

# Work For Customers, Not Personas

Written By Mathew Patterson · August 20, 2025



Illustration by Meredith Mielke

Imagine you're at a party, and a friend of a friend says, "I've heard some stories about you!" Do you assume they have a thorough knowledge of all the complexities and nuances that make you...you? No. More likely you spend 10 panicked seconds recalling the most embarrassing stories your friend knows and trying to figure out from this newcomer's face whether they have already heard them.

At least those stories include you in particular. Ideal customer profiles and personas are useful tools in our work lives, but they will never correctly describe the fullness of any actual person who uses your products and services. They are a helpful generalization at best.

The only way to really know and understand your customers is to hear from them directly. In customer-facing roles that happens automatically, but what about the rest of the company? Well, that's where your customer service platform can help.

## Why real customer contact matters

Should an engineer, an accountant, or a logistics manager really take time away from their actual workload to spend time connecting with customers? Yes! Here's why:

- **Learn how real customers think and talk.** Seeing a customer describe your products or services in their own words, as opposed to how you intended them to be used or how you talk about them internally, can be surprising and educational.
- **Share internal knowledge with customers and staff.** The people who build products, decide on the pricing, or manage shipping have important context about why things work the way they do and what might happen in the future. Sharing that information with the relevant people can create much more satisfying customer interactions. That knowledge may be the difference between "I'm sorry, we don't plan to add that feature," and "We're not planning to add that feature, but let me explain why, and how the changes we are planning will work for you."
- **Inform priorities across the business.** Companies who understand who their customers actually are (as opposed to who they think they are), and who know what they care about, can make smarter strategic decisions with less risk.
- **Discover and capture customer insights.** The customer service inbox might be the only chance you have to hear directly from many of your customers. During the course of a support conversation they may share their thoughts on your competition, your pricing, what they struggle with, what they would pay more for, and so much more. You just need a [way to find and collect those customer insights](#).

Given the advantages listed above, you might expect people across your company to jump at the opportunity to hear from customers directly. However, that's often not the case, so you may have a little work to do.

## The causes of resistance to customer contact

When planning to involve more of your team in customer contact, it is helpful to consider the most likely reasons they are not already interacting with customers:

- **They undervalue customer contact:** For most staff, it's likely nobody has ever told them why customer contact matters in their role or explained why they should care about it. That information gap needs to be addressed first.
- **"Not my job" syndrome:** Some people see customer contact as other people's problem to handle and would rather keep clean boundaries on their own areas of work.
- **Fear of making a mistake:** Many people really do understand the value of great customer service, and they're worried that they'll make mistakes if they try to talk to customers directly.
- **Limited time available:** How long will it take to "connect with customers"? When the time investment required is high, or even just unclear, it can be difficult to commit to the effort.
- **Lack of support from higher up:** Underlying almost every other factor is the impact of leadership that does not value customer contact for non-customer-facing teams. If managers and leaders are not encouraging, demonstrating and supporting customer contact efforts, they are always going to be a lower priority.

## How to encourage whole company customer communication

Any company can increase the number of people who have direct customer contact (or who are at least exposed to customer conversations). Look at the suggestions below to find the approaches most viable in your particular role and company.

### 1. Get leaders on board first

Everybody takes their direction from the top, both explicitly and by paying attention to what their leaders talk about and prioritize. Ideally, have your executives and managers spend time with customers, even in very short bursts, and that practice will spread more easily throughout the company.

Even if they can't make time for a support queue session, look for ways leaders can share stories of specific customers and their experiences with your company. Having leaders tell those stories and relate company strategy to real customers is a powerful message to the whole team.

### 2. Reduce the fear factor

Some people outside of customer-facing roles will hesitate to email customers because they worry about their language skills, technical understanding, or capacity to follow up.

One approach that has worked inside Help Scout is to have those folks write a draft answer but let a customer service professional review it before the answer is sent. That can build their confidence and reduce any risk of a low-quality response being sent.

Here are three more ways to reduce hesitation and fear:

- **Start with a view-only option.** If your support tools allow for it, give people access to read and follow customer conversations without being able to send replies. They will be exposed to customer language and information, and they'll also see how those questions are handled by others.
- **Use internal notes.** Let your staff share their insights about how products are built, why policies exist, or whatever else they have deep knowledge about without forcing them to explain it directly to customers. [Internal notes are an excellent tool](#) for sharing that information with frontline teams.
- **Share information with your team.** A very low-effort way to increase exposure to people in different areas of your company, and build them relevant reports. For example, use tags to [collect product feedback](#), and include some real customer quotes alongside the aggregate numbers. Let them know they can dig in to see the actual conversations if they are interested.

### 3. Reduce the cost of customer contact

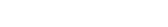
If the time and effort needed to connect with customers is a major concern, here are a few ways to limit those costs while encouraging people to take part.

- **Review your licensing options.** Can you add "reporting only" or otherwise-limited users to your help desk tools? That might make it more feasible to open up access to more people, even if they don't use it every day.
- **Offer time-limited ways to learn from customers.** An open-ended "We'd like everyone to spend some time in the queue" is a very hard sell. A better approach is to create specific, time-bound opportunities for interaction. For example, during Help Scout company retreats, every team member attends to a couple of "support power hours."
- **Build in customer contact from the start.** Have all your new hires spend some time reading real customer queries. If it is part of their job from the start, it is less likely to be perceived as an additional cost.

Customer contact creates potential for profit

No matter which business you are in or what your role is, the better you understand your real customers, the better you will be able to deliver what they need. Finding ways to keep everyone in the company closer to customers will enable better decision-making, inform your products and services, and help strengthen your customer-centric culture.

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After running a support team for years, Mat joined Help Scout, where he helps people deliver better online customer support. Subscribe to [The Supportive Newsletter](#) or find him on [LinkedIn](#).

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