

# The Textline Guide to Customer Support

How to Choose the Right Customer Support  
Channel for Every Situation



TEXTLINE

Customers these days demand more than just a phone number or email address listed on a company website. Traditional customer service channels such as phone and email remain popular, but technology has multiplied the number of ways to connect with customers. Companies are now using live chat, texting, bots, social media support, remote support, and self-service help centers, but they're not always using these channels effectively.

While most businesses realize the value of investing in new channels because improving customer experiences can boost the bottom line, the number of options can be overwhelming. It may be difficult to determine which channels to offer, which to prioritize, and the right time to use a particular channel.

Whatever your strategy, it's not enough to offer only phone and email support. [Customers have grown frustrated with these methods and prefer channels that don't require talking to another person](#), according to a report in Business Insider last year. New channels such as business texting let customers reach businesses when it's convenient for them—without the long wait times. As a result, consumers have decreased the use of live customer service agents by 10 percent in the past two years, and 59 percent of consumers prefer channels that are not voice-based solutions.

The customer service industry is now undergoing an unprecedented transformation, after seeing little innovation since call centers in the 1970s.


“With the proliferation of communication channels things started to change—call centers became contact centers—and [we are now witnessing a revolution in customer service](#) fueled by new technologies, the ubiquity of digital channels, and last but not least, driven by customers demanding better customer service that is faster, more convenient, and more reliable,” according to Dr. Volker Hildebrand, Global VP of Customer Engagement and Commerce Solutions at SAP, in an article published in Forbes.

One cause of this shift is the growing use of mobile phones and smartphones. Customers are communicating differently than they used to—they spend less time talking on the phone and send fewer emails.

// More and more communication between companies and their customers is moving from phone calls and email to messaging platforms like SMS. After all, the most used app on everyone's smartphone is the texting app. But most businesses are not yet reachable by text messaging."

— ALAN BRAVERMAN, CEO OF TEXTLINE

Customers prefer texting because they want service that they can get anywhere, at any time, without having to wait to get ahold of a live customer service agent. People are also more responsive by text message—

 **95%** of texts are read within three minutes of being sent

People are communicating differently today, but most businesses have not adapted to changing consumer behavior. Companies that haven't updated their customer service department may find that their customers won't hesitate to leave, and many will tell their networks about their bad experience, often on social media. This is bad news for your business. In 2017, 54 percent of consumers left a company because of bad customer service, according to Business Insider. But the good news is that 68 percent of consumers increased their activity with companies that provide good service.

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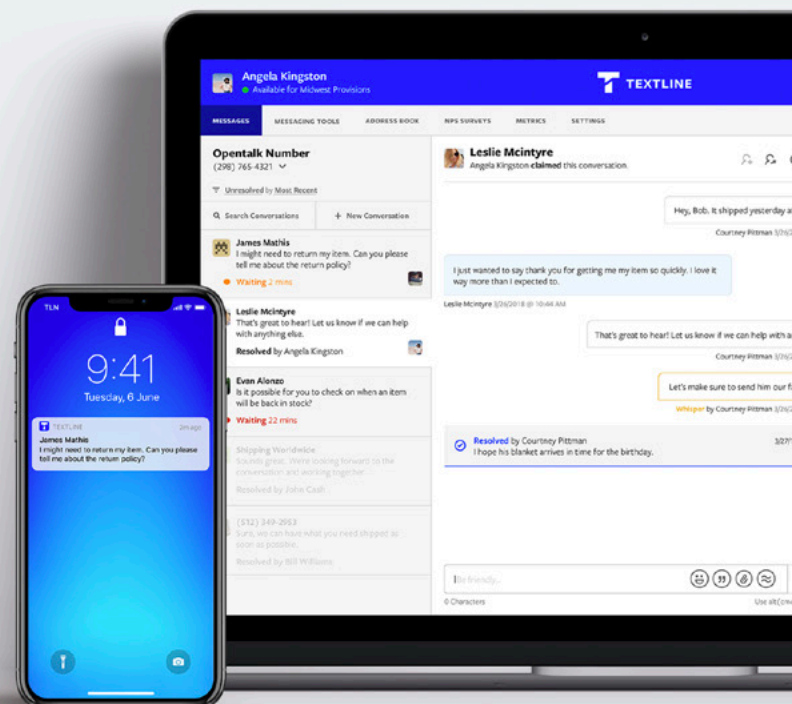
Multi-channel support is already the new standard for customer support. In this environment, it is important to narrow your focus. Rather than providing every available option, choose a few channels and be deliberate about providing the most appropriate channel for the issue or the moment at hand. Take into account the complexity of your product and the nature of the customer request. Stay flexible, consider your audience, and pay attention to which channels your customers prefer, so that you can meet them where they are.

Every channel has unique strengths and weaknesses that make them better suited to different customer issues, and some messages work better on certain channels than others. For example, many customers prefer self-service help centers for very quick and simple queries, while they like texting for time-sensitive matters that need an immediate response. And sometimes it is still necessary to pick up the phone to handle complicated issues or emotionally charged situations.

But the most important thing to consider is, never underestimate the value of human connection and making your customers feel like there is a real person who cares about them at the end of the line.

Texting is the best way to engage with customers in a way that is convenient and cost-effective.

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# The big three:

## Phone, email and text

Phone and email are traditional customer service channels that have been used the longest, and their ubiquity persists despite the introduction of new channels. The benefit for companies is that customers are familiar with these channels and how to use them, but their limitations are also well-known. Texting is the newcomer of the three, but its use is highly linked to both channels as it can be used to supplement both.

Even though use of phone and email is declining, it is likely that you cannot stop using them entirely—some customers, especially older generations, are not comfortable or familiar with newer outlets like live chat or social media and will always prefer making a phone call or sending an email. The better option is to reconsider when and how you're using phone and email and figure out how they can work together with newer options like text messaging.



# Phone

Customer service over the phone may seem old-fashioned, but having a direct, personal conversation in real-time will never go out of style. Despite the multitude of new customer service channels, some people prefer to pick up the phone and talk to another person, especially if the alternative is talking to a machine.

A phone call is still the best way to handle complex customer service interactions that require a lot of time to resolve, and it is also the best channel for situations where the customer may be angry or frustrated. These scenarios require an empathetic service agent who can detect emotion from the customer's tone of voice and defuse the situation. Therefore, voice-based customer service is increasingly being used as an escalation channel as customers move to texting, digital self-service, and live chat for more straightforward interactions.

The drawbacks to phone service are well-known. On the customer's side, there are delays and the dreaded phone tree before they can reach a human agent. For the company, there are significant costs associated with maintaining a skilled team of live support specialists, especially those that want to provide 24/7 support.

Many companies are using automated customer service platforms that use new technology such as artificial intelligence to operate more efficiently. In the age of AI, employing human service agents to answer the phone can seem too costly and time-consuming. But companies should think of phone interactions as rare opportunities to connect with customers, nurture relationships, and increase customer loyalty. AI is great for repetitive, predictable tasks, but technological limitations mean that human agents are still better for edge cases and customer interactions that require emotional intelligence.



## Ideal for:

Complicated situations that take a long time to resolve. Customers who are angry or frustrated.

## Pros:

- Real-time, immediate responses.
- Good for building meaningful customer relationships.

## Cons:

- Hard to monitor and difficult to analyze data.
- 24/7 support is hard to provide.
- People may have to wait a long time to actually reach a person

# Text

Text-message-based customer service channels are relatively new and have yet to see widespread adoption. But companies who use business text messaging platforms are gaining an edge in building relationships with their customers. Text messaging is a unique solution that provides better customer service while saving businesses time and money. It is a fast, efficient, and cost-effective channel that also allows you to directly connect with customers and provide personalized, one-on-one service.

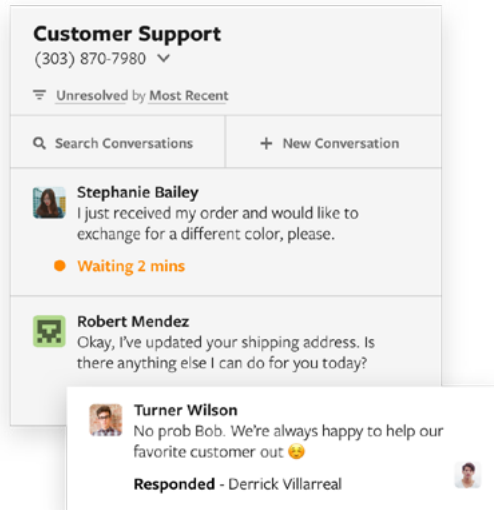
Most people want to text message with businesses in the same way that they are texting their family and friends, but not all businesses are equipped to do so. In fact, customers may already be texting your business even if you haven't enabled the technology, because most people assume when they see a phone number that they should be able to call or text.

## You may be missing inquiries from customers who think that you're ignoring them.

"Text messaging has been around for a while, but recent changes in consumer behavior are feeding the demand for business text messaging: People no longer answer calls from unknown numbers," says Braverman. "And many people have completely stopped listening to voicemail messages, let alone responding to them. Email inboxes are overflowing with messages. Text messaging is the best way to reach people today."

Compared to other communication methods like mass emails and automated chatbots, texting makes your business feel friendly and personable. Customers feel valued because there is a person at the other end of the line, and that builds trust in your business and leads to better customer retention. Text messages are a fast, brief and efficient method of relaying information that saves time for both you and your customers. People prefer texting because they can reach you or respond whenever it is convenient for them. They are also more likely to immediately respond to a text message compared to an email and less likely to be deterred by stuffed email inboxes. Texting takes less time than calling because people aren't put on hold or subjected to phone trees.

In the era of multichannel support, texting is a versatile channel that can function both as a primary and supporting channel. If you're already using phone and email, you can use texting to escalate into existing channels or to follow up on critical emails and phone calls. Texting is also great for personalized reminders and other types of supplemental information.



Business text messaging platforms allow companies to keep all of their conversations in one place, making it easier to monitor and analyze conversations. You can also automate parts of the customer service process by using templated messages that can be scheduled ahead of time for messages such as reminders and notifications that would be cumbersome to handle manually.

As with all forms of written communication, however, texts don't provide the full picture when it comes to a customer's emotions. A customer service agent may misread the tone of a text message in the absence of indicators from a person's tone of voice. For longer and more complicated issues or situations where the customer is emotional, it may be better to pick up the phone.

#### Ideal for:

Urgent matters, simple queries, and automated responses such as reminders and notifications.

#### Pros:

- Fast, real-time responses.
- An easy and inexpensive way to provide one-on-one customer service.
- Can be used as a primary channel and a supporting channel.

#### Cons:

- Not the best channel for complicated issues or detecting customers' emotions.

## Ready to start texting?

Text messaging is the best way to connect with customers—and it's more convenient for everybody.

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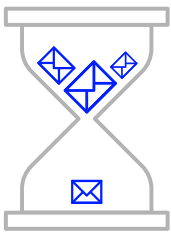




# Email

Email is a widely used support tool that has many advantages. It's a low-cost solution that is easy to set up, especially on a smaller scale, and it is good for keeping discussion records. Support agents don't need a lot of training to use it, and most customers are already comfortable with the technology. In addition, email is a great channel when companies need to send documents and long pages of instructions.

As your support team grows, however, email can be difficult to manage between multiple people on a team, and you may need to purchase tools for tracking, delegation, and keeping archives.



The biggest drawback to email may be slow response times. Zendesk reports that [the average email response time is between 18 to 26 hours](#), and that means that email inquiries typically require about a day, and 3-4 touches, to resolve. Email is not the best channel to use if your customer has an urgent matter.

Delayed responses mean that customers' issues are not addressed in real-time. Customers who are upset about an issue may grow angrier as they wait for a reply. Email can also be frustrating when it comes to issues that need more back-and-forth conversation than is typical. Customers dislike reading very long emails that would be better suited to a phone conversation.

Emails also don't provide the full picture when it comes to a customer's emotions and can feel impersonal compared to texting and phone calls. Some customers may not be able to accurately express themselves in writing. Agents may also have a difficult time gauging a customer's level of anger or frustration through email in a way that they would not on the phone, where they would be able to detect a customer's feelings through their tone of voice and adjust their response accordingly.

## Ideal for:

Issues that are not urgent and don't necessarily need a quick reply.

## Pros:

- Inexpensive.
- Easy to set up.
- Good for record-keeping.

## Cons:

- Delayed response times.
- Emails can get lost in cluttered inboxes. Not good for complicated issues that need a lot of back and forth.
- Not the best channel for emotional situations or building deeper customer relationships.

## The other players:

# Self-serve help centers, live chat, social media, and bots

For companies that are accustomed to phone and email, emerging channels can be intimidating. But ignoring these new outlets would be a mistake, especially since customer interactions with phone and email have decreased by 7 percent in the last two years, according to Business Insider. You may not have the resources to provide every new support channel, but figuring out which ones are a good fit for your business and your customers is the first step.



# Self-serve help center

When it comes to simple, straightforward customer service issues, many consumers prefer self-service channels such as online FAQ sections. The benefit is that customers don't have to wait for assistance; they simply visit your website to get the answer to their inquiry. Self-service channels are fast and convenient, and they don't require customers to observe normal business hours. They also allow a company to assist customers via visual tools, such as screenshots, videos, and diagrams.

According to a 2015 survey conducted by Forrester Research, [customers are using web and mobile self-service interactions more than talking to human agents](#), and the use of web self-service increased from 67 percent in 2012 to 76 percent in 2014. Online forums/communities and virtual agents have seen usage jump from 31 percent in 2012 to 56 percent in 2015. Moreover, customers won't wait around for answers anymore. Fifty-three percent of customers will abandon their online shopping carts if they can't get immediate assistance.

Companies like self-service channels because they reduce customer support costs by 25 percent or more. These channels are great for customers who are tech-savvy, independent, and need quick answers. But self-serve can feel impersonal, and some people still prefer getting assistance from another person. When it comes down to it, self-serve doesn't provide the type of one-on-one, personalized customer experience that can set your brand apart from others. The experience can also be frustrating when it comes to unique or complicated issues, and it doesn't work for customers who don't have consistent access to the internet.

## Ideal for:

Simple, straightforward issues that are easily looked up online.

## Pros:

- Low-cost solution.
- Response time is minimal.

## Cons:

- Online resources need to be continually updated.
- Doesn't work for complex issues.
- Requires access to the internet.





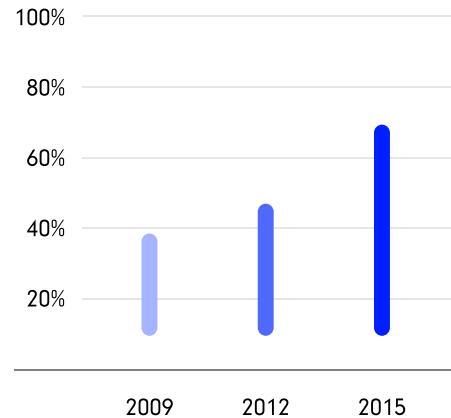
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their online shopping carts if they  
can't get immediate assistance.**

—Forrester Research



# Live chat

Live chat is a popular way for customers to reach companies, especially when it comes to urgent requests. The channel provides customers with an easy and low-friction way of interacting with service agents in real-time. [Forrester reports that use of online chat has grown significantly in the past few years](#), from 38 percent in 2009 to 43 percent in 2012 and 65 percent in 2015.



Live chat allows companies to easily connect customers with agents with the right expertise to handle their problem. Issues can be resolved in real-time, and agents can make use of observations about user behavior on the website during their conversations. In addition, from the perspective of the company, it is a low-cost and efficient channel.

Live chat may seem functionally similar to business text messaging, but a major difference is that it doesn't feel as personal. Another drawback is that it isn't as convenient—people can't leave a conversation and come back to it. And similar to self-service channels, live chat requires customers to be at a computer with internet access. Lastly, for more in-depth conversations, phone may be the more appropriate channel.

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# Social media

Social media customer service is a great example of companies adapting to the way their customers communicate and providing service that is convenient for them. Consumers are increasingly getting on Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn to contact companies. In some cases, those who have had trouble getting ahold of a service agent over phone or email turn to social media to air their frustrations.

The possibility that an angry customer may broadcast a poor customer service experience to large audiences using social media makes it even more important that businesses pay close attention to social media service requests. Whether they are tweeting at a company or DMing them, they expect a fast response, no matter the time of day.

Social media has taken word-of-mouth and amplified it. Consumers are not only affected by posts about a business from people that they personally know; tweets, reviews, and posts from strangers can be just as influential.

## Ideal for:

Audiences who spend a lot of time on social media.

## Pros:

- Social media service meets customers where they are already spending a lot of time

## Cons:

- Companies may have difficulty providing rapid, 24/7 service.
- It's more difficult to capture customers' personal information compared to phone and email.

**Customers spend 20 percent to 40 percent more with companies who engage and respond to social media service requests.**

—Bain & Company



# Bots

Automated customer service tools such as chatbots that use AI technology are perhaps the most talked about new development in customer service technology. Bots are allowing companies to manage ever-increasing customer service interactions over multiple channels without having to employ more people. They are most useful in helping agents complete tasks that are repetitive and predictable, and in some cases, they can take over those tasks and interact with customers autonomously.

AI companies say that technology and humans can work together seamlessly to improve customer service. But despite the growth of automated solutions like chatbots, [Forrester warns of a coming revolt against them:](#)

// Human resistance against ineffective chatbots is on the way, and a groundswell of jaded customers will crowdsource tips for end runs around chatty chatbots.”

— FORRESTER

A major issue is that current limitations in AI technology can mean chatbot sessions that are a far cry from the lifelike experiences that they promise. Some do a poor job of directing customers to the right human service agents, and they often don't have live agents overseeing sessions to step in when they fail.

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# Conclusion

Now that you're more informed about your customer support options, it's time to make some decisions. Maybe you're happy with your primary channels and just want to supplement your existing system. Or maybe your current setup isn't working, and you need to overhaul everything. Whatever your situation, we recommend exploring business text messaging, because it is the most versatile channel. Text messaging platforms can add to your existing support systems or be your main source of customer support. Learn more about business texting here.

## Ready to start texting?

Text messaging is the best way to connect with customers—and it's more convenient for everybody. Sign up for a free trial today and start leveraging SMS to offer support, increase engagement, and close deals with your customers.

[Sign Up for a Free Trial](#)

