

## **My experience on Customer support.**

### **What do customers really want from their support staff?**

Perhaps this is the question that is upper most in most organizations worldwide. I have been providing support for customers (and potential customers) of **Smartworks** for the last one year. I thought I could share some of the insights I had developed over a period of time to find out what the customers really want.

Most of my interaction with the customer is through E-mail. However since Smartworks is one of the heavily used software internally at Accord I also spent time over phone and as well as in face-to-face meetings to understand what goes through in the minds of customers. Of all the modes of customer support (face to face / telephone / E-mail) I found providing a good support to customers entirely through e-mail as the most challenging and satisfying of all my support activities.

While my experience is specifically concerned with supporting a software product of moderate complexity, I guess some of my insights might be applicable to any other customer support executive person no matter what product they support. If you are somehow involved in dealing with customers and would be eager to share your insights (or disagree with mine!) please feel free to send me an email.

As a customer support executive I had the following goals set for myself.

- a) Develop a clear understanding of the product I support.
- b) Look at the product from customer's perspective.
- c) Identify customer delights and frustrating problem in our product.
- d) Ensure I have multiple ways of receiving customer feedback.
- e) Balance customer's expectation with what can be achieved.
- f) View customer support as part of product development

### **Clear Understanding of the product you support**

One of the reasons (IMHO) customers get frustrated in dealing with support personnel is when customers know more about the product than the support executive. It is important for the support executive to go through all the documentation (data sheets, user guides, demos, tutors etc.) as thoroughly as possible. The support personnel should know the product inside out.

My success at providing support to our customers has been mainly due to my association with Smartworks as a test engineer. Also Smartworks is extensively used by all employees at Accord and that includes me too. Besides knowing about all the features/functionalities of the product, it is important to have a good knowledge of what are the features it lacks or is going to have, what are the existing problems, what are the functions it can or cannot provide.

If the support personnel are new to the product, then besides reading all the documents about the product, (s) he should also use the product to get a better understanding of its features.

### **Product from a customer's perspective**

Customer support executives often look at problems reported by the customers as “problems”. It would do them a lot good if they view them as opportunities in improving the product in terms of enhanced features, easier usability and better documentation. I have often come across customer support engineers implying that the customer was not smart enough to figure out the problem by himself/herself. Often this attitude erodes customer confidence and results in loss of potential business.

I remember the way I used to react to customer mails earlier when I had just joined the Smartworks support team. Any cross remark about the product or any feature of the product used to really put me off. I would imagine all the things that I would possibly say in the reply mail.. ‘I know we do not have this feature, what do you need it for?’ or ‘this is how our feature is supposed to work, it is a feature, not a bug’ or ‘this is all we can give for the amount you are paying’ so on and so forth, though I could not actually write such things in the mail. But then very soon I did realize that customer comments were helping us in a big way in improving our product.

I learnt one more important thing the hard way, that customer problems are genuine and (s)he has not misunderstood the working of the feature. I was so confident that certain errors will not happen in our product. But when some customers complained about these problems I couldn’t believe until I saw the screen shot. One such problem was related to calendar settings in Project Planner, it used to show two Sundays consecutively in the Gantt chart. We had not seen this happen in the test lab and the attitude in the team was ‘This cannot happen’, until one user sent us a screen shot with the problem. Only then could we accept it and fix the problem.

I realized how important it was to be in customer’s shoes when going through customers’ problems. Always side the customers when a problem is reported and not your developers. Even if it is a case of misunderstanding of the working of a feature, it is worthwhile to analyze why the customer did not understand it and improve the design of that feature. The customer is right always, well... most of the time!

### **Customer delights & Frustration**

Most often a user is thrilled by a feature, which he doesn't explicitly pay for and advertised by the vendor. These features could be as simple as a car perfume given as token of appreciation given by your car dealer when you buy a new car. It is important that these features are done in a way the customer discovers it himself/herself and has a pleasant surprise.

Auto login in Smartworks SmartTracker is one such feature. The user has to login to a project once by giving the userid and password. The next time on, all (s)he has to do is just double click on the project to login. The users of Smartworks were so delighted with this feature that they cannot do without this feature now.

Another feature is 'My Projects' which allows user to have only those projects listed in the tree view with which they are associated. Users found this feature very neat.

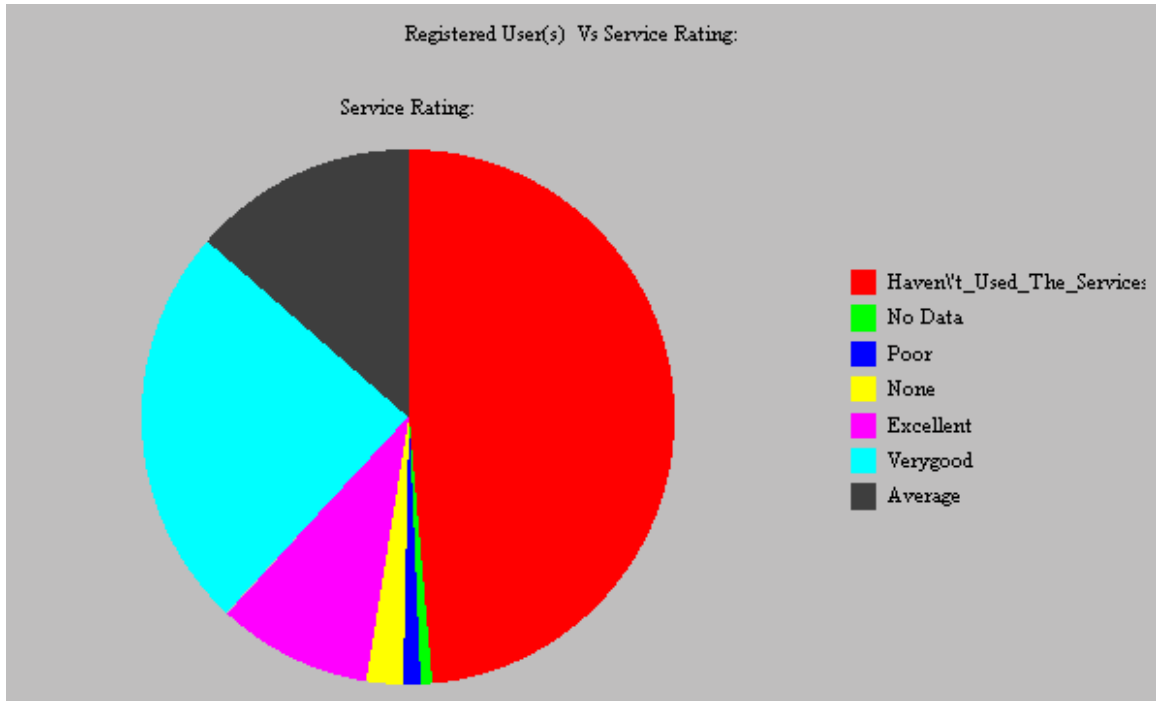
Such small features go a long way in enforcing the fact that we are here to make our users job easy.

Customers often get frustrated by inelegant implementation of a feature, which they most frequently use. It is not as if the feature is completely absent, but using the feature is so cumbersome and non-intuitive for the customer that (s)he wonders about the brain which implemented it.

Smartworks too had some such features, which really frustrated our customers. One was regarding printing of Gantt charts in Project Planner. We did not realize how important this feature would be until emails started pouring in asking for this feature. We had not anticipated this as we thought that in this technology era where everyone is moving towards a paperless office, this feature will not be missed much. And since Smartworks is a collaboration tool, the project plan would be available to everyone on their desktop, then why would they need a hardcopy? But it turned out to be the most required feature and we had to provide it immediately.

There were some more grouses like inability to plan tasks in terms of hours, allocating resources in percentages, which we had not anticipated. These features are being implemented now.

We have been catering to our users requirements slavishly. The figure below shows what our customers feel about the support we provide:



### Multiple ways of receiving customer feedback

Product quality hinges on the feedback of the customers that we receive. It is better to receive a nasty response rather than not receive any response at all. Users' response means that someone has found your product worth spending his valuable time on. Its very important that feedback forms are simple and easy to fill and send. Mandatory fields to be filled should be as few as possible.

All users of Smartworks at Accord either send their feedback through email or get in touch with the team personally. We value the feedback of our internal customers as much as we do our external customers. In fact they have played a major role in making Smartworks a mature and successful product.

Smartworks provides a feedback form along with all of its plugins, which is easy to fill and send. We also provide a survey form in our plugins, and this mode of feedback is used by our customers very often. The survey form contains some questions and a list of answers from which the user has to choose. These two modes have been the major ways customers use to reach us besides directly writing to us at [contactsw@accord-soft.com](mailto:contactsw@accord-soft.com)

### Balance customer's expectation with what can be achieved

It is not possible to implement all the requirements given by the customer, possibly due to design constrains or the requirement may not fall in the scope of the product. In such

cases it is very important to let the customer know that it will not be implemented rather than say that it will be done in the next release just to please the customer.

For Smartworks, we have been able to successfully balance the expectations of our customers with what we can achieve. Smartworks team sets high expectation level for itself and tries to provide all the possible features that customers would want. All the enhancements of the customers are consolidated before drawing the project plan for the next version.

### **View customer support as part of product development**

Smartworks has installation base of 100 as of today and continues to increase everyday. It has around 1700 registered users. Smartworks products are released internally to all Accordians first. This is followed by a feedback form, which is sent to all the Accordians to be filled. Only after the suggestions / problems reported by our internal customers are handled that the product is made available in the market place.

The customer support and customer feedback have become tightly integrated with the product development. Most of the features to be done in the next release are determined by the customers rather than a project manager. So every customer feedback is considered as an opportunity to improve the product.

To conclude, I would like to say that providing support is a very challenging task that requires a lot patience and cool headedness. It has its share of ups and downs. Some times the customers are not pleased with your reply, sometimes they acknowledge the prompt and efficient service which helped them to get back to work within no time. That is very fulfilling.

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