

Use tech to your advantage when seeking customer support

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By Consumer Reports

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Technology is changing the service industry: Tableside tablets at restaurants, for instance, let diners order and pay for food without a waiter. (Photo from www.bostonglobe.com)

Outsourcing of jobs has been a painful, recurring theme in the past several years, but here's a twist. More companies are outsourcing customer service—to their own customers.

Remember when attendants pumped gas, clerks bagged groceries, and the sales help measured your feet before you tried on a pair of shoes? Today at Applebee's and Chili's, tableside computer tablets allow patrons to order food and drinks and pay the bill without a waiter. Got a tech-support problem? Forget the help line. Just post your question to a company's message board and wait for amateur troubleshooters to respond.

The do-it-yourself economy is transforming industries, services, and society at 4G speed. Why have companies embraced self-service so enthusiastically? To save money. A customer service transaction handled by a live agent usually costs between \$2 and \$10, compared with just pennies for, say, placing an order online, says John Goodman, vice chairman of Customer Care Measurement & Consulting, based in Alexandria, Va.

But self-service shouldn't mean no service. Try canceling an online order immediately after pressing "submit." Chances are you can't. Or try tracking down live help if an eBay transaction goes sour.

Consumer Reports offers advice on how to cope with the new reality.

How to find help in a self-help world

Technology that makes self-service possible also gives consumers a powerful voice. Internet forums can turn one person's headache into a corporate nightmare. Companies actively patrol social-networking venues such as Facebook and YouTube to monitor what's being said about them — and often respond to a concern before it goes viral.

Twitter has become the go-to brand for customer support; be sure to incorporate the company's Twitter handle in your critique. There's even an app called GripeO that will take your complaint right to a company's doorstep.

Here are other tips:

- Though few firms post their toll-free numbers on all of their Web pages, more and more offer live chats with agents. It's faster and more efficient than e-mail because you can have a clear dialogue. Be sure to print or e-mail yourself a transcript of the conversation before signing off.
- User communities within a firm's site are a surefire way to get noticed. You can post questions and comments, and air grievances about products and services. Often a representative will join the discussion to put out a fire before word gets out. According to one study, disgruntled customers are almost three times more likely to express their unhappiness to others than those who have a good experience. Each dissatisfied customer spreads the word to about 28 people.
- Sidestep automated phone menus. Consumer Reports suggests checking out websites such as DialAHuman.com and GetHuman.com, which list hard-to-find customer-service numbers and advise how to bypass automated prompts to get a live person.
- Use the "E" word. If you make it through to a live person and still feel you are getting the runaround, tell the agent you want to "escalate" your complaint. That's a guaranteed attention grabber because agents can be criticized for bumping too many calls "upstairs" to a supervisor.

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- Climb the corporate ladder. If your comments are ignored, go to the bottom of the website's home page and sniff around for hyperlinks to "corporate contacts," "investor relations," "company information," and so forth. That's where you can usually find contact details for top management.

Consumer Reports writes columns, reviews, and ratings on cars, appliances, electronics, and other consumer goods. Previous stories can be found at www.consumerreports.org.



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