service = Happy Customers = Higher Sales

As we all know, the prospect of calling an 800 line, navigating a multilevel IVR, and waiting on hold is not enticing—nor does it enhance the shopping experience. Email is even worse, who knows when or if you will ever get an answer? The ability for customers to launch directly into live help greatly enhances the shopping experience and allows customers to complete the sales cycle unimpeded.

Plus, as customers are shopping, they may have more questions. The prospect of dialing the 800 number and waiting for a second time is sure to kill any desire to make a purchase. Forrester Research estimates that over 67% of people who fill their online shopping baskets abandon the process before completing the sale. Why? They get lost, have a question, and lose patience. Don’t let valuable customers walk right out of your store. Be there to help them.

7. Increase Efficiency and Save Time

You might think that live online help is inefficient. But, compared to email and the phone, live help offers an efficiency advantage:

- Live online help expedites knowledge transfer with the ability to “show and tell” information. Both the phone and email are limited to one communication channel.
- Email requires the customer to wait for an answer: by the time the query is addressed, the customer may have already bought from another merchant. A phone call often requires waiting on hold, where your potential customer might lose patience and hang up. Web-based help is immediate and in-medium.
- The ability to capture the customers’ trail through self help (searches performed and URLs visited) allows the agent to instantly surmise what the customer is looking for, without going through a detailed explanation at the beginning of the live help session.
- The ability to push URLs allows agents to give customers instant information or instructions without the having to walk them through the process.
- While customers follow instructions or view URLs sent to them by the agent, the agent can help other customers and return to those viewing information as needed.

8. Increase Agent Satisfaction

In a traditional support and service environment (call center or otherwise), agents communicate with customers via either phone or email. This offers little variety and attributes to high turnover. In an integrated environment, agents can be on the phone, answer incoming web conference requests, and respond to emails during slow times. Allowing agents to multitask and work across multiple communication channels expands their skill sets and contributes to higher job satisfaction.

9. Keep Customers Online

Using the phone often requires the customer to disconnect from the Internet and leave the website. (According to a 1998 study by Georgia Tech, over 50% of online customers have only one phone line.) On the other hand, live help is web-based: customers can see the website content while they explain the problem. Plus, agents can sync browsers with the customer to “show” them what they need while “telling” them about it in a live text conversation.

10. Perpetuate Better Service

In any service or support environment, it’s far more efficient to answer a question once for many site visitors, than to answer the question individually for each customer. It’s even more efficient to make that routine information available in a searchable self help repository. Industry estimates conclude that as many as 80% of incoming queries are for routine information.

With an integrated self help and live help system, agents can determine which questions are asked most often and add that information to the self help system. Through this practice, the self help capabilities of your website continue to improve, perpetuating better/faster service by enabling customers to help themselves to the information they need.

Conclusion

Today's customers have high service expectations and low patience levels. Live help makes the online shopping experience much more satisfying, ensuring completed sales and repeat customers. According to a Jupiter Study (September 1998), 41% of respondents stated that the availability of live help would significantly impact their web-based purchase decisions. Now is the time to set your site apart from the competition with superior customer service and one-to-one communication.

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