SupportIndustry.com

2008 Service and Support Metrics Survey

- The Results -

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Executive Summary:

Supportindustry.com conducts an annual survey designed to explore the state of enterprise service and support — current industry trends, future plans, technology adoption, workforce issues, benchmarking strategies, metrics and other areas. This year's survey, sponsored by Parature Inc., a provider of on-demand customer service and help desk software, reveals that, while support organizations are evolving processes and adopting technologies to improve service delivery, they continue to face characteristic challenges.

Respondents to this year's survey, conducted in February 2008, comprised high-level executives responsible for a range of internal help desk and external customer-facing functions and representing vertical sectors across industry. Of these executives, 30% are responsible for customer-facing support operations, 28.7% handle internal help desk functions, and a hefty 41.2% are charged with managing both. Nearly a quarter of the 85 companies responding have more than 10,000 employees and the same percentage have support center budgets of more than $1 million annually.

Highlights from this year's survey:

• **Everyone Wants a Piece:** Every year that SupportIndustry.com has conducted the Service and Support metrics survey, we've seen an overarching theme: For support teams — whether they're serving customers or their own company's employees — the pressure never lets up. Respondents continue to report that demand for their services increased over what they experienced the previous year. In this year's study, three quarters of executives responding (74.1%) say they've seen increased demand for and use of their services.

Has the demand for your support services increased, decreased or remained the same compared to last year's demand?

Choice	[N]	Percent	Graph
Increased	60	74.1%	
Decreased	3	3.7%	
Remained the same	18	22.2%	
Total Responses:	81	100%	

• **Multi-Talented and Multi-Tasking:** Be they customers or employees, they expect more than ever to be able to choose the way they interact with support agents. That puts more pressure on service directors to either create positions dedicated to a specific service channel, or ensure that agents are trained to handle multiple types of channels in their interaction with clients. Around 43% of respondents to this year's survey say that more than three quarters of their agents handle multiple channels (phone, email, live chat, co-browsing) to meet the needs of business customers or enterprise clients.

Sidebar: All in a Day's Work

It comes as no surprise to hear that customer service reps and help desk agents operate in a work environment that can be, at times, volatile. But it might surprise some people to hear that reps sometimes receive actual physical threats. In fact, nearly 40% of respondents to this survey said their agents have been threatened in some way by irate customers. Some even report receiving a death threat or two.

This information was among the interesting findings we gleaned when we asked executives some open-ended questions related to things they'd seen in their years managing contact centers. Questions like: What's the craziest request your support department has ever received? What's the angriest response your support department has ever heard when trying to solve a problem? Not surprisingly, expletives from customers are fairly common — about registration processes, about not having access to HR files for which they are not authorized, about an agent mistakenly calling at 4:00 in the morning (okay, so that last one might have earned itself a profanity or two).

Inane, nonsensical and just plain crazy support requests and complaints make good fodder for reading, as their frequent publication in trade rags and in sound-off forums attest. A few favorites from this survey:

• **Issue:** One woman wanted the help desk to tell her where an old boyfriend got her work number.
• **Outcome:** She was directed to security.

• **Issue:** Customer's daughter lost the customer's camera at a nightclub and she wanted it replaced under warranty.
• **Outcome:** Contact center declined her request.

• **Issue:** Customer asked for support for a competitor's product.
• **Outcome:** Support center offered to "convert" them.

• **Issue:** Employee needed help finding the 'star' key on a telephone.
• **Outcome:** Agent helped them locate it.

• **Issue:** Employee wanted to remove a porn virus from his PC before his boss found out.
• **Outcome:** Mission accomplished.

• **Issue:** Employee asked help desk to put out a fire in an cigarette receptacle outside the building.
• **Outcome:** Help desk directed them to facilities personnel.

• **Issue:** Customer had a meltdown because the pharmacy where he did business had a wireless antenna outside the store. He threatened to sue the corporation for non-secured wireless access points through which someone could steal his pharmaceutical information.
• **Outcome:** Escalated the complaint to the company's CEO, CFO and CIO so they could respond in writing as to the security of their operations.

As it turns out, callers also like giving call centers helpful suggestions when they're not entirely happy with the support they've been given, or they're just plain frustrated. Some of the more interesting suggestions:

• **Suggestion:** Caller suggested that the support department "go out and sweep the road" rather than trying to provide service.
• **Outcome:** Agent advised caller that the suggestion would be taken under advisement.

• **Suggestion:** Caller said he's better get the answer he needed, because if he didn't, he'd have a 'contact' at the CIA investigate the company's software. He'd also have his attorney draw-up legal papers and report the software provider to the attorney general.
• **Outcome:** They gave him what the information he wanted after repeated attempts to reason with him.

Though help desk and call center agents are trained to do whatever they can to reason with irate and abusive customers, they can only do so much. Most respondents say they have processes in place where, after admonishing the caller that they will only receive further help if the abuse stops, they can escalate to a manager. One has a database in which data from threatening calls is entered, and the session information then gets escalated to the COO, who contacts the customer personally to see if the relationship should be terminated.

What percentage of your agents handle multiple interaction channels?

Choice	[N]	Percent	Graph
<10%	16	19.8%	
10%-25%	14	17.3%	
25%-50%	7	8.6%	
50%-75%	9	11.1%	
>75%	35	43.2%	
Total Responses:	81	100%	

• **Getting it Together:** More than half of the respondents to this year's survey (56.8%) say they've managed to integrate at least some of their channels, whether it be at the level of multichannel queuing, through a single view into multichannel interactions, or via a common knowledgebase for interactions across channels.

Are your support channels integrated?

Choice	[N]	Percent	Graph
Yes	46	56.8%	
No	35	43.2%	
Total Responses:	81	100%	

• **Helping Others Help Themselves:** Numerous incentives — cost reduction, customer demand, the need for a more-rounded services portfolio — have driven organizations to fund self-service projects and strengthen existing offerings over the last few years. This year, nearly three quarters (72.6%) of responding executives say they offer access to a searchable knowledgebase or dynamic FAQ. Meanwhile, nearly 44% now allow clients to submit cases electronically via the Web should they decide to use that avenue — a ready option if they can't find their answers in a searchable knowledgebase and decide to escalate their case to an assisted help channel.

• **From a Distance:** Based on the significant cost savings realized when support agents are able to solve problems remotely rather than making a deskside visit, remote control and diagnostics tools continue to make inroads into IT help desks, both for enterprise and customer support. More than 45% of responding organizations use remote control tools in their support efforts, while 21.2% use remote diagnostics and 27.5% leverage screen-sharing and co-browsing technologies.

What support channels do you offer your customers? (choose all that apply)

Choice	[N]	% of Respondents	Graph/Respondents
Phone	75	93.8%	
Knowledge management/knowledgebases	43	53.8%	
Dynamic FAQ	15	18.8%	
Email autoresponse/suggest	36	45%	
Text Chat/Instant Messaging	19	23.8%	
Screen sharing	22	27.5%	
Remote control	37	46.2%	
Remote diagnostics	17	21.2%	
Electronic case submittal on web	35	43.8%	
User Forums	18	22.5%	
Webinars	18	22.5%	
Other	5	6.2%	
Total Respondents:	**80**		
Total Responses:	**340**		

• **Your Place or Mine:** Nearly 40% of respondents have entrusted their support technology deployments to software-as-a-service (SaaS) models. In fact, research shows that CRM and other sales and service-related technologies lead the types of applications driving the on-demand software market. Of those respondents who don't currently use a hosted solution, a third say they likely will within the next year.

Do you currently use a hosted model for any of your support-related technologies?

Choice	[N]	Percent	Graph
Yes	31	39.7%	
No	47	60.3%	
Total Responses:	**78**	**100%**	

•**Satisfaction Not So Guaranteed:** A solid majority (70%) of respondents have adopted formalized survey vehicles and other measurement vehicles so they can quantify customer satisfaction. Still, that means a full 30% don't have any formal methods in place for determining customer satisfaction.

Do you use methods to formally determine customer satisfaction related to support performance?

Choice	[N]	Percent	Graph
Yes	56	70.9%	
No	23	29.1%	
Total Responses:	79	100%	

SURVEY ANALYSIS

Meeting Demand

While the job of service and support executives never gets any easier, with the proper corporate backing and funding, the challenges can be exciting rather than job-threatening. Much depends on whether service is viewed as a strategic component of the business. If the highest levels of management understand that exemplary customer service can increase revenues, or that superior IT support within the enterprise ensures the productivity that drives the business — and funds the efforts accordingly — then the job of a service and support director is a little easier.

This kind of sponsorship is crucial if a service organization is to continually evolve to meet new challenges. Every year that we've conducted this survey, a significant majority of respondents have reported that demand for their services had increased over the previous year. In this year's study, three quarters (74.1%) say they've seen increased demand and use of their services, with only 3% reporting a drop. In 2006, 77.2% of respondents said they saw the need for their services increase during the course of the year. Further, in 2004, a hefty 85% cited increased demand, while 71% did so in 2003.

It's clear that the challenges will continue to mount annually, whether it's due to an expanding customer base that's accustomed to choice in service options, or an increasingly complex and sophisticated IT infrastructure needed to sustain the corporate workforce. However, while 44.9% of this year's respondents were fortunate enough to see their budgets grow over last year's figures, 34.6% say their budget allocation didn't tick upward.

Did your support operation's budget increase, decrease or stay the same from last year's budget?

Choice	[N]	Percent	Graph
Increased	35	44.9%	
Decreased	12	15.4%	
Remained the same	31	39.7%	
Total Responses:	78	100%	

Technology's Place

Regardless of these challenges, the support team at the end of the phone line or in the chat window has got to perform at the highest level possible given its budget range and available technology. Customers and employees must have a good experience with agents in order for the company to be able to encourage positive behavior in the future, whether it be buying behavior or adherence to internal IT standards.

That same superior performance should be delivered by Web-based self-services, including knowledgebases, search engines, FAQs, and Webinars, particularly so if the support organization is operating as a profit & loss center, as 34.6% of responding organizations are. If Web-based self-services aren't the extreme cost-cutting measure they were once thought to be, it's because they're something more: They meet the needs of customers who want to solve their own issues; they offload repetitive tasks so support teams can concentrate on more important duties (about 24% of respondents say at least some of their agents also perform sales tasks); and they allow organizations to evolve their service strategies and portfolios as needs change. While self-services can deliver cost-savings in some areas, and certainly allow for better allocation of resources, the bigger benefit they offer is the potential for competitive differentiation as part of a comprehensive service portfolio.

The improving level of content available on the Web is creating customers who are increasingly savvy about what they want when they embark on a search: They want access to targeted content, and they want it available from the most likely sources. In other words, if a company sells a product or service, it needs to offer online content that's able to support that product or service. In doing so, the company not only increases its chances of satisfying customers, but, by encouraging a return visit, gives itself additional opportunities to further please them. If customers don't find this content — or find it and find it lacking — the company hasn't exploited the experience, and the customer may head elsewhere. And more than likely, given the availability of social media networks and forums, they'll share that 'experience' with others.

Survey respondents recognize this. About 15% cite increased customer satisfaction and loyalty as the primary benefit they've seen from implementing self-service knowledgebases and other Web-based technologies. Around a third of respondents — 30% — say their biggest gain has been in increased efficiencies, not surprising given the number of phone calls and emails that can be avoided if sufficient resources are put into a knowledge management initiative. In fact, 12.8% point to just that — they say reduced support incidents are the greatest benefit gained from self-service. Meanwhile, just over 14% point to the cost reductions they've realized as their biggest gain .

And support-delivery costs can be significantly lower thanks to these initiatives. Though costs will shift to other functions, such as database development, knowledgebase population, ongoing maintenance and administrative functions, self-service knowledgebases can significantly reduce the cost of the support transaction itself. Compare these potentially low costs with phone-based support costs. More than half of respondents (54.8%) say they spend between $10 and $49 on each phone call they handle, with 3% saying the average call costs them more than $100.00.

What is your average cost per phone-based support contact?

Choice	[N]	Percent	Graph
Less than $10	26	35.6%	
$10 - $24	18	24.7%	
$25 - $49	22	30.1%	
$50 - $74	3	4.1%	
$75 - $100	1	1.4%	
More than $100	3	4.1%	
Total Responses:	73	100%	

Though less expensive in general than the phone, email by no means guarantees reduced costs for every transaction, as success depends greatly on workflow processes, the quality of autoresponse content, and the agents who might ultimately field the email. Around 32% of respondents say they spend between $10 and $49 per email-based issue, though 56.5% saying they spend less than $10. Instant messaging is less expensive, with 21% saying they expend between $10 and $49 per chat session and nearly 60% saying they spend less than $10.

Lower costs, improved service delivery and end-user satisfaction are likewise oft-cited reasons for deploying remote control, remote diagnostics and co-browsing tools. About a third of respondents — 30.2% — who've adopted such toolsets say they're able to resolve 75% to 99% of the problems for which they use that function-ality, and another 27% say they're able to take care of between 50% to 74% of problems without a deskside visit.

If you use remote diagnostics/remote control, how often are you able to successfully resolve a problem and avoid an onsite/deskside visit?

Choice	[N]	Percent	Graph
less than 10%	14	22.2%	
10% - 24.9%	8	12.7%	
25% - 49.9%	2	3.2%	
50% - 74.9%	17	27%	
75% - 99.9%	19	30.2%	
100%	3	4.8%	
Total Responses:	63	100%	

Channel Distribution

Demand, as well as cost considerations, have service organizations increasing the number of channels they offer for support. Experts caution that just because a support organization can offer a channel doesn't mean it should, but it's clear that customers want to have choice when it comes to how they get support.

Not surprisingly, nearly all respondents — 93.8% — offer the phone as a channel, surpassing all other offerings. Still, this represents a slight drop of 3% from 2006's figure, suggesting that companies and their customers are relying more on other channels. There's no problem with not promoting the phone as a viable channel as long as other channels offered are backed by sufficient resources. Other interactive channels — both live and delayed assistance — include remote control (46.2%), email (45%), screen-sharing (27.5%), live chat (23.8%), and remote diagnostics (21.2%).

On the self-serve side of the equation, more than half of respondents (53.8%) allow their constituents to access online knowledgebases, and another 19% provide dynamic FAQs. Around 44% of companies allow their customers to submit cases — a good option for first contact or for escalation — to their contact center via the Web. Another 22.5% provide Webinars on a variety of topics.

Of note is that 22.5% of companies say they now allow their customers to take part in user forums via their Web site. Though many companies have not yet taken this route for a number of reasons (fear of transparency, product types not well-served by customers sharing technical information, etc.), it behooves certain industries to do so. For technology providers supporting certain product types, forums and other online communities have proven fertile ground for customers to share problem solutions. In other markets, they simply want to discuss product experiences or other issues related to their interests. Businesses that host forums can take the information housed there and translate it to better product development, improved marketing campaigns and more. Forums also encourage businesses to provide the best support possible, because if they don't, they — and everyone else — might hear about it.

How are contacts distributed among channels? For respondents in this survey, the phone is still fielding the largest bulk of support transactions. Just over 97% are handling at least some percentage of their contacts by phone; only 2.5% say they're handling none via this channel. Email likewise handles a high percentage of contacts, with 93.6% saying they're handling at last some of their customers via this method.

Newer to the support spectrum, chat and self-service still lag behind more entrenched phone and email options, particularly as organizations have work to do to integrate them into their support strategies. Just under three quarters of respondents (73.1%) are solving at least some of their support transaction through self-service knowledgebases, while just 36.7% have managed to push some support to chat. There's plenty of opportunity there, as 63.3% aren't driving any transactions to chat. And chat, though an assisted channel, enables agents to handle more than one session at a time if they're talented. As for self-service, more than a quarter of respondents (26.9%) aren't driving any transaction to self-serve channels, which can reduce costs and impact customer satisfaction.

Long recognized as a key component in improving service and support quality and delivery, integration among service channels is on the rise, thanks both to work by large enterprises on individual integration efforts and vendors offering integrated contact management platforms. More than half of respondents (56.8%) say they've managed to integrate at least some of their channels, whether it be in the form of a common knowledgebase, a single view into all customer interaction data, or an integrated contact management platform. That compares to 40% of respondents who cited multichannel integration in 2006, 30% in 2004, and 27% in 2003.

A Measure of Performance

The establishment and tracking of metrics continue to play a major role in improving contact center performance. Traditional metrics such as first-call resolution and rate of abandonment will continue to be measured, though more organizations are considering ways to measure performance indicators that more closely tie the support organization to overall business performance. Here's a snapshot of how respondents measured up in traditional metrics:

• **Average abandonment rate:** 21.3% of respondents claim an average call abandonment rate of less than 1%. The highest percentage of respondents in this category — 46.7% — have an abandonment rate of from 1% to 5%.

What was your average abandonment rate in the last year?

Choice	[N]	Percent	Graph
less than 1%	16	21.3%	
1% - 5%	35	46.7%	
6% - 10%	14	18.7%	
11% - 15%	6	8%	
16% - 20%	2	2.7%	
20% and above	2	2.7%	
Total Responses:	75	100%	

• **Average speed to answer for phone-based support:** 8% of respondents take more than 60 seconds to answer a call, while 12% do so in less than five seconds. The largest percentage — 37.3% — take between 5 and 15 seconds to answer a call.

What is your average speed to answer the phone?

Choice	[N]	Percent	Graph
less than 5 seconds	9	12%	
5 - 15 seconds	28	37.3%	
16 - 30 seconds	16	21.3%	
31 - 45 seconds	12	16%	
46 seconds - 60 seconds	4	5.3%	
60 seconds and above	6	8%	
Total Responses:	75	100%	

• **Average hold time for phone-based support**: About 4% of respondents say their customers wait more than five minutes on hold while 25% say their customers experience no wait for service. The largest percentage (39.5%) keep customers and other constituents on hold for less than a minute.

What is your average hold time for phone based support?

Choice	[N]	Percent	Graph
no hold time	19	25%	
less than one minute	30	39.5%	
1 to 2 minutes	19	25%	
3 to 4 minutes	4	5.3%	
4 to 5 minutes	1	1.3%	
more than 5 minutes	3	3.9%	
Total Responses:	**76**	**100%**	

• **Average speed to answer email-based requests:** 26% of respondents say they answer email questions in less than an hour, while, on the other end of the spectrum, 10.4% say it takes from 24 to 36 hours to answer an email. The highest percentage of respondents in this category — 36.4% — say it takes from one to six hours to respond to an email question.

What is your average speed to answer email-based support requests?

Choice	[N]	Percent	Graph
less than 1 hour	20	26%	
1 - 6 hours	28	36.4%	
6 - 12 hours	10	13%	
12 - 24 hours	11	14.3%	
24 - 36 hours	8	10.4%	
36 - 48 hours	0	0%	NA
48 - 60 hours	0	0%	NA
more than 60 hours	0	0%	NA
Total Responses:	**77**	**100%**	

Gauging Customer Satisfaction

More and more organizations are coming to the realization that if they want to ensure customer satisfaction, they've got to do more than just sell quality products and services — they're got to back them up with a superior support strategy, appropriate channel selection, and easily navigable and valuable content. But beyond that, they realize they need to actually determine whether what they're offering is appreciated — or even used — and 70.9% of respondents to this year's survey are doing so through various customer satisfaction survey vehicles. Still, that means a full 29.1% of organizations don't use any formal methods to quantify customer satisfaction.

Of the customer sat mechanisms used, incident follow-up surveys lead the list, with 61.4% of respondents employing them. Also leveraged are ongoing relationship surveys, used by 47.1% and call monitoring, used by 35.7%. Nearly 35% of respondents say they're able to tap into unsolicited customer feedback to use in their customer relationship programs. To further determine how they're executing, 42% of respondents benchmark their performance against that of other support organizations.

If you use methods to formally determine customer satisfaction-related to support performance, what mechanisms do you use?

Choice	[N]	% of Respondents	Graph/Respondents	% of Responses
Incident follow-up surveys	43	61.4%		29.9%
Ongoing relationship surveys	33	47.1%		22.9%
Unsolicited customer feedback	24	34.3%		16.7%
Focus groups	7	10%		4.9%
Call Monitoring	25	35.7%		17.4%
Other	5	7.1%		3.5%
None	7	10%		4.9%
Total Respondents:	70			
Total Responses:	144			100%

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PARATURE

About Parature

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 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 8 million end users worldwide. For more information, visit www.parature.com

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