

CUSTOMER SUPPORT HANDBOOK

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Foreword

As a software engineer for most of my professional life, I got used to being able to Google an answer to any possible question in a minute. When I found myself in a customer support role, I had many questions once again. How do you handle angry clients? How do you say “no” to a customer? How do you handle downtimes? I tried taking the same approach, but Googling hasn’t helped; there were almost no good articles on the topic. The ones I did find were very inconsistent.

I had to figure out everything on my own. I’ve made a lot of mistakes. A couple of times I’ve done horribly. Sometimes those mistakes cost me thousands of dollars. But 30,000 support tickets later, I’ve learned a lot.

Two years ago Alex and I, the founders behind [Jitbit Helpdesk](#), decided to start a customer support blog through which we would share that knowledge. By that time there were a couple of decent blogs on customer support out there, but all of them were too vague and philosophical for my liking. The focus of our blog has always been on actionable stuff – something you can immediately apply to your work regardless of your product or industry.

This book is a compilation of all the articles we wrote on our [Customer Support Blog](#) over the last two years. We’ve edited them to follow each other in a logical order.

Hope you enjoy.

– Max Al Farakh, co-founder of Jitbit

Part one

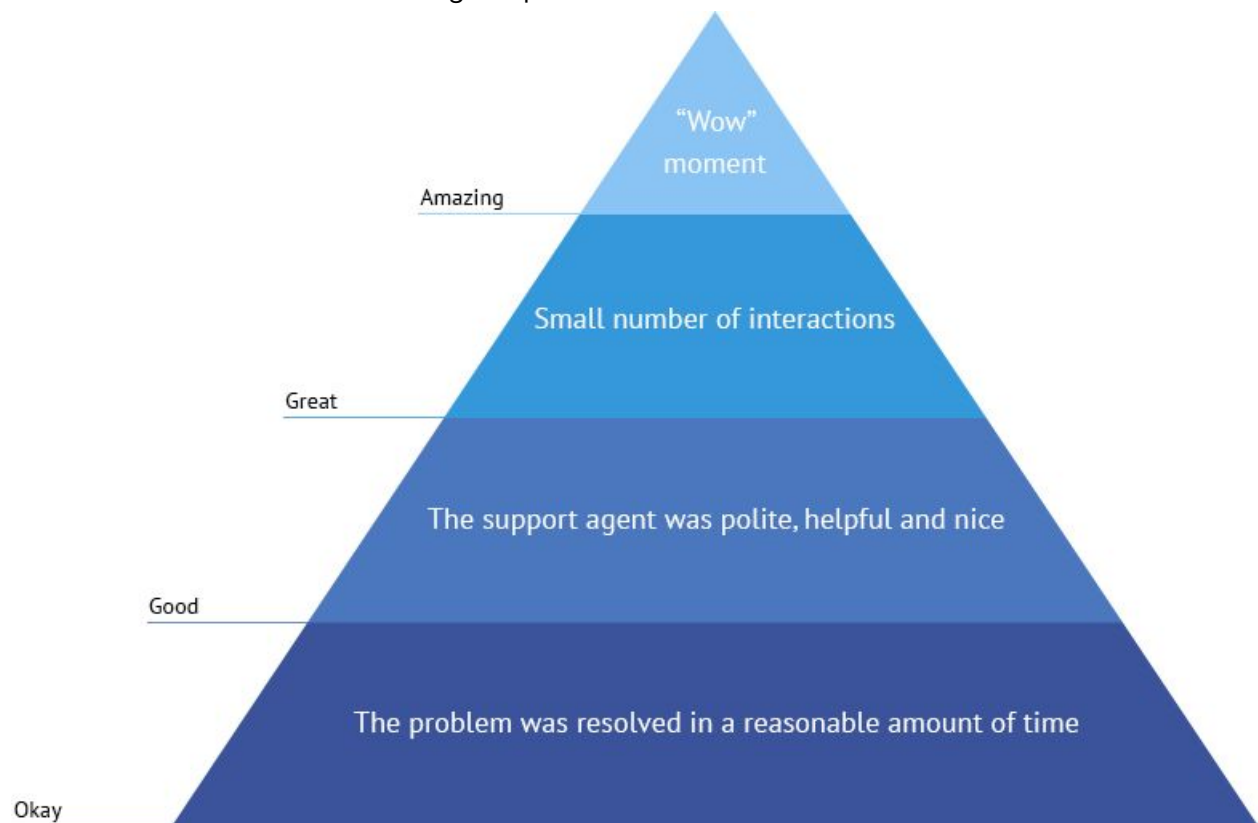
How-to's

1. Amazing customer support defined

You probably already know that providing great customer support should be a top priority. But what exactly is an amazing customer support experience? Over years of answering support tickets and developing a helpdesk ticketing system, we figured out what works and what doesn't. This is our attempt to provide a definition of "great customer support interaction".

Customer support hierarchy of needs

Customer needs are represented as a pyramid on the following chart. I took the idea from Maslow's hierarchy of needs. The idea is simple — if you can't solve the problem, it doesn't really matter how nice and friendly you were. The customer will still be upset. Of course, he is going to be less upset because you were somewhat helpful and a pleasure to talk to, but the user's fundamental need — solving the problem — hasn't been satisfied.



Of course, we are aiming at "amazing" here, but it's not that easy, and often it's not possible at all. On the other hand, the "great" level is always achievable, so it should be the absolute minimum level of customer support you provide. It should always be "great" and sometimes "amazing". Let's take a quick look at each pyramid level.

“The problem was resolved in a reasonable amount of time”

Okay, this one is obvious — you have to actually solve the user’s problem. But what if you can’t? Let’s say your product doesn’t support a feature the customer needs and you are not going to implement it. What can you do to earn some great-customer-support points?

Just say "no". Tell them you can’t help and provide a reasonable explanation. It may sound scary, but it works. We did this hundreds of times. It's okay to say "no". Users are always thankful that you’re being honest and not wasting their time. Of course, they will be upset, but at least they won’t be angry. Some companies are so afraid to say "no" that they keep pushing the customer's request down the queue to "deal with it later", which, in turn, sometimes results in no answer at all.

“The support agent was polite, helpful and nice”

This is really all there is to say. It’s really self-explanatory. You have to be nice to people. In fact, you have to be the nicest person they’ve ever met, because people will remember and tell their friends about this.

“Small number of interactions”

The problem should be resolved in as few interactions as possible. Ideally, it should be resolved in a single interaction, but you do not always have control over this. Users rarely provide all the information you need to solve their issues right away. The best thing would be to ask additional questions as well as provide possible solutions.

Also, passing users around is a huge no-no. By this, I mean saying something like, “Bob over in the sales department handles this type of issue; contact him at bob@terrible-customer-support.com”. I’m sure there is a special place in hell for support agents who do this. You either contact Bob yourself and then pass along the information to the customer OR you ask Bob to contact the customer himself.

The "Wow" moment

Up to this point, everything has been pretty simple. However, getting to the amazing level is a challenge. First of all, what is a “wow” moment? Well, it’s something you do that makes a customer say “WOW”. It’s a huge burst of positive emotions he's going to remember. “Wow” moments have become the holy grail of customer support. It is something you can’t always get, but should always be trying to.

This is a topic for another article and I won’t go into many details here. The “wow” happens when you go the extra mile. To give you an idea, here is a thing I like to do:

1. A customer submits a new feature request or asks for a bug fix.
2. It's an easy fix and it can be done in a couple of minutes.
3. I jump straight to the code, fix it and deploy the app.
4. The customer gets his fix 10 minutes after submitting the ticket.

Works every time. Keep your eyes open for opportunities like this.

You do not have to do anything special to provide great customer support: solve problems, be nice and don't make customers do uncomfortable things. At the same time, we should always seek opportunities to be amazing. Go the extra mile and make customers say "WOW".

2. How to apologize to a customer

As customer support engineers, we have to apologize a lot. This is probably what we do most often. When I was just starting out in customer support, it was the hardest thing for me to figure out. When a customer is upset, angry or furious, what do you do to make things right? Simply solving the issue was never enough. For a long time I struggled to find the answer and I think I finally found it — after years of working in customer support and developing a helpdesk ticketing system. The right apology can work magic. **An apology is a chance to convert a disappointed customer into a loyal customer** if you know how to handle it right.

"Sorry for the inconvenience"

We've all heard this phrase before. Probably multiple times. Here is a question: do you think hearing it made anyone feel better? If anything, this phrase only makes you feel worse. It means absolutely nothing.

I'm going to repeat this over and over throughout this book: **sound like a human being, not like a robot**. Imagine someone spilling coffee on you and saying, "Oh, sorry for the inconvenience this caused you." People do not say "inconvenience" in real life. They say, "I'm really sorry." You need to sound like a human being if you want customers to believe that you are actually sorry.

Bad: *Sorry about the inconvenience.*

Good: *Gosh, I'm so sorry about this. We screwed up.*

Always take full responsibility

For some reason, many support agents like to shift the blame: *"I'm sorry you got charged \$10,000 twice. Our payment provider had some issues."* Oh, right. It's not your fault. I get it. I'm not angry anymore.

It's always your fault. And you have to take full responsibility for it.

Bad: *Sorry our app was down for five hours. Our hosting provider is having some trouble.*

Good: *I'm so sorry for this downtime. This is totally our fault. The whole team is working with our hosting provider to resolve this as soon as possible.*

There is no "you" in an apology

A good apology is all about empathy. In other words, you need to show that you really understand how the issue affects the customers.

Bad: *Terribly sorry about that.*

Good: *I know this is a huge disruption to your day. I'm sorry that we caused this frustration.*

Good apology checklist

Those were the main guidelines you should always keep in mind when writing an apology. Here is a short checklist you can use:

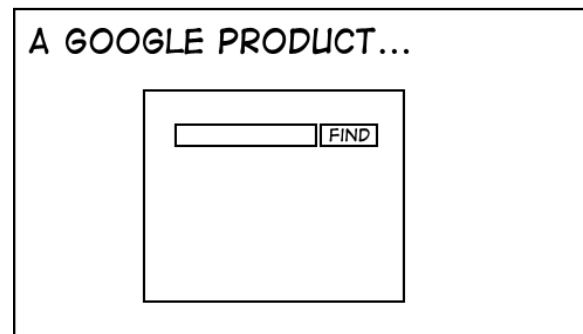
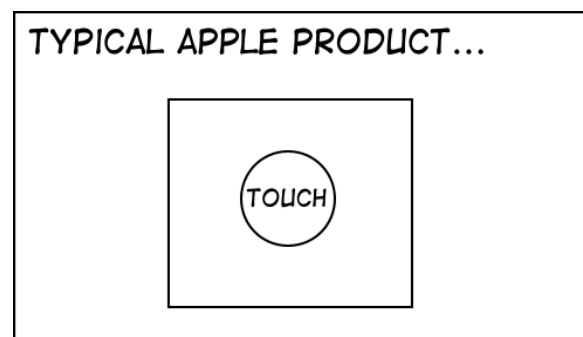
1. Listen.
2. Start with a "thank you".
3. Say you are sorry and take the blame.
4. Explain what happened and what's being done to resolve the issue. Don't dumb it down.
5. Depending on an issue, you can offer something to the customer to make up for it.
6. Thank the customer for using your product and for bearing with you while you resolved the issue.

We all make mistakes — customers understand that. How you handle your mistakes is what makes you stand out. No matter how angry a customer is, you can always fix it with a good apology.

3. How to handle feature requests

Whatever industry you're in, you must be getting tons of feature requests from your customers. There is a widespread belief in the tech industry that you should always say "no" to them. At Jitbit we think that this belief couldn't be more wrong.

On some days we receive as many as ten feature requests for our support ticketing system. If we implemented all of them, the app would quickly turn into a messy pile of buttons, checkboxes and other stuff no sane person could ever use. (You will see what I mean if you look at some of our well-known competitors.)



YOUR COMPANY'S APP...

FIRST NAME:	<input type="text"/>	TYPE CD:	<input type="text"/>	4 - K AA2- DK9B KKA? CN3 AA-9
LAST NAME:	<input type="text"/>	TQP STAT:	<input type="checkbox"/>	
SSN:	<input type="text"/>	FT/PT:	<input type="checkbox"/>	
ID:	<input type="text"/>	VER:	<input type="text"/>	
PHONE 1:	<input type="text"/>	CAT CD:	<input type="text"/>	
PHONE 2:	<input type="text"/>	CITY:	<input type="text"/>	
ADDR 1:	<input type="text"/>	STATE:	<input type="text"/>	NEW
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Still, Helpdesk wouldn't be that great if not for our customers and their ideas. So, how do you handle feature requests correctly?

Find out what the actual problem is

Customers almost never tell you **the actual underlying problem** they are having. They just tell you **a possible solution** that they believe should solve it. Those solutions are almost never great. They are actually quite bad, for the most part, because customers think about their needs only, while you have to think about all the other customers, not to mention overall product integrity and the like.

That's why it's your job to come up with solutions. The first thing you should do when receiving a feature request is **ask the customer to describe the actual problem** they are having. From my experience, 50% of all feature requests can be solved using existing features. So, your first response should be:

Why exactly do you need this? Can you please provide a real-world example?

Saying "No" is okay

The idea of "always responding 'no' to feature requests", which I mentioned in the beginning, is actually really clever. Originally it just meant that you should be very careful when adding features because too many features can (and will) make your product unusable. However, Steve-Jobs-wannabe startup founders recently caused this idea to mutate into something completely different. Currently, it is something like: "How dare you tell me what to do with my app? I'm the visionary here. I know what you need better than you do!"

Anyway, it is okay to refuse to implement a feature. Customers rarely expect you to actually do things they ask for. How do I know this? Because every time we add a feature they asked for, they are pleasantly surprised. Literally, every time. So, it's okay to say no. How you say it — that's what matters.

Make customer feel appreciated

As a support agent, you probably don't get to decide how to respond to a feature request. It doesn't really matter — there is only one thing you need to do. You need to make customers feel appreciated.

People who submit feature requests are the most engaged and valuable customers you have. They use and love your product and they want it to be better. They are trying to help.

Be nice. Thank them for taking their time to write and share their ideas and thoughts. Even if you're going to apologise and refuse the feature request. Even if their ideas are totally crazy.

Make them feel appreciated — that's the only thing that matters when responding to feature requests.

4. How to prioritize your support queue

So, you come into work in the morning, open up your help desk app and see 50 tickets waiting in the queue. How do you go about responding in the most effective way? The obvious method is to handle old issues first — going bottom to top. That's what I was doing for a long time until I realized that it's wrong. The oldest issues aren't always the most important ones.

Here is how we prioritize tickets at Jitbit:

1. Close all the thank you's

Fifty unanswered tickets is a mess. That's why I like to bring that number down to something more manageable. The first thing I do is scan through the tickets and close all the "Thank you, it worked!" ones from the previous day. All general praise and "your product is awesome" tickets also fall into this category. Everything you can respond to in 30 seconds should be handled first.

It usually takes me around 5-10 minutes. Hopefully now you have fewer tickets in the queue and you're feeling better because of all the praise you've just read.

2. Urgent issues: billing, bugs etc.

Next come the most important issues — the ones that should be handled as quickly as possible or else you may lose a client. These usually are the most complicated ones and it may take some time to go through them all. Start with the billing issues, then move to critical bugs.

3. "How do I ..." tickets

At this point there is no pressure: there are no more urgent issues and you can take your time responding to anything that's left. Now it's time to respond to general questions about your product. Hopefully by now you've invested some time into building a help section on your web site. If not, keep an eye out for repetitive questions. If you get asked the same question twice, move the answer to the knowledge base.

Generally, the best possible response to a "Does your product support ..." and a "How do I ..." is a link to a knowledge base article.

4. Feature requests

We deal with feature requests last because they don't need to be responded to quickly and they take a lot of time to handle correctly. Again, there is no rush. You have time to think about

every request carefully. Listen to what your users have to say to get some insight into your product.

If you don't know whether or not you're going to add the feature requested, reply with a "thank you, we'll consider that" and log the request in your bug tracker (with a link to the support ticket to be replied to later).

So, to sum up:

1. Close all the "thank-you" tickets. It's easy, it doesn't take much time and it makes you feel good. Think of it as a warmup.
2. Now move to the urgent issues, because you don't want to lose money.
3. General support questions give you a chance to improve your help section and score some "wow" points.
4. Feature requests are probably the most complicated and useful category. Luckily, now you don't have to rush; you have time to handle them correctly.

5. How to handle downtimes

Every app is going to go down at some point. No matter how good your team is, you are going to have a major downtime. It's not a question of "if", it's a question of "when". Even Google goes down from time to time. When downtimes do happen, things get ugly quickly. These are going to be the hardest times for you and your customer support department.

Every serious outage causes loss. How much you lose depends directly on how your customer support agents handle it.

Get ahead of the downtime

Groove, one of our competitors, had a major downtime a couple of months back. Eleven hours passed between the times when the downtime began and when the company noticed it. I'm not trying to make fun of a competitor – I really feel for them. But still, 11 hours is freaking crazy.

You don't want to be in their shoes. To prevent this, you can use tools, like Pingdom and PagerDuty, that monitor the server uptime and notify you as soon as your app goes down. When something goes wrong, our phones start blowing up with automated text messages and calls. The chance that the entire team will sleep through these alerts is pretty slim (hey, a benefit of having your team spread across different time zones).

During the downtime: communicate continuously

You need to have a central place where you can continuously communicate with your customers throughout the downtime. Like most companies, we use Twitter for this. Some big companies have dedicated status pages (you can use StatusPage.io, if you want one).

When tickets start pouring in, you need to apologize, let them know you're handling it and send everyone to that place (hey, another benefit: downtimes are great for getting new Twitter followers). Post regular updates afterwards. Here is what customers want to know:

1. **That you are aware of the downtime and that you're working on it.**
2. **What the downtime means for them.** Was their data lost?
3. **What the next steps are for them.** Should they do something immediately? Change their passwords, for example.

After the downtime: tell users what the problem was

After everything is settled, write a blog post. Users need to know what happened, how it affects them and what measures you have taken to prevent this from happening in the future. If the outage affected all of your users, you may want to send an email to all customers.

Here are some general guidelines for the blog post:

1. **Don't point fingers.** Even if the downtime was not your fault, try not to shift the blame. Don't say something like, "That was totally [a third-party service] fault, we had nothing to do with that."
2. **Don't try to be funny.** If you have a B2B app, people probably lost money because of the downtime. This is a very bad time to make jokes.
3. **Don't pretend that the downtime was not a big deal.** When you say something like "a very few customers were affected", it sounds like you think it was not that big of a deal. Guess what? It was a huge deal for those who were affected.
4. **Don't forget to say you're sorry.** Preferably multiple times.

6. Dealing with difficult customers

For the most part, our customers are pleasant and reasonable people. I'm sure your customers are the same. However, every once in a while there comes a customer who is hard to deal with. He is annoyed, upset or maybe even plain rude. Here is how we handle complicated situations at Jitbit.

Be at your best

Talking to a difficult customer is arguably one of the most complicated situations you have to deal with as a helpdesk technician. Unleash your arsenal: use better words, listen carefully, be polite and empathetic. Basically, you need to be the nicest guy the person ever talked to. Be so good that it would be impossible for them to stay mad.

You should also remember that, as we said before, this is the place where you can convert an annoyed customer who's ready to quit into one of the most loyal customers you have. It depends on how you deal with it. All our previous articles have been preparing you for this moment.

Start with an apology

Of course, you have to fix the problem as quickly as possible, but a good apology is crucial too.

Here is the checklist again:

1. Listen carefully,
2. Say "thank you" and "sorry" many times,
3. Take full blame.
4. Explain what happened and what's being done to resolve the issue. Don't dumb it down.
5. Depending on the issue, you can offer something to the customer to make up for it.
6. Thank the customer for using your product and for bearing with you while you resolved the issue.

Don't take it personally

It is easy to get emotional and screw up everything. I am particularly bad at this kind of situation. An irritated customer starts being rude, I take it personally and write rude responses. There is nothing worse that you can do. You have to stay professional.

Customers can be rude and sometimes even insulting. You can't. **If you feel overwhelmed with emotions, just take five and come back to that ticket later.**

Delegate it to someone else

If you, like I often do, screw it up, it is a good idea to pass the ticket to someone else. Our head support guy, Vlad, is way better at this than I am – he always stays calm and professionally deals with every situation. When I feel that I'm starting to lose control, I immediately assign the ticket to him in our helpdesk system.

The customer is happy that the idiot he was dealing with (me) has been replaced by a nice guy and everybody wins.

You don't need every single customer

I'm just going to say it – some people are total assholes. Sometimes these people buy software and need support. You are better off without these people as your customers.

They will drive you mad, and it is just not worth it. Usually, you can easily identify them, and it's best not to deal with them at all. "Sorry about that. Here is your refund. Have a nice day." Done.

7. How to say "no" to a customer

It's safe to say that when a customer contacts support, all they want to hear is a "yes" to all their questions and requests. But that's not always possible. This is one of the most complicated situations in customer support because people, in general, take rejection seriously.

A couple of years ago at the Business of Software conference in Boston, [Sarah Hatter](#) said something that was a revelation to me:

There are so many ways to say "no" without actually saying "no."

Most of the time you can say it differently. Let's discuss how you can reject a customer without ruining your relationship.

Make it sound like a "yes"

Let's say you have a feature that is available only with an "Enterprise" plan and your customer asks you something like, "Can I use this feature?" Compare the two answers below:

No. You have to be on the Enterprise plan to use that.

Sure. Once you upgrade to the Enterprise plan, this feature will be available to you. Here is a link you can use to upgrade.

The first answer cuts the conversation short and makes the customer feel bad. By going with the second answer, you have a chance of getting a sale. At the very least you end the conversation on a positive note.

Provide an alternative

By providing an alternative, you show that even though you can't provide what customers want, you are willing to make some effort to not let them down. They will appreciate it.

For example, if a customer asks us, "Do you have Google Drive integration?", I would answer:

We do not have it yet, sorry. But we do have Dropbox integration. Let me know if that works for you.

Give them a detailed explanation

Let's say you get a feature request and you know for sure that you're not going to implement it. In this case, as I wrote in our "dealing with feature requests" guide, saying "no" is okay.

However, if you're going to reject a customer's request, you need to explain why are you rejecting it. The customer will appreciate your explanation and will feel grateful that you cared enough to take the time to write it.

You can't always say "yes". Learning to say "no" is essential. Just like an apology, rejection is a chance to gain trust from customers and make them more loyal to your company. You just need to handle it correctly.

8. How to WOW your customers

Two years ago, in the very first post of this customer support series of articles – “Amazing customer support defined” – I put “WOW moment” as the top priority for a great customer support interaction.

The first time I heard the term “WOW your customers” was from Tony Hsieh’s “Delivering Happiness” – a great book that changed the way I look at customer support. Here is how the book defines it:

When a customer experiences WOW, you are giving them a pleasant surprise. You are exceeding their expectations. You are addressing their needs thoughtfully and in unexpected ways. It is an expression of your authentic interest in the person who seeks your services, not just in the transaction.

As you can see, it’s pretty abstract, much like most of the other articles on this topic. Today I wanted to share some actionable advice on how to WOW your customers – the specific stuff you can try today.

Why do you need to WOW your customers?

Humans tend to remember strong emotions pretty well. If you make them say “WOW”, they are going to remember this for a long time and you will get a very loyal customer. WOW moments create a long-lasting loyalty. That’s what you’re going for.

However, WOW’ing someone is a challenge, especially over email. You can’t do it in every single support ticket, but you should always try.

WOW’ing is all about greatly exceeding expectations. Here are a couple of ways you can do that.

Act faster than they expect

This is actually quite easy because people have low expectations for email response time. A response time of 24 hours is considered fast by many people. So, if you keep it down to two hours or less, which is very realistic, you will WOW a fair share of customers.

It’s not just about the response times. Here’s my favorite example of acting fast, something I personally do quite often. If a customer submits a bug report that I know is easy to fix, I just go ahead and fix it right away. Most of the time it takes just 10-15 minutes. That never fails to impress.

Basically, **if a customer wants something that takes less than 20 minutes, just do it now.**

Save them some money

It's better to get a loyal customer on a cheaper plan than an upset customer on an expensive plan who will churn in the next three months. Offer free upgrades. Give a discount even if they don't ask for it. It doesn't have to be a big one – even a 5% discount could go a long way.

We often let customers use cheaper plans, even if they do not qualify for it. We also give a 20% discount to all returning customers. Things like that contribute to our low churn rates and do wonders for our lifetime value.

Automate your WOW's

WOW moments work better when they are personal and intimate. However, you can try automating them. They definitely won't work every time, but, you know, it's free, so why not? A good place to look for opportunities to add WOW's to is your automated emails. For example, here is what we have in our purchase confirmation email:

Hey Bob. Thank you for purchasing. Every morning we read our new customers' names aloud, in front of all our employees. Your name will be in that list tomorrow morning. Thanks.

We really do try to read their names, by the way. Most people understand that this is an automated email and just ignore it, but every once in a while we get a customer who is delighted that he gets special treatment from us, and that didn't cost us anything.

Do something crazy

Instead of exceeding expectations, you can do something they do not expect. Send a pizza to their office. Send a handwritten note. Give away a popular book in your industry as a gift. Meet them for coffee.

Just surprise them.

You can't WOW people in every single support ticket, but you should always look for opportunities. It's not that hard when you put some practice into it. Some of these moves have worked for me for a long time. If you have any moves yourself, I'd love to hear those in the comments.

9. Building a support site for your startup

You've already launched your product; now it's time to set up a "self-service" help page for your users. Why?

According to Forrester, *"72% of customers prefer self-service to resolve their support issues over picking up the phone or sending an email."* Our own studies (we keep an eye on these metrics because we're selling a helpdesk ticketing app) show that up to 45% of support issues can be solved without contacting support. Of course, it varies throughout specific niches and industries, but on average it's 45%. This means that almost half of your support burden can be lifted.

A good FAQ page

Include routine and repetitive questions in your FAQ and stay short and sweet. Things like changing email or adjusting the billing info — let the customer do these simple things on their own. Remember to add screenshots; they help a lot

Just launched? Have no idea which questions will become "repetitive"? No problem. Show your app to your colleagues. Show it to your friends and family members. **Write down their questions** and put those on your website.

Keep the paragraphs short and clear; mind the headers and formatting to make the text easy to read. Don't be too technical. Cognitive psychology studies show that presenting small chunks of information is a great strategy for organizing and prioritizing information, making it easier for users to understand it.

Add the Search button

No matter how detailed the FAQ is or how structured and organized things are, some people will prefer using the search button to find an answer. Make the search box big and fancy. Place it "above the fold" on your page. Use Google's site search if you don't have your own engine, it's pretty easy to set up; you can even customize the design.

What a good Knowledge Base should have

If you are in the process of picking a helpdesk app, look for one with a built-in knowledge base. It will save you a lot of time and nerves because you won't have to answer the same questions over and over again. Here are the things to look for in a great KB:

- Ability to categorize articles and add tags to them

- Clear design with ability to customize the look for your brand
- Search
- Rich formatting features
- Suggests articles from KB when user is about to submit a ticket

(All of these features are available in Jitbit Helpdesk ;))

Part two

Tips & Tricks

10. Better words to use in your customer support emails

We always talk about how our responses to customer support requests should be more personal and less corporate and boring. But what makes a response personal? It's all about the words you use. This article is about how you can dramatically improve your customer support responses just by using some words instead of others.

Use empathetic phrases

In the last chapter, we talked about how empathy is the most important quality in customer support. Now we'll try to put this knowledge into practice. What you need to show to a frustrated customer is that you know and understand how he feels. Empathetic phrases are one of the most powerful tools at our disposal for this. Here are some phrases I personally use frequently:

- I completely understand and I'm really sorry you feel that way.
- I know it sucks, but...
- You are right.

Add those to your "canned responses" list if your support ticket system has this feature.

Don't use empty words

There are two words I never, ever use when talking to customers: "inconvenience" and "feedback".

For some unknown reason, every issue in the customer support world is called an "inconvenience" these days. Whether you had a minor trouble or a major disruption that caused you to lose customers, they are both "inconveniences". There are better words to use (I just used them in a previous sentence): trouble, issue, frustration, irritation, annoyance, hassle.

"Feedback" is just a horrible word to use when describing someone's ideas and thoughts. We have gotten used to it and barely notice it anymore, but it's just wrong. As with "inconvenience", for some reason everything a customer says is called "feedback". Better words to use: thoughts, ideas or, at the very least, input.

Better goodbyes

We usually don't put a high value on the way we say goodbye in emails. Generally, everyone has a preset signature like "Regards, Max". We can improve on that. The better phrase to use would be "Let me know if you need help with anything else. Have a great weekend".

Also, the end of a message is great place to add jokes or personal comments to connect with a customer. For example, I mentioned the World Cup to many customers during the previous month — everybody loved it!

Essentially, the difference between great and mediocre customer support is the words we use. By simply using one word over another, we can make customers happier.

11. Metrics to monitor customer happiness

How do you measure your customer support team success? The answer that immediately comes to my mind is "customer happiness". It is the ultimate helpdesk metric: if your customers are happy, you've done a great job. However, "customer happiness" has one problem (apart from it being an obvious buzz term and sounding cheesy) — it can't be measured.

Any metric that can't be measured is a bad metric — that's Analytics 101. We can't use it to evaluate our team performance, but we can break it down into smaller, more manageable metrics.

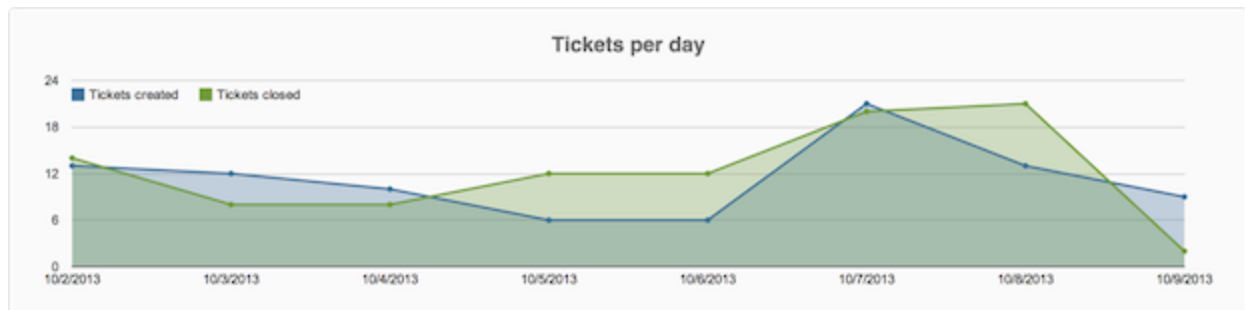
Average number of tickets created per day

This is the most basic and one of the most important helpdesk metrics. You'll know how many tickets your team can handle per day/week/month. That's probably the most useful performance indicator. You can also use it to predict when you need to hire additional customer support employees.

Average number of tickets closed per day

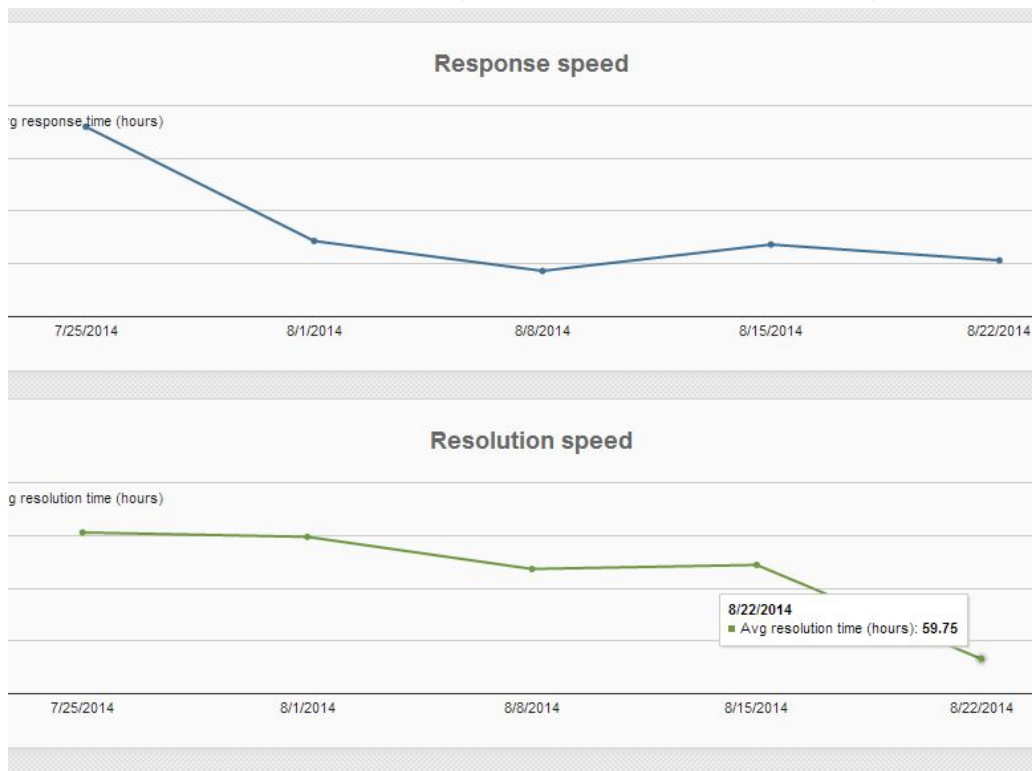
A great metric to use in combination with "new tickets" is "tickets closed". In a healthy helpdesk, the number of closed ticket should be more or less equal to the number of new tickets. If you constantly fall behind, it's time to hire more people.

Most helpdesk apps show these two metrics together. Here is how we do it in Jitbit Helpdesk:



Response time

We talked about response speeds in the very first article in this series. If you make customers wait for hours for a reply, they won't be happy. Usually only the first reply speed is being measured, as it is the most important one. Customers want an acknowledgement that someone has taken over their request within a reasonable amount of time. Also, if you have SLAs and guaranteed response times, this is probably the most important metric for you.



Resolution time

Resolution time is the time between ticket creation and closing. Low response times do not necessarily mean that you're awesome. If your average response time is less than an hour but

your total resolution time is 5 days, that's not good. Remember that we should aim to solve every ticket as quickly as possible with a minimum number of interactions with customers.

12. Easy ways to improve your customer service

No matter how good your customer service is, you can always do better. I've prepared a couple of tips that helped us a lot recently.

Don't be anonymous

Your customers will trust you more and will be more comfortable talking to you if you let them get to know you. Create a page on your site with a list of all your team members, including pictures and short descriptions. When possible, use “personal” mailboxes and names in your replies. “John Realname” works better than a generic “ACME Inc. TechSupport” if your helpdesk software allows this.

Check out our “About” page. You can see all of us listed there. It's easier for customers to trust us if they know that there are real people behind all those emails.

Offer a personal touch

A personal touch in a support email can go a long way. Try to find something you have in common with a customer. Maybe his company is based in your hometown. Maybe you use their services. Check their email signatures – I bet you can find something.

For example, we once had a pretty famous game developer trying out our app. They wrote us a support email and I told them that I play and enjoy their games. We exchanged a couple more emails about gaming and they became customers shortly afterwards.

Work on your response time

We've noticed that many customers feel uneasy when they learn that we do not offer phone support. It's understandable. We live in a world where a 3-business-days response time to a support email is accepted as the norm. Your customers are worried that it will take too long to get help. Prove them wrong.

Response time is the most important metric in customer support. Try to reply faster. Ideally, be available 24/7. Hire support agents in different time zones if you have to. Your average response time should be around 3-4 hours, at least for the first reply you're sending to the customer.

Hire often

Customer support is hard. If you have to respond to hundreds of emails per day, you will eventually get burned out. Nothing good can come of that. Team burnout is very common and the best thing to do here is to be proactive.

Hire more customer support agents before you actually need them, not after. You can use your helpdesk reporting tools to see when the ticket load goes up, which means that you need to start looking for more employees.

13. Quick tips for answering support emails better

Here are some nice, short, quick and actionable tips on how to better respond to customer support emails:

- Start with a "Hi, John!" It is always a good thing to use customer names, and a "Hi" is almost always better than "Hello". There is no need to be overly official. I use "Hello" in extreme cases when we screw up badly. The exclamation mark at the end is a matter of personal preference.
- Say "thanks" and "sorry" a lot. There is never too much of those in one email. Basically, every time you say "no", it should be succeeded with a "sorry".
- Talk like they do. Note their writing and use the same terms they use, even if they are wrong. Most people don't like to be corrected.
- Learn how to apologize. This is probably the most important skill you can have.
- Write like you talk. I can't emphasize this enough – don't be too formal. However, don't be too friendly, either – find the middle ground. A good rule of thumb is that if you can't imagine yourself speaking it, don't write it.
- Aim for better readability. People don't read – they scan. What Jacob Nielsen says about users not reading the web is true for emails, too. Therefore, use short sentences, short paragraphs with double line breaks between them, numbered lists and even headers if appropriate.
- Don't use empty words like "thanks for the feedback" or "sorry about the inconvenience". It's the email version of "your call is very important to us".
- Don't be afraid to say "no".
- Above all, be nice and try to always "wow" them.

Part three

Essays

14. Robotic 'enterprisy' customer support is not the worst kind

We've talked a lot about how you should talk to customers – the whole "be a human, not a robot" thing. This is still an issue in many companies. When I get responses to some of my support inquiries, I often wonder if a human being is even capable of writing such dry, "corporate" emails. However, lately a new, completely opposite trend has been emerging.

Many companies now have "happiness heroes" or "champions" instead of customer support agents. Those people seem really happy about getting my emails.

Overly enthusiastic customer happiness champions

Many replies to my support tickets sound something like this (at least in my head):

Oh my god, thank you so much for writing this email!!!!1 This is the best thing that happened to me this week and you are my favorite person in the whole world!. I think I will make a tattoo with your name on my forehead. Oh, here is the answer to your question...

Of course, I'm exaggerating, but it's not far from the truth. The problem with being overly enthusiastic about support emails is that I don't believe you one bit. You are not happy about my email – I just gave you more work to do. I also know that hundreds of people got the same "I'm so happy" canned response today alone.

I am aware that there are people who enjoy getting their asses kissed, but I refuse to accept this as the default behavior. I'm not enjoying this at all, and I feel like I'm being treated like an idiot. Please cut the bullshit and just answer my damn question.

How to make customers love you back

In your pursuit of the customer's love, it's easy to take things too far. I honestly don't know what's worse – corporate speak or a happy-for-no-reason person. You know what makes customers love your company? Getting their problems solved.

You get bonus points if you're awesome in the process. Be nice, friendly and efficient, and value other people's time. Above all, be a normal human being. There is a line between being an awesome, helpful person and a try-hard creep – you don't want to cross it.

15. 7 Things Customers Don't Want to Hear

As a customer service professional, you know that when you get customer service right, you make a customer for life. However, when you get it wrong, the customer will spread the news about her bad experience with your company all over Facebook and Twitter like a fast-moving oil slick.

Whether you work via online chat or you respond to phone calls or emails, the difference between right and wrong is often in the words you choose. You must make sure you choose them carefully. Like never-ending Muzak, there are things a customer never, ever wants to hear. Study these seven examples and learn to avoid the problems they can cause.

1. You messed up

If you ask “Didn’t you read the instructions?” your customer will morph into a big old growly bear. Don’t imply that it’s the customer’s fault (even if it totally is). Instead, say, “Let me try walking you through the process.”

2. #sorrynotsorry

Customers can spot insincere apologies. Put yourself in their shoes. They heard that “We care about your business” recording 27 times while on hold. Instead, it’s better to empathize. “Oh, I get it, that’s so frustrating.” Then move on to helping them.

3. You can’t talk to my boss

Come on. Your boss is there to help, same as you. If your customer is frustrated with your response, don’t stonewall; kick it upstairs. Some difficult customers find it soothing to get the VIP treatment.

4. I can’t make an exception for you

Just as with t-shirts, “one size fits all” is a bad idea when it comes to customer service. Okay, maybe you truly can’t make an exception. But is there a way to sweeten the bad experience? Why do you think Southwest Airlines hands out all those free drink coupons? It’s to make their customers happier. Say, “Here’s what I can do for you,” and follow through on that promise: whether it’s a discount on a new product or service, some money taken off the bill, or whatever you can give.

5. There's a software patch coming soon

Your customer doesn't care about the future. Your customer cares about NOW, so tread carefully. "Thank you for letting us know. I'll make sure that our programmers are aware of this glitch." Take down the details if it's something new. Then say, "In the meantime, perhaps I can suggest this work-around..."

6. Read this link in the FAQs

If you're doing an online chat, you can paste in the instructions. Step by step is the better way, checking after each step to see if your customer got it. If you're on the phone, even if you've already answered the same question 47 times, remember that for your customer it's the first time. She deserves a polite answer, not a curt one.

7. I'm going to have to transfer you

Customers may have been growing cobwebs on hold before they got to talk to you. Now you're shuttling them off? Do it properly, please. Say, "I hope this doesn't happen, but if you do get cut off, here is the direct line." Or, better yet, say, "Hang on, I'm going to get Marissa in Sales to help you." Then, when you have Marissa on the line, introduce the customer to her.

The Golden Rule rules

Your mama was right. Delivering on customer service means practicing the Golden Rule — treating others the way you would want to be treated. Customers want to feel that you listened to them, and that you care. You can't solve all your customers' problems, but you can make them happier than they were when they first contacted you. All it takes is the right words.

16. Hire customer support like Southwest hires flight attendants

Let me start with an amazing story I heard from Mikey Trafton in 2012 at the BoS conference. This story is about how Southwest Airlines interviews for flight attendants.

First, they publish a newspaper ad for flight attendants and receive a bunch of CVs. After that they invite about fifty or sixty candidates to the interview. They interview them all together, in a big conference room, where there are both group interviews and one-on-one interviews.

Here's the amazing part. At some point, Southwest breaks candidates into smaller groups of eight to ten people. They put them in a circle and **ask each candidate to tell the story of the most embarrassing moment in their life**. People go around the circle and tell that embarrassing story one by one...

You might be thinking, 'Sure, what they are hoping to learn is how people overcome adversity. Or how people don't take themselves too seriously. Or how open-minded they are to tell that embarrassing story in public. Or how they handle the embarrassment part overall, etc etc.'

No.

As it turns out, the interviewers aren't even paying attention to the person telling the story. **They don't listen. They are looking at the faces of everyone** else in the room. They're looking for empathy. Empathy simply shows up on your face if someone is telling about their most embarrassing moment right next to you — but only if you're an empathetic person.

That's the main test.

Why your customers need empathy

Fear, embarrassment and anxiety often come from not knowing how things work. Most airplane passengers are not familiar with aerodynamics and Bernoulli's principle, which makes planes fly. They don't know that turbulence is normal, that landings are autopilot-assisted and how rudder-controlled turn is different from aileron-controlled turn.

This is just like how non-tech people have no idea how WiFi works, how printers print and computers, ahem, "compute". My mom still thinks that Skype connects through a cell phone network despite my numerous attempts to object. She's afraid to move icons around on the desktop so that she doesn't "break" anything.

I just need to be in my mom's shoes when I'm assisting her over the phone in fixing her laptop.

"Empathy" is all about **being in someone else's shoes**. That is why former waiters are the easiest customers to serve food to. People who have worked in call centers are extra polite and patient when they call a helpline. If you see a person being extra helpful to someone with a fussy infant, you'll know that this person is likely a new parent himself.

Empathy comes from having had similar experiences. The easiest way to help customer support employees become more empathetic is to put them in their customers' shoes. This is much easier if you have a great support ticket system that gets out of the way ;)

17. Support by founders

At Jitbit, Alex and I have been handling support tickets ourselves from the very beginning. We didn't have much choice because it was just the two of us. Two years ago we started hiring customer support employees, but we still answer a significant number of support tickets daily.

I strongly believe that founders must talk to customers as much as possible (and there is no better place to do this than your help desk software). Even Jeff Bezos does this every now and then, and the guy is a freaking billionaire.

Is it even a good idea?

Yes, if you do it right. Support emails are the place to learn who your customers are, what they want and what is wrong with your product. You need answers to these questions to make decisions about your business.

As founders, we spend most of our time looking at faceless numbers in reports and analytics. It's so easy to forget that there are real people behind those numbers. Customer support emails help you stay in touch with reality.

But be careful; if you do not control it, support can quickly take over your schedule and you're never going to get anything else done. So here are two things to keep in mind when handling support yourself.

Incorporate support into your schedule

Like I said, you don't want to let yourself drown in support tickets. You have to keep a balance so that you can spend time answering support emails while staying on top of everything else.

The easiest way to achieve this is to do support at fixed hours, and not even think about it at other times. I used to answer support emails throughout the day whenever I had a minute. Trust me — that's terribly unproductive. Currently I handle tickets for one hour in the morning and one hour in the evening. That's the best advice I can give to founders: **select one or two fixed hours during which you respond to tickets.**

Know when to take a break

Customer support emails never end. It's an exhausting routine. Letting support take over your life is the quickest way to burnout. It happened to me a couple of times. It was ugly.

When you find yourself annoyed by every single customer, please do everyone a favor and stop responding to tickets. Take a couple of weeks off. Do other things. Hire a dedicated support person if you haven't done this yet. I can't stress this enough: **when support becomes a burden, it's time to stop**. Don't let yourself and your customer service suffer.

18. Support by founders, pt. 2

A while ago, I wrote an article encouraging founders to reply to support tickets. I wrote that founders should answer as many support tickets as they can. After doing this for another year, I admit that I was wrong.

Founders are overqualified for the job

Nine times out of 10, when a ticket comes in, I immediately know the answer to the issue. Most tickets are not interesting. They are boring because they are too easy. They are not challenging. It's just a matter of typing an answer and nothing more.

Generally, founders are extremely overqualified for the support job. We have many skills, lots of other responsibilities and not much free time. Because of that, answering support tickets becomes annoying, and when it becomes annoying, your replies get worse.

In the original article, I wrote "know when to take a break". That would work. When you become annoyed, you should stop doing it for some time. But the truth is, I can't really take a break. There are plenty of issues our support team can't handle on its own, and one of the founders has to step in.

Now, this is serious. I believe that the quality of your customer support is directly related to your revenue. My burnouts may cost us a pretty penny. Luckily, we've found a solution.

Divide support into two levels

This is nothing new. Dividing support tickets into different levels depending on the issue complexity is a method that has been used by helpdesk teams for years. It just felt too "corporate" for us and we never bothered to do it. We used the "everyone answers everything" approach, which worked well until recently.

Now our support team handles about 80% of all tickets and I don't even look at them. When the team can't handle something, they escalate tickets to our level. This approach reduced my load significantly, and most tickets I handle now are more interesting and challenging. The support team and I are working together more efficiently.

So far, the two-level support is a win-win situation for us. I have yet to find any downsides to this approach. Responding to as many support tickets as you can inevitably leads to burnout. This is the case when we should prefer quality over quantity. Two-level support has proven to be an efficient way to do that.