77: Feel The Pain

Tear down the walls between support and development

In the restaurant business, there's a world of difference between those working in the kitchen and those out front who deal with customers. It's important for both sides to understand and empathize with the other. That's why cooking schools and restaurants will often have chefs work out front as waiters so the kitchen staff can interact with customers and see what it's actually like on the front lines.

A lot of software developers have a similar split. Designers and programmers work in the "kitchen" while support handles the customers. Unfortunately, that means the software chefs never get to hear what customers are actually saying. That's problematic because listening to customers is the best way to get in tune with your product's strengths and weaknesses.

The solution? Avoid building walls between your customers and the development/design team. **Don't outsource customer support to a call center or third party.** Do it yourself. You, and your whole team, should know what your customers are saying. When your customers are annoyed, you need to know about it. You need to hear their complaints. You need to get annoyed too.

At Basecamp, all of our support emails are answered personally by the people who actually build the product. Why? First off, it provides better support for customers. They're getting a response straight from the brain of someone who built the app. Also, it keeps us in touch with the people who use our products and the problems they're encountering. When they're frustrated, we're frustrated. We can say, "I feel your pain" and actually mean it.

It can be tempting to rely on statistical analysis to reveal your trouble spots. But stats aren't the same as voices. You need to eliminate as many buffers as possible between you and the real voices of your customers.

The front lines are where the action is. Get up there. Have your chefs work as waiters. Read customer emails, hear their frustrations, listen to their suggestions and learn from them.

Cut Out the Middle Man

> Almost all Campaign Monitor development, support and marketing are performed by two people. Even if we're forced to expand the team, we'll never separate support from development. By personally responding to every request, we force ourselves to sit in our customers shoes and see things from their perspective.

> *It's important to understand why your customer needs something, not just what it is they need. That context often has a direct impact on how we design something. Cut out the middle man. It's much easier to give your customers what they want when your ears are that close to the ground.*
>
> *I've discussed this setup with loads of people and the first response is often "shouldn't you just hire a junior to handle your support?" Put yourself in your customer's shoes. If you want your steak cooked just how you like it, would you rather talk to the bus boy or the chef that's actually cooking it?*

—David Greiner, founder, Campaign Monitor

78: Zero Training

Use inline help and FAQs so your product doesn't require a manual or training

You don't need a manual to use Yahoo or Google or Amazon. So why can't you build a product that doesn't require a manual? Strive to build a tool that requires zero training.

How do you do this? Well, as we've mentioned before, you start by keeping everything simple. The less complex your app is, the less you'll need to help people out of the weeds. After that, a great way to preempt support is by using inline help and faqs at potential points of confusion.

For example, we offer preemptive support on the screen that allows people to upload their logo to Basecamp. Some people experienced a problem where they would keep seeing an old logo due to a browser-caching issue. So next to the "submit your logo" area, we added a link to an faq that instructed customers to force-reload their browsers in order to see the new logo. Before we did this, we would get 5 emails a day about this problem. Now we get none.

79: Answer Quick

Quick turnaround time on support queries should be a top priority

Customers light up when you answer their questions quickly. They're so used to canned responses that show up days later (if at all) that you can really differentiate yourself from competitors by offering a thoughtful response right away. During business hours, we answer 90% of all email support requests within 90 minutes — and often within a half-hour. And people love it.

Even if you don't have a perfect answer, say something. You can buy goodwill with a response that is delivered quickly in an open, honest way. If someone is complaining about an issue that can't be fixed immediately, tell them something like, "We hear what you're saying and we'll be working on it in the future." It's a great way to diffuse a potentially negative situation.

Customers appreciate directness and will often shift from angry to polite if you respond quickly and in a straight-shooting manner.

An Army of Many

> *How can a small team of just three developers create an innovative product and successfully compete with the big guys? The answer is to enlist an army of many.*
>
> *Remember from your first day that your customers are your most important asset and that they are absolutely vital to your long-term success so treat your community of users like royalty. The way to compete with the big guys is by starting small and paying attention to every one of your customers.*
>
> *It is your customers that will be the first to alert you of bugs, that will be the first to alert you of needs that have not been met and it is your first customers that will carry the flag and spread your message.*
>
> *This does not mean that your product has to be perfect when you launch. Quite to the contrary, release early and often. However, when your customers encounter bugs, make sure to send a reply to them quickly thanking them for their input.*
>
> *Customers don't expect your product to be perfect and they don't expect that all of their features will be implemented. However, customers do expect that you are listening and acknowledging*

that you care, so show that you care. This is one area where most large companies show a huge deficit so develop a sense of community early.

At Blinklist, every single customer email is answered, usually within the first hour (unless we happen to be asleep). We also have an online forum and we make sure that every single post and comment gets acknowledged.

Equally important, all of our developers receive our customer feedback and they are active participants in the online discussion forums. This way, we are slowly but surely building an active and loyal BlinkList community.

—Michael Reining, co-founder, <u>MindValley</u> & <u>Blinklist</u>

80: Tough Love

Be willing to say no to your customers

When it comes to feature requests, the customer is not always right. If we added every single thing our customers requested, no one would want our products.

If we obeyed every whim of our customers, Basecamp would have: comprehensive time tracking, comprehensive billing, comprehensive meeting scheduling, comprehensive calendaring, comprehensive dependency task systems, comprehensive instant message chatting, comprehensive wiki functionality, and comprehensive whatever-else-you-can-imagine.

Yet, the #1 request we get on customer surveys is to keep Basecamp simple.

Here's another example: Despite some complaints, we decided not to support ie5 with our products. That was 7% of the market we were writing off. But we decided it was more important to worry about the other 93%. Fixing bugs and testing for ie5 just isn't worth the time. We'd rather make a better product for everyone else.

As a software development company, you have to act as a filter. Not everything everyone suggests is the right answer. We consider all requests but the customer is not always right. There will be times when you just have to piss some people off. C'est la vie.

Related to this, it's critical that you as a development company love your product. And you won't love your product if it's filled with a bunch of stuff you don't agree with. That's yet another justification for vetoing customer requests that you don't believe are necessary.

81: In Fine Forum

Use forums or chat to let customers help each other

Forums and web-based group chat are a great way to let customers ask questions and help one another out. By eliminating the middleman — that's you — you provide an open stream of communication and save yourself time in the process.

At our product forums, customers post tips and tricks, feature requests, stories, and more. We pop in from time to time to offer some assistance but the forums are mainly a place for the community to help each other and share their experiences with the product.

You'll be surprised how much people want to help one another.

82: Publicize Your Screwups

Get bad news out there and out of the way

If something goes wrong, tell people. Even if they never saw it in the first place.

For example, Basecamp was down once for a few hours in the middle of the night. 99% of our customers never knew, but we still posted an "unexpected downtime" notice to our Everything Basecamp blog. We thought our customers deserved to know.

Here's a sample of what we post when something goes wrong: "We apologize for the downtime this morning — we had some database issues which caused major slowdowns and downtimes for some people. We've fixed the problem and are taking steps to make sure this doesn't happen again...Thanks for your patience and, once again, we're sorry for the downtime."

Be as open, honest, and transparent as possible. Don't keep secrets or hide behind spin. An informed customer is your best customer. Plus, you'll realize that most of your screwups aren't even that bad in the minds of your customers. Customers are usually happy to give you a little bit of breathing room as long as they know you're being honest with them.

A side note about delivering news, bad and good: When bad news comes, get it all out in the open at once. Good news, on the other hand, should be trickled out slowly. If you can prolong the good vibes, do it.

Be Swift, Direct, and Honest

> It may sound strange, but the best-case scenario is when the company itself reports the bad news. This is proactive and prevents your company from being put in a weakened, defensive position.

—Greg Sherwin, Vice President of Application Technology, <u>CNET</u>, and Emily Avila, Principal, <u>Calypso Communications</u> (from <u>A Primer for Crisis PR</u>)