

SUPPORT INDUSTRY.COM

Best Practices Case Study Series: Support Center Solutions

PARATURE.

When Content is King

At Webs.com, the mantra might be: “Content is king.” That premise has taken the company from its inception as a basic Web site building tool and hosting provider to becoming the social publishing platform it is today — a platform that allows anyone to take their interests and make them the foundation of a social network. To bring about this transformation, Webs.com has moved beyond simply providing tools that allow their customers’ site visitors to comment via forums; with the company’s extensive portfolio of products, visitors can become true members of a particular social community, contributing images, videos, wiki material and more — content that greatly enhances the value of that community.

“The difference between Webs.com and Facebook, for example, is that they’re a social network built around people, while we provide the ability to build social networks based around a site owner’s particular interest. We’re highly focused on content,” says James Watson, director of customer relations for the Silver Spring, Md.-based Webs.com.

The strategy behind this business model characterizes the company’s approach to support as well. For Web-born companies, quality content — and ready access to it for customers and partners — can be a key differentiator in their support portfolio. As support organizations continue their quest for best practices in services delivery, their strategies increasingly include access to high-quality self-service content through knowledgebases, dynamic FAQs, downloads, and forums, complemented by whatever escalation channels make sense.

When Webs.com moved to bolster their support delivery so they could keep pace with rapid growth — as well as to make support a more strategic component of their overall value proposition — they searched for a solution that would complement their Web roots. In 2008, they chose a customer service software suite from Vienna, Va.-based Parature Inc. Webs.com is now leveraging Parature’s integrated suite of modules, including their portal, self-service knowledgebase, ticketing system, email, chat and forum capabilities.

“We want to differentiate our support team from the typical customer service team. We want our support reps to be ‘Web product specialists’ — not just resolving little how-to questions, but understanding how people are actually using our platform,” says Watson. “We want to understand how customers are building sites and how we can improve that experience.”

Getting Webby With It

When Webs.com first launched, the support team relied largely on a simple Pine-based email system and some static Web pages answering how-to questions, but as the company added more products to their offerings, that support model proved inadequate. They decided they would replace it with a more comprehensive online support system, but wanted to avoid building it in-house.

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When they responded to a call from Parature and saw a demonstration of their suite, their cost/benefits analysis — including the fact that they didn't have to dedicate in-house developers to deploy or maintain it — convinced them to invest in the SaaS-based applications.

Raising the Bar

Fueling Webs.com's early satisfaction with Parature was the fact that they were able to rapidly deploy it and start resolving issues. "We quickly moved away from Pine and started using Parature's ticket tracking system, chat, and forum products. We finally could bring everything into one product and do so with few internal resources," says Watson.

Watson and his team continually explore ways to best interact with customers and improve their service delivery. They've developed a ticketing structure based on the way customers want to submit tickets, and use Parature's autoresponse feature to handle high-volume, redundant issues. They've taken advantage of the suite's pass-through authentication capabilities to identify existing customers, and "skinned" the product to give it the Webs.com look and feel.

Webs.com wants to maintain the flexibility they've engendered in their support processes as they continue to monitor the best ways to serve their customers. For a new partnership agreement with the American Chemical Society, for instance, in which ACS is committing to 100 premium user sites for their different organizations, Webs.com will add telephony-based support to their services portfolio. They'll offer that channel at least through the ACS project development cycle, and then explore whether it makes sense to continue to do so. Adding a telephony-based option is just part of the evolution of discovering the best ways to serve their particular customer base, says Watson.

With nine people, the support team is now supporting 55 products; meanwhile, they're serving millions of customers and seeing up to 20,000 new members joining daily.

"We've got a lot more to support on the product side, and we have to find a way to optimize that without becoming just a group of autoresponders," says Watson.

Support, Meet Engineering

Webs.com now has two service-level agreement tiers depending on whether a customer is using their free or premium model, each with its own ticket routing process. The knowledgebase is open to all users, but if a customer is not paying to use a particular product, they can't access the corresponding knowledgebase segment.

The entire service team contributes to the knowledgebase, and — as best practices in support dictate — works closely with the engineering team to ensure that the two groups can provide continuous feedback between product development and support. In fact, after moving into a larger building and giving each team their own sections of the building, Webs.com moved the two groups back into close proximity so they could enjoy the

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synergy they had enjoyed in smaller quarters. That model of information-sharing, both through communications tools and verbal communications, creates a level of awareness in each group of the other's issues, says Watson, resulting in better products and better support of those products.

"By tying the groups closely together, we can fix products as issues occur — everyone's aware when a problem arises. Many companies have people who develop products in glass towers, and though they may hear about a support issue, they don't understand it to the same extent that they would if they worked closely with their support team," says Watson. "Here we can channel support communications in a productive way through the engineering team."

Watson says it's not difficult to know when people are having problems with products or support "because they start blogging about us." So Webs.com doesn't closely track such metrics as how many tickets they're getting. What Watson's really interested in are the high-level details that differentiate good support from bad: where the knowledgebase is failing to provide information, what information is getting low ratings, and the support team's response times, for example.

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The fact that everyone involved can contribute to the knowledgebase has been a significant productivity boost for the service organization. Setting approval processes for submissions to the knowledgebase and promotion of articles to customers is a simple procedure, and easily managed.

"The great thing about Parature is that you can make processes as strict or as flexible as you want and we can change who has access or control at any time," says

Watson.

Reducing Costs, Optimizing Delivery

Watson says Parature has delivered a significant return on investment, both through softer benefits such as empowering Web specialists and customers, and through the hard-cost savings that have come from keeping headcount steady while experiencing high corporate growth.

"If it weren't for Parature, I think our team would be double the size. The products have allowed me to not only offload tasks, but actually empower the team to handle those tasks," says Watson. These tasks include managing the forum, assigning moderators, and setting up autoresponders and closing them when they're no longer needed — without the aid of engineering.

"That's the problem with other products — you need to tie up other resources from the company to help the support organization," Watson adds. "Parature has optimized our group."



About Parature, Inc.

Parature, the global leader in on-demand customer service software, makes it possible for any business to leverage the Internet to provide outstanding customer service. The company's software-as-a-service (SaaS) delivery and integrated, intuitive design enables organizations to better and more efficiently serve, support, engage with and retain customers in today's Web world. Founded in 2000, Parature received the 2007 & 2008 Product of the Year Award from Customer Interaction Solutions magazine and has been named to the Inc. 5000 list of Fastest Growing Private Companies in America. For the past three consecutive years Parature has been on the Washington Business Journal's list of Best Places to Work. Headquartered in Vienna, Virginia, Parature is at work in organizations of all types and sizes, and helps support more than 13 million end users worldwide. For more information, visit <http://www.parature.com>.