

The future of customer support(The economist, 5/11/2012)

FOR the past decade, technical support has been in the vanguard(先駆け) of globalisation. With the costs of intercontinental communication shriveling(しぼむ) to virtually nothing, phone and online customer services have migrated(他の所に移る) to wherever they can be managed most efficiently and cheaply. India *blazed the trail*(新境地を開拓する), building a \$5 billion outsourcing(外部委託) business on helping Westerners solve high-tech niggles(小さな悩み、あらし).

Recently, the Philippines has taken over as the world's call-centre hotspot, offering comparable(同程度の) wage costs to India, with the added benefit—at least to North American ears—of a Yankee drawl(母音を伸ばしたゆっくりとした話しぶり).

Some of the biggest brands in software, consumer electronics and telecoms(電気通信会社) have now found a workforce(労働力) offering expert advice at a fraction(ごくわずか) of the price of even the cheapest developing nation, **who also speak the same language as their customers, and not just in the purely linguistic sense.** Because it is their customers themselves.

"Unsourcing", as the new trend has been dubbed(一と異名を取る), involves companies setting up online communities to enable peer-to-peer support among users. Instead of speaking with a faceless person thousands of miles away, customers' problems are answered by individuals in the same country who have bought and used the same products. This happens either on the company's own website or on social networks like Facebook and Twitter, and the helpers are generally not paid anything for their efforts.

As might be imagined, the savings can be considerable. *Gartner*, the research company, estimates that using communities to solve support issues can reduce costs by up to 50%. When *TomTom*, a maker of satellite-navigation systems, switched on social support, members handled 20,000 cases in its first two weeks and saved it around \$150,000. *Best Buy*, an American gadget retailer, values its 600,000 users at \$5m annually.

To motivate members to participate, *Lithium*, a software company that provided TomTom's and Best Buy's systems, turns the whole thing into a game. Such "gamification", increasingly ubiquitous(どこにでもある) in areas ranging from self-improvement to project management, works by awarding "kudos(榮譽)" points for a helpful answer, allowing helpers to "level up". This boosts(促進する) their status and often comes with a joke(冗談っぽい) honorific(敬語). Solve enough problems and you might eventually become a "super fan", in the top 0.5% of responders.

Companies prize such fans especially highly because they account for a disproportionate(不釣り合いな) number of responses. In the case of Lenovo's support network for its personal computers, a mere 30 super fans have generated nearly half of the 1,200 accepted solutions. A single super fan in the Logitech network, code-named KachiWachi, has posted over 45,000 responses related to the company's webcams.

One British company has taken unsourcing to the extreme. GiffGaff, a virtual mobile operator, not only encourages clients to help each other out but also to recruit new customers and even promote the firm via home-made YouTube adverts(広告). Unlike most companies, GiffGaff rewards participants with points that can reduce their monthly phone bills. The system seems to work: GiffGaff says the average response time for questions is just three minutes, day or night, with 95% of queries being answered within an hour.

There are limits to the scope(範囲) of unsourcing, however. Some of the issues frustrate customers most, such as billing errors, have to be dealt with by someone with access to confidential(部外秘の) customer data. Rolling out(展開する) fully fledged(成熟した) customer-generated support to health, government and banking industries could also face legal hurdles. Moreover, Gartner warns that unsuccessful deployments(展開) risk a tidal wave(押し寄せる) of criticism on social networks. It expects customer satisfaction to fall in 70% of organisations shifting support functions over to users in the next two years.

Despite this, the prospect of halving support costs is likely to prove tempting for many companies. They might also hope that it will be harder for customers to vent(発散させる) their ire(怒り) when its focus is not half a world away, but possibly right next door.(674)