

Customer Support

The IronRooster Way —————

OBJECTIVE

The objective of this white paper is to offer a better understanding of how to manage technical customer support on hardware and software-related issues within (products fully developed in-house) and outside (products of other companies) your organization.

While it may be evident to provide support for software developed in-house, it is not always clear how it should be managed to guarantee long lasting customer satisfaction.

On the other hand, when providing support for a partner company, although the guidelines and processes may already be set, efforts still need to be made in order to guarantee high-quality support for both the partner company and its customers.

CHALLENGES

Within the organization

When technical customer support is offered for products developed in-house, all knowledge about the product is at hand. The challenge here is to identify a centralized point of contact.

One may assume that this contact should be the developer(s) since they know the product inside and out. However, once the project is finished, they are likely to be move on to other projects, and may not be available for support-related issues except for priority cases (e.g., bugs).

This main point of contact will answer the customer's queries related to the product, log the issues, and evaluate their urgency, and if possible, resolve them within the agreed SLA. If the issue is complex, it will likely be escalated to the development team.

THE 3 KEY POINTS HERE ARE TO HAVE A:

1. Technologically knowledgeable person with development skills who can manage the incoming requests;
2. Well-documented technical and user guides to ensure agents are properly trained; and,
3. Ticketing system providing organized traceability of the incoming requests.

CHALLENGES

Outside the organization

When offering technical customer support to clients, knowledge transfer is crucial. Normally, in this case, the customer should already have its own ticketing system and detailed documentation on hand.

All knowledge necessary for the agent to provide excellent service must be transferred.

Unlike the previous case described above (“Within the Organization”), there may be no one within the organization of the agent knowledgeable of the product to be supported. Therefore, it is utterly important that knowledge management on the customer’s side is well organized. Otherwise, the knowledge transfer may fail on many points resulting in a very low customer satisfaction levels.

SUPPORT WITHIN HEALTHCARE

Providing technical support within the healthcare sector requires both exceptional technical skills and focus as lives may be at stake.

Agents must distinguish a software issue from a hardware failure at an early stage so that the investigation can be accelerated to the correct team in a timely manner.

Real-time solutions (issue resolved over the phone) should be sought, but may not always be available. In these cases, deeper investigation is required to resolve reported issues.

SOFTWARE SUPPORT

When hospital staff is reporting an issue and the customer has medical devices with software running on them or a connected PC/device, it may be hard to discern if the core of the problem derives from the software, the hardware itself, or a temporary network failure.

Widely implemented medical software is rarely the core of the issue as these solutions are thoroughly tested and meet very high standards before hitting the market. Network failures, even if only temporary, on the other hand, are very common and can cause glitches in the communication between the various interfaces used in the hospital's IT systems. Such cases are generally easily identified through log records.

Software issues may also arise through incorrect usage. As such cases may not initially be evident, more thorough investigation is often needed. Third-party software, such as operating systems, antivirus software, etc., may also interfere with the proper functioning of the medical device.

Most issues, whether software or network related, can be resolved remotely if the system is online and a connection is available. (Ensuring the network works as intended is generally the responsibility of the hospital's IT department). If a remote fix is not possible, a field service engineer must be sent to the site.

HARDWARE SUPPORT

Recognizing a hardware failure may sound simple, but as mentioned earlier, if the customer is using hardware where software is directly (installed on the device itself) or indirectly (installed on a PC connected to the device) involved, it may require a deeper investigation.

Physical damage (cracks on the display, broken parts, etc.) are evident hardware failures and require repair (on-site or at a repair center) or replacement. However, there are cases where the core problem is not evident.

For instance, for devices managing blood products, the temperature reading of the device is vital. If the temperature increases or drops or monitoring fails, several factors must be investigated including the network, the sensor probes, and any external factors affecting room temperature (fan or air conditioner near the probe/device), icing on the probe/device, etc. If the device is nonfunctional (lock mechanism failure for instance) due to a network malfunction, a simple restart/power-off and on or remote aide may be sufficient to resolve the problem

Field service engineers

Providing technical support for hardware requires not only a technically-orientated and well-trained agent but also field service engineers who can go on-site and conduct repairs.

Well-organized workflows and communication between the agent(s) and the field's service engineer(s) are key for maintaining customer satisfaction.

Even in cases where repair work is carried out by a third party, the work must be coordinated so that each party (agent, engineer, and customer) involved has all the relevant information for the issue to be resolved as quickly as possible. The involvement of the device management team is also important as the provision of spare parts is their responsibility.

KNOW YOUR CUSTOMER

Before picking up the phone or replying to an email from the customer, ensure you know who you are responding to.

This knowledge offers a better understanding of how you should handle the incoming calls/emails and what type of questions to ask for the best possible service. If you are providing technical customer support within the healthcare sector, it is likely that you will be contacted by hospital staff, such as nurses and biomedical engineers or IT technicians.

Nurses may not be as technologically knowledgeable as IT technicians; therefore, communications must be adjusted accordingly.

If you are providing customer support to a foreign country, be aware of the customs when it comes to how to address customers. There are cultures where a simple “hi” or “hello” is considered rude, and where calling somebody by his/her first name may be deemed unusual or unprofessional.

LANGUAGE BARRIERS

Providing customer support within an international environment involves tackling different languages and their various dialects.

When the language for which you are providing support is not your mother tongue, fully understanding the customer over the phone can be challenging. In such cases, to avoid awkward situations and annoying the customer by asking them to repeat themselves too often, be creative and ask your questions in different ways and approach the issue from different angles until you have gathered all the information you need for the reported issue.

Another factor that may make understanding the customer difficult over the phone is the quality of the line. If there is some background noise at the customer site or the line is bad, you may need to consider terminating the call and calling back at a later time or asking them to email a detailed description of the issue in question.

And, in all cases, apologize for any inconveniences.

GATHERING CORRECT INFORMATION

For any customer service, gathering information is key. Without information, a correct solution to the reported issue is unlikely.

Always record the name (first and last), the site, phone number, and the email address of the person reporting the issue. This information usually already available in email queries.

When the customer calls in, make sure to gather all information correctly. Spell the name and the email address if necessary and use a spelling alphabet for the given language (such as the NATO Phonetic Alphabet for English-speaking customers) to make sure you obtain information correctly.

To gather information regarding the issue itself, it is important that the agent is well-trained and can understand the issue by asking relevant questions.

FOLLOW-UP

For customer support, ALWAYS keep the customer updated, even in cases where you have not yet made real progress. Otherwise, if the customer does not hear from you since your last phone/email exchange, they may think that the issue was dropped or they are not receiving the support they paid for.

There are also situations when the customer does not answer your emails or cannot be reached by phone. Try sending reminder emails or using a different phone number (i.e. site's general number) so that the customer can see that you are trying your best to resolve their issue.

Avoid closing unresolved tickets only because the customer did not reply. Many unforeseen factors can cause a lack of response (PTO, sickness, training, transfer to another site, etc.)

CONCLUSION

Managing technical customer support is a critical factor in the success of any organization, especially if they design, develop, and sell technology-based products. To remedy the various challenges faced in-house and outside the organization, it is important to understand the countless elements that are required to guarantee long-lasting customer satisfaction.

These elements range from providing hardware and software support to clearly and completely understanding your customer.

For more information on how to manage technical customer support and how IronRooster can help you in this area, please take a look at our services at ironrooster.io