

Peer problem solving leads to operational efficiency

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Strength in numbers may not just be a truism for those seeking moral and emotional support, but it also may be an avenue for those seeking customer support. New research shows peer-to-peer problem solving can lessen the need for firms to actually have to contact their supplier for a traditional customer support service call.

"This has never been shown before, this notion that people who have full-time day jobs handling support for their companies also take time to answer other people's questions, thereby significantly reducing their own need for support and other customers' need for support," says Boston College's Accenture Professor of Marketing, Kay Lemon, one of the report's authors. "It is really good news for both companies looking to solve their customer support problems more efficiently, and for firms who need to provide such customer support. It's a win-win."

The study, "How Customer Participation in B2B Peer-to-Peer Problem Solving Communities Influences the Need for Traditional Customer Service," is published this month in the *Journal of Service Research* and drew data from 2,542 business-to-business customers of a Fortune 100 technology company. It was written and researched by Lemon, assistant professors Sterling Bone and Kristal Ray of Utah State University, and assistant professor Paul Fombelle of Northeastern University.

"If something isn't working, obviously the person who does tech support must look for a solution to the problem," says Lemon. "Our research suggests if the supplier firm has a problem-solving community for all of

its customers to participate in, those customer tech support individuals, who actually reach out to seek help from their peers and who then receive help from their peers, solve their problems on their own and much more quickly. This creates efficiency for customers so they don't have to log traditional service requests with the supplier."

Traditional [customer service](#) is defined as the one-to-one customer-firm interaction after the sale that helps customers learn about products, troubleshoot, and solve problems. Because fast, helpful customer support can be a lifeline to a business's success, more and more companies are turning to firm-hosted collaborative efforts like peer-to-peer problem solving (P3) communities to fill some of their customer service needs.

"Say you're a customer of General Electric and you're a regional hospital network and you have 20 CT scanners," says Lemon. "For any organization with a CT scanner, the person who is in charge of making sure the scanners work would be the person who belongs to this community."

And increasingly, the study says, such communal collaborative effort is what's solving customer problems, thus enabling firms to leverage the collective knowledge and wisdom of their customer communities for greater operational efficiencies.

"By being actively involved in the co-creation of customer support service, customers are taking over a role once solely occupied by the firm," reads the article. "The firm is able to conserve the time and resources associated with traditional support services, while customers are able to solve problems faster and more efficiently."

"As a customer, it's almost a different way of getting your money's worth," says Lemon. "You're getting your money's worth when you need to because you can always call the company for support, but you're also

getting your money's worth because you're getting access to really smart people – other customers – who do what you do and who might be able to help you solve the problem faster."

The research also found the use of static knowledge, the information provided by a supplier's website or answer forum that exists behind the log-in firewall, also reduced the need for reliance on traditional customer support service calls. But interestingly, when users utilized both the P3 communities and the static knowledge, they were more likely to eventually use traditional customer support.

"That combination is less effective than just using one or the other," says Lemon. "What we think is going on is when people have really tough problems, they're trying multiple avenues, not finding a solution, and ultimately they're going to submit a service request."

The researchers believe the report may be a resource of efficiency for businesses who have these P3 communities, or who are thinking of instituting them.

"It would be very helpful for a firm to understand exactly what is influencing their customers who need to use traditional customer service support," says Lemon. "In a business-to-business setting, if you want to make your customers more self-sufficient and more effective in solving their own problems, you can analyze how the community is being used and understand what particular levers are being used to help people find solutions."

Overall, the study demonstrates the value of creating and effectively managing P3 communities in a B2B setting, and that posting questions and replies in these communities lead to positive outcomes for the firm.

"It would be useful for the supplier firm to spend some time and

resources training customers how to use its community effectively," says Lemon. "What I hope is that people understand the value of these peer-to-peer problem-solving communities in a business to business setting. They are increasing the self-sufficiency and the customer's ability to solve problems quickly and they're also reducing the need for traditional [customer support](#) from suppliers."

Provided by Boston College

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