RWS

Why customer support in a digital-first world must be built on 'structured content'

Contents

With special thanks to Val Swisher for her contribution on taxonomy.

# Customer support in a digital-first world

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed our daily lives so much – our routines, our habits, our interactions with one another and with businesses. There remains much uncertainty over whether we will return to how things were before, whether wholescale change and new habits will last – or whether the truth will lie somewhere in between the two.

In the world of business, we have witnessed a rapid acceleration of the digital transformation trends that have long been heralded. Lockdowns have forced much economic activity and interaction online and businesses have quickly had to adapt to their new circumstances.

As societies reopen, we will undoubtedly see a return to offices and high streets, but customers will still be looking for choice, convenience and ease of doing business – all things that the online world excels at when done well.

For some time now, power has been shifting away from companies to customers, who in an online world have almost limitless choices and increasingly expect their unique needs or requirements to be met and any questions they have to be answered almost instantly.

Companies must make sure that their systems, processes and staff are equipped to deliver the 'one right answer' to the customer, when they want it, and how they want it. The risks of not doing so have just risen as in a digital-first world, if you don't, your competitors, wherever they are in the world, will.
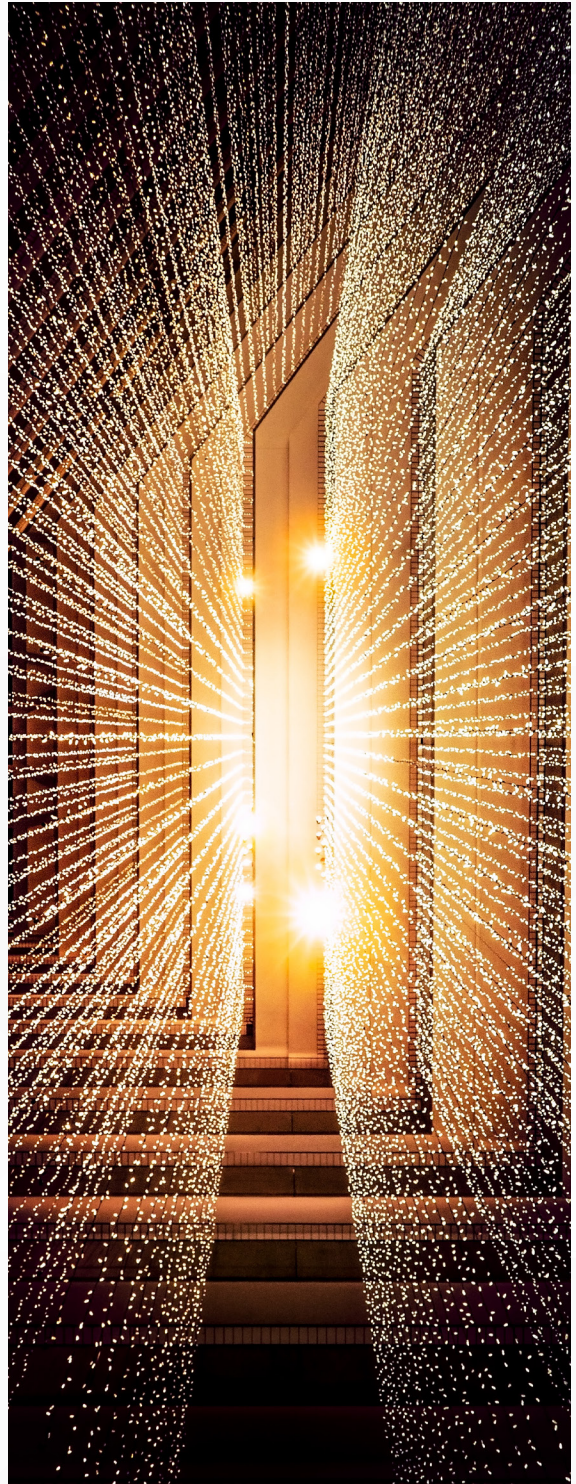
Key challenges for customer support

Customers are demanding and their expectations around how brands interact with them, how brands respond to them, and the level of help or support they receive have skyrocketed in recent years.

Make it easy. Or else.

In a digital world, the online experience is critical. Online experiences are easy to compare, and when some companies manage seemingly effortlessly to provide meaningful personalization, seamless service and swift resolutions, customers wonder why every company isn't making it as easy for them. The companies that customers find it difficult to interact with or deal with will increasingly lose out to those who make it as easy as possible.

Wherever I want, whenever I want, how I want

Many customers expect to be able to contact companies at any time, from any place, on any device – whenever suits them best. However, being able to create a seamless experience, across multiple channels, is difficult, and is only getting harder as the number of digital channels available to customers proliferates. And for global customers, they want those communications and customer support to be in their own language.

Be quick about it

Increasingly customers want quick if not instant answers to their questions. We all lead busy lives. No one wants to be left waiting on a customer service call for ages. Making it easy for customers to quickly find the answers themselves helps improve the customer experience significantly.

Do you know who I am?

Companies talk about building relationships with customers, but it is an oddly one-sided relationship if the company blanks the customer or fails to recognize them. Customers increasingly expect to be recognized whenever they contact a company and for them to be aware of any previous issues or relevant interactions they've had with the company.

These challenges are not new, but in a fiercely competitive world where digital channels dominate, creating a fantastic customer experience across them has become more important and more pressing than ever.

How can companies respond?

As the digital-first world begins to dominate, there are three key areas that companies need to focus on and address if they are to meet these challenges and deliver great customer support.

1. Employee enablement

Businesses need to make sure that they enable all their staff to always have access to the right information, at the right time, securely, and with every confidence that the information they are accessing is correct – having the 'one right answer' at their fingertips.

Work From Home and distributed teams make achieving this harder, but it can be done with good communication tools, efficient systems, and a 'single source of truth'.

2. Better customer self-service

As companies engage wider, more global audiences, across multiple channels, the volume of content needed for customer support continues to explode.

With more resources rarely forthcoming, companies need to find technology solutions that will help customers to find the answers they are looking for faster themselves.

3. Work smarter not harder

With content volumes exploding, companies need to work smarter not harder.

They need to use technology to improve the productivity of their staff, automating wherever possible, and reducing unnecessary or repetitive work. The adoption of automation tools, conversational interfaces, and even AR/VR augmented services to improve the customer experience will be critical.

The content bottleneck

Great content is the cornerstone of the customer experience.

If your staff don't know the answer, struggle to find it, or worse still give the wrong answer, then the customer has a less than optimal experience.

If the information you make available on your website is poor quality, confusing, or incorrect, again the customer has a bad experience and their trust in your brand falters.

So good quality, accurate, and easily accessible content matters enormously.

But as we move into the digital-first world, the volume of content needed is exploding, and providing the right content across all channels, in multiple formats, and multiple languages, and keeping it all up to date and correct, becomes enormously challenging.

The result is that content becomes a bottleneck, where it's simply not possible to do everything that you want or need to do for your customers.

Throwing more resources at it is of course an option, but few companies are in a position to do so.

As we alluded to earlier, to overcome the content bottleneck companies need to turn to technology to help them do more with the same or less. They need to work smarter not harder. They need to improve the productivity of their teams – reducing repetitive tasks that could perhaps be automated, reusing content wherever possible, and establishing a 'single source of truth' that their staff can rely on.

In order to do this, companies need to look at how they organize their content – as it can make all the difference.

Most companies' content remains 'unstructured'. To take advantage of the latest technology and automation it needs to be 'structured.'

Unstructured content

'Unstructured content' is the more traditional 'book-based' approach to writing and publishing customer support materials.

In a traditional model, writers produce manuals, procedures, and training materials with desktop publishing tools such as Microsoft Word, Office 365, Google Docs, Adobe FrameMaker, InDesign and Quark – but the model has a number of limitations.
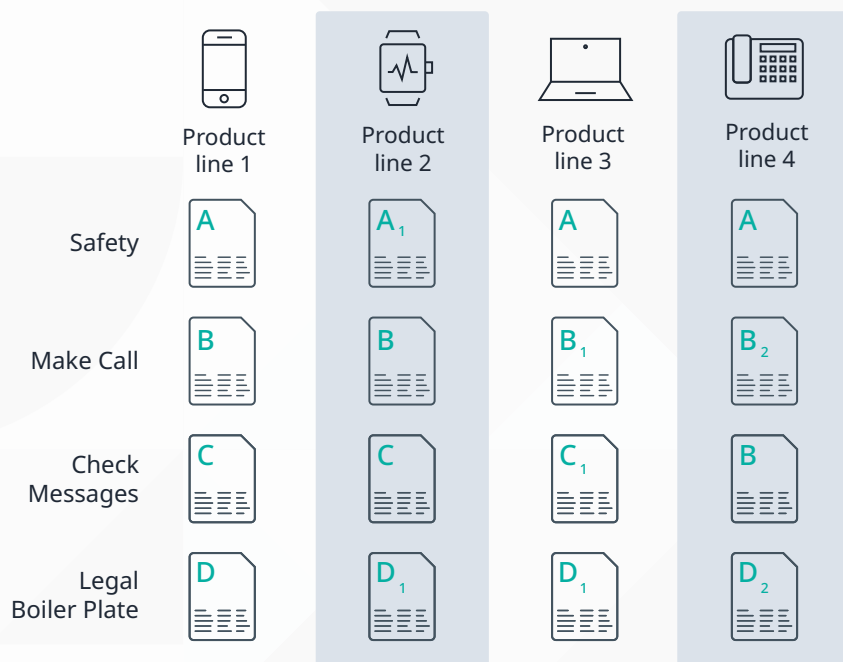
Content is difficult to share because it is locked in context. This dependency on context poses a problem because the information that describes one product is often almost identical to information that describes another product.

For example, the task of replacing an ink cartridge in a printer may be nearly identical in fifteen different printers. If that content cannot be reused, then there is a duplication of effort, writing and reviewing the almost identical content over and over again.

In the traditional model, writers cut and paste content from one publication to another, or simply rewrite the information from scratch. Cut and paste methods, however, are notoriously unreliable, leading to low levels of reuse and inconsistencies across publications and customer documentation.

When it comes to translating content, often the same information must be written and translated multiple times because it lives in different files in different contexts.

In addition to wasted time, effort and cost, inconsistent information annoys customers, who get frustrated that they can't find the right information in the moment they need it, and who then pick up the phone for an answer – which obviously costs the company more than if the customer can quickly find the answers to their own questions.

	Product line 1	Product line 2	Product line 3	Product line 4
Safety	A	A_1	A	A
Make Call	B	B	B_1	B_2
Check Messages	C	C	C_1	B
Legal Boiler Plate	D	D_1	D_1	D_2

Structured content and the customer experience

In contrast to unstructured content, structured content gives an organization the ability to eliminate rework, redundancy and errors – which makes its content operations more efficient and scalable, and can deliver considerable cost savings.

The term 'structured content' refers to the use of XML for the writing, storing and publishing of technical information. The most popular XML standard for this is called DITA.

With structured content, writers create their content in smaller modules or topics of XML that are stored in a repository (called a Component Content Management System or 'CCMS'), and these modules or topics can then be reused in multiple places.

This approach makes it possible to write content once and reuse it across many publications and output formats. The assembly of content into various publications or deliverables, such as PDF, HTML, or tool tips, can be automated. In addition, the layout itself can be automated – relieving the writers of manual desktop publishing (DTP) tasks.

What is DITA?

DITA is an XML-based open standard for structuring, managing and publishing content that has seen significant adoption over the last five years – specifically for the management of technical information.

IBM originally designed DITA, an acronym for 'Darwin Information Typing Architecture', for the writing, management, and publishing of technical information. The standard is managed by OASIS, the open standards organization.

A study by Aberdeen Group showed that documentation produced from structured content led to:

34% Fewer errors and inconsistencies

Significant fall in calls to the support centre

Increased revenues

Structured content, knowledge and the employee experience

It is common knowledge that an organization's effectiveness is significantly improved by the ability of its employees to harness corporate knowledge easily and use it efficiently in their day-to-day jobs.

Knowledge that resides in documents is defined as explicit knowledge, while knowledge that resides in people's heads is known as implicit knowledge – together they form the corporate knowledge that empowers employees to do their jobs.

Corporate knowledge is frequently lost – either when information becomes inaccessible or when people move jobs or retire from the organization. This is knowledge which needs to be captured, curated, managed and delivered to ensure the business keeps achieving its goals and continues to grow, irrespective of change. Yet doing so is easier said than done.

Creating an effective digital working environment requires more than just knowledge management or a social intranet – it needs people, knowledge and content to work fluidly and in a unified manner.

To improve employee effectiveness, organizations must ensure access to definitive knowledge across the organization, a 'single source of truth', and, if they are being clever about it, ensure that the underlying content is AI-ready – so the system is able to grow with you and take advantage of advancing technology capabilities as they become available.

Structured content requires information architecture – which is vital for leveraging the invaluable knowledge and business insights organizations hold in their data and information.

A structured content approach makes sense when content is business-critical. It plays a vital role in digital transformation initiatives – anything from dynamic content assembly for self-service portals, powering virtual agents, to enabling process automation and building intelligent portals.

Structured content and taxonomies

With structured content, writers create small, standalone components of information that can be reused in a mix-and-match fashion to produce various end products.

It is critical that we have a way of organizing all the content components so that we can make sense of how they are stored and managed. We do this using a taxonomy.

A taxonomy is a system of organization. It is the roadmap for how we organize and classify content. An enterprise taxonomy is used to:

· Organize large quantities of information

· Improve search speed and accuracy

· Enforce consistency

· Increase usability

· Enable reuse

Simply put, if you cannot find your content, you cannot reuse it.

To be successful using structured authoring, you need a well-thought-out taxonomy. You also need buy-in from everyone who creates, edits, reviews and manages content.

However, a taxonomy is only as good as the consistency with which it is used. The more content and content creators you have, the more critical it is to have a planned taxonomy.
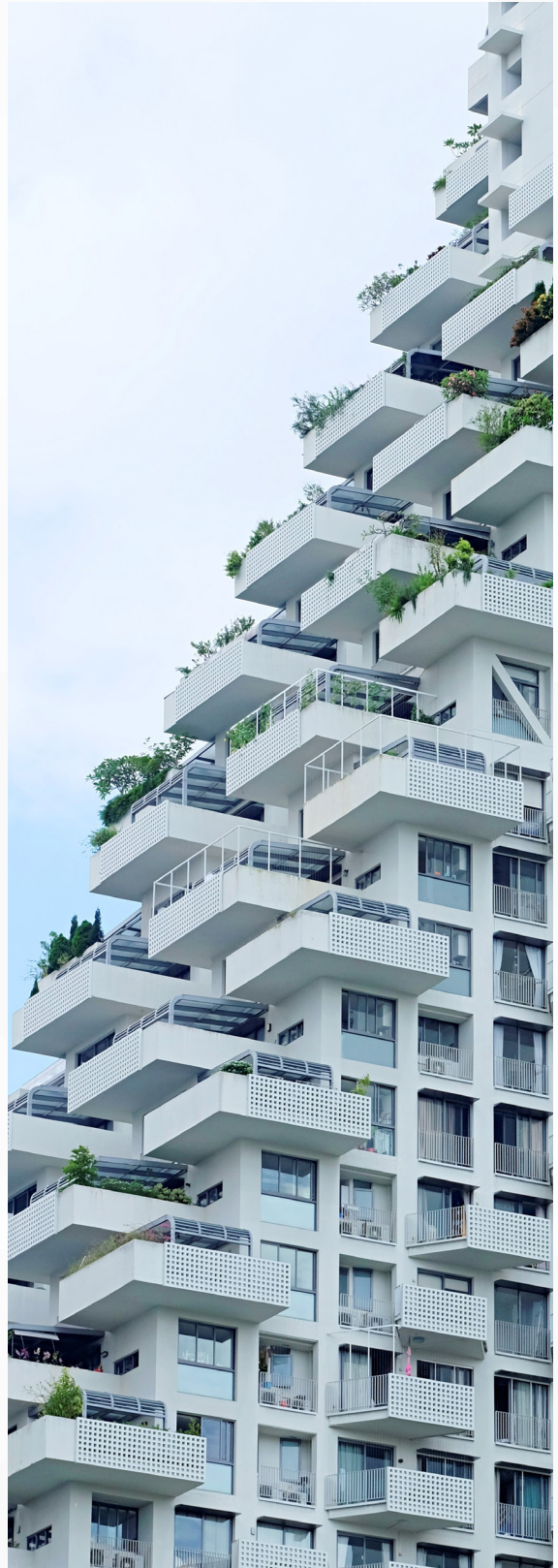
Using metadata to find content

Metadata is data about data. It is an individual tag that is assigned to a piece of content to help describe and locate that content. Metadata is the tool that you use to organize your taxonomy. Metadata tags are primarily used for search. There are two kinds of metadata: internal and external.

Internal metadata

One of the primary benefits of structured authoring is the ability to reuse content in multiple outputs. Information exists in a single, reusable component – giving you a single source of truth – that can be written once, and then used in multiple places.

In order to reuse content, we must first be able to find it. This is the purpose of internal metadata. Internal metadata consists of tags that content creators use to organize and locate existing content components. Once located, a component can be reused.

Agreeing on a robust set of internal metadata tags is important for reuse, scale and organization.

If a writer cannot locate an existing component quickly, they will just create a new component. This new component will be somewhat similar to the existing, but elusive, component. However, when this happens, we lose the single source of truth we are working so hard to achieve and defeat the very purpose of content reuse.

External metadata

External metadata is used by customers to search and hopefully find the specific content, such as the answer to a customer service query, that they are looking for. External tags are also called keywords. They are critical for search algorithms and Search Engine Optimization (SEO).

External metadata should be as extensive as possible. After all, you want your customer to find the content they need as quickly as possible so that they don't move on to a competitor's website or call your customer service team prematurely.

Difference between internal and external metadata

Often there is a very large overlap between internal and external metadata tags. In some companies, the exact same tags are used by writers to search the CCMS and used by customers to search the corporate website or other published content.

There are some instances where you wouldn't want your internal metadata to be exposed to external search engines. For example, with new product launches, you would use an internal 'fake' product name and use it in the internal metadata until the official name is released.

Benefits of structured content

Because structured content enables content reuse, you can eliminate unnecessary duplication of effort and ensure consistency anywhere common content is reused.

Structured content:

Improves business agility

Improves findability

Provides better content governance

Makes it easier to adopt AI technologies

Unstructured content management vs structured content management

Stages in the content delivery process		Challenges of unstructured approach	Benefit of structured/ DITA methodology	Functional benefit	Business benefit
	Reusing content	Manual cut and paste processes that are time consuming and lead to inconsistent information.	Write topic once and reuse it across different documents or output format types.	Reduce effort of producing content by as much as 30-50%. Empower greater content reuse. Reduce inconsistency of information.	Reduce frustration of customers who see inconsistent information. Reduce support calls by people who can't find the information they need. Drive more revenue through increased customer satisfaction.
	Formatting/publishing documents	Each writer wastes a portion of time manually formatting documents.	Automates formatting and publishing.	Reduces manual processes and low-level tasks.	Empowers the organization to focus on higher level value-added activities.
	Variation management	Creating publications targeted to different audiences involves the management of many different documents that cannot be synchronized.	Reduces overheads by managing variations through reuse mechanisms and conditions.	Produce documentation that is tailored more precisely to the needs of the customer.	Improves the customer experience and drives down the number of costly calls to the call centre. Ultimately leads to greater customer satisfaction and loyalty.
	Translation	Since content is stored in big blocks, such as chapters, there is no granular mechanism to identify which content has changed from an earlier version. The result is that previously translated content is going out to translation again – creating overheads and increasing the cost of the translation process.	The amount of new content produced is reduced through reuse, leading to lower translation costs. Content that has not changed can be identified – further reducing the amount of content going into the translation process.	Reduces amount of content going to translation and reduces the cost of translation by 15-30%. Empowers an agile localization methodology that translates content as it becomes ready, reducing the time to market for localized content.	More content can be localized and more markets can be reached with the same budget. Global market revenue and product shelf life can be increased.
	Translation layout and publishing	Layout of translated documents is a manual and costly desktop publishing (DTP) process. DTP can be as much as 20% of the total localization cost. It is also labour intensive and can slow down releases to global markets.	Publishing processes are automated in the target languages.	Saves 20% or more of localization costs and also speeds up localization processes.	Empowers organizations to simultaneously ship ('simship') products in global markets. Enables organizations to translate more content and reach more markets with the same expenditure.

Summary

How your organization structures its content may seem unimportant, but as we have seen, the implications for how well you can serve and support your customers in a digital-first world are significant.

In our new digital-first world, structured content, and DITA in particular, are key components in developing an effective digital strategy to deliver better customer support and create great customer experiences.

Structured content has the unique power to impact both the customer and employee experience – helping companies support customers more effectively, and their employees to work more efficiently.

Customer expectations in a digital-first and fiercely competitive world are high, and as power increasingly lies with the customer, companies need to respond. Without limitless budgets, being able to produce the enormous volume of content needed, and provide great customer support and experiences to customers wherever they are in the world, only really becomes achievable with structured content. This ability to deliver truly personalized experiences and customized customer support on a global scale will increasingly separate the winners from the losers in a digital-first world.

And for employees, structured content when combined with a good taxonomy, metadata and AI, has the capability to transform the user experience when it comes to locating information. Being able to create and rely on a 'single source of truth' changes everything for employees. This is especially key to organizations who are information driven or whose offering is information itself – such as financial services, medical information services, legal services and so on. Retaining corporate knowledge and gleaning insights from your data can only help improve the customer support you provide and increase customer satisfaction and loyalty.

Those who make the move to structured content will soon realize the enormous benefits it brings, and will be best-placed to take advantage of automation, AI, and future technology developments that can significantly improve the customer experience.

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