



An Exploratory Research Study:  
**Customer Experience &  
Customer Self-Support**

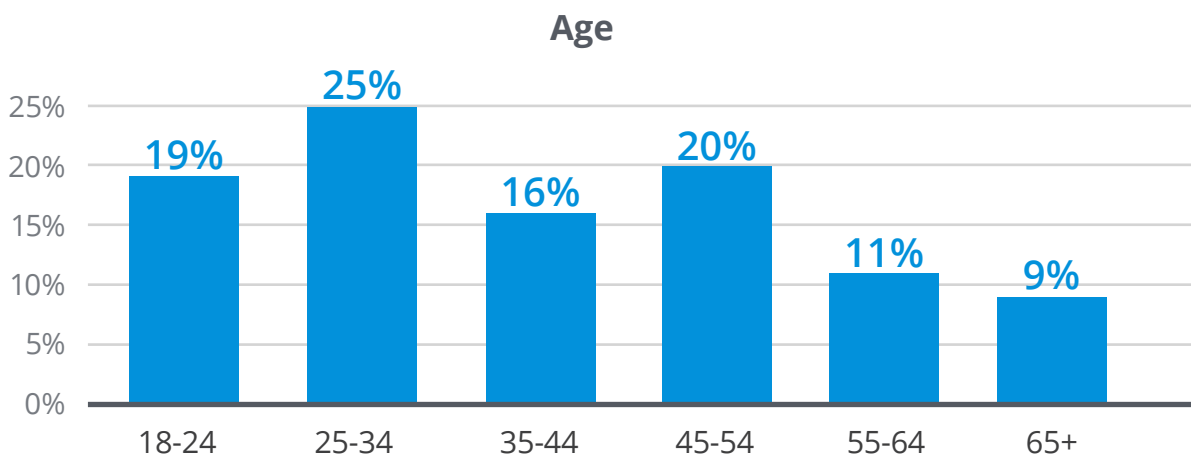
higher  
logic

vanilla

# Research Overview

This research report presents an overview of customer attitudes towards support and self-support efforts, namely through the use of online communities and knowledge bases. Additionally, this report seeks to identify how these attitudes shape a customer’s experience, the actions they take and their subsequent perception of the organization.

To conduct this study, we surveyed a random sample of 285 people, who were asked a number of questions, including, but not limited to, their habits and preferences on customer support, customer experiences and how it influences their actions. Additionally, we captured the age of the respondents to identify any trends that may be more or less prevalent among certain age categories. The ages of the respondents can be seen in the chart below.



While the findings were aligned with what existing research has indicated, our research has revealed four key findings.

## **Finding 1: Customers can’t find the support solutions they’re looking for online.**

While customers overwhelmingly prefer to search Google for answers to their support questions, they often end up having to contact customer support—indicating that their self-service attempts are usually unsuccessful.

## **Finding 2: Positive experiences resonate more than negative ones.**

Both positive and negative experiences compel customers to take action; however, good customer experiences have a bigger impact. Customers are not only more likely to tell their family and friends about a positive experience rather than a negative one, but they're also more likely to write a review.

## **Finding 3: Customers expect organizations to offer effective self-service tools.**

Customers expect organizations to make self-service support tools available, which is especially prevalent among those who are less than 35 years old. This expectation, however, comes with a stipulation: the support must be *effective*. Ultimately, offering no self-service is better than poor self-service since poor service wastes time.

## **Finding 4: Customers trust organizations that focus on customer service and support.**

Fast response times to issues provide for the best experience possible, and organizations that focus on delivering excellent customer service (which is oftentimes fast and efficient service) are rewarded with trust and confidence.

## **TABLE OF CONTENTS**

- **Finding 1:** Customers are often unable to find the support solutions they're looking for online.
- **Finding 2:** Positive experiences resonate more than negative ones.
- **Finding 3:** Customers expect organizations to offer self-service tools for support.
- **Finding 4:** Customers trust organizations that focus on customer service and support.
- Conclusion and Key Recommendations.

## Finding 1

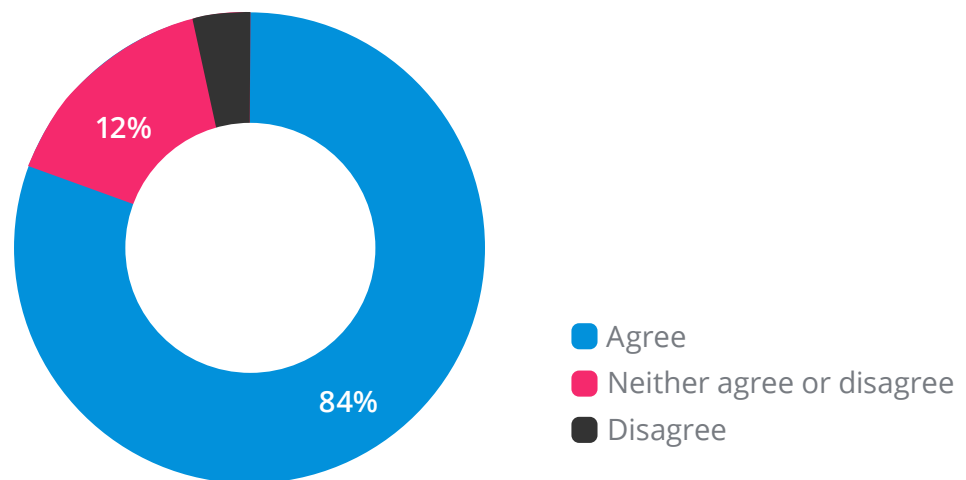
**Customers are often unable to find the support solutions they're looking for online.**

# Customers prefer self-service support but end up having to turn to more traditional methods of support to get the answers they need.

Customers overwhelmingly prefer to solve product or service issues on their own before they reach out to customer support. This only becomes more prevalent when looking at those who are less than 35 years old (89%). While our research shows that customers want to solve issues on their own, our findings also indicate that non self-service options are among the most preferred.

This could indicate that while customers prefer to help themselves, their attempts at solving their own issues are often unsuccessful and they end up contacting customer support.

## I attempt to solve support issues on my own before I contact customer support



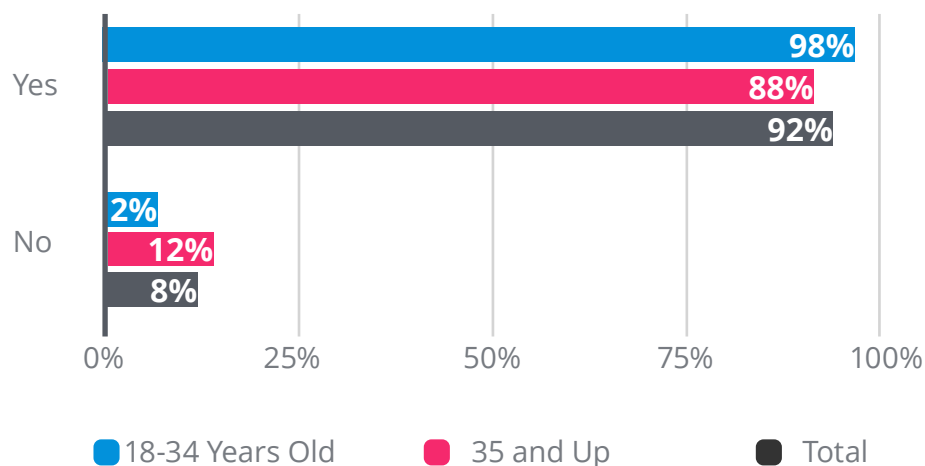
Customers have indicated that their most preferred support channel is a search engine (e.g. Google). This finding aligns with research findings from other organizations, such as the Technology Services Industry Association (TSIA), that found that 9 out of 10 consumers cited Google as their preferred support channel.<sup>1</sup> Ultimately, this study revealed that 91% of customers who attempt to solve support issues on their own look to Google as their go-to place for answers.<sup>2</sup>

Although a vast majority of customers prefer to serve themselves, our research reveals that many customers still end up using phone and email support. This indicates that either, a) not all organizations are offering self-service support, or; b) organizations do offer these services but customers are unable to find them (namely due to poor SEO).

Previous research would suggest the latter, as roughly 66% of organizations have said that they have a branded online community, and 63% say they have a knowledge base.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, this research reveals that of the respondents who indicated they did have a branded community, 61% of them are used for customer self-service support.<sup>4</sup>

Our research also supports the latter conclusion that these functions are unable to be found. While a total of 92% of respondents said they would use a knowledge base for self-service support if it was available, only 30% of respondents say that they've actually used one.

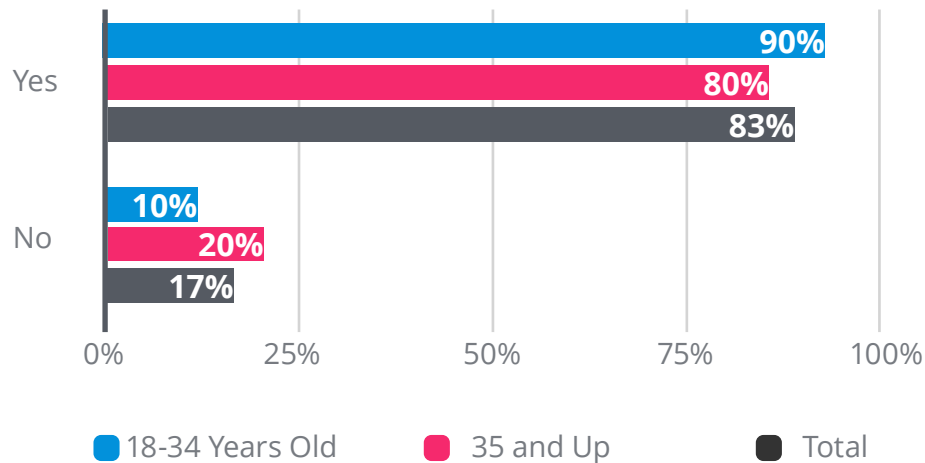
### Would you use a knowledge base for self-service support if it was available?



The same pattern stands true when looking at online communities. A total of 83% of respondents say that they would use an online community for self-service support if it was available, but only 41% say that they've actually used one for this purpose.

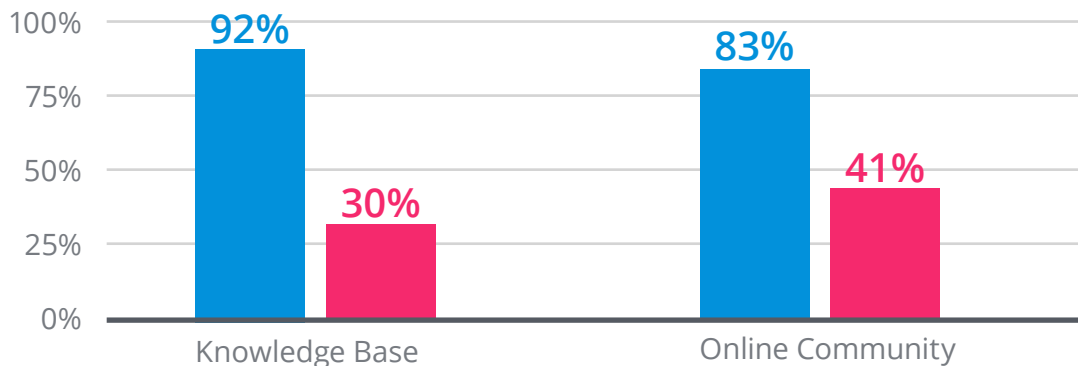
1. TSIA, *The State of Social Support, 2018*, (TSIA, 2018) <<https://www.tsia.com/App/UI/Viewfile.aspx?id=14687>>  
2. Ibid.

## Would you use an online community for self-service support if it was available?



Ultimately, a vast majority of customers are willing to use knowledge bases and online communities for self-service support, but most have not done so. This contrast can be seen in the chart below.

### Have used versus would use if available



■ I would use for self-service support if available ■ I have used for self-service support

Again, as existing research indicates that most organizations do have an online community, these findings reveal that customers are unable to locate them; in other words, their SEO is poor.

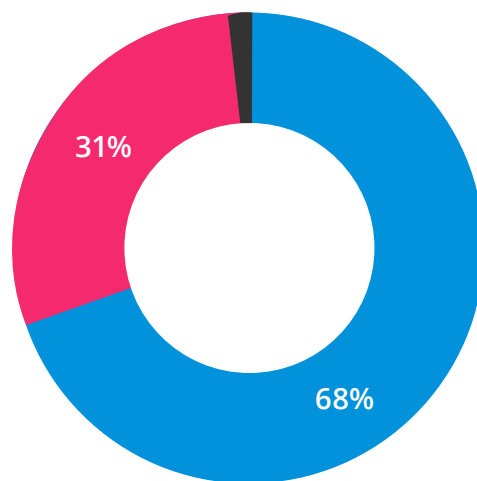
3. Vanilla Forums, *Online Communities: The Benefits and Impacts on Organisations 2019*, (Vanilla Forums, 2019) <<https://pages.vanillaforums.com/online-communities-the-benefits-and-impacts-on-organizations-2019>>

4. Ibid.

This is especially true since Google is the most preferred support channel—and poor SEO means that more often than not, these support options do not appear on the first page of Google search.

Our research indicates that not being on the first page is detrimental. 68% of respondents report that when using a search engine for support, if the answer to their question doesn't appear on the first page of Google, they will not navigate to the second page. Instead, they will rephrase their search and try again.

**If the answer to my question doesn't appear on the first page of Google, my first response is to:**



■ Rephrase my search and try again   ■ Navigate to the second page   ■ Other

Essentially, if an organization's community or knowledge base doesn't appear on the first page of the search engine, it is more than likely to not be found by the searcher. Customers then turn to the more traditional methods of support, such as phone and email, to get the responses they need, despite the fact that they prefer to find answers on their own.



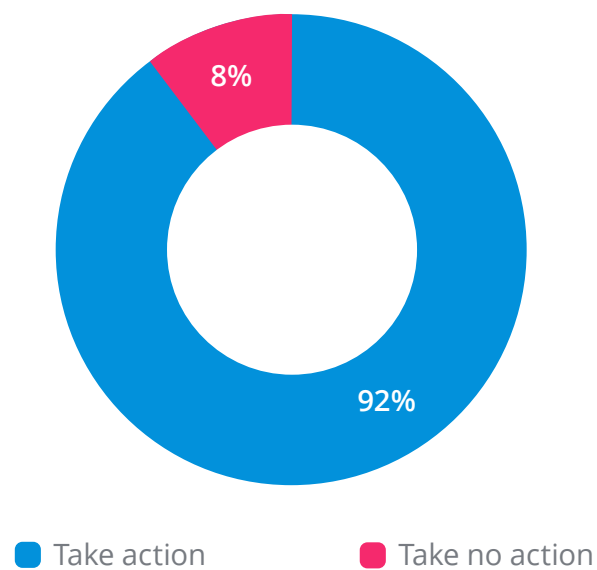
## Finding 2

**Positive experiences  
resonate more than  
negative ones.**

# All experiences lead to actions, and good experiences have more of an impact on customer actions than bad experiences do.

Regardless of whether customers have faced a good experience or a bad one, they are very likely to take action. When it comes to the types of actions they're willing to take, our research shows that positive experiences are more influential than negative ones.

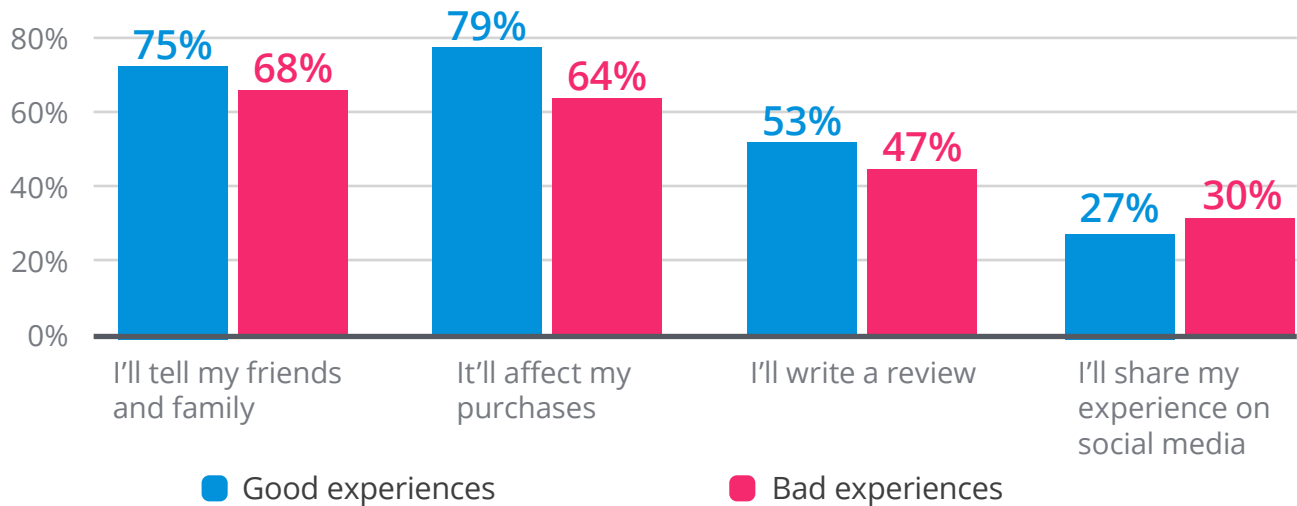
## Customers that will take some sort of action after strong positive or negative experience



Customers are more willing to share their experience or write a review if they've had a positive experience rather than a negative one. This finding partially aligns with research conducted by Sitel Group—as Forbes explains:

*“30% of consumers who have had a negative customer experience say they would share it on social media or post a negative review online, while nearly half (49%) of consumers who have had a positive customer experience say they would share it on social media or post a positive review online.”<sup>5</sup>*

### How good and bad experiences impact customer actions

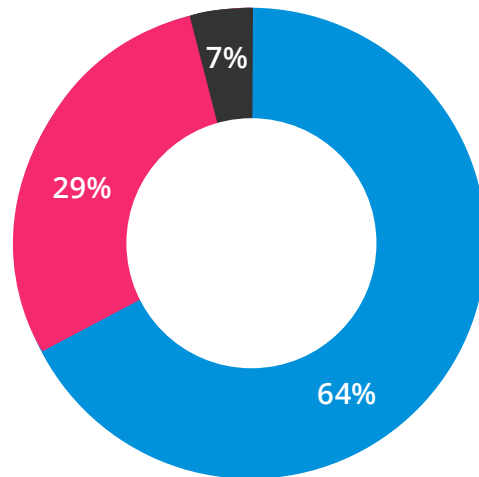


When customers have good experiences, their most common course of action is to purchase more products/ services from that company (79%). In contrast, when customers have a bad experience, their most common course of action is to tell their friends and family about that experience (68%).

Interestingly, customers are more likely to post about their experience on social media when they have a bad experience rather than a good experience (30%). This, however, doesn't translate to writing a review, which unlike social media posts, are usually seen beyond immediate networks and contribute to the reputation and overall rating of a company.

When customers look to find information about an organization, they look at reviews, which give them the power to either advocate for or disparage an organization. A majority of customers (55%) say that excellent peer reviews can boost their trust of an organization. But bad reviews have an impact as well. This is because a majority of customers (64%) trust information provided by their peers more than information provided by an organization.

## I trust information written by other customers more than information provided by the company



■ Agree ■ Neither agree nor disagree ■ Disagree

Strong and positive customer reviews ultimately have more pull than powerful messaging or strong marketing efforts by the organization—customers trust other customers. It's therefore more important than ever for organizations to ensure that customers have a good experience, as 53% will go on to write a positive review, which garners the most trust from potential customers.

Additionally, after a bad experience, our research shows that 61% of customers will switch to a competitor. This finding aligns with research conducted in 2018 by New Voice Media, that found that, "67% of customers have become 'serial switchers,' [which are] customers who are willing to switch brands because of a poor customer experience."<sup>6</sup>

**61% of customers will switch to a competitor following a bad customer experience**

New Voice Media also reported on the financial impacts that this has on organizations—costing organizations upwards of \$75 billion a year.<sup>7</sup>

5. Dan Gingiss, *Consumers Are More Willing To Share Positive Experiences Than Negative Ones*, (Forbes, 2019) <<https://www.forbes.com/sites/dangingiss/2019/04/10/consumers-are-more-willing-to-share-positive-experiences-than-negative-ones/#228fa6d46a49>>

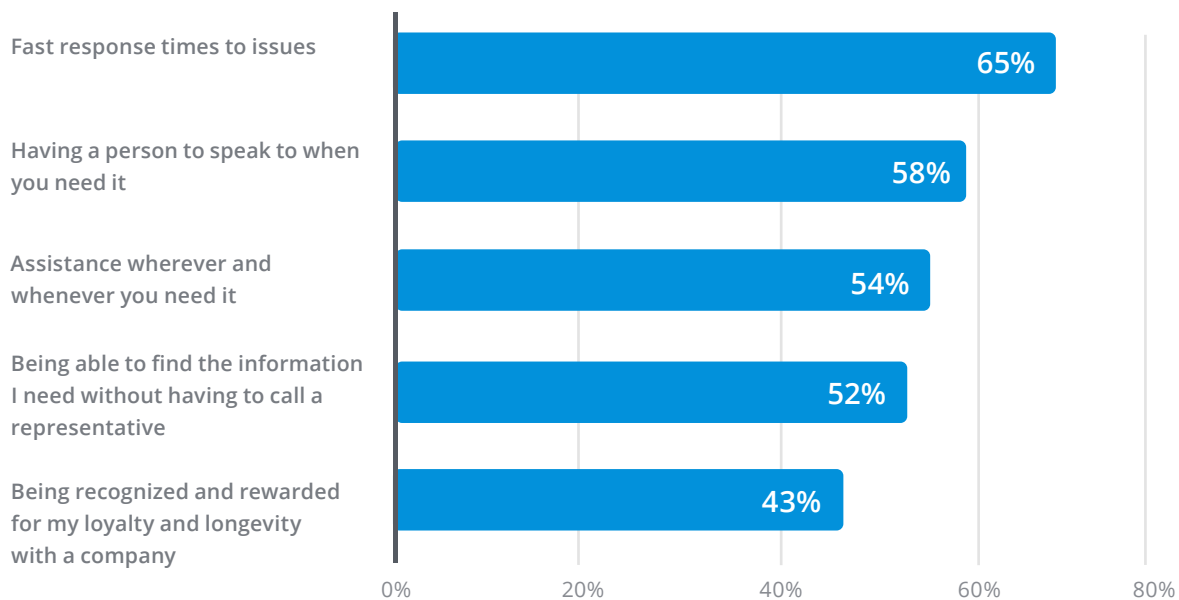
6. Shep Hyken, *Businesses Lose \$75 Billion Due To Poor Customer Service*, (Forbes, 2018) <<https://www.forbes.com/sites/shephyken/2018/05/17/businesses-lose-75-billion-due-to-poor-customer-service/#3d1de3d516f9>>

7. Ibid.

This begs the question—what exactly is it that creates or contributes to a positive experience? Our research indicates that the number one contributing factor to a positive customer experience is fast response times to issues. 65% of respondents reported that this was a leading factor in making or breaking their experience with an organization.

This finding aligns with research conducted by the CMO Council in 2017, who also found that fast response times to issues is the most important attribute of a customer’s experience with a brand.<sup>8</sup>

### Top 5 Customer Experience Attributes

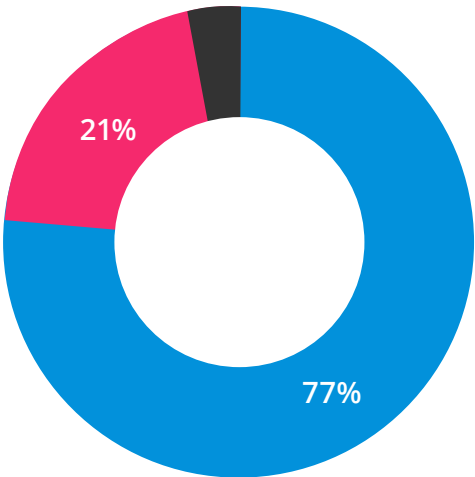


This supports our first major finding: “Customers are often unable to find the support solutions they’re looking for online.” Since it’s neither fast nor easy to locate solutions online, customers have to turn to more traditional methods of support to get the answers they need despite the fact that they would prefer not to contact support. Improving SEO and usability of self-support options will therefore substantially improve customer experience.

---

8. Marketing Chats, *The 5 most and least important attributes of customers’ experiences with brands.*, (MarketingCharts, 2017) <<https://www.marketingcharts.com/customer-centric/customer-experience-79078/attachment/cmocouncilsaphybris-most-least-important-attributes-great-customer-experience-jul2017>>

# I view organizations more positively if they offer self-service support



■ Agree   ■ Neither agree nor disagree   ■ Disagree

When it comes to making a positive impression on customers, our research reveals that organizations can make an immediate positive impression if they offer a form of self-service support. 77% of respondents said that they view organizations more positively if they do offer these types of self-service options for customers looking for support. While customers may view organizations more positively when they see these options, our research also reveals that when using these tools, if they're difficult to use or poorly designed, it can actually be worse than not having any self-serve options at all.

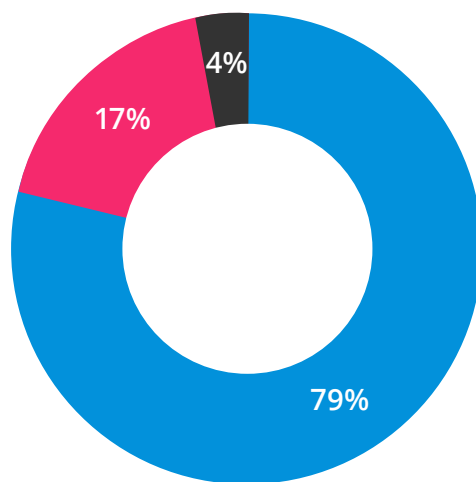
## Finding 3

**Customers expect organizations to offer self-service tools for support.**

# While customers expect organizations to offer self-service tools, it's better to offer none at all than to offer sub-par or ineffective self-service.

Our research indicates that providing customers with self-service support tools has become an expectation, with 79% of customers saying that they expect organizations to provide them with the ability to find answers themselves. This finding mostly aligns with and supports existing research by Microsoft, which found that 88% of customers expect organizations to offer self-service support.<sup>9</sup>

## I expect organizations to provide self-service support tools

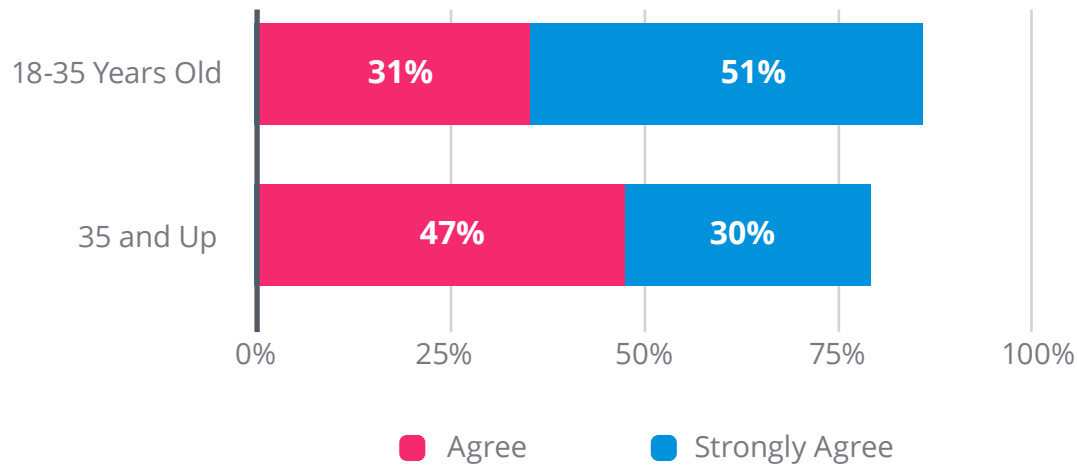


■ Agree   ■ Neither agree nor disagree   ■ Disagree

While 79% of respondents say that they expect organizations to provide self-service tools for customer support, these responses can be further broken down into either “agree” or “strongly agree.” When looking at those who strongly agreed that organizations should be providing these tools, most are less than 35 years old.



## Respondents who “agreed” and “strong agree” that they expected organizations to provide self-service support options



Age affects expectations, and we can therefore predict that the amount of those who strongly agree that organizations should be providing self-service options will only increase with time.

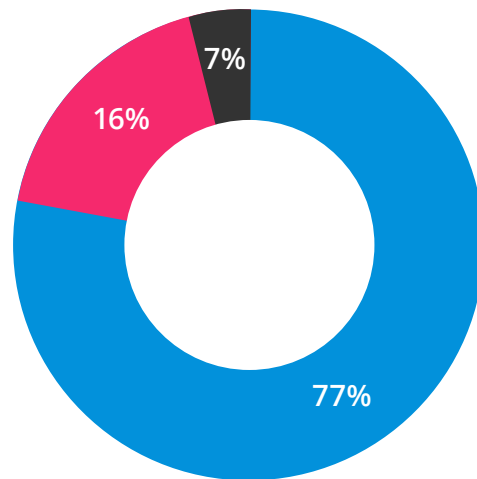
For organizations that do provide these options, our research shows that customers will reward them with a positive outlook right off the bat, since, as previously mentioned, 77% of respondents indicate that they view organizations more positively if they offer self-service support. There is, however, a catch. While customers will view organizations more positively if they have self-support tools, this is only true if these tools are *effective*. In other words, having them for the sake of having them isn't good enough—they need to be easy to use and deliver the results that customers want.

Customers value speed over anything else; having self-service tools that are ineffective and do nothing except waste time can actually harm your reputation.

---

9. Microsoft, *Global State of Customer Service, 2018*, (Microsoft, 2018) <<https://info.microsoft.com/rs/157-GQE-382/images/EN-US-CNTNT-ebook-2018-State-of-Global-Customer-Service.pdf>>

## Offering poor self-service support is worse than not offering any at all since it wastes my time

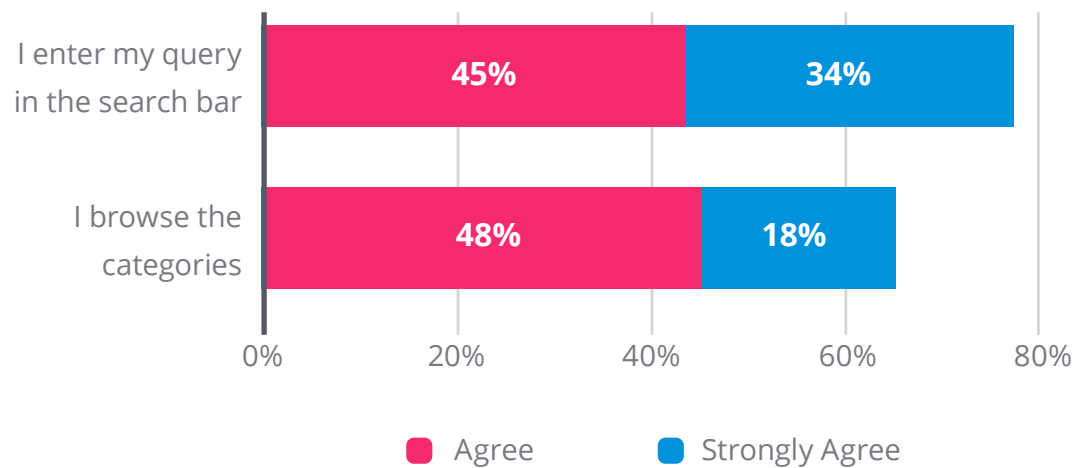


■ Agree   ■ Neither agree nor disagree   ■ Disagree

But what exactly constitutes poor support? What makes a self-service tool, such as an online community, ineffective? To answer this question, we look to customer behaviours; that is, what do they do when they use an online community? What actions do they take?

Ensuring that your online community is able to successfully execute the first steps that customers take in the community can help improve the experience. When it comes to self-service support through an online community, our research indicates that it is important for communities to have both a strong and visible search function, and clear categories that are easy to find/ easy to navigate.

## When you enter a community for support, what is the first thing you do?



When customers use a community for self-service support via the community homepage, 79% will first type their queries into the search bar. Additionally, 66% say that they would also take to browsing the categories as their first step in searching the community for support.

Online communities that capitalize on searchability and ensure that categories and the discussions that fall within those categories are accurate will be in a position to provide their customers with a good experience.

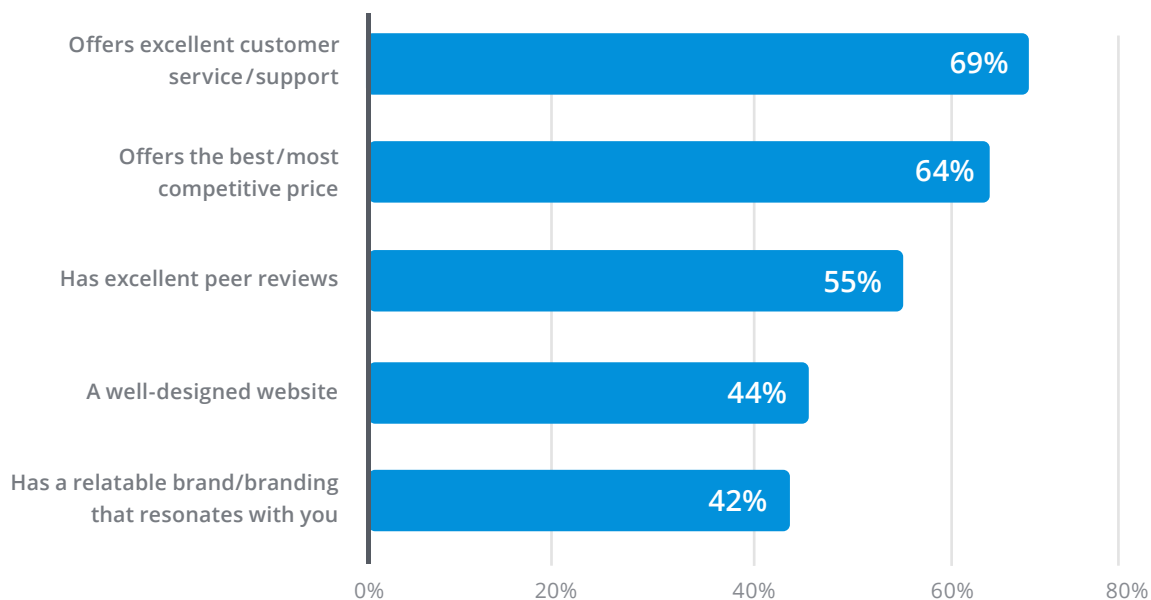
## Finding 4

**Customers trust organizations that focus on prioritizing customer service and support.**

# Customers trust organizations that not only offer excellent customer support, but also look the part—that is, their web design showcases their credibility.

Our research shows that organizations who offer excellent customer service and support are able to capture high levels of trust from customers (69%). This comes to no surprise since fast response times to issues is shown to have the most impact on customer experience, and so organizations that can offer fast and easy customer service support have the confidence of their customers.

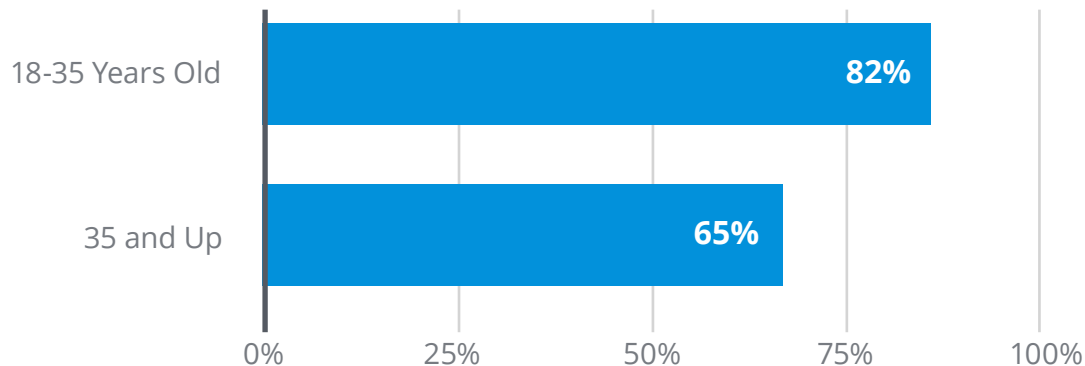
## Top 5 factors that impact trust in organizations and brands



In addition to excellent customer service, there are a number of other factors that can help organizations gain the trust of their customers. This includes offering great prices (64%), having excellent peer reviews (55%) and having a well designed website (44%).

Website design, in fact, plays a huge role in not just gaining the trust of customers, but also in ensuring that the organization seems credible.

### **I believe that how a company's website is designed is a good indicator of their credibility**

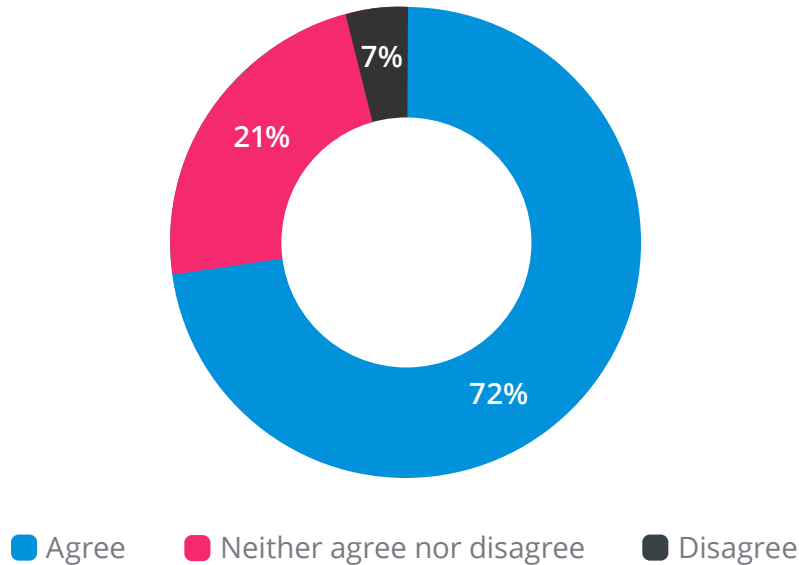


While 72% of respondents agree that how a website is designed is a good indicator of their credibility, the level of agreement varies depending on the age of the respondent. Interestingly, those who are less than 35 years old are far more likely to agree with this statement, with 82%, whereas only 65% of those who are older than 35 years old agree. Nevertheless, this statistic shows that customers make quick judgements about an organization merely based on their web presence.

This finding aligns with research conducted by Invision App, who found that judgments on website credibility are 75% based on a website's overall aesthetics.<sup>10</sup> This means that even if the pricing page is decent, the content is solid and the product is well-designed, if the website doesn't look aesthetically pleasing or if it's outdated, customers will likely already have a negative opinion about the brand.

This, however, works the other way around as well; if the website is carefully thought out and well-designed, organizations will be able to give themselves a positive boost before the customer takes any other action. Building credibility and trust are important, especially since 79% of customers say that they will purchase more from an organization with whom they've had a positive experience.

## A poorly designed website erodes my trust in the brand

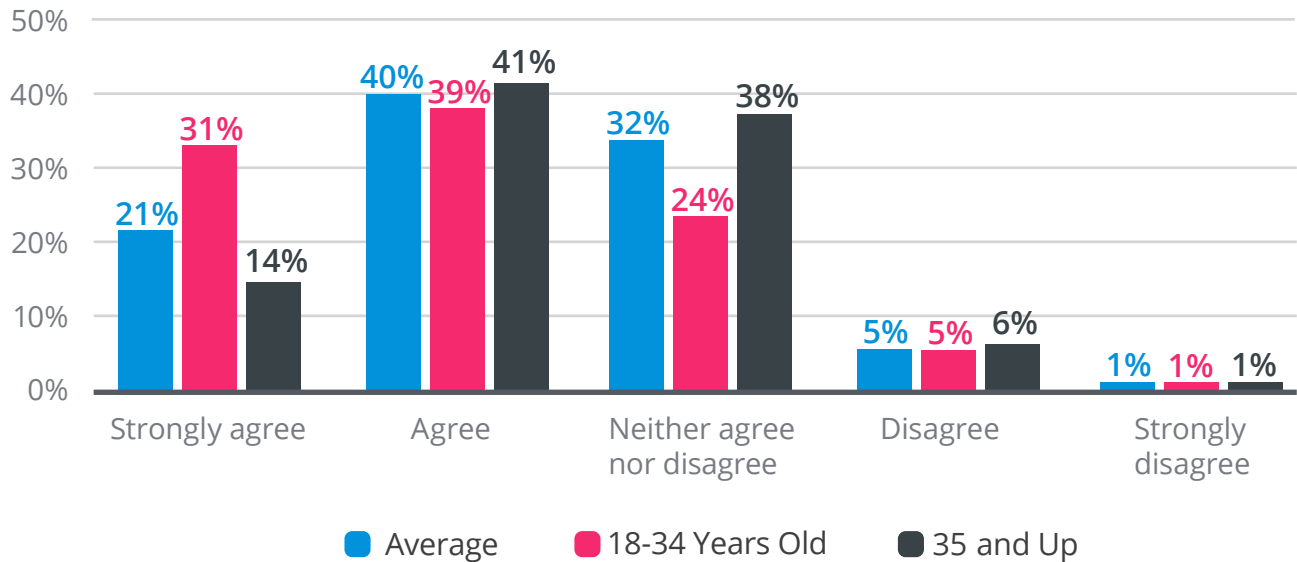


When it comes to trust itself, nearly three-quarters of respondents noted that a poorly designed website will erode their trust in the brand. Good design is something that customers value highly, especially when it comes to those who are under the age of 35—and that includes layouts on mobile devices. Unfortunately, many organizations make the mistake of not ensuring that their website design is responsive across all devices.

In fact, a study concluded by SAP ipl found that when organizations don't have sites that are mobile friendly, 48% of visitors take it as an indication that the business just doesn't care.<sup>11</sup> Ultimately, customers choose to trust in organizations that work to ensure that their websites not only look pleasant, but also deliver a seamless experience no matter what device is being used.

Having an active and visible support community is also something that can help build trust—not only because potential customers can see that there's an easy way to receive self-service support for any issues, but also because an active community means that their peers care a lot about the brand. Since 55% of customers say that excellent peer reviews help build trust, an active community full of supportive and enthusiastic peers is something that can increase the likelihood of a purchase.

## An active and visible support community increases my likelihood of making a purchase



As seen in the chart above, 62% of respondents agreed that an active and visible support community made them more likely to make a purchase. Additionally, an active support community is something that is much more valued by those who are less than 35 years old, since 70% of those in this age range agree that it contributes to the likelihood of them making a purchase. For those who are 35 or older, 55% agreed, which is still a significant number.

10. SAG ipl, *Updated! 104 Web Design Statistics 2020*, (SAG ipl, 2020) <<https://blog.sagipl.com/web-design-statistics/>>

11. Ibid



# Conclusion and Key Recommendations

Customers demand self-service support, and will view organizations that deliver on these demands in a much more positive light. Ultimately, organizations who empower their customers to quickly solve issues on their own will be heavily rewarded, as customers overwhelmingly prefer to take some sort of action to acknowledge an excellent experience.

While excellent customer experiences are made up of a number of different parts, the most distinctive factor that makes for a great experience is being able to have issues solved as fast as possible. For a vast majority of customers, this means solving issues on their own—which almost always begins with typing the search query in Google.

Self-service support options that do not show up on the first page of Google are more than likely to not be found via search engine, as most customers (68%) will not navigate to the second page. As a result, the best self-service tools to invest in should be SEO-friendly, and work to capitalize on SEO best practices. Due to their SEO capabilities, online communities and knowledge bases provide an excellent foundation for a strong self-service customer experience—which also happen to be options that customers actually want to use.

Indeed, 83% of respondents say they would use an online community for self-support and 91% say they would use a knowledge base. The problem is, while a majority of respondents would use these options, nearly half haven't been able to. Since existing research indicates that a majority of organizations have online communities (66%) and knowledge bases (63%), this finding is most likely to indicate that a majority of organizations have yet to master SEO practices—without which they are basically invisible to customers looking for support.<sup>12</sup> When customers are able to find the information they're looking for without having to contact a representative, over half say that it greatly increases their experience.

When it comes to building trust, organizations that focus their efforts on providing excellent customer service support will be able to capture the trust of a majority of customers. Again, this is due to the fact that customers, above all else, want fast response times to issues. On the

---

12. Op. Cit., *Online Communities: The Benefits and Impacts on Organisations 2019*.

chance that customers need to contact support because they can't find the answers they're looking for online, they expect to have quick and efficient customer support.

Self-serve expectations and the desire to do business with organizations who put effort into their web design are much higher among those who are less than 35 years old. The growing importance of these factors will ultimately make or break organizations moving forward, as the population continues to age.

After analyzing the research and data from this study, we present three key recommendations. These recommendations are intended to help organizations continue to meet the growing demands of customers and provide excellent customer experiences.

### **Recommendation 1: Invest in self-service platforms and tools that can be easily customized.**

Customers want organizations to provide them with self-service support options, but not all tools are suitable, nor are the vendors that support them. Our research reveals that customers care a lot about appearances and will make immediate judgements about an organization based purely on website aesthetics. Organizations should therefore look to procure self-service tools that can be easily customized, not only for design purposes, but also for user experience. Depending on the vendor and platform capabilities, branded online communities can be the best and easiest self-service support tool to customize. Customizations efforts should focus on four areas:

- Design is on brand and looks aesthetically pleasing
- Search bars are accessible and easy to use
- Categories are visible and named appropriately
- Works perfectly on mobile devices

Organizations that focus their design efforts on these areas will more than likely be able to deliver an excellent customer experience.

**Recommended reading:** [Transforming the Digital Customer Support Journey](#)

## **Recommendation 2: Make search engine optimization (SEO) a top priority.**

Customers are often unable to find the support they are looking for via their Google search. Organizations must work to improve their SEO so that their self-service support options can be easily found on the first page of Google. While organizations should work towards having the most informative content possible, there are certain on-page SEO factors that should always be kept in mind when looking to improve the SEO of a community forum:

- Meta descriptions, titles and page headings are included and use keywords
- The page URL is SEO friendly (includes keywords)
- Keywords are chosen appropriately and are placed carefully
- Internal and external links are included frequently, yet only when appropriate
- All images include alt text

By focusing SEO efforts on these areas, organizations will likely see a steady rank improvement on Google.

**Recommended reading:** [The Big Book of SEO](#)

## **Recommendation 3: Invest in customer success teams.**

Organizations that focus on their customers and delivering an excellent experience will be rewarded. Since our research reveals that good customer experiences have consistent and positive outcomes, such as a high likelihood of writing a review or telling family and friends, organizations should invest in improving experiences. Customer success teams should aim to connect with customers, build trust and rapport, encourage customers to use the online community and ensure that customers feel appreciated. The organization will benefit greatly from positive reviews and from having an active community since both of these are attractive features for potential customers.

**Recommended reading:** [Enabling Customer Success With Community Building](#)

# References

TSIA. The State of Social Support, 2018. TSIA: 2018.

< <https://www.tsia.com/App/UI/Viewfile.aspx?id=14687>>

SAG ipl. Updated! 104 Web Design Statistics 2020. SAG ipl: 2020.

<<https://blog.sagiapl.com/web-design-statistics/>>

Microsoft. Global State of Customer Service, 2018. Microsoft: 2018.

<<https://info.microsoft.com/rs/157-GQE-382/images/EN-US-CNTNT-ebook-2018-State-of-Global-Customer-Service.pdf>>

Marketing Chats. The 5 most and least important attributes of customers' experiences with brands. MarketingCharts: 2017.

<<https://www.marketingcharts.com/customer-centric/customer-experience-79078/attachment/cmocouncilsaphybris-most-least-important-attributes-great-customer-experience-jul2017>>

Hyken, Shep. Businesses Lose \$75 Billion Due To Poor Customer Service. Forbes: 2018.

<<https://www.forbes.com/sites/shephyken/2018/05/17/businesses-lose-75-billion-due-to-poor-customer-service/#3d1de3d516f9>>

Gingiss, Dan. Consumers Are More Willing To Share Positive Experiences Than Negative Ones. Forbes: 2019.

<<https://www.forbes.com/sites/dangingiss/2019/04/10/consumers-are-more-willing-to-share-positive-experiences-than-negative-ones/#228fa6d46a49>>

Vanilla Forums. Online Communities: The Benefits and Impacts on Organisations 2019.

Vanilla Forums: 2019.

<<https://pages.vanillaforums.com/online-communities-the-benefits-and-impacts-on-organizations-2019>>

higher  
logic

vanilla

VANILLAFORUMS.COM

1-866-845-0815

Join the conversation:

