

CUSTOMER SERVICE VS TECHNICAL SUPPORT: WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?



Customer Service and Technical Support both have their roles in organizations. However, there are significant differences between the two.

- **Customer Service** focuses on the experience of the customer.
- **Technical support** focuses on resolving a technical issue or problem in the fastest, most cost-effective way.

What is technical support?

Business Dictionary [defines](#) technical support as:

"User-friendly assistance for individuals having technical problems with electronic devices."

The primary focus of technical support is to resolve a [technical incident or problem](#). These incidents are either perceived or actual deficiencies with the service or product the customer is seeking support for. That's why it behooves the [technical support engineer/representative](#)—and the company—to:

- Determine what is not functioning properly
- Resolve the issue as quickly
- Maintain a friendly and supportive vibe

In most situations, the ultimate measure of success is that the customer doesn't have to contact support again.

What is customer service?

Customer service takes a different approach, focusing instead on the experience of the customer. Customer service, according to Business Dictionary, is defined as a:

"Range of services provided to assist customers in making cost effective and correct use of a product."

This means that a customer service representative can also take a more proactive approach to support and initiate communication with customers. Importantly, customer service does not have to be technical in nature.



Different customer approaches

Because your goal varies, your approach when interacting with a customer likely varies, too.

- **Good technical support means listening in order to fix.** A technical support representative is focused on resolving your issue as quickly as possible. Technical support reps listen to symptoms, try to reproduce the issue, and quickly provide a solution to the issue.
- **Customer service reps listen with empathy.** They put themselves in the "shoes" of the customer and try to understand what the customer is trying to accomplish. They aren't listening to fix they are instead listening to recommend. This could be recommending a new product, or different approach.

Different product perspectives

When discussing the difference in perspective, I like to use what I call the "word processing example."

When you contact technical support about an error in your word processor, they can always help you resolve that error dialog box that pops up. They can also help you figure out what plugin isn't working and remove it.

However, when you say, "I'm writing a paper in APA format and I need to know how to make the first page header different than subsequent pages," technical support will probably come up short.

This is where customer service steps in and can offer distinguishing value. Customer service means knowing what the customer is going through and helping to find a solution.

Continuing with our example, a good customer service rep would understand what APA format means. They will also know that if someone is asking questions about how to write a paper, they are probably rushed and on a tight deadline. If your customer service rep don't know the answer right away, the rep knows how to get customers in touch with the right resources.

Technical support is dead. Long live technical support.

You should consider adding customer service practices to existing technical support groups.

In the late 90s and early 2000s, skilled technologists were more difficult to find. Back then, it was easy for organizations to stand out by providing high quality technical support.

Nowadays with the conversion to digital business, technical competency is much more mainstream. Customers want to have great experience with your organization. They are interested in partnerships that go beyond the initial purchase. They want to know that you understand their goals and that you can help them accomplish them.

In other words, they want to have a great experience with your organization.

Customer service best practices

At this point you are probably wondering just what customer experience is. Simply put, customer experience (CX) is customer comfort. Comfort is a general feeling that the money and time you have invested in a product or service is worth the value received.

There are many components that lead to customer comfort. The list below are the ones I try to focus my teams on.

Empathy

Support representatives need to provide the customer with a sense of understanding. The customer should feel like they are working with a partner who understands the problem from their point of view.

Ideally, representatives working with customers should have at least a basic understanding of the industry they are supporting.

Competence

The #1 expectation of any type of support request is that the person providing assistance knows the product inside and out. There is nothing that erodes customer comfort faster than fumbling through a support call.

This also means if representatives don't know the answer to a question, they should admit it. Saying "I don't have the answer but I can get it for you" will be much better received than pretending that you know an answer.

Friendliness

No one likes to work with a jerk. Representatives should strive to solve customer challenges in a friendly way without over-doing it.

Communication

This is another extremely important aspect of comfort. At all times representatives should make sure a customer knows four things:

- What is the cost of support?
- What work is occurring to address their issue?
- What will you be working on next?
- What is the current ETA for completion of work?

As long as customers know those items, they will usually be much more comfortable.

Offer of assistance

Support representatives should always ask what they can do to help. Don't ever assume you know what the customer wants. The best way to learn, is to ask.

CX becomes critical

A 2015 Gartner survey revealed that an overwhelming majority of companies believe that customer experience is the new basis for competition. And, according to [Salesforce](#), "86% of buyers will pay more for a better customer experience."

While there will always be a need for technical support, IT organizations should evaluate if their support solutions are really meeting the needs of their customers. Are you just supporting a product or are you providing an experience for your customers?

Related reading

- [BMC Service Management Blog](#)
- [Help Desk vs Service Desk: What's The Difference?](#)
- [Service Desk Best Practices for Creating More Value](#)
- [Internal vs External Customers: How Are They Different?](#)
- [Service Desk Support Analyst: Roles and Responsibilities](#)
- [5 Ways to Deliver a Transcendent Customer Experience](#)