Implementing Web Chat: How to Launch, Staff, and Monitor

Demographics, CSAT, and Low Cost

Drive Adoption of New Assisted Support Channel

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Implementing Web Chat: How to Launch, Staff, and Monitor

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Move over phone and email. The latest assisted support channel for supporting customers is web chat, and after multiple years of growth in consumer support, web chat is now being adopted by enterprise support in a big way, with multiple $10-plus billion TSIA member companies launching web chat for customers in 2011. Companies may be initially driven to adopt web chat due to demands from younger demographics, but high satisfaction scores, low cost per interaction, and extremely flexible options for outsourcing all make chat a must-have channel for any customer support operation.

In this report, learn the best practices for launching, staffing, and quality monitoring for web chat, as well as key elements to look for when evaluating a web chat platform. In addition, TSIA will provide answers to five of the most frequently asked questions about chat and its use for customer technical support. As younger demographics that prefer chat as an interaction channel age into the target demographic, for most companies, adopting web chat for customer support should be a priority for any call center or technical support operation. The tips, tricks, and best practices revealed in this report will not only make implementing a chat channel easier, but will help existing chat operations improve both employee productivity and customer satisfaction.

DEMOGRAPHICS ARE THE PRIMARY DRIVER IN ADOPTION OF WEB CHAT

In 2010 TSIA introduced a new benchmark survey questionnaire, expanding the number of data points captured from 200 to more than 330. Survey questions were added to collect information about multiple emerging areas of support operations, including social media, value-added services, and expanded use of web collaboration tools, including web chat as a customer support channel. Figure 1 shows the average monthly percent of customer incidents by channel for 2001, as well as 2011 data from the new benchmark, which includes web chat.

Over the last decade, the percentage of customer incidents handled by phone has dropped from 64% to 58%, challenging many companies’ insistence that phone remains the only channel that matters. Though just added last fall, the web chat option has already gathered 3% of interaction volume in the survey, and TSIA Research expects that number to climb to 5% to 8% by 2012. Of the TSIA members already offering web chat, multiple companies are receiving more than 10% of interactions via chat, with some members receiving 20% to 25% of volume via the chat channel.
Web chat has been growing as a popular channel for consumer support over the last decade, first in industries such as telecommunications and financial services before moving to consumer technical support. Now enterprise support is getting into the act, with large B2B TSIA members presenting case studies at conferences about use of web chat, and multiple large firms currently shopping for a chat platform or in the early stages of a web chat deployment. What is causing this rapid introduction of web chat for customer service? The easy answer is demographics.

As seen in Figure 2, seniors, those aged 65 and older, have a very high propensity for phone support, with 76% of seniors saying that when they need support for a product, they pick up the phone and call. But as the age of the customer drops, the reliance on phone for support lessens, with Gen-X (those aged 35 to 45) and Gen-Y (those aged 21 to 35) relying on phone support less than half the time. But the biggest shift happens with the New Silent Generation (NSG), the under-21 crowd, whose number one channel of choice is web chat with 28%, followed by a Google search with 25%, and web self-service at 24%. Only 19% of the NSG says they prefer phone for customer support.
The primary age group targeted by consumer firms is usually 18 to 35, which is why consumer-savvy companies began introducing web chat in the last decade, trying to appeal to customers who came of age using Yahoo! Instant Messenger and SMS texting via smartphones as a primary method of communication.

As the younger demographics graduate from college and enter the workforce, IT is being flooded with system administrators who are very tech savvy and have a strong preference for web chat. With the ranks of younger IT workers growing, enterprise firms must offer web chat to meet the needs of this younger demographic, and more technology companies are reporting that web chat is showing up on customer surveys as a preferred support channel.

**Beyond Demographics: Web Chat Advantages**

Though demographics and customer demand may cause companies to investigate adding web chat to their multi-channel strategy, there are other reasons why web chat makes sense for support operations, including:
- **Seamless transition from unassisted to assisted support.** TSIA has published multiple reports documenting the decline of self-service success, currently averaging a low 49%. For customers who attempt self-service but are not able to find what they need, offering a web chat option allows the customer to seamlessly move from unassisted to assisted support, while remaining in their channel of preference: the web.

- **High customer satisfaction scores.** According to the TSIA Benchmark survey, and case studies from large technology firms, web chat incidents are highly rated by customers, surpassing average satisfaction scores for email and self-service. In Figure 3, web chat interactions average 4.05 on a five-point satisfaction scale.

- **Lower cost per transaction.** With less infrastructure required than phone and email, web chat incidents also tend to cost less. Figure 3 shows the average incident cost by channel, with chat averaging $39, considerably less than $162 for phone incidents and $77 for email incidents.

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**Figure 3: Interaction Cost and CSAT by Channel**

![Figure 3: Interaction Cost and CSAT by Channel](Image)

Source: TSIA 2011 Benchmark
**Beyond Chat: Proactive Chat as Revenue Driver**

One of the unique capabilities of web chat is that it is not only a reactive channel for customers, it can be used as a proactive channel to provide an exceptional customer experience, as well as to generate incremental revenue. Proactive chat is accomplished using a rules engine to identify customers on your website that meet very specific criteria, and the system automatically prompts the customer, inviting them to a web chat session. If the customer accepts, they are routed to an available contact center agent or support technician for assistance.

As seen in *Figure 4*, proactive contacts are appreciated by customers, particularly essential information about products or services. Customers are less willing to receive proactive contacts concerning new product offerings, special deals, and promotions. Like email, customers prefer communications that bring value to them, not targeted sales information.

*Figure 4: Customer Attitudes toward Proactive Contacts*

![Figure 4: Customer Attitudes toward Proactive Contacts](image_url)

Proactive chat was first used by online retail or e-commerce vendors to reach out to customers with items in their shopping cart to answer any questions they may have in order to hasten the checkout process. For this scenario, proactive chat is driven by the amount of time spent on the website and the value of merchandise in the online shopping cart.
For technology support, proactive chat can also help generate revenue if the proactive option is included in premiere maintenance agreements, creating a value-added service companies are willing to pay additional maintenance fees for. When creating rules for proactive chat, consider:

- **High-value customers.** The rule engine can identify your highest value customers and prompt them with a proactive chat request. The rule can be based on service level purchased—to identify “platinum” customers, or by a customer “customer value” field populated on the account or contact record. In this way, resources are leveraged to provide additional support to your most valuable customers.

- **Customers struggling with self-service.** Rule engines can also easily identify customers struggling to self-solve issues, by the number of searches or articles viewed, or just by length of the self-service session. Reaching out to a frustrated customer and offering assisted support is a great way to turn a negative experience into a positive one.

- **Increasing employee utilization.** When lulls happen in the call center or tech support center, proactive chat can be used to leverage all available resources, keeping them busy with customers until inbound volume picks up again.

**TOP FIVE FAQS FOR WEB CHAT IN TECHNOLOGY SUPPORT**

Looking back over web chat-related inquiries from TSIA members, as well as questions received from the audience on webcasts about chat best practices, TSIA Research has compiled the top five frequently asked questions (FAQs) regarding web chat programs. The following sections will explore each of these FAQs:

1. Does chat work for technical support?
2. How do I staff for my chat channel?
3. How many chat sessions should an agent manage?
4. How does training for chat differ from phone?
5. Is chat a good option for outsourcing/offshoring?

**1. Leveraging Chat for Technology Support**

Does chat work for technical support? The first question received by technology companies considering a web chat project is about the applicability for chat for complex technology problems. Aren’t some problems just too difficult to describe, analyze, and troubleshoot via a chat session? Should Priority 1 or “hot” issues be handled via chat?

According to TSIA members, customers gravitate toward their channel of choice and stick with it, meaning customers who prefer the chat channel tend to use it for everything—even Priority 1 or “hard
down” problems. Never assume that any channel is less important or less critical than phone—remember and honor the demographic channel preferences in Figure 2. However, that does not mean that web chat is the best channel to resolve every issue.

When creating guidelines for your chat program, consider the following:

- **Identify issues that don’t lend themselves to chat resolution.** Yes, some issues may be too complex for a chat interaction, and over time, you will identify a list of these issues. Complicated recovery procedures—especially when there is a high risk of data loss—may be better handled by phone.

- **Train chat agents on escalation procedures to transition to phone if necessary.** Once you have identified issues that are not well addressed via chat, be sure to train chat agents on how to transfer chat customers to phone. The worst chat stories occur when customers say, “This is getting too complicated for chat, may I call you?” And the agent replies, “No, I don’t have a phone on my desk.” Even chat agents should be able to pick up the phone and call a customer, but if that isn’t possible, at least have a “warm transfer” procedure in place, so the customer can be transferred—along with the chat history—to a phone agent.

- **Leverage chat as a jumping-off point for remote control.** When a customer is connected to an agent via chat, firing up a remote-control session is an easy way to speed up resolution for the incident, as well as create an audit trail of everything that happens that can be written to customer history and save a lot of chat typing.

2. **Multi-Channel Staffing: How to Staff Chat**

Another question most companies ask when launching a new web chat channel is in regard to staffing: Do I need dedicated chat agents, or can employees handling web chat incidents also answer phone calls and respond to emails?

In the early days of chat, industry analysts recommended “blended agents,” meaning support technicians were trained on every channel, and were able to take the next sequential incident in queue, whether that was an email, phone call, or web chat request. Multiple years into the use of web chat, opinions on this topic have shifted: TSIA Research now recommends that employees handling customer web chat interactions be dedicated to the chat channel for all or part of their shift, not juggling chat along with other interaction channels.

Why the shift in thinking away from blended agents? A two-year experiment at two very large mobile phone providers, one in North America and one in Europe, has changed the minds of many industry insiders. The mobile providers both launched two teams of web chat agents, one group dedicated to chat, the other group working in blended mode, handling chats along with emails and phone calls. The
assumption that employees would adapt to the blended environment was wrong: after a two-year trial, dedicated chat agents had dramatically higher productivity, accuracy, and satisfaction scores than blended agents.

As will be discussed in the web chat training section, the skills required to excel at customer interactions via chat are quite different than the skills used for phone calls, and depending on their personal skills, employees tend to perform higher in one channel than the other. For this reason, a dedicated team of chat agents is ideal. However, if you do need to share employees across channels, break up shifts so employees can be dedicated to chat for two to four hours at a time, instead of fully-blended agents.

3. Web Chat Productivity: Are Multiple Sessions Recommended?

In the consumer support world, web chat agents frequently juggle multiple chat sessions at a time, dramatically increasing productivity. When TSIA Research suggested on a recent webcast that technology support organizations could also attempt multiple sessions at a time, the audience pushed back in a major way, saying their enterprise technology support issues were far too complex for multi-tasking.

While this may be true for some issues, and for some employees, the nature of web chat interactions does lend itself to multi-tasking. After interviewing many companies about chat operations, TSIA Research has found that resolving the identical issue takes slightly longer via chat than it does for phone. According to technology support organizations, when customers call you with a problem, they give you their undivided attention. When a customer is chatting with a support technician about a problem, the customer is frequently on a call, browsing the web, or doing other work at the same time. This creates latency in the chat conversation, with the support employee experiencing dead time while waiting for the customer to respond to his or her last question.

For experienced employees, this latency makes handling multiple sessions acceptable. In the high-volume, low-complexity consumer world, such as airline reservations, agents handle as many as eight concurrent web chat sessions. For technology support, juggling two sessions may be the maximum. When considering having web chat employees handle multiple sessions, keep in mind these guidelines:
• **Not everyone can multi-task.** The ability to keep track of more than one customer problem at a time is not a skill everyone possesses. Multi-tasking agents must remember where they are in the conversation with multiple customers and be able to keep an eye on more than one window to avoid response delays. Definitely employees should not attempt multiple sessions until they are seasoned and feel comfortable attempting an additional chat session.

• **Select additional sessions based on the current issue being worked.** Some customer issues may actually lend themselves to multi-tasking, such as problems requiring recovery procedures that take several minutes to complete, or when customers are slow to respond to questions or prompts, creating dead time for the agent.

• **Closely monitor quality to identify if multi-tasking is impacting service levels.** For any employees handling multiple concurrent sessions, keep a close eye on average session length, first-contact resolution, and definitely CSAT scores. Identify problems early and request the employees only work one incident at a time until they further develop their skills.

4. **Training Employees for Chat: Phone Training Doesn’t Cut It**

For companies with long-standing employee training programs, rethinking training content and skills assessment for web chat may be challenging, but companies with successful web chat support teams have determined that different skills are required for successful web chat, and these skills must be tested during the employee screening process. As an example, web chat’s text-centric communications demand concise responses, and fast and accurate typing skills. Most companies have found that younger workers do best with chat, as they are frequent users of IM and SMS text. However, support technicians must be trained to avoid inappropriate shortcuts and abbreviations: There is no place for “LOL” and emoticons in business chat.

• **During the screening process.** According to TSIA members with successful chat operations, the top traits to screen for when hiring call center agents or support technicians for web chat roles include applicants comfortable with multiple technologies—such as those who are website savvy, have the ability to multi-task, and possess excellent typing skills. Part of the interview should be conducted via chat, either remotely or while the applicant is in the office. Assess typing skills, focus under pressure, and ability to keep track of multiple conversations at once.

• **During the training process.** In addition to company, product, and soft skills training, new hires should receive up to a week of training specific to the web chat technology and how to leverage it for helping customers. Make sure they are proficient with any productivity-enhancing features, such as using response libraries and knowledgebases to shortcut typing. Spend time on customer scenario training, making sure new agents know how to diagnose problems and probe for details via chat.
• **During the go-live process.** Premiere chat platforms include supervisor silent monitoring, which is an excellent way for team leads or supervisors to monitor a dashboard of chat interactions and silently drop in to observe any session that is going longer than average, or to spot check how new employees are performing. If necessary, the supervisor can make his or her presence known to assist the employee if they are struggling.

5. **Do Web Chat Interactions Lend Themselves to Outsourcing?**

With data indicating that web chat interactions are more effective and less expensive than email, many companies evaluate introducing chat based on potential cost savings, and applicability for outsourcing is usually a part of that conversation.

As seen in Figure 5, not only does the chat channel lend itself to successful outsourcing, but TSIA members are outsourcing web chat offshore at a much higher rate than phone calls and emails. Across all TSIA members, phone calls and emails are primarily staffed by direct employees of the company. But the numbers for web chat are quite different: 61% of chat interactions are handled by offshore outsourced workers. Seven percent are handled by onshore outsourced workers, leaving only 32% of chat interactions managed by company employees.

*Figure 5: Channel Staffing by Owned and Outsourced Workers*

Source: TSIA 2011 Benchmark
Why does web chat lend itself to outsourcing, particularly with offshore workers? The reasons include:

- **No accent neutralization.** As a text-only channel, chat has fewer language and culture issues than phone, and no worries about accent neutralization, i.e., the common—and expensive—practice of language training to eliminate strong accents.

- **Ability to control volume.** Chat interaction volumes are controllable, unlike phone and email. On nights and weekends, or during particularly busy times, the chat option can be removed from the website entirely, or only offered to particular customers by value or region.

- **Real-time surveys for instant quality monitoring.** TSIA data shows that customers respond to satisfaction surveys at a much higher rate if the survey is received immediately after the interaction. Most web chat platforms include a survey module that can prompt the customer at the end of the chat session, before they leave the site. Not only does this boost survey response rates but the information captured should be more accurate, as the incident is fresh in the mind of the customer. For outsourced chat interactions, that means faster notification if satisfaction problems arise.

**CITRIX ONLINE AND TSIA RECOMMEND**

As this paper has shown, web chat is growing in popularity as a customer support channel, in part because of customer demand—particularly from younger demographics—but also because companies are finding that chat delivers an excellent customer experience with a much lower cost per incident than phone or email. When launching a chat program for your call center or technical support operations, consider the following recommendations.

- **Start small.** Unlike other channels, chat volume is easily controlled by only offering the chat option on the corporate website for certain customers or geographies, or for specific times during the day. Start with a limited rollout to make sure systems and training are working effectively before opening up the chat option to a wider audience.

- **Have escalation procedures in place.** As we have seen, some issues become too complex to handle efficiently via chat. In these situations, be certain that chat employees are well trained to provide a graceful transition to phone, whether they are handling the call themselves, or doing a warm transfer to a dedicated phone agent.

- **Integrate, integrate, integrate.** Web chat can dramatically boost agent productivity by allowing experienced employees to handle multiple sessions at once. But that isn’t the only potential productivity gain with chat. Through integration, be certain to leverage existing content by auto-suggesting text from a response library and/or a knowledgebase, and
automatically write chat conversations to customer history to eliminate manual steps by chat agents.

GOTOASSIST CHAT

GoToAssist Chat is an online connection method allowing the customer and representative to immediately communicate in a chat interface. No download is necessary. The customer simply begins typing in a web form hosted on the organization’s website.

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- Faster into session—no software download.
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- Enables multiple chat sessions simultaneously.
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ABOUT GOTOASSIST

GoToAssist is an easy-to-use remote support tool that enables businesses of all sizes to connect with customers online. With GoToAssist, users can improve customer service, reduce session times, decrease overall support costs, and eliminate time-consuming, expensive travel.

To learn more about GoToAssist, GoToAssist Chat, and the power of remote service delivery, visit www.gotoassist.com or call 1-800-549-8541.

ABOUT TSIA

The Technology Services Industry Association (TSIA) is the leading association dedicated to advancing the business of technology services. Technology services organizations large and small look to TSIA for world-class benchmarking and research, exceptional peer networking and learning opportunities, and high-profile certification and awards programs. TSIA corporate members represent the world’s top technology companies as well as scores of innovative small and midsize businesses in four major markets: enterprise IT and telecom, consumer technologies, healthcare and healthcare IT, and industrial automation. TSIA brings the technology services industry together.

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