

# Duck Hunting and the Future of Customer Support

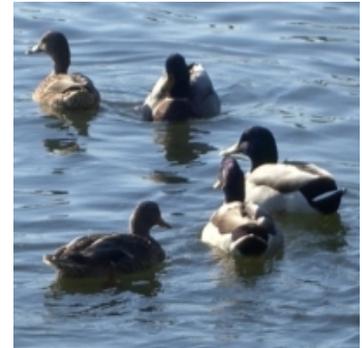
by  
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## Introduction

One of my early statistics mentors gave me sound advice about survey research and sample design:

***"Shoot where the ducks are!"***

Vala Afshar's thoughtful [The Future of Customer Support is Social, Mobile, Video and Insourced](#) says pretty much the same thing only about customer support: more people are using mobile, social, and video technologies to communicate and collaborate so these need to be used in customer support as well and we need to learn how to manage them.



## Good sense

I agree with Afsharar. Communicating with customers when, where, and how they want to communicate just makes good sense.

This isn't anything new for anyone who has been around customer support technology for the past several decades. New technology comes along and, if it sticks, it's eventually integrated with customer support operations. A quick web search illustrates how much attention is paid to the use of [technology in customer support](#), and [conferences and meetings abound](#) where "what's new" in customer support and call center management is discussed.

Afshar does come down hard on the side of interactive video becoming more important to customer support. His message is that some outsourced customer support operations might be

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hard-pressed to supply quality interaction via two-way video and that companies need to be prepared for that eventuality, perhaps by being prepared to "in-source" previously outsourced support functions.

### **Cost-effectiveness and sustainability**

Things are bit more complex than that, of course. It's important to keep in mind not only user acceptance but also cost-effectiveness and sustainability. Some customers will prefer self service as a matter of habit. Others will prefer not to have a personalized or a face-to-face response due to privacy, transaction speed, or shyness concerns. "Different strokes for different folks," as we used to say. Managers need to be prepared to handle a wide variation in expectations.

Doing so efficiently will continue to be a challenge. High-quality personalized customer support costs money whether we are talking phone, chat, e-mail, video, the Genius Bar at the local Apple Store, or Amazon's Mayday button. The person at the other end from the customer has to be knowledgeable. While there's no question that customer support operations should use the communication channels preferred by customers, ensuring that knowledgeable help are available when needed is also important.

How this can be done in a cost-effective manner is a challenge that is well understood by anyone involved in training or mentoring support staff. You can go just so far with technology-supported decision making. Empathy, understanding, assessment, resolution, and satisfaction are all helped along by technology and the creative analysis of the data associated with the caller but it's ultimately the people involved in the communication process that drives success, not the machines.

### **Good support is good marketing**

Related to this is the point made by Afshar that good customer support is good marketing. While this point isn't new, it is helpful to distinguish between customer support for consumer markets and BTB marketing.

Consumer markets are often driven by volume. This impacts how post-sale support is provided. The costs and processes associated with B2B marketing and the roles of mobile and social technologies may be significantly different especially when complex products are services are what is marketed and supported. Perhaps the collaboration possibilities inherent in the growth of social and mobile tech in the enterprise, and the resulting extension of employee collaborative activities to external groups such as B2B buyers and sellers, will be more valuable than video per se given the fragmented nature of so many business relevant conversations. (This topic is addressed in some of the Related Reading cited at the end of this article.)

Also we have to think about scalability and integration and the impact on costs. Customer support in the consumer market place places a great premium on repeatability and standardization and these are sometimes at odds with personalization. Perhaps in the B2B marketplace a higher premium exists for personalization; this might be more sustainable given higher per-transaction values and lower overall volume when compared with mass market consumer products.

### **Supporting infrastructure**

We also need to consider the supporting infrastructure and the management not only of communication pathways but also management of the information content that's being transmitted along these pathways. Large customer call centers rely on the integration of telecom based systems for call switching and routing with customer tracking support provided by sophisticated database tools.

Incorporating more communication channels into the media mix while maintaining call volume and quality requires integration of backend systems along with content and language controls to help manage experience consistency. Expanding infrastructure to include the ability for employees within the firewall to collaborate as well as communicate with customers via a variety of media including video (e.g., via a platform such as Avaya Aura) raises additional management and governance issues as communication variety increases.

Providing experience consistency as more channels are added is a challenge and suggests the need for the integrated management of all customer support touch points. That's not a new idea but it is notoriously difficult to accomplish given corporate political realities. As support processes becomes more mobile and social in nature it's possible that the same type of management control can't be exerted over distributed B2B customer interactions as was possible when all incoming customer support requests were theoretically being routed through a single 800 number portal.

### **Make support more collaborative**

The real impacts of the new technologies extend beyond in-sourcing and video to the need to make support more collaborative and less hierarchical than might have been the case in the past.

I remember once working with a client to assess customer support activities and found that the majority of post sale customer contact was actually occurring outside the call center and its customer system database. Extending access to the customer support system to non-call-center staff, given pricey license fees in place at that time, was viewed as onerous by the client. Also, organizational and departmental politics made the sharing and coordination of customer service difficult.

Adding more channels for communicating directly with the customers implied the need for a more collaborative means of coordinating responses than might have been the case in the past. This is an example of how process and governance change requirements can outweigh technology change in influencing the adoption of new technologies.

Selling new tools is easy. Figuring out how to orchestrate all the resulting business process changes -- including better coordination in customer support management -- is more difficult.

## **Conclusion**

I agree with much of what Afshar says about how mobile and social technologies are impacting customer support but I don't think he goes far enough in his admittedly brief article. Effectively adapting mobile, social, and video technologies will have significant implications for costs, personalization, and response consistency and -- perhaps most importantly -- for the manner in which customer support is managed.

Perhaps I should alter my mentor's dictum when it comes to the impact of new interactive technologies on customer support:

***“Shoot where the ducks are but don't be surprised when they start shooting back!”***

*Related reading:*

- [\*Should Everyone in an Organization Have Customer Service Responsibilities?\*](#)
- [\*How Closely do Traditional and Social Media Based Customer Support Services Need to be Coordinated?\*](#)
- [\*Social CRM Adoption: What You Don't Know Won't Hurt You, Right?\*](#)
- [\*What Are YOU Trying to Do with Mobile Technologies in the Enterprise?\*](#)
- [\*What Should Apple Do To Fix Its Maps Fiasco?\*](#)