

Best Practices for Chat Support by Emily Millar

As consumers continue to seek customer support online, there is tremendous opportunity for companies to enhance their customer service in real time. While social media as a platform for CRM takes the spotlight these days, consider the value more traditional service channels offer to connect with customers. In the end, companies must select the right service and support channels to fit the desired customer experience.

One area filled with potential is online chat. Online chat is not new. The ability to have real-time, two-way text communication between an agent and a customer over the Internet has existed for some time, with varying degrees of success. But with the need to enhance customer service, support more complicated products, and engage with a new, hyperconnected consumer—all while reducing support costs—online chat deserves serious consideration.

The benefits of a robust online chat presence are significant. In a 2008 Forrester Research study, reactive chat earned a 15 percent return on investment, compared to proactive chat's impressive 105 percent return. As a global contact center provider, Telus has seen similar impressive results with its clients. For one client, the addition of a new sales chat queue (at a fraction of the cost of voice support) generated \$2 million dollars in additional revenue in the first month alone. The combination of consumer preference and cost-efficiency makes online chat a powerful and profitable customer service and sales channel.

For companies that plan to implement online chat, it's important to do it right. In a recent study commissioned by Telus International, we established a set of benchmarks for the ideal chat session.¹ The study identified the three key areas where companies can maximize their online chat presence: agent skills, chat system features, and communications style. See the checklists at right for more details.

Even with an increasing array of complicated products and services available to consumers, instant gratification and immediate response are still expected. Online chat, launched effectively, can be a big boost to customer satisfaction.

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¹ Telus International, "Best Practices: Online Chat Sales" (February 2011), http://www.telusinternational.com/online_chat_study

1. Agent Skills: Agents must project confidence and knowledge in the company and its products at all times. Training for online chat is the most important thing a company can do to optimize the customer experience.

Attribute	Description	Considered
Average response time (ART)	Set metrics for time between customer question and agent response.	
Expectation setting	Agents provide estimated wait time for delays.	
Accuracy of responses	Avoid inaccurate, conflicting, or confusing information.	
Direct objective responses	Provide direct answers to questions, devoid of promotional copy.	
Conversation flow	Provide a balance of scripted versus free-form responses.	
Patience	Ensure chat sessions are not rushed to hit efficiency metrics.	

2. Chat Systems Features: Agents must understand the chat platform and the available features in order to set customer expectations and maximize online interactions.

Attribute	Description	Considered
Hours of operation	Hours and days of operation are posted, including time zones.	
Chat transcripts available	The ability to save or e-mail chat transcripts for future reference.	
Typing notification	An indication appears when agent is typing a response.	
Queue position	Queue numbers are provided to set expectations on wait times.	
Wait time	Estimated wait time is provided for reaching an agent.	
Entitlement process	Information is collected prior to engaging customers.	
Encryption of sensitive information	Personal information is masked on the system.	
Added features	Changing font size, dynamic icons, cobrowsing, page pushing, etc.	
System availability	Chat platform is reliable with no lag times or dropped sessions.	

3. Communication Style: Agents must respond using clear language and proper grammar, and in a tone that reflects the company's image.

Attribute	Description	Considered
Brevity and staying on point	Short sentences that directly relate to customer questions.	
Grammar, spelling, and structure	Effective communications support agent/company credibility.	
Voice and tone	Chat conforms to corporate identity and personality.	
Terminology	Language has mass appeal, minimizes technical terms and acronyms.	
Personalization	Agents use customer name and other personal information gathered during chat.	