

The organization of customer support services

Customer
support
services

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In their paper “Repositioning the Customer Support Services: The Next Frontier of Competitive Advantage,” Sheth, Jain and Ambika highlight the critical role of customer support services in the success of organizations. It is a continuation of research where Jag Sheth highlighted the importance of otherwise neglected areas – purchasing (Sheth *et al.*, 2009) and supplier relationships (Sheth and Sharma, 1997).

Customer support services play a vital role in business-to-business marketing, and as the authors suggest, need to play an important role in business-to-consumer markets. I build on their recommendations for customer-centered teams, and based on research, I expect the following changes in the organization of customer support services (Table 1):

- Recent research has reinforced the efficacy of teams over hierarchies. Customer support services personnel need to be embedded into teams that cater to the needs of customers as functional boundaries and deep expertise reduce the speed to serve customers. The customer-facing team can contain functional areas such as sales, marketing, customer support services, supply chain, accounting and R&D. As suggested in the paper, the customer support services function will flourish in firms where they are a part of customer-facing acquisition teams.
- The second area of shift will be in recruiting. Traditionally, firms focused on skills and hired employees that had the depth but not necessarily the width of knowledge. In increasingly turbulent environments, the customer support services function will require people who can be innovative and learn new areas, i.e. develop the width of knowledge. Firms will hire people who have dynamic learning capabilities and train people for their current needs.
- The third area of change will be in the organization of teams. In emerging team structures, the teams will be autonomous and self-organizing around the desired outcome.
- Fourth, traditionally, firms and managers focus on existing products and processes. In evolving structures, the focus will not only be on outcomes but also on innovating current processes and developing new processes.
- Fifth, traditional evaluation of people is focused on processes, with some attention paid to outcomes. In the emerging era of teams, the assessment of people will move away from processes and towards outcomes of the team, innovation of the team and individual's learning and contribution to the team.
- Finally, management will also evolve from a focus on people to a focus on teams. Rather than coordinating people, managers will focus on the coordination of teams. Management levels will be reduced, and key leaders will act as general managers distributing resources to maximize output.

In summary, customer support services will be critical in the success of organizations, but the successful organizational form will move away from hierarchies to team-based structures.



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Table 1.
Changes in the
organization of
customer support
services

Traditional customer support organization	Emerging customer support organization
Hierarchical structure	Team structure
Management hire for skills	Management hires for attitude, train for skills
Management control of employees	Autonomous and self-organizing teams
Focus on existing products/ processes	Focus on outcomes and continuous innovation
Evaluation of people focused on process	Evaluation of people focused on outcomes, innovation, learning and contribution to team
Focus on management of people	Focus on coordination of teams

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