

The Company or the Crowd? Comparing Consumers' Reactions to Peer-Provided and Firm-Provided Customer Support: An Abstract

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Abstract Despite firms' best efforts, at some point, most customers will experience difficulty using the products they have purchased. Traditionally, consumers have looked to firms to provide them with assistance when they experience problems. Recently, consumers themselves have begun to play a more active role in providing customer support to their peers, which we term *peer-provided support*. While emerging evidence suggests that peer-provided support can provide benefits to firms by reducing costs and providing high-quality customer support to customers (Cook, 2008), can peer-provided support have an advantage over firm-provided support?

When a consumer experiences a customer support issue, clearly actions are required to address the underlying problem and enable the customer to use the product as she wishes. However, we argue that, in addition to this *functional* element, effective customer support also requires a *social support* element to help address the negative psychological state (Gelbrich, 2010; Laros & Steenkamp, 2005) that often accompanies. Social support is "the perception or experience that one is loved and cared for, esteemed and valued, and part of a social network of mutual assistance and obligations" (Taylor et al., 2004, p. 354–55). Indeed, this kind of social support may be especially important when a functional solution cannot be fully realized (i.e., when the underlying problem cannot be solved). Prior research also suggests that consumers themselves may be particularly adept at providing social support to their peers (Bickart & Schindler, 2001; Butler, Sproull, Kiesler, & Kraut, 2007).

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Hence, we posit that peer-provided customer support may have an advantage in improving customers' psychological state via enhanced social support and may play an important role in improving their overall satisfaction following a problem.

Across four studies, we show that peer-provided support generates greater satisfaction than firm-provided support in cases when the support attempt cannot successfully address the problem that the customer faces. First, using actual online postings from a support community, we show that while a successfully solved problem always leads to greater customer satisfaction, when a problem remains unsolved, peer-provided support results in greater satisfaction than firm-provided support (pilot study). Study 1 validates these results by replicating them in a controlled experimental setting. Study 2 extends these findings by identifying the mediating role of social support and by ruling out a potential alternative mechanism. In addition, we show that portraying firm employees as more customer-like can also generate enhanced feelings of social support and lead to greater customer satisfaction when the underlying problem remains unsolved. Study 3 draws from the mimicry literature and demonstrates that employees who imitate the language that customers use in their support requests can also provide customers a greater feeling of social support and thus replicate the advantage of peer-provided support.

References Available Upon Request