The xSellco guide to

e-commerce customer service

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Introduction

Anyone who's worked in retail knows the adage "The customer is always right" all too well. It's been drilled into the heads of sales associates all over the world to ensure that the needs of any consumer who sets foot in a store—whether they intend to make a purchase or not—are put first.

Thanks to the rise of e-commerce (not to mention, mobile commerce and social media), retailers can connect with potential customers in entirely new ways, blurring the distinction between online and offline shopping. But the internet has also increased buyer expectations—not least when it comes to the speed of customer service.

Myriad shopping channels means more places for people to contact you: in person at a brick-and-mortar store; or virtually via email, live chat or social media. And if they opt for the latter, they expect to be attended to as swiftly as if they were standing right in front of you.

If you're slow to respond, or don't offer a satisfactory answer to their query the first time (or at all), you could get called out in an unflattering online review that hurts your reputation and future sales. Few e-commerce companies can get away with a 10-plus-hour customer service call and turn it into a marketing opportunity (that honor goes to footwear e-tailer Zappos). Fewer still can survive a slew of bad reviews.

Additionally, e-commerce businesses selling on marketplaces must adhere to the standard service level agreement of responding to messages from customers within 24 hours, or risk adversely impacting their seller metrics.

For multichannel sellers, the ability to respond to customers quickly and accurately depends on easy access to transaction data. But if your support agents have to juggle multiple user accounts and logins, speed takes a hit and the chance of human error increases—and that's not even taking international customers into consideration.

This guide is intended to provide actionable advice we think will benefit e-commerce businesses of all sizes.

We hope you find it useful.

Customer service can make or break an e-commerce business

Product and price are important, but providing excellent customer service will result in repeat purchases and word-of-mouth referrals that no amount of marketing can replicate.

Bad customer service, on the other hand, will cost you: according to NewVoiceMedia, U.S. companies lost $62 billion worth of business in 2016 because of it.

In the same vein, Microsoft polled 5,000 consumers for its 2017 "State of Global Customer Service" report and found that 56 percent had stopped doing business with a brand due to a poor customer service experience—nearly half of which had done so within the previous 12-month period.

Thanks to better technology and faster internet speeds, consumer expectations are higher than ever. And e-commerce businesses that can't keep up with their shoppers' ever-growing demands will see their traffic decline and sales suffer.

So, what exactly is it that these hard-to-please consumers expect from online businesses? In short: fast, personal responses.

In fact, according to McKinsey, 75 percent of online shoppers expect help within five minutes. And if they can't get their questions answered quickly, they will go elsewhere.

But don't fool yourself into thinking that fast responses only apply to queries that come through your own e-commerce site. If you're present on multiple channels, customers can choose to contact you on whichever one they want—and their need for speed doesn't decrease just because they sent you a Facebook message instead of an email.

Indeed, customers want a consistent, hassle-free experience wherever they choose to engage with you—and they expect to be able to start a conversation with you on one channel and continue it on another without having to repeat themselves.

It's worth noting that there are few things more irritating to a customer than feeling as though they aren't being listened to when they have made the effort to reach out to a company: Accenture found that 78 percent of customers become frustrated because they need to reiterate the same information to multiple employees of a company or through multiple channels.

Remember, even though it can become increasingly difficult to stay on top of all your queries as your e-commerce business grows, customers don't care how many channels you have. They just want to shop however they want to shop, have their questions answered, their problems solved and their comments acknowledged—quickly.

Get it right and your business will reap the rewards. A 2017 American Express survey found that U.S. consumers are willing to spend 17 percent more to buy from companies that deliver excellent service.

Key customer service challenges for e-commerce businesses

There's never been a better time to sell online.

Global e-commerce sales are expected to reach $2.842 trillion in 2018, a 23.3% increase over $2.304 trillion in 2017, according to market research company eMarketer.

The potential is huge—but to make the most of it, online sellers need to retain current customers and attract new ones. And an increasingly competitive e-commerce space means that one customer service slip-up could send consumers straight into the shopping cart of your biggest rival.

For many e-commerce businesses, customer service comes with its own unique set of challenges—and for multichannel sellers, dealing with conversations across various sales channels can make for a poor shopping experience when not managed effectively.

If you sell online, the following customer support challenges will be all too familiar.

CHALLENGE #1: PROVIDING QUICK RESPONSES
In today's always-on digitally-enabled world, it goes without saying that consumers expect speedy response times from companies.

Omnichannel engagement solution Altitude polled 3,000 people about their customer service expectations and found that over 80 percent expect a response to emails and social media postings within 24 hours.

Not to mention, taking longer than a day to respond to messages on marketplaces such as Amazon will not only frustrate your customers, it's also against service level agreements (SLAs), which gives the impression that you're an unreliable seller.

Footwear accessories brand Hickies responds to all social media queries within three hours—a big difference from its 24-hour targets on Amazon. Using the prioritized inbox setting in xSellco, agents can easily focus on the most urgent queries first.
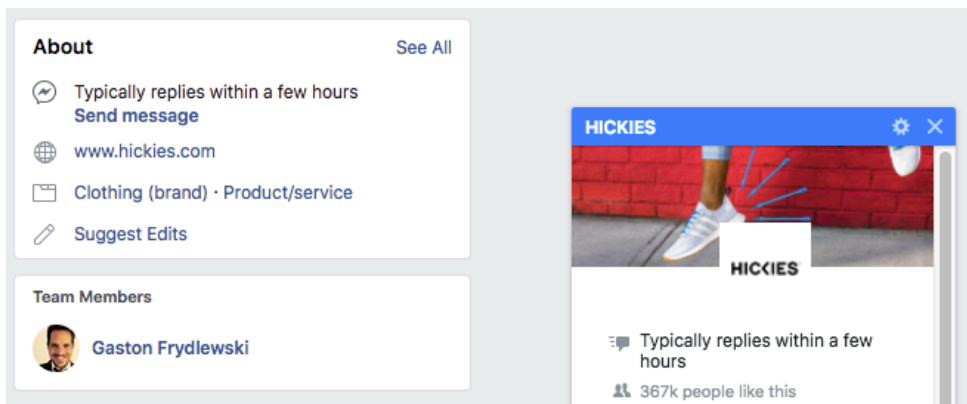
Online shoppers will inevitably have questions before, during and after their purchase and if your e-commerce site can't provide the answers, you need to offer immediate assistance.

CHALLENGE #2: NOT HAVING A 360-DEGREE CUSTOMER VIEW
In order to respond and get to the root of a problem quickly, you need a complete view of your customer.

According to Accenture, 78 percent of customers get frustrated when they have to repeat themselves—imagine how annoyed they'll feel if your support team asks for specific order details?

E-commerce businesses need a full picture of their clientele, including a complete view of their transaction history and any previous communication, so that no matter how customers choose to make contact, they receive the prompt, personalized experience they expect.

For Suzuki, one of the world's biggest car manufacturers, managing online support with a lack of customer context was a time-consuming challenge. Overcoming this obstacle with an e-commerce help desk allowed the company to reduce its average customer response times by 84 percent.

CHALLENGE #3: SPEAKING THE CUSTOMER'S LANGUAGE

Only 4.83% of the world's population are native English speakers, so if you're selling internationally, it helps to be able to communicate with customers in their local language.

A Common Sense Advisory survey of 3,000 online shoppers across 10 countries found that 74 percent said they are more likely to repurchase from the same brand if the post-purchase care is in their own language

Smaller e-commerce businesses that sell internationally may struggle to offer the same level of support to global shoppers that their domestic customers receive. Aside from time zone challenges, it takes longer to decipher queries written in a language you don't speak in order to provide an accurate response without jeopardizing the customer experience.

That's not to say that you have to go out and hire a handful of multilingual customer service agents for every country you sell in. Using a translation tool is an effective way to keep support costs down, but if you don't use a help desk with auto-translate built in, copying and pasting messages into Google Translate can impact productivity.

An easy way to improve the customer experience when using any kind of auto-translate tool is to start off the message with a short disclaimer. Let customers know that while responses to international queries are automatically translated, your team will do everything to resolve their issue without delay. Get this disclaimer professionally translated so that the first contact with every international customer is easy for them to understand.

CHALLENGE #4: MAINTAINING A CONSISTENT CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE ACROSS MULTIPLE CHANNELS

Most thriving e-commerce companies are powered by sales from multiple online channels—and considering that half of all online product searches begin on marketplaces such as Amazon and eBay instead of Google, it makes sense that omnichannel is still the industry's hottest buzzword.

> **"Responding quickly with the right info has a huge impact on our customer relationships."**
>
> **Ali Caldwell, Na'vi Organics**

While customer service responses may look seamless from the shopper's point of view, it takes a lot of moving parts behind the scenes to provide consistent communication across social media, websites and international marketplaces.

For small online businesses in particular, multichannel selling is a key driver of growth. However, providing multichannel customer service with limited resources and a small headcount can significantly reduce profitability.

In some cases, customer service can hinder growth. With increasing sales comes an influx of customer queries that can get in the way of achieving important business goals.

"Keeping on top of emails from different sources became a really time-consuming process. Being able to respond quickly with the right information has a huge impact on the relationship we have with our customers," says Ali Caldwell, co-founder of [Na'vi Organics](.).

Whether you're a die-hard marketplace trader or only use sites like eBay to sell off excess inventory, your success starts and ends with knowing your customer on every channel and providing an experience that meets their unique expectations.

CHALLENGE #5: MANAGING CUSTOMER EXPECTATIONS THROUGHOUT THE DELIVERY PROCESS
Once a product has been dispatched for delivery, its fate is in the hands of a driver who probably isn't that concerned about the experience your customer receives.

Managing customer worries during this "black hole" can be difficult.

According to xSellco's internal data, delivery questions make up 30 percent of all incoming customer queries. For customer service agents, that's a lot of back and forth with shipping carriers, a significant amount of "Have you checked with your neighbor to see if they received it?" or blindly deciphering the behavior of delivery drivers who may well have faked a signature in favor of a quick power nap.

> ## "It's about communication at every touchpoint."
>
> **Ben Richardson, FreestyleXtreme**

How retailers manage this "wait and worry" period, however, is hugely important for building trust and loyalty. The way in which online sellers communicate with customers by facilitating the purchase journey even after they have paid for your product can carve out a huge competitive advantage.

FreestyleXtreme, one of Europe's largest action sports retailers and an xSellco client, maintains that the secret to their success is driven by communicating the right message at key steps in the journey and allocating customer service as an essential part of their marketing strategy.

"It's just about communication at every touchpoint," says Ben Richardson, customer experience director at FreestyleXtreme. "We designed our support process by simply looking at why our customers were contacting us during the purchase journey and providing information at each of these points. This helps us both save money on customer support and get more reviews."

### CHALLENGE #6: SEAMLESSLY DEALING WITH RETURNS, EXCHANGES AND CANCELLATIONS

At least 30 percent of products ordered online are returned, compared with only 8.89% purchased in brick-and-mortar stores.

One reason for this, according to Shopify, is because the "tactile input" that consumers crave in order to connect with a product is missing from e-commerce, so they're relying on risk-free return policies if they change their minds.

xSellco data shows that 35 percent of customer queries are made up of damaged items, returns and cancellations. Thus, with 65 percent of all queries comprising the most time-consuming requests, it's easy to see why e-commerce customer service is a race against the clock.

Providing a seamless customer experience while managing a product return end-to-end, or explaining to a buyer how to upload a picture of their damaged goods, is tedious and complex.

Fast-fashion retailer Pretty Little Thing makes the returns process incredibly simple by providing all necessary information on their website, including links to the Parcel Connect website and to download new return slips.
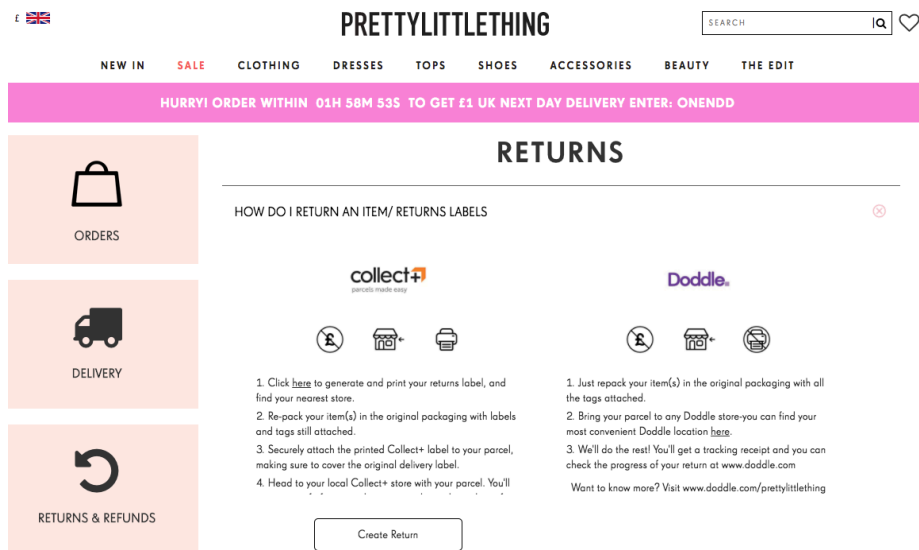
While not all online businesses have the scale or budget to allow for such a user-friendly returns process, a simple follow-up email after delivery that includes everything a customer may need to know about returns, exchanges or faulty items is a great way to reduce blind incoming queries.

If you sell on marketplaces like Amazon, this kind of post-sale communication is a great way to improve the buying experience and give you a competitive edge.

CHALLENGE #7: SEASONALITY AND PEAK PURCHASE TIMES

Allocating the right amount of staff during peak purchase times such as Black Friday and Christmas is standard practice for any e-commerce customer support team, but replicating this kind of efficiency during the normal working week can be tricky.
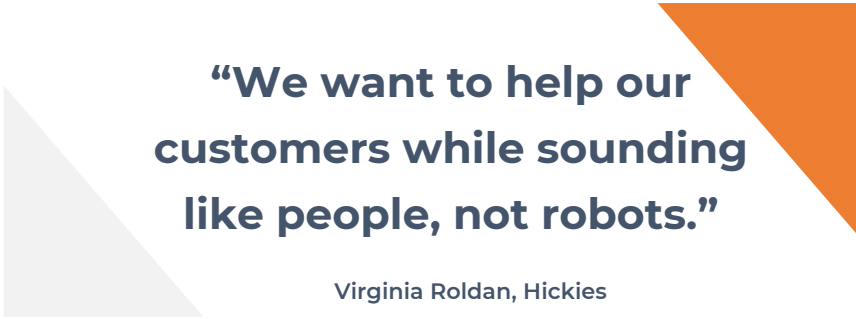
Unless you track your best hours for sales on a daily basis, assigning staff levels is often a stab in the dark.

Internal xSellco data shows that the peak query times for e-commerce customer service lies between 11am and 2pm, meaning customer service agents are busy in the afternoon which can often lead to an overflow into the following morning if queries aren't resolved that same day.
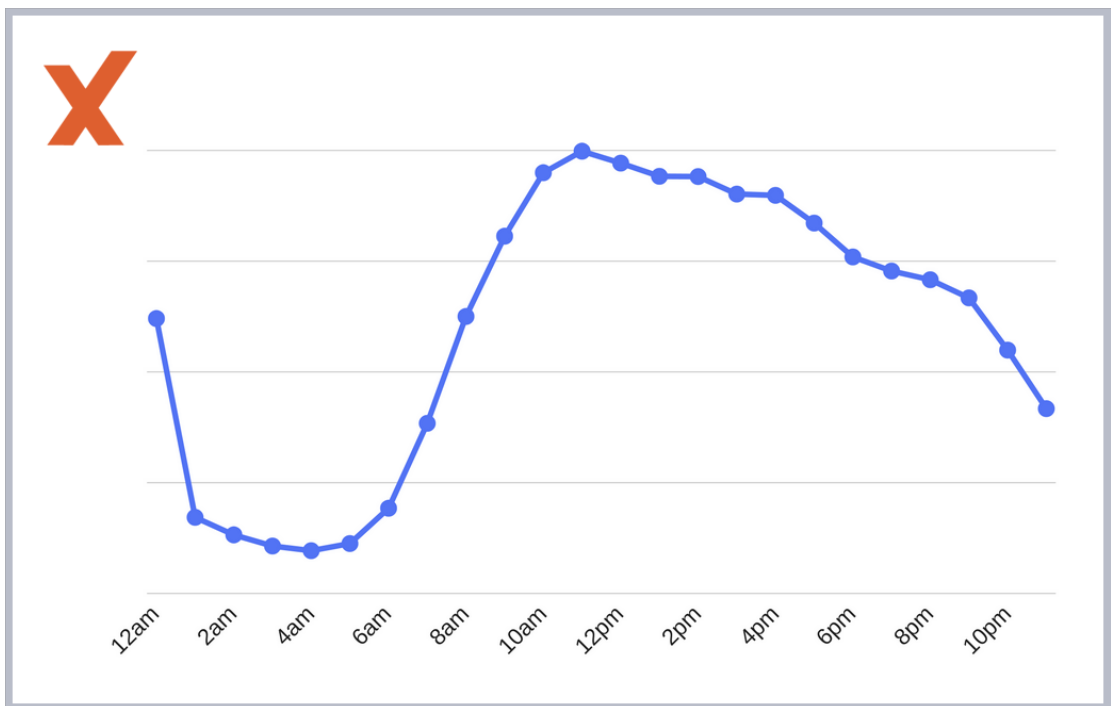
Scheduling staff levels at the right times is key to maintaining a high level of productivity and motivation across the entire day.

CHALLENGE #8: PROVIDING PERSONALIZATION AT SCALE

"We want to help our customers while sounding like people, not robots."

Virginia Roldan, Hickies

People buy from people—and this quote from Hickies presents a challenge faced by many customer service agents in e-commerce: How to provide a personal experience while resolving queries quickly?

Answering large volumes of the same kinds of questions every day can lead to complacency around personalization and keeping a human connection with customers. In fact, an AgilOne survey of over 3,000 consumers in the UK and U.S. found that over 70 percent of respondents expect to receive a personalized experience from online brands.

The more you know about your customer at first glance, the easier it is to provide a personal touch at scale, while still maintaining efficiency.

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Customer support metrics you should be optimizing

"You can have data without information, but you cannot have information without data," said science-fiction writer Daniel Keys Moran.

E-commerce businesses are dripping in data that, when used correctly, can drive growth and change. The challenge? Figuring out which numbers to cull and crunch and how they can be used to step up your customer service.

There are plenty of metrics your support team can measure, but tracking them all can be a loser's game. To know what's working and where you should improve, you need to watch the following numbers:

#1. TICKET VOLUME
Ticket volume tracks incoming requests for support over a period of time. Each new inquiry, including all follow-up communication around that issue, counts as one ticket.

This is where the phrase "less is more" is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, more support tickets means more customers, which could mean growth. But less support tickets received over time could also show that your team is making massive improvements to your products and e-commerce site, leading to fewer issues cropping up.
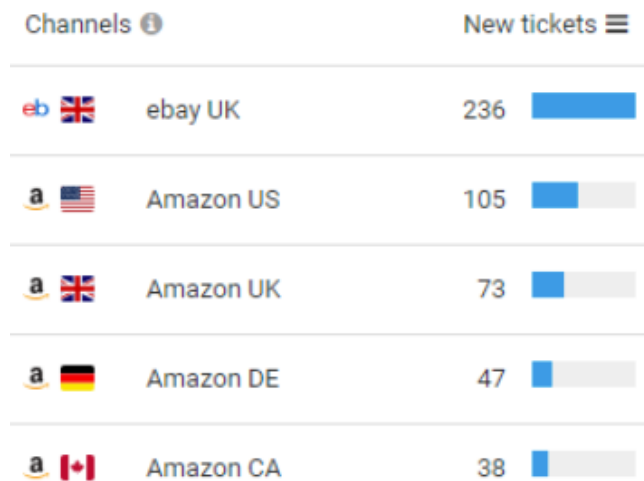
For new businesses, support tickets are essential for understanding any problems with products or processes. As time goes on, volume is expected to decrease as improvements roll out. But alas, that's not always the case.

xSellco Helpdesk customers can monitor incoming messages versus outgoing messages, active tickets and new tickets.

These figures can tell you a number of things:

- The workload your team can expect
- Trends in support queries
- Whether you need more or less support team members
- If ticket volume is decreasing over time as you solve issues

Never focus on this metric alone, however, as ticket volume viewed in isolation doesn't necessarily reflect the amount of conversations your support team is having with customers.

Channels ⓘ		New tickets ☰
eb 🇬🇧	ebay UK	236
a 🇺🇸	Amazon US	105
a 🇬🇧	Amazon UK	73
a 🇩🇪	Amazon DE	47
a 🇨🇦	Amazon CA	38

#2. RESPONSE TIME

Response time is the average number of minutes or hours it takes your support team to write back to customers.

A recent study conducted by SuperOffice discovered that the average time it takes to handle a customer service request is between 15 and 17 hours—and customer expectations around response times are rising year on year.

It's arguably the most important metric for support teams to measure, as a support ticket is usually the first time a customer communicates with your business. And yet, 41 percent of companies surveyed by SuperOffice did not reply to customer service emails at all, not even with an automated response.

Ticket types ⓘ		First	Avg
Returns Query		9h	
Cancellation		13h	
Manual ticket		15h	
Other Query		20h	
Defective Item		21h	

Analyzing the number of times in a 24-hour period that a member of your support team did not respond within the recommended amount of time will indicate how long, on average, it took your business to get back to customers that day. It will also help you be more efficient when delegating tasks to your team.

#3. TICKET TYPES

Identifying and understanding ticket trends offers a look into what problems are prompting customers to contact your support team, which will help you to focus on areas in your business that need to be improved.

Typical questions to consider:

- What is the most common ticket you receive?
- Is there a new issue that you've never seen before?
- Over time, are certain issues being resolved?

By analyzing ticket volume trends in a given time frame, you can establish short- or long-term issues experienced by your customers. For instance, you might see that on a particular day your team is swamped with queries concerning a lack of order confirmation emails. On a long-term scale, you might find that product queries increase by 20 percent at the end of the year, which could suggest that your listings require more detailed information.

Query types ⓘ	New tickets ☰
⚙ System Message	105
🎁 Product Query	103
🚚 Shipping Query	99

Choosing the right customer service solution

Consumers hate to wait.

LivePerson surveyed nearly 6,000 shoppers across the U.S. and Europe to find out what makes a great e-commerce customer service experience: 82 percent said fast resolutions to their problems, while 56 percent want their issues resolved in a single interaction.

Sound familiar? If you can't solve pre- and post-purchase queries quickly, you will lose business. That's why an e-commerce help desk, purpose-built for online sellers, is key to keeping your customers happy.

With so many help desk solutions on the market, it's easy to be swayed by a familiar name or whichever product appears on Google's first page. As an online seller, your needs differ from those of a financial services company or a non-profit.

You know a one-size-fits-all approach to customer service won't grow your e-commerce business, so why choose a one-size-fits-all help desk?

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Claire Southwell, Operations Manager, Cymax

cymax
BUSINESS

How important is an e-commerce help desk to your business?

This is very important to us, as we have a large volume of messages that come in. Being able to connect them in a centralized location to get a better idea of an overall view of what you have pending is very helpful to us. It also saves time as we are not having to search in multiple marketplace portals.

What are the most important things to look for when evaluating a help desk solution?

Functionality, the ability within the platform to grow and expand quickly, and in-depth reporting.

What advice do you have for sellers who want to make sure their customer service reinforces their brand?

Having a system where you are able to centralize your emails is super helpful when it comes to work flow, especially if you have a large team and a large volume of customer inquiries that you need to respond to daily.

What sort of metrics do you focus on to measure customer service success?

We measure our team based on speed of their responses, accuracy when addressing all open emails and requests each time they are in an order, pushing an order as close to resolution as possible on each touch and ensuring their communication to the customer addresses all issues.

Ted Cory, Founder, Skullsplitter Dice

How important is an e-commerce help desk to your business?

Customers are our life and our future. Ensuring they're treated like the gold that they are is crucial to our business.

What are the most important things to look for when evaluating a help desk solution?

Ease of use, integrations to the right marketplaces and awesome support (because you will have questions).

How important are response times to your business?

They are important, but we really look at substantive response times. Everyone hates a message saying they are important and someone will be in touch in 24 hours. Forty-nine percent of our messages are answered within six hours.

How important is it to your business to give customers personalized responses?

If you care about your customers it shows—personalized responses are part of that. People can tell when you care.

What's next?

We started this guide with a well-known retail adage, so we'll finish with one, too: about 20 percent of your customers will drive 80 percent of your sales.

What does that mean for your e-commerce business?

The answer is simple: you must make sure you are providing excellent customer service on an ongoing basis, meeting everyone's needs and keeping in mind that no one wants to feel like another number in a queue.

Now that you know which metrics matter most in e-commerce, you are on the way to improving your customer service. If you want to increase the lifetime value of your shoppers and grow your customer base across multiple sales channels, your next step could be to invest in an e-commerce help desk such as xSellco Helpdesk.

Ready to get started? [Try xSellco free for 14 days](#) and see how simple multichannel customer service can be.

Customer service glossary

Active tickets
Tickets in the customer support queue in the process of being resolved.

Agent contribution
The level of activity and effort an agent put into responding to tickets. This is based on how many tickets that agent responded to, average first response time and other such factors.

Assigned tickets
Tickets that have been assigned to a customer support agent, but may or may not have been responded to yet.

Auto-responder
A computer program that responds to messages sent to a particular email address. It allows businesses to get back to customers 24-7.

Auto-translation
A feature that translates one natural language into another, without the need for a multilingual agent.

Average handling time
The average time it takes a customer support team to completely resolve a ticket.

Average first response time
The average time it takes an assigned customer support agent to respond to a particular ticket for the first time.

Billable tickets
A ticket that accounts for your xSellco usage. Spam, system messages and feedback reply messages are typically among the few that aren't included under these types of tickets.

Centralized dashboard
The place within your customer support software that allows you to see an overview of all available analytics.

Closed ticket
The final status of a ticket in the customer support pipeline, indicating that the issue has been resolved.

Custom fields
A feature that enables customers to add information to a ticket that would be useful for a customer support agent to know.

Customer satisfaction
A metric that measures the level at which your product or service has met the customer's expectation.

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Customer support agent
A person on the customer support team who responds to queries about the product or service.

Email forwarding
The process of forwarding a received email to another recipient.

Email notification
For customers, this is an email about the status of their ticket. For support agents, it's a reminder about ticket status.

Help desk
Software that helps businesses manage their own customer support process.

Incoming messages
The number of messages that arrive in your xSellco Helpdesk dashboard in real time.

Key performance indicator
A measurable value that determines if your company is achieving its objectives.

Labels
A text tag that enables customer support teams to automate the sorting and segmenting of support tickets into specific categories, i.e shipping queries, returns queries. Everyone on the support team can access these labels.

Live chat
A tool that enables customers to speak to an agent in real time.

Multichannel support
The ability to manage customer support queries for a variety of channels in one place.

My tickets
A folder in xSellco Helpdesk that's specific to each individual customer support agent. It displays the tickets that have been assigned to that particular person.

New tickets
The place in the dashboard that shows the most recently submitted tickets.

Order details
A document that provides the full details of a customer's order, including purchase and payment information, delivery status, etc.

Order query
Any question from a customer that needs to be answered by a support agent.

Outgoing messages
The number of messages sent by support agents to customers.

Overdue ticket
A ticket that has not been tended to in the recommended amount of time, according to the specified Service Level Agreement (SLA).

Pending ticket
A ticket status that indicates the support team may need extra time to resolve it. The SLA timer is paused during this time.

Query type
The category in which a specific customer support ticket falls under.

Recently closed
A tab under Live Chat that displays any recently closed chats.

Resolution time
The amount of time it takes a customer support agent to resolve a ticket.

Resolution rate
The amount of times a support ticket is resolved from the number of total tickets received.

Response time
How long it takes a customer support agent to respond to a ticket.

Returns query
A customer support ticket that is directly related to issues regarding returns.

Rule
A condition that customers use to program the software to behave in the way they want it to. Rules are specific to each customer. For example, you can set up a rule to auto-assign tickets to certain customer support agents.

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Service Level Agreement
The official agreement between a company and the end user of their product or service that defines the level of service expected.

Shipping query
A ticket that is related to the shipping part of the customer's order.

SLA achieved
The measurement that indicates a customer support agent has completed a ticket in the optimum amount of time.

Snippets
A tool within xSellco Helpdesk that allows users to personalize messages using a pre-defined hashtag. This can be used for ticket responses and live chat.

Spam
An xSellco Helpdesk folder where unsolicited or undesired tickets are displayed.

Team (performance)
A folder in xSellco Helpdesk that provides an overview of the team's performance and displays reports such as the number of tickets handled, average handle time, number of messages sent and number of internal notes.

Templates
A tool within xSellco Helpdesk that enables customers to create message templates.

Ticket status
Each stage of the lifecycle of a ticket, i.e opened, pending, assigned, closed.

Ticket volume
The total amount of tickets in the customer support queue at any one time.

Unassigned ticket
A ticket not yet assigned to a customer support agent.

User onboarding
The process by which a customer begins their journey with your product or service.

Widget
An interface application that enables a specific function to be performed.