As customer service continues to embrace a self-serve model, organizations need to consider how that model fits with their current customer service strategy. An enterprise social network (ESN) can support the technical implementation of that self-service model.

Helping to Improve the Self-Serve Model

Customer service trends are changing. Customers are becoming more self-sufficient. Studies show that more than 66 percent of customers prefer to solve their own problems before attempting to reach a customer service representative. This is done by searching knowledge bases, looking through question and answer archives, browsing company blogs, and engaging in community forums.

Sometimes a company doesn't know what type of services to offer customers or what to include, and this is where an ESN comes into play. By its nature an ESN is designed to aggregate these self-service tools into a centralized experience.

An ESN provides a great experience for your customers as it is their singular always-on destination for discovering the information they are seeking. A single search can retrieve content from the knowledge base, the community, and other sources.

An ESN can be customized to match a particular blog or Website design and include an administration toolbar. Blogs and wikis can be populated to create a 'knowledge base' which can include frequently asked questions, or a question and answer community section where customers can speak with each other about issues. The community section may also highlight trending questions and make recommendations on content to customers based on their past activity.

Connecting Customer Communities

The nature of customer support itself is changing and companies are benefiting from new, game changing social and communication technologies, including ESNs. A recent McKinsey Research study shows that those who adopt more client-centric tools, such as an ESN, along with client centric processes, can increase revenues up to 20 percent and profitability up to 2.5 times.

Human nature drives people to interact or collaborate with those they trust or like. People often go to their personal networks for answers. If you don't know someone personally, then you reach out to find an identified expert. Over the last few years, the growth of customer communities has made it easier for consumers to find other people with expertise in using a product, whether they are specialists from the supplier or other customers. Gartner Research recently published a prediction that by 2014, organizations integrating communities into customer support will realize cost reductions of up to 50 percent by deflecting calls to the community.

A well-integrated customer community can deliver several benefits when directly connected to the customer service team:

• Higher customer satisfaction, because customers are able to access the experience and knowledge of their peers and product experts.
• More rapid training of customer service staff, because the community provides a ready-made knowledge base from which to learn.
• Lower customer service costs, because more customer issues can be resolved through peer-to-peer interaction.

But most important of all is the need to retain personal contact with the customer throughout the experience, from community to customer support and back again. This avoids the jarring disconnect a customer observes when dealing with the same company through different channels. Therefore, the other big challenge in support is staffing of customer service. As support professionals change jobs, take field positions, change companies or even retire, the ability to capture their knowledge becomes critical to an organization. Customer service staff should take an active role in community discussions, contribute their knowledge, and escalate a customer request by creating a service ticket when peer-to-peer support through the community fails to resolve the problem.

Collaborative Support

While telephone support is not going away any time soon, phone support opportunities are diminishing. A new wave of collaboration technologies accompanied by the rapid adoption of mobile devices and wearable technology are providing new approaches and solutions to the knowledge capture problem. There are many mobile applications that already support collaboration through asynchronous mobile communications, as well as real time communications and video conferencing.

During these moments of collaboration, companies providing the support often do not keep a record of their solutions so they are not capturing valuable, reusable knowledge. One such example is the increase of video support calls over mobile devices. Customer services are already implementing buttons within their apps that instantly connect you with a live support person, over video, who can answer questions and show you how the services or device works. The use of video in support allows customers, suppliers, colleagues, partners, channels, and others to provide support in a much more personalized way. Much of this video information along with any associated data may be captured and shared within an ESN.

The bring your own device (BYOD) movement has fueled the effort put into the area of wearable devices. Many consumer electronics vendors have announced watches that connect with mobile devices or directly to the cloud (if they have WiFi). These devices often pair with smartphones, allowing mobile employees to record video and still have their hands free. This ability to record video or implement a video conference makes it easier to capture knowledge from the field. The knowledge must then be stored, shared, and presented to end customers. This is where the ESN comes into play.

Along with mobile technologies come new types of context-aware software that supports the sharing of technical information. This additional context information for field support employees will allow them to be more productive and also provide higher quality support. As you use devices like this, field support managers will have enhanced ability to capture knowledge.

For example, a large car company uses an ESN as a service tool to share knowledge with their network of dealerships. An iPad is used to record short videos of maintenance services or incident information reports, and the details are then shared through an ESN platform to improve and maintain consistent global customer service.

The Impact of Customer Support

For companies to succeed in the new wave of the self-serve model, they need to engage and interact with their customers in a manner that showcases open discussion to gauge sentiment, gain product feedback, and respond to issues in a timely manner when they arise. A recent Harris Interactive poll showed that 89 percent of people would be willing to pay 25 percent more for excellent customer service, but if customer service is bad, 89 percent would move to a competitive brand.

An ESN provides the social glue to connect these information sources and tools together in a well-integrated and easy to use experience. As collaboration and communication tools change over time your ESN acts as the aggregator for these best of breed solutions. While most ESNs have a full complement of information sharing tools such as wikis, blogs, activity streams, and social media feeds, not all include a diverse set of real time communication tools right out of the gate. Most ESNs do have rich APIs to enable you to extend the capabilities of the environment. Thus, your investment in an ESN will continue to provide value through changes in technology and enterprise applications.