



 [Print Article](#)  [Close Window](#)

From: www.cio.com

Improve Cloud Support With a Customer Bill of Rights

– David Taber, CIO

June 21, 2012

In previous articles about cloud support, I've focused on [developer support](#) and the misallocation of dollars by vendors who produce too much documentation and not enough code samples.

In that article, you may have thought I wasn't being polite. But to misquote Crocodile Dundee, that wasn't a rant—*this* is a rant.

After too many years in the software business, including two stints as a VP in public companies, I know the business pressures facing support groups. Theirs is not a fun job, particularly in end-user support that is endlessly threatened with over-measurement, cost cutting, and [offshoring](#).

My beef is not with the support worker-bees or even their managers. The problem here is right at the top, including the boards of directors, of cloud companies whose executives are too focused on "innovations" and not focused enough on ease of adoption.

Commentary: [How to Avoid Cloud Customer Support Worst Practices](#)

Notice that I didn't choose the words "ease of use." That's way too subjective, too hard to measure and vulnerable to cute iconography. Ease of adoption is much more concrete and easier to measure—albeit harder to do well at. It's also stupid that cloud application vendors aren't focusing on ease of adoption, because that's where their subscription dollars are going to come from.

Do Cloud Vendors Value Support Teams over Customers?

What's the problem here? This month, I moved my firm onto a new infrastructure of cloud services and applications. What we found—literally without exception—was a set of user interfaces that were pretty but also managed to obscure needed functions. "Documentation" consisted of FAQs and videos that didn't cover half the features, were incomplete and out of date on the things they did describe and pointed to "more complete" explanations that happened to be dead links. If we were lucky, there was a customer self-support area full of misinformation and broken English.

So Somebody Brilliant in all these firms had decided that it wasn't worth the investment to make [customer onboarding](#) really self-service. But they didn't offer the hapless user much of an alternative either.

The inevitable consequence? Support calls. Lots of 'em. So many calls that the support department stopped answering and made us leave a voice message (that was answered more slowly than an email). How nice. Somebody Brilliant thinks his customers' time is worth less than his support team's time. Subtle message there.

We did get some answers via email, but, because of the nature of our issues, the emails only led to the

need for more cases to be submitted for related follow-up questions.

But the real issue for cloud vendors isn't vague [customer satisfaction](#) or time-to-resolve metrics. Their lack of information caused us to make decisions that very nearly caused us to terminate our contracts with the vendors. We couldn't understand how to get the service to be applicable to our business needs. That's right—this is how major cloud vendors are treating *paying* customers, not just the rubes.

The Cloud Customer Support Bill of Rights

This is all so last century. It is so pointless to be re-running this experiment in mass-market adoption. OOBIE, or [out-of-box experience](#), may be an obsolete acronym, but it's an ever-relevant idea. Let's modernize it to be ITCE—in the clouds experience.

Analysis: [How to Support Cloud Applications](#)

Cloud vendors, when you put up a new cloud application or service, start your usability lab (even if it's just a walled garden and not a lab) with prospects early. Make sure every aspect of the sign-up, initial configuration, and onboarding processes is end-to-end tested before you go live. Develop at least three use cases and three personas. Use them to identify where you biggest adoption and usability problems will be. Then put the (brief but complete) documents out there. Checklists are fine.

Furthermore, I'd like to propose an ITCE Bill of Rights. Paying customers of cloud services or applications are entitled to the following:

- A phone number dedicated to ecommerce and credit-card support that someone will actually answer in real time.
- A knowledge base that's more than just user generated content in a supposedly searchable forum.
- A discussion thread for each article in the knowledge base; this way users can support each other in an organized way, not just by making random posts in a forum.
- A FAQ section that lets you search the answers as well as the questions.
- A portal to the bug / incident database that shows all solved problems (not just the ones for my cases, also searchable by topic).
- A feature-request area with user voting and discussion threads that are searchable; this makes it easy to figure out if the system doesn't do this or that yet.
- A set of tips organized by topic, not a series of random blog posts from a product manager.
- A bug or question submission form that is well structured, asking for the needed information up front, and has picklist items that cover 90 percent of bug-submittal cases.
- The ability to directly IM the person who just provided your case/bug response. When digging into a problem, it rarely helps the end user to IM a robot or a random support flunky who is unfamiliar with the case.
- A support phone connection that is intelligible, not to mention supported by enough VoIP bandwidth and reliability.
- An SLA page that lets you know about uptime, responsiveness and (thank you, [LinkedIn](#)) security breach status.

This is all pretty simple. Cloud vendors are being cheap on stuff that is high leverage. That leads to overloaded support teams, which happen to be expensive and low leverage. Doing things right will cost you less, cloud vendors, and it will get you more of the recurring revenues you promised your investors. Get your act together.

David Taber is the author of the new Prentice Hall book, "[Salesforce.com Secrets of Success](#)" and is the CEO of [SalesLogistix](#), a certified Salesforce.com consultancy focused on business process improvement through use of CRM systems. SalesLogistix clients are in North America, Europe, Israel and India. Taber has more than 25 years of experience in high tech, including 10 years at the VP level or above.

Follow everything from CIO.com on Twitter [@CIOonline](#), on [Facebook](#), and on [Google +](#).

© 2012 CXO Media Inc.