

Google Service: The Bridge Between Expectations and Satisfaction

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Abstract

Customer service is a central component to all organizations. When a consumer has a positive service interaction they develop a favorable view of the company, loyalty toward the brand, and become a repeat customer. Although there are numerous media that provide customer service, organizations are struggling to meet customer service expectations in the digital age. The media that are delivering customer service to consumers are constantly changing. With this knowledge, a positive impact could be made on this critical issue by customizing the medium to the consumers' preferences and expectations during customer service interactions. Through the process of design inquiry, which includes the integration of research and design, our team started to analyze secondary sources from academic, business, and management journals. Consultant interviews for the research ranged from Marketing and Computer Science professors at Ithaca College, a journalist from a top-tier technology publication, a social media professional at a global advertising agency, to an international scholar on customer service. We also conducted a survey with Ithaca College students and found that our surveyed consumers still prefer traditional methods of customer service, including telephone and face-to-face communication. Our research findings indicate that customers expect the same experience online as they would receive in person. Customers also expect timely and customized service due to the development of an instant gratification perspective. However, organizations are struggling to accommodate rising consumer expectations in a way that is cost-effective. In the design phase of this inquiry we explored numerous prototypes and alternative design ideas. Our final design proposal is a new model for online customer service that uses the power of one of the world's most reliable search engines. The theoretical product, *Google Service*, would integrate Google's existing search capabilities with a new customer service-oriented platform. *Google Service* is a comprehensive tool that combines multiple service platforms, acting as an intermediary between the customer and the organization to provide quick, personalized, and holistic customer service experiences.

Keywords: Customer Service, Online, Customization

1. Introduction

When approached with the question, "What is a critical issue in organizations?" our team immediately discussed the evolving relationship between customers and organizations in the digital age. Millennials have witnessed the development of e-commerce, social media, and new mobile platforms. As early adopters and active consumers, this generation communicates with organizations online just as frequently as they are connecting with friends and family on social media. However, due to easy access to information, our generation uses the platforms to critique any organization that does not live up to customer service expectations.

There are numerous outlets for a service interaction between a customer and an organization. For example, a problem with a computer can be answered by looking on the company website, following troubleshooting steps, looking on forums, watching YouTube tutorials, instant messaging with the company via their website, sending an

e-mail, looking for a number to call, or physically going to the store to discuss the issue face-to-face with a company employee. Although there are many traditional and online venues for customers, consumers still “perceive a lower quality of service overall and are less satisfied” after a service interaction.¹ As young consumers and emerging professionals in the communications field, we want to explore the issue of customer service in the digital age and find a new model to benefit consumers and organizations.

2. Purposes

Our primary research question is to understand how organizations are meeting customer service expectations in the digital age. First, we need to determine the importance of customer service within organizations and how it can help or hinder customer loyalty. Through primary and secondary research, we want to understand how and why customers select a medium for service and how they define quality service interactions. Second, we will gain a holistic understanding of consumer perceptions and examine the conditions, motivations, and influences that can affect the quality of a customer service interaction. Finally, we will investigate new platforms for customer service, such as social media, to understand how organizations can leverage these new technologies. Using expert interviews, case studies, scholarly articles, and a survey, we hope to gain diverse perspectives on these topics and use design inquiry to create a new model for customer service in the digital age. We plan to expand on existing designs that already enhance customer service and help organizations increase customer loyalty.

3. Research Questions

After preliminary research in the field of customer service and after defining the purpose for our design inquiry, our research questions and the main areas of focus are:

- What are consumer expectations during a customer service interaction?
- What factors influence a consumer’s definition of quality customer service?
- What drives consumers to choose particular mediums for customer service? This includes face-to-face, telephone, e-mail, social media, instant messaging, crowd service, live video chat, etc.
- How can organizations ensure that the consumer is getting the best possible answer/service for their inquiry?
- How can organizations meet consumer service expectations in the digital age?
- How can organizations meet consumer service expectations in the most cost effective manner?
- Are there any organizations or recent innovative ideas that are already meeting consumers’ expectations?

4. Hypotheses

The hypotheses listed below are not going to be tested with control groups, but rather, they are speculations we have made:

- Quality is directly linked to customization, which is a result of the medium through which the customer service interaction takes place.
- If consumers are able to use their preferred medium for customer service they will have a better service interaction, thus increasing customer loyalty and decreasing complaints.
- When a consumer is using their preferred medium for customer service, they will perceive the interaction to be of a higher quality.

5. Design Goal

Our design goal is to create a service tool that meets all of the following criteria:

- Decreases negative experiences, complaints, and feedback from the consumer
- Is user-friendly and accessible
- Makes the experience less stressful for consumers and organizations
- Is more customized by incorporating consumer experiences, perceptions, and ideas of quality
- Is cost-effective

6. Research Methods

In order to understand the adaptive nature of customer service in a world with drastic technological changes, we began our secondary research by studying traditional customer service methods. We focused on the motivations behind the user's choice of a customer service medium. This allowed for a further investigation into the critical issue of meeting consumer expectations for quality service.

We drew from business publications and articles published in various scholarly journals to collect this secondary research. Drawing from the collective pool of data, we realized that the most important factor in a customer service interaction is meeting the standard of quality a consumer expects. We explored factors that influence the quality of these interactions and discovered that quality is directly linked to customization. Therefore, the medium through which the customer service interaction takes place is dependent upon customization. With this hypothesis, we wanted to know if consumers agreed. We created a survey, approved by the Human Subjects Review Board at Ithaca College, and distributed it through the personal social media accounts of the team members.

Our other primary research method involved interviewing experts in the fields of emerging technology and customer service. We wanted to make sure to have a diverse pool, so we reached out to multiple experts in various fields that related to our topic. The interviewees included Marketing and Computer Science professors at Ithaca College, a journalist from a top-tier technology publication, a social media professional at a global advertising agency, and an international scholar on customer service. After conducting several interviews and reviewing our survey results, we approached our critical issue from a different perspective, which redefined our final design solution.

7. Primary and Secondary Research Findings

7.1 The Importance Of Customer Service

Customer service is critical to most, possibly all, organizations and businesses, regardless of the field. As Diggines and Machado say, "It does not matter what type of business we are in, customer service will always be part of the business. Customers are a central part of all businesses and their loyalty is earned by means of excellent customer service."² Therefore, organizations should strive for customer centricity. Being customer-centric means understanding the customer's point of view.³ Without customers, especially loyal customers, one cannot have a business or organization in any form; for school systems, you need students, for health clinics, you need patients, and for retail, you need shoppers. Customer service satisfaction and customer loyalty should be seen as "the ultimate goal of any business" since "it is essential for a business to live up to its customers' perceptions of customer service."⁴ Without loyal customers, a company could experience severe loss of profit. Companies must "manage the experiences of customers to ensure that bad service does not lead to a loss of revenue."⁵ With a focus on the critical nature of customer service, we noticed that organizations are competing to "attract and retain their client base in an increasingly competitive environment."⁶ Concentration on the customer service experience is a way to differentiate between brands that are putting customers first and those that are not.⁷

7.2 Customer Service Definitions

Customer service is “a measure of how your customers perceive their interactions with your company...” which is “the sum of all experiences a customer has with a company over the duration of their relationship....”⁸ We are dealing primarily with “personalized service [which] tailors the service to the customer” and as a result, we also see “manipulative service [which] often deals with encouragement or sale-driven behavior.”⁹

Experts place customer service expectations into two categories, “primary expectations” and “secondary expectations.”¹⁰ Primary expectations are basic and could include going to a restaurant and expecting a meal to be cooked and delivered to your table, or something similar. Secondary expectations include anything that would enhance our primary expectations, like having a friendly waitress.¹¹ We are aiming our research and design at improving secondary expectations of customer service in an online context.

7.3 Customer Perceptions

Customer service is a subjective phenomenon. “Good customer service means different things to different people.”¹² Therefore, it is extremely difficult to offer service that will meet the expectations of every consumer. While some consumers want to have a personalized, empathetic experience, others prefer to seek out information on their own. According to a case study that examined interactions at a financial services call center, “expressing empathy was not always a good thing – some customers wanted no empathy whatsoever.”¹³

In addition to varying emotional needs, consumers have different expectations for the amount of time that is needed to rectify a customer service issue. The length of conversation and wait-time between responses is perceived differently depending on the customer. If the representative takes a short time to help the customer, it can be perceived as either efficient *or* that the representative ended the service interaction too quickly. On the other hand, if it takes the representative longer, there is a perception that the representative is taking their time and caring for each individual *or* they are seen as incompetent.¹⁴

7.4 Customer Expectations

Having the same standards for traditional and online customer service platforms has presented problems for companies. In an online customer service venue, physicality is lost. Customers cannot see the “line” of other people waiting in front of them, which would be present in a traditional setting. Negative feelings may arise during this wait period due to the desire for instant gratification that we typically experience with smart phones, computers, and other programs. There is a lack of critical thinking from both the consumer and the company, which creates a problem for companies that use online customer service.¹⁵

In order to broaden our understanding of this customer service disconnect, we conducted a primary survey with twenty-two Ithaca College students that allowed us to analyze varying perceptions of customer service in the digital age. The responses for the question, “How do you define quality customer service?” were diverse. Six people wrote the word “helpful” and three people wrote the word “patience.” However, some people wrote that quality service must be “fast” or “quick,” while others said that they liked when employees were “taking their time” or making them “feel personally valued and important.” One person mentioned that honesty was important to them during customer service interactions. Though small, this sample of consumers reflects a diverse range of perceptions of customer service quality. On a larger scale we can infer that these multiple perceptions require multiple media to accommodate the variance.

Our survey results indicated that twelve people saw no change between the definitions of traditional and online customer service while six other participants did. This confirms the idea that people expect the same service during interactions using both traditional and online media platforms.

Perceived quality of customer service is based upon the disconfirmation theory, which defines quality as a function of how well the service experience meets prior expectations.¹⁶ Customer perceptions and previous expectations are the driving forces behind the difference between quality service and poor service.

7.5 Customer Service: An Ever-Changing Field

“Expectations are not static, but change all the time. In fact, they can change by the day or even the hour depending on the product or service.”¹⁷ With customer expectations changing constantly, new products being launched, and

new technology on the rise, it is essential that organizations constantly update their customer service procedures and methods. “Any company that has a business sense will continuously redesign, tweak and improve its customer service expectations which will also develop and evolve over time, thus making it essential that service delivery keeps pace with those expectations.”¹⁸ The article, *Emerging Role of Social Customer Experience in Customer Care*, reinforces the point that, “[c]ompanies are adjusting to the changing behaviors of their customer base, because if they do not, their customer satisfaction scores are at risk, and customer loyalty and revenue targets have the potential to be affected.”¹⁹

7.6 Variables Of Customer Service

Not only is customer service an ever-changing field, but also there are also many variables that can assist or inhibit customers during customer service interactions. Some variables deal with the company, others with the consumer, and others are external to both the consumer and company, which they may or may not have control over. Examples include but are not limited to:

Company Variables:

- a. Representatives
- b. Available mediums
- c. Store/website layout

Customer Variables:

- a. Attitude and identifiers (race, gender, class, etc.)
- b. Available transportation
- c. Value of product/service

External Variables:

- a. Technical problems (Internet failure)
- b. Power outage
- c. Other customers

In addition to these variables, the article, *Can I Help You?: A Framework for the Interdisciplinary Research on Customer Service Encounters*, references more types of variables in service settings; customer, provider, and context variables influence behavior in service settings. For instance, the gender, appearance, race, sociability, and demand of the customer may affect the type of service behavior the customer service provider supplies. The customer service representative’s gender, organizational identification, and perception of their relationship with customers can also influence these situations. Context variables are also important; store activity, emotions, length of encounters, and the ability to help customers were all named as important variables in service interactions.²⁰ With so many variables and factors to consider, and with the customer service field constantly evolving, it is imperative to ensure that anything the organization does have control over is well executed. Diggins and Machado recommend that these variables can be managed more effectively by having the consumer select the most suitable medium with which to reach the receiver.²¹ This can go both ways depending upon whom is sending messages, whether it be the organization or the consumer.

7.7 Social Media, Crowd Service, And Customer Centricity

Another variable affecting organizations is the emergence of new technology. Social media is one of the newest technological innovations in customer service and companies are still learning to leverage this platform to help meet customer expectations. To learn more about the use of social media in customer service, our research team consulted Jason Rozet, a social media associate at Ogilvy & Mather. We also spoke with Steven Van Belleghem, a professor at Vlerick Business School in Ghent, Belgium. Both experts spoke about the need for instantaneous customer service and high customer expectations.

When Mr. Rozet consults for corporate clients, one of the first questions he asks is “What is the role of the company in the customer’s life and what service do they expect?”²² When designing a social media plan, Rozet identifies which channels the target audience uses most frequently. Often times, companies are not servicing the customers on the right medium. “There might be a disconnect between channels and people might only want to talk through one medium,” said Rozet.²³

Professor Belleghem also recognizes the struggle for companies to meet consumer expectations and has been researching how to close this gap through crowd service and customer centricity. According to Belleghem, customers are benchmarking companies against the “wrong” industries and are saying, “Why can’t my bank be more like Amazon?”²⁴ In a digital world where customers expect a “24/7 one-stop shop” there are “extreme consumer expectations.”²⁵ Professor Belleghem commented that in his latest book, *The Conversation Company*, he encourages the use of “genuine customer-centric organization that exploits the possibilities of digital media.”²⁶ Although he believes that traditional services are still relevant to organizations, Professor Belleghem notes that crowd service is becoming essential for organizations. He states that the “crowd economy is really the third phase of the Internet.”²⁷ The only way companies can keep up with these “24/7 expectations” is to bring consumers together to offer customer service *to each other*.²⁸ Now, people can “shout louder than marketers.”²⁹ The general public voice is powerful, trustworthy, and seemingly neutral; crowd service is a trending model for customer service that offers more value while cutting organizational costs.³⁰ According to Belleghem, customers trust people who seem “neutral,” mentioning that, “we are returning to the earlier days where word of mouth is the most effective form of marketing.”³¹

A recent *Forbes* article said, “If you want to build customer loyalty, start by making a decision: are you willing to put the customer at the center of everything you do? Putting the customer at the center is complicated, but it is worth it.”³² Although crowd service would be the most cost-effective method for service, organizations have to keep in mind that customers still prefer traditional methods. There comes a point in “any social media customer service interaction where the limitations...come into view.”³³

After our conversations with experts, analyzing our survey data, and reviewing our secondary research, we inferred that the customer’s primary concern is to access information at their convenience, but also through their preferred medium. In order to increase customer loyalty and put customers at the center, organizations need to help their customers quickly access the service platform of their choice.

8. Design Considerations

We are striving to create a new and innovative design to improve customer service experiences. The following are design considerations that we needed to keep in mind when modeling:

- Keeping the customer as the focus because they are central to the design
 - “Delivering good service is no longer optional, but is fundamental to the success of an organization.”³⁴
- Offering phone communication for customer service issues
 - “Telephoning a live representative remains the most frequently used customer service channel... This shows that customers are not abandoning the traditional customer service channels in favor of newer ones.”³⁵
- Making sure the website includes the six key dimensions of e-service as quality defined by *The Journal of Electronic Commerce Research* as “information quality, website usability, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and personalization.”³⁶
- Leveraging crowd service
 - “The only solution [to close the expectation gap] is for people together to offer more customer service.”³⁷
- Providing social media as a medium for customer service issues
 - “As companies refine their social business processes, we predict that the adoption levels of social media as a form of support among customers will continue to rise.”³⁸
- Evaluating our responses based on traditional versus online communication because they are two distinct ways of communicating
 - *Media, Culture & Society Journal* reveals, “online communication has distinct features that separate it from more traditional modes of communication.”³⁹
- Providing explanations of service hours and reminders regarding aspects lost through online customer service interactions
 - Although social media (such as Twitter) are 24/7, some companies do not employ representatives 24/7 and are therefore not present, but the average customer is not aware of social media working hours.

- When customers use in-person services, they can see the waiting line in front of them; however, they cannot see the “line” in front of them when using online media.⁴⁰
- Ensuring that our design includes customization without compromising privacy
 - Often times, service encounters require a trade off between privacy and customization when dealing with e-service versus personal interactions.⁴¹
- Designing an online service system and providing reminders that online media can be deceptive and produce incorrect perceptions or cause miscommunications. Stating that both parties should be aware of this can help deter negative experiences.
 - The lack of quality or “media richness” when using online customer service systems may produce “erroneous perceptions, miscommunication and conflict escalation” since customers and representatives are unable to receive *and* transmit multiple communication cues.⁴²
- Providing empathy during all customer service interactions
 - “The ability to empathize with customers is regarded as an important competency for customer service agents.”⁴³

9. Design Methods

Models that facilitate efficient customer service and direct consumers to their preferred medium already exist. *GetHuman.com* is one example that provides you with the quickest ways to get in contact with a human representative and offers a condensed view of the services made available by the company. This allows consumers to choose the medium they feel is best. However, the “users must arrive” at these platforms in order to make a difference for organizations.⁴⁴

According to our survey, ten participants visit Google first when inquiring about a customer service issue, and only five listed that they use other websites, with seven people not answering the question at all. Customers have already decided that Google is the best option, which is why it is the most appropriate venue to host a new customer service application.

10. Design

From the start, our design has focused on the media the consumer chooses for service interactions. Our initial idea involved creating a survey and a Frequently Asked Questions workflow. This idea would be sold to companies as a prerequisite before the consumer seeks an ineffective medium of customer service. The questions would help the company know what medium the consumer prefers and help them to make the most logical decision based on their problem and preferences. This design, although practical, did not address the majority of the design considerations.

The next design, an online customer service database, was created to address the problem on a larger scale. The idea for a database evolved from the original design, but addressed customization to a greater degree, which is an integral component to our solution. This database would act as a website that collects service information like a search engine and would require users to create a customized profile. This profile would be created based upon answers given to a survey determining preferred methods of communication during customer service interactions. Once the website was accessed, the consumer would have the ability to search for instant solutions to their problems, tailored to their specific needs. Although this design effectively addressed the critical issue, it would present unexpected obstacles in the form of realistic funding, manpower, and appeal to the public. Additionally, research revealed that similar designs already exist, such as *GetHuman.com* and *Directly.com*, but are not being utilized by the masses despite their value and functionality.

While discussing the database we mentioned that it aspired to be the “Google of customer service.” After discussing the problems with current designs on the Internet, and how our database could solve them, we realized that using Google as a platform could solve the problems that the database presented. “Google is the most-visited site throughout most of North America, Europe, south Asia and Australia,” which addresses the issue of mass appeal.⁴⁵ Due to the popularity of Google, it already has major funding, and it has not yet ventured far into the customer service market. Merging our database with Google could assist loyal users with quick answers. They would not have to sift through all the wrong answers in order to find the one that is specifically right for them.

In November 2013, Google launched a new project called *Helpouts by Google*. This tool allows anyone to search for “How-To” tutorials given by live experts. Depending on the nature of the tutorial or who teaches it, there may be a fee. The benefits of this design include quick solutions that are tailored to the person through video chat. Our research team spoke with Alex Wilhelm, a reporter for a leading publication on emerging technology, who covered the *Helpouts by Google* launch. Wilhelm is hesitant about the new product’s success, saying there has been “complete radio silence” in the media and in the “Twittersphere.”⁴⁶ *Helpouts by Google* is “still in its infancy and leaves the door open for other integrations later on.”⁴⁷ Now is the time to partner with Google because *Helpouts by Google* could be integrated into our design and increase traffic to the new product.

Capitalizing on this new feature, while incorporating our database design, we propose *Google Service*. This specialized Google application would make customer service interactions more user-friendly and would help prevent negative service interactions due to using inefficient media.

We chose the *Google Service* design because it is practical and it will take into consideration the opinion of various stakeholders. For businesses, this service will allow them to focus more time and energy on other aspects of their businesses. Businesses will be able to worry less about maintaining a positive reputation if customers are having less negative service interactions. *Google Service* could act as a filter to negative feedback. By giving the customer the correct answer and the most accommodative medium, less negative interactions will occur. Businesses will be able to cut costs and reduce customer service personnel since Google will act as an intermediary. Benefits from Google’s perspective include increasing traffic to the already busy site and encouraging visitors to use other Google products.

Google Service is our final product, which incorporates all of our previous designs. The interface would work as follows:

1. Any Google user searching or inquiring about customer service issues will be alerted about *Google Service*. Users will have the option to utilize this new function, and if they choose not to, they will be directed to their usual search. If customers chose to try this product they will be brought to the next screen.
2. The user will be asked to log into their Google+ account or will be asked to create one. If they do not wish to do so, they will still be able to use *Google Service*, however, it will be less customized.
3. After logging in to their Google+ account, users will be given a five-question survey. The survey will include question-based scenarios, questions regarding preferences, and questions asking what they consider to be quality service. Information will be protected from all third parties.
 - a. Keywords will track the customer’s experiences and preferences, allowing Google representatives to tailor any consultation.
4. After the customer has gone through the customization process, *Google Service* will prompt them with their original question and a chance to explain their issue further.
5. Once the question has been asked, the application will regenerate the question to confirm its accuracy.
6. Upon confirmation, the search engine will determine the best medium based upon their survey answers. If the consumer does not wish to use the medium *Google Service* selected for them, they will be supplied with other available service options.
7. The consumer will have the option of using:
 - *Helpouts by Google*
 - Company telephone (Powered by *GetHuman.com*)
 - Store locator and directions through Google Maps
 - Live chat with representatives of Google, *Directly.com*, or the company
 - A step-by-step workflow
 - E-mail correspondence
 - Online forums (crowd service)
 - Video tutorials
 - Redirection to the company’s customer service website or tools
 - a. Representatives for live chats and *Helpouts by Google* will be selected by Google.
 - b. *Directly.com* is a free online service allowing live chats with unendorsed “experts.” This may require an agreement or partnership with Google.
 - c. *GetHuman.com* is a website that gets the consumer to a live representative from the company as quickly as possible. This may require an agreement or partnership with Google.
8. Once a medium has been chosen, the information will be supplied and the customer can proceed with their service inquiry.

9. Next, Google+ users would be asked to complete a more detailed, optional survey to further customize their profiles. This survey would supply *Google Service* with a better understanding of the customer and what media they prefer with certain problems. Examples of categories would be electronic devices, laptops, cars, kitchen appliances, etc.

10. Upon completion of the customer service interaction, the user will be prompted with a feedback survey that would ask the following questions:

- a. Please evaluate your experience with *Google Service*. We greatly value your input.
 - i. What could we do better?
 - ii. How would you rate the success of this method?
(Using a 5-star scale)
- b. Would you like to tell your friends about your experience with (company) and/or Google Service?
 - i. Facebook
 - ii. Twitter
 - iii. LinkedIn
 - iv. Instagram
 - v. Tumblr
 - vi. Pinterest

The team has created mock-ups of the design for this process. Please contact one of the authors if you would like to inquire further.

11. Metrics

Three months after the launch of *Google Service* we will come back and measure the successes of the product. If the product is meeting the outlined metrics, we will continue and then do a mid-year evaluation. If the product is not meeting standards and outlined metrics, we would need to collaborate about the future of *Google Service*. These are the standards *Google Service* will be held to:

- High success rates (average 3.5 - 5 stars) from consumer feedback survey
- Over 40% increase in positive feedback - from organizations, customers, and Google Service
- Confirming with organizations that they have seen a decrease in negative customer service experiences
- 30% of Google users interacting with *Google Service* daily
- Measure opinions on the product through Radiant 6 software (a social media monitor)
- 20% increase in Google+ accounts
- Increase in profit for both the company and Google
- Repeat purchases by customers at companies contacted

12. Conclusions

Through design inquiry, we have discovered that customer loyalty is integral to the vitality of an organization. Our primary and secondary research findings demonstrate that customer service expectations and levels of satisfaction are still not being met, despite the numerous options for service interactions. With a core focus on customization, we hypothesized that the medium through which a service interaction takes place is one of the most influential and important factors of the interaction. With these concepts in mind, we designed a digital platform that is user-friendly, accessible, customizable, cost-effective, and would decrease negative experiences. The number one goal of *Google Service* is to increase customer loyalty by being an intermediary between customers and organizations – helping to eliminate the gap between companies and consumer expectations. Our product, *Google Service*, provides users with the most effective customer service outlet (telephone, chat, forum, etc.), specifying which medium would be best to meet their service interaction needs.

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