



2021 Report

The Future of Support Has Arrived: It's Conversational

FIVE TRANSFORMATIVE TRENDS



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The conversation has changed: the transformation of customer support

Intro from



Kaitlin Pettersen

Global Director of Customer Support at Intercom

Today, customer support is undergoing massive, irreversible change.

A recent survey* we ran with nearly 600 support leaders revealed that the majority of support teams are struggling to manage increasing conversation volumes. Simultaneously, 73% of support leaders say customer expectations of excellent service are rising, but only 42% are certain they're meeting those expectations.

Until recently, due to technological limitations, most support teams faced an impossible choice – stay personal with customers or get efficient. Staying personal meant offering expensive, unscalable services like

1:1 phone calls or 24/7 real-time chat. Efficiency meant deflecting customer issues through impersonal forms and “do not reply” emails.

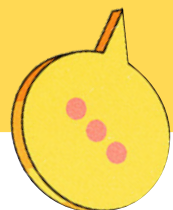
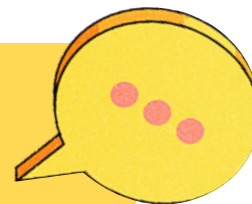
This type of “good enough” support is no longer good enough. Today, modern customers expect both fast and personal support. But under the weight of outdated tools of the past, overworked support teams are struggling to keep pace and achieve that seemingly elusive balance. The antidote? Conversational support – the new way to deliver support that bridges the gap between what customers want and what our teams can realistically deliver. Conversational support empowers us to deliver efficient, personal support through a messenger-first experience.

“Many companies – across both B2B and B2C – are turning to conversational support to manage high conversation volumes and exceed customer expectations.”

Our survey revealed that many companies – across both B2B and B2C – are turning to conversational support to manage high conversation volumes more efficiently and exceed customer expectations. By combining human, self-serve, and proactive support, they're getting ahead of known problems, automatically answering repetitive queries, and quickly resolving complex issues.

*Intercom commissioned an independent market research firm to survey a random sample of 593 support managers and leaders based in the U.S. The study's margin of error is +/-4% at the 95% confidence level.

“Even during turbulent times like the COVID-19 pandemic, conversational support is helping support teams enhance their customer relationships, increase their efficiency, and boost their CSAT scores.”



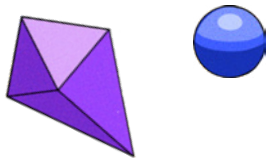
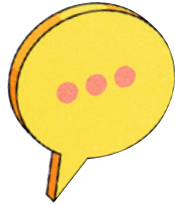
Unlike messenger-based tools of the past, conversational support technology is so much more than “live chat.” Powered by a modern business messenger, bots, and automation, it scales your ability to answer more questions from more customers without increasing headcount, budget, or hours logged. Our study showed that even during turbulent times like the COVID-19 pandemic, conversational support is helping support leaders enhance their customer relationships, increase their efficiency, and boost their CSAT scores.

With all of these benefits, it’s perhaps no surprise that many support leaders plan to invest more in conversational support capabilities in 2021, including proactive support, chatbots, and automation. There are five key trends leading the charge – in this report, we dive into each one and share our best tips for staying ahead of the conversational curve.

Enjoy!

Kaitlin Pettensen

5 conversational trends transforming support



Trend 1

From reactive to proactive support

Trend 2

Satisfying customers' need for speed

Trend 3

Supercharging team efficiency

Trend 4

Bridging the customer expectation gap

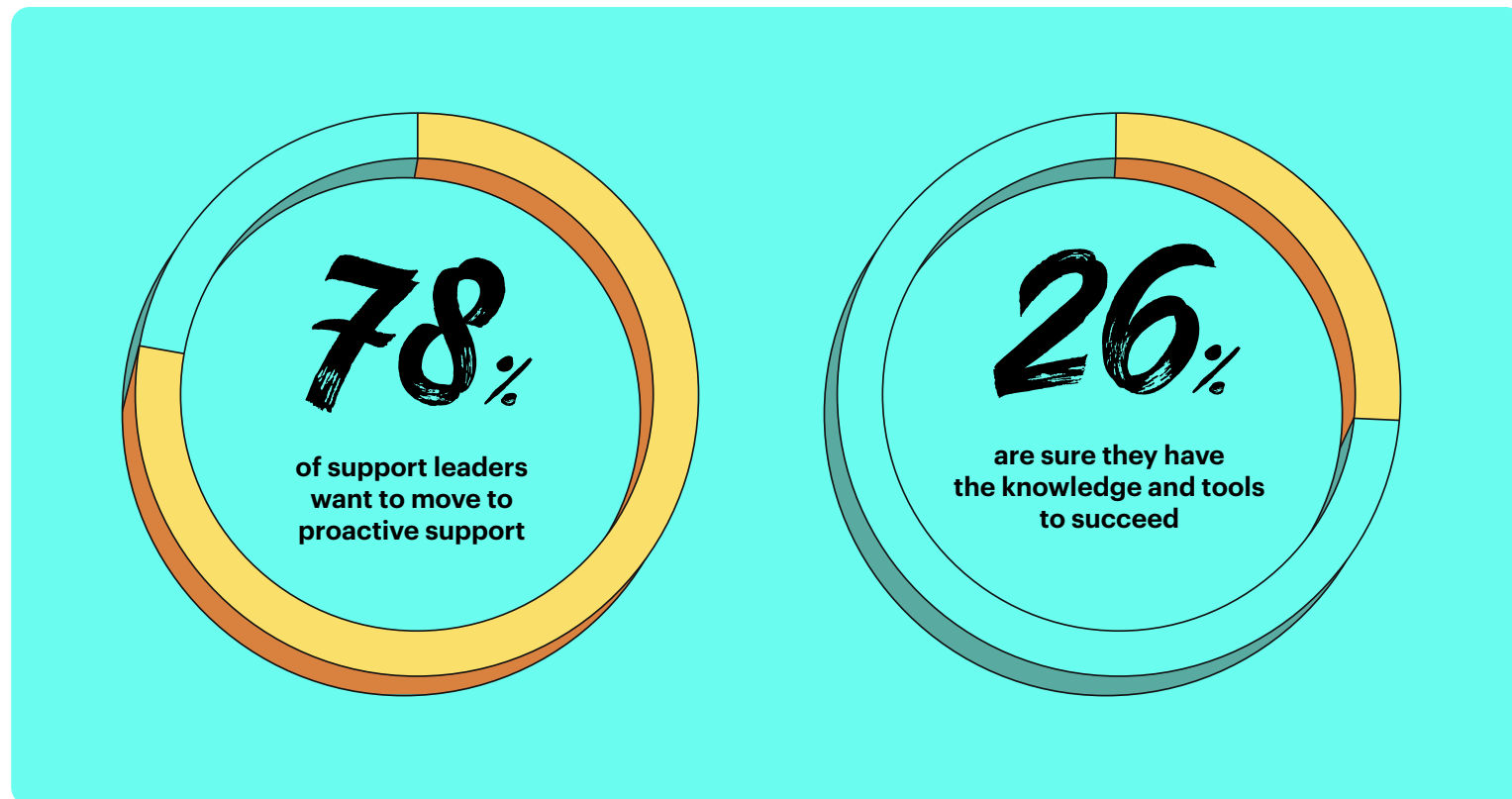
Trend 5

From "cost center" to value driver

Trend #1 From reactive to proactive support

Today, the typical reactive support strategy is to let common issues roll in for support teams to address, but this approach not only overwhelms your team, it also means customers frequently have to wait hours or even days to get the help they need. It turns out there's a real appetite for that to change.

Our survey revealed that 78% of support leaders are keen to move from a reactive to a more proactive approach with their support. It's perhaps no surprise when you consider that proactive support is your first line of defense – empowering your team to pre-emptively solve known issues before they ever hit your inbox, which also keeps customers informed and satisfied.



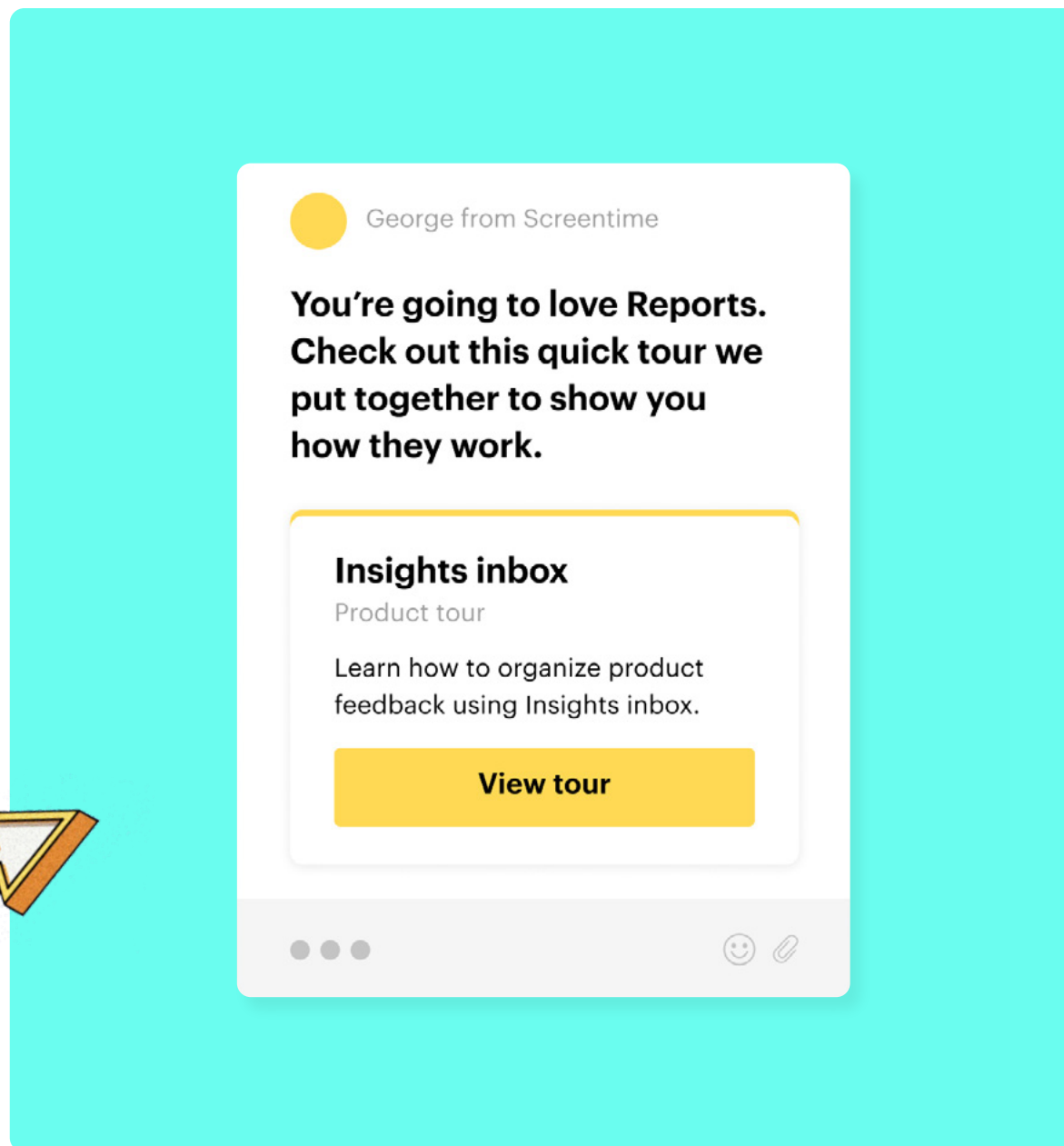
Traditionally proactive support may have been seen as the sole domain of marketing or product teams. But with rising conversation volumes coupled with increased customer expectations, proactive support is now a top priority for many support leaders for the year ahead. So, what's been holding them back from taking the

leap? Some 74% of support leaders surveyed aren't confident they have the knowledge and tools to succeed.

3 simple steps to start offering proactive support

1 Pre-emptively resolve questions with proactive messages

Instead of deflecting queries, you can prevent common issues from occurring in the first place. If there's a known issue, like a delivery delay or a bug in your product, you can send a targeted outbound message alerting customers and providing helpful next steps. You can also onboard and educate new customers with product tours, so they have all of the information they need to get started with your product or service and overcome common hurdles.



2 Identify common pain points and FAQs

Your proactive support is only as powerful as the customer insights that fuel it. With a modern conversational support tool, you'll be able to quickly spot your customers' most pressing questions, and dig into how effective your team is at resolving them. Look out for simple recurring issues that are eating into your team's bandwidth – these are the exact issues to address proactively.

3 Partner cross-functionally for maximum impact

Creating a great customer experience is everyone's responsibility in your company – not just support. Make sure your team has open lines of communication with every customer-facing team – from product to marketing to sales – so you can share eye-opening, critical insights that help drive business growth, improve your product or service, and more.



“Don't think about support like a queue that needs to be processed. Think about it like a feedback loop for your product that you're constantly optimizing around.”



Shirley Shaw, Head of Customer Success Engineering at Clearbit

Trend #2 Satisfying customers' need for speed

Answering mind-numbing, repetitive queries like “How do I update my password?” can feel like Groundhog Day for your team. Not only is this time-consuming, it's also a heavy drain on your support team's resources and morale. No one wins when your team is stuck running up an endless ticketing treadmill – especially not your customers! Keeping pace with a constant flow of support tickets means all of your customers will have to wait longer for a response.

Modern customers are used to living in an on-demand world where their every whim can be met 24/7 – think: on-demand fast food, instant news updates, and same-day deliveries. Well-crafted customer service chatbots satisfy customers' need for speed and control by providing immediate resolutions at the right time, in the right place.

Support leaders who automate support with chatbots are:

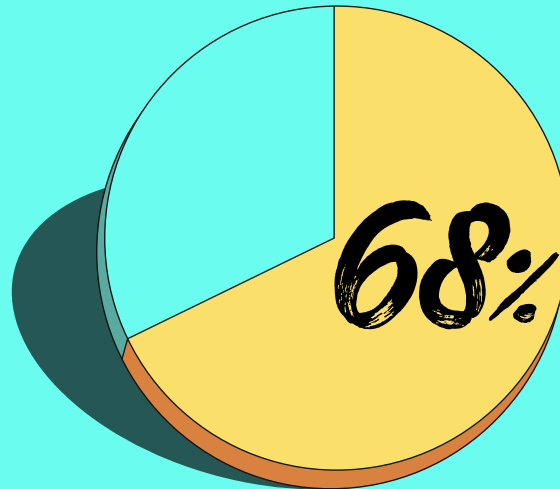
60%

more likely to report an improvement in resolution times

and

30%

more likely to report an increase in customer satisfaction



of support leaders who already use chatbots plan to invest more in them in the coming year.

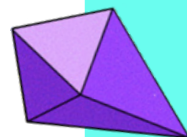
Our survey revealed that chatbots drive significant gains for businesses and customers alike: support leaders who automate support with chatbots are 60% more likely to report an improvement in resolution times and are 30% more likely to report an increase

in customer satisfaction, than those who don't. With all of these gains, it's perhaps no surprise that 68% of support leaders who already use bots plan to invest more in them in the coming year.

3 simple steps to start automating repetitive tasks with bots

1 Almost instantly resolve simple queries

When a customer writes in with a quick question, like “How do I change my credit card details?” they expect a close-to-instant response. A powerful way to satisfy customers’ need for speed is to set up a bot that immediately resolves these types of simple, frequent queries. With Intercom, you can use [Resolution Bot](#) to speed up self-service even further by surfacing relevant answers based on what customers are typing – before they even hit the enter key.



How do I change my credit card details?

To add, change or remove your payment card, simply head to “Billing details” in “Your account” and click “Update card”.

Once you’ve added your new card, click “Save”. Let us know if you have any trouble 😊

Did that answer help, or are you looking for something else?

That helped 👍

Show me more 👁️

2 Put your bot to work after hours

“Just because your team is fast asleep, grabbing a coffee, or in a team meeting doesn’t mean customers will pause their questions. Even after hours, they’ll still expect a fast, transparent response. You can set up an Out of Office bot to set customer expectations 24/7 and let them know when you’ll reply. Your bot can even follow up with helpful next steps, like encouraging customers to check out your FAQs.

3 Triage issues to the right team

Instead of requiring customers to fill out lengthy emails or forms, you can set up a bot to gather conversation data in a way that feels lightweight, faster, and more conversational. Then, the bot can automatically route each query to the right support team. So if someone has a billing issue that’s high priority, for example, the bot can gather that data and triage the issue to your Billing team.



“Resolution Bot has been a tremendous help to our team and is saving our customers 3,600 hours per month with its instant answers.”



Gabriel Madureira, Senior Director of Growth Operations and Web at MongoDB

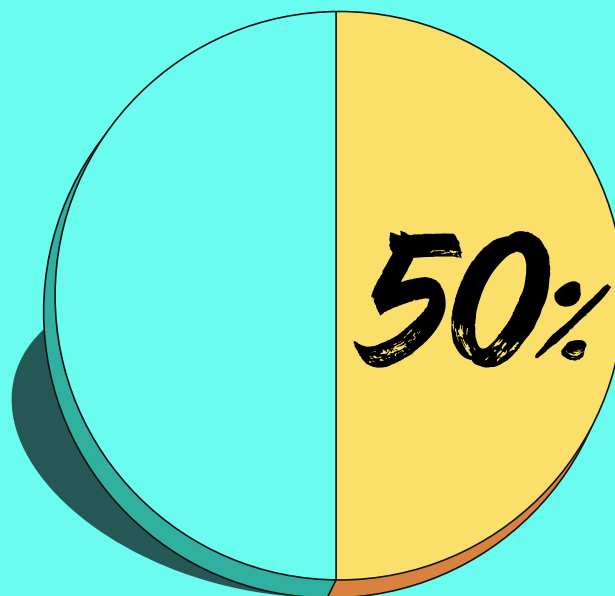
Trend #3 Supercharging team efficiency

Your support team may *appear* to possess superhero powers, like the ability to calm angry customers and solve multiple complex issues simultaneously. But they're still human, and being human comes with productivity limits. Unless your team is supported with the right tools and workflows, they could risk burning out.

So, it comes as no surprise that support leaders consider increasing workflow efficiencies to be one of the top three areas for investment in 2021 (it's up there with proactive support and automated chatbot support). Taking mundane, repetitive tasks off your team's hands will add more fuel to their tank and leave them with more time and headspace to manage critical queries that require a specialized human touch.

However, increasing workflow efficiencies is also one of the top three reported challenges. So what strategies do support leaders plan to leverage to help stem the tide of incoming queries and reduce the burden on their overworked teams? Automation

is key. Some 50% of those surveyed are planning to invest in automation – like automated workflows and chatbots – to increase their team's efficiency in the coming year.



of support leaders plan to invest more in automation to increase their team's efficiency in the coming year.



3 simple steps to begin supercharging your team efficiency

1

Boost your automated workflows with bots

One of the most efficient and personal ways you can boost your automated workflows is with – yes, you guessed it – bots. For example, you can set up a bot to automatically collect relevant data on your customers' queries, route relevant issues to the right team, and escalate the most urgent issues so they immediately reach the top of your priority queue.

The screenshot displays a chat window for a customer named Scott Balenson. The chat header shows the customer's name, a 'Reply in 14m' button, and various action icons. The chat history includes:

- A customer message: "Hi, I can't change my credit card. I keep getting an error message." (30m · Seen)
- A bot response: "👋 Scott – sorry to hear. I found an open issue on the bug. I'll link this conversation to it, and will let you know as soon as it's resolved." (20m · Seen)
- A yellow callout box: "Importer issue Brad commented in Credit card input failing. You'll get another note when the issue is closed." with a refresh icon.

The right sidebar contains a 'Conversation details' panel with the following information:

- Urgency: High
- Product area: Importer
- Type: Bug
- ID: 43894839

Below this is a 'Related' section with a 'Customize' link, showing a card for Scott Balenson with a location pin, a calendar icon, and 'Last seen 2m ago'. At the bottom, there are sections for 'Latest conversations' (showing a snippet: "I'm having trouble with the... 30m") and 'Recent page views'.

2 Create a connected tech stack

Some 61% of support leaders surveyed said their team hit roadblocks once a month because their support stack isn't integrated with technology from other teams. Whatever tools you're using – whether that's social media, call center or even sales tools – make sure your conversational support solution automatically syncs data across systems. This will save your team time switching between tools and searching for siloed information.

3 Streamline your support with apps in the messenger

Another time-saving tip is to use apps in the messenger to streamline tasks you usually carry out with your favorite tools. For example, you can hop on a quick call with a high-priority customer, check in on order statuses, and manage subscriptions all from the messenger – without switching tools and losing context.

The logo for GURU, featuring the word "GURU" in a teal, sans-serif font inside a white rounded rectangle with a thin teal border.

“Adding apps to Inbox has empowered our support team to quickly and accurately resolve customer questions. With the adoption of apps we have decreased our median first response time by 18%.”



June Zhang, Customer Support Manager at Guru

Trend #4 Bridging the customer expectation gap

It's no secret that customer expectations are higher than ever before. Our study revealed a huge gap between what customers want and what support teams can realistically deliver – 73% of support leaders say customer expectations are increasing, but only 42% believe they're meeting those expectations.

Improving customer satisfaction (and subsequently loyalty) hinges on a company being able to close the gap between what customers expect – fast and personal support – and what a company actually delivers.

Again, support teams are turning to chatbots to satisfy modern customers' need for speed and control. The good news is that support teams that use chatbots to automate simple conversations are 27% more confident that they're prepared to meet accelerating customer expectations, compared with teams who don't.



73%

of support leaders say customer expectations are increasing

but only

42%

believe they're meeting those expectations








Support teams who use chatbots to automate conversations are 27% more likely to say they're prepared to meet accelerating customer expectations, compared with teams who don't.

3 simple steps to start exceeding customer expectations

1 Set clear expectations

No matter what your business looks like, unmet and unclear expectations are the root of all heartache. A good customer experience is rooted in setting crystal clear customer expectations. When a customer writes in, set up your bot to let them know how long they're going to wait. And if the wait is on the longer side, then make sure to meet that expectation.

 Do: Set clear expectations	 Don't: Leave people guessing
 <p>Hey there, the team is out of the office right now 🌙, but they'll be back in a few hours.</p> <p>Just leave your email address and they'll reply as soon as they can.</p> <p>Email: sara@zenapp.com</p>  <p>Thanks so much, Sara! 😊</p>	 <p>Awesome, so glad you got in touch. Our team can't wait to reply.</p> <p>Okay, thanks. When will that be? How will they get in touch?</p> <p>Hello?</p> <p>...anyone there?</p>

2 Empathy is about anticipating needs, not saying nice things

We strongly believe automated interactions can still be empathetic interactions – but true empathy isn't necessarily what you think. Designing an empathetic chatbot has nothing to do with making the bot say nice things. It has everything to do with understanding your customers' context and creating bots that accurately anticipate and address their needs.

3 Above all, be personal

Nothing says "I don't value your business" like a canned, generic response. With a modern conversational support tool, you can automatically gather rich context about each customer, like what plan they're on, what company they work for, and what type of issue they have. Then, when a customer writes in you'll have all of the data you need to provide a fast, personal, empathetic response.



“When someone writes to us, we should know who they are, what their experience has been leading up to that, and make it feel like they’re reaching out to a friend that’s there to help, versus a case number.”



Kristen Swanson, Customer Experience Chief of Staff at Slack

Trend #5 From “cost center” to value driver

Today, more and more businesses are realizing the true bottom-line value that incredible customer service brings to a business – customer loyalty, retention, and advocacy to name but a few. In fact, customers don’t just seek out higher quality service – they’re willing to pay more for it.

Conversational support can help you elevate the support function within your company, so your team can go from drowning in reactive conversations (the old way) to carving out more time to become strategic, revenue-generating business partners (the new conversational way).

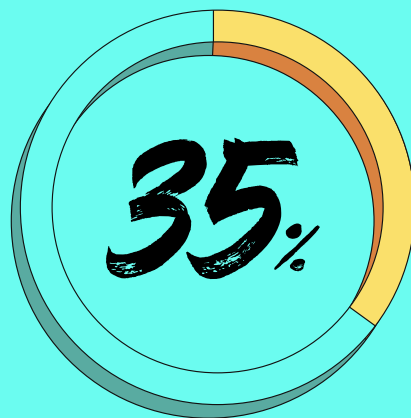
30%

of support leaders plan to measure their team’s impact on customer retention in the coming year

and

25%

plan to do the same for renewals



Companies who use chatbot technology are 35% more likely to be able to track their support ROI than those who don’t.

Having a positive impact on revenue generation is something many support leaders are actively working towards – our survey revealed that 30% plan to measure their team’s impact on customer retention in the coming year and 25% plan to do

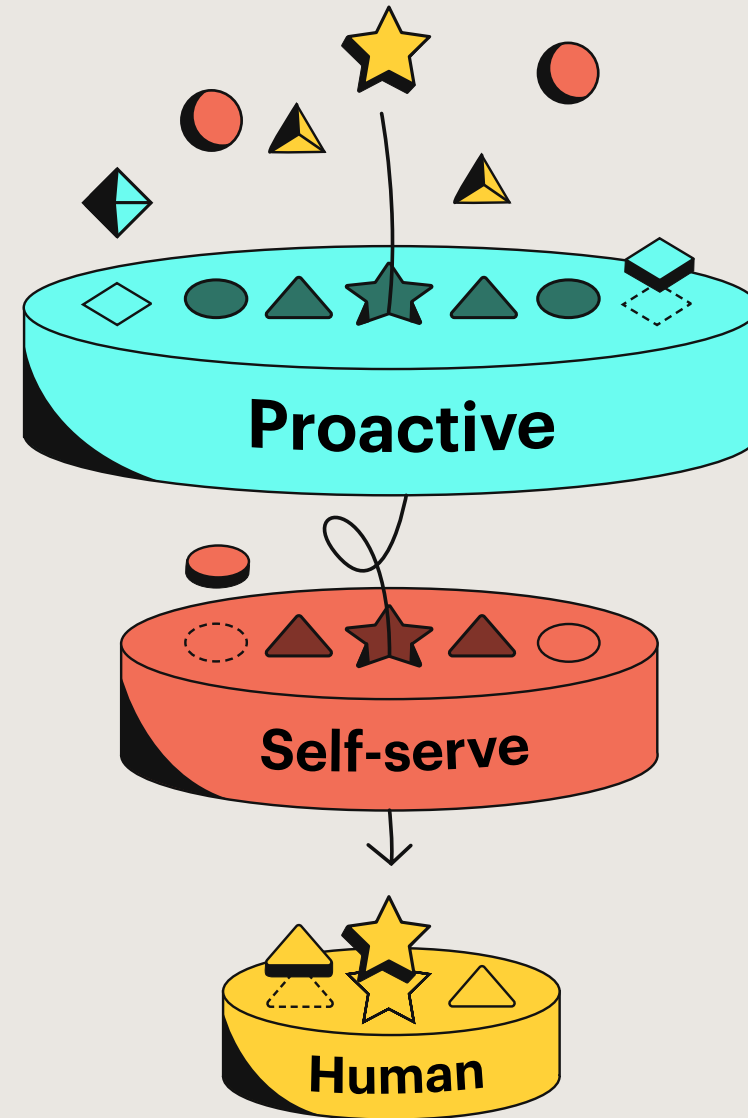
the same for renewals. Once again, time-saving bots can help you get ahead of the curve – our data revealed that support teams who use chatbots are 35% more likely to be able to track their support team ROI than those who don’t.



3 simple steps to take your support to the next level

1 Win back time with the Conversational Support Funnel

Many support teams get stuck in the day-to-day work of establishing a healthy baseline for customer experience and efficiency, leaving little time to drive business outcomes. By implementing the Conversational Support Funnel, proactive and self-serve support resolve most frequent queries, freeing your support team to focus on more critical work, like boosting customer loyalty and retention.



2 Focus on moving the needle

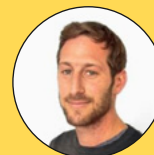
No one knows your customers and their pain points better than your support team. They're better placed than anyone else in your business to champion the voice of the customer to help improve your product roadmap and provide a great customer experience at every stage of the funnel, boosting customer loyalty and advocacy. Focus your team's attention on these needle-moving activities.

3 Measure business outcomes

Rather than solely tracking overhead costs, it pays to focus on measuring business outcomes, like customer retention, renewals, etc. After all, what good is a single positive interaction if a customer runs into another issue and churns two days later? By tracking bottom-line metrics like retention and renewals, you'll be able to prove the long-term impact of your support to the powers that be.



“We’re seeing a big motion across all businesses on how an amazing customer service experience drives loyalty overall.”



Tom Ronen, Head of Customer Success at Monday.com

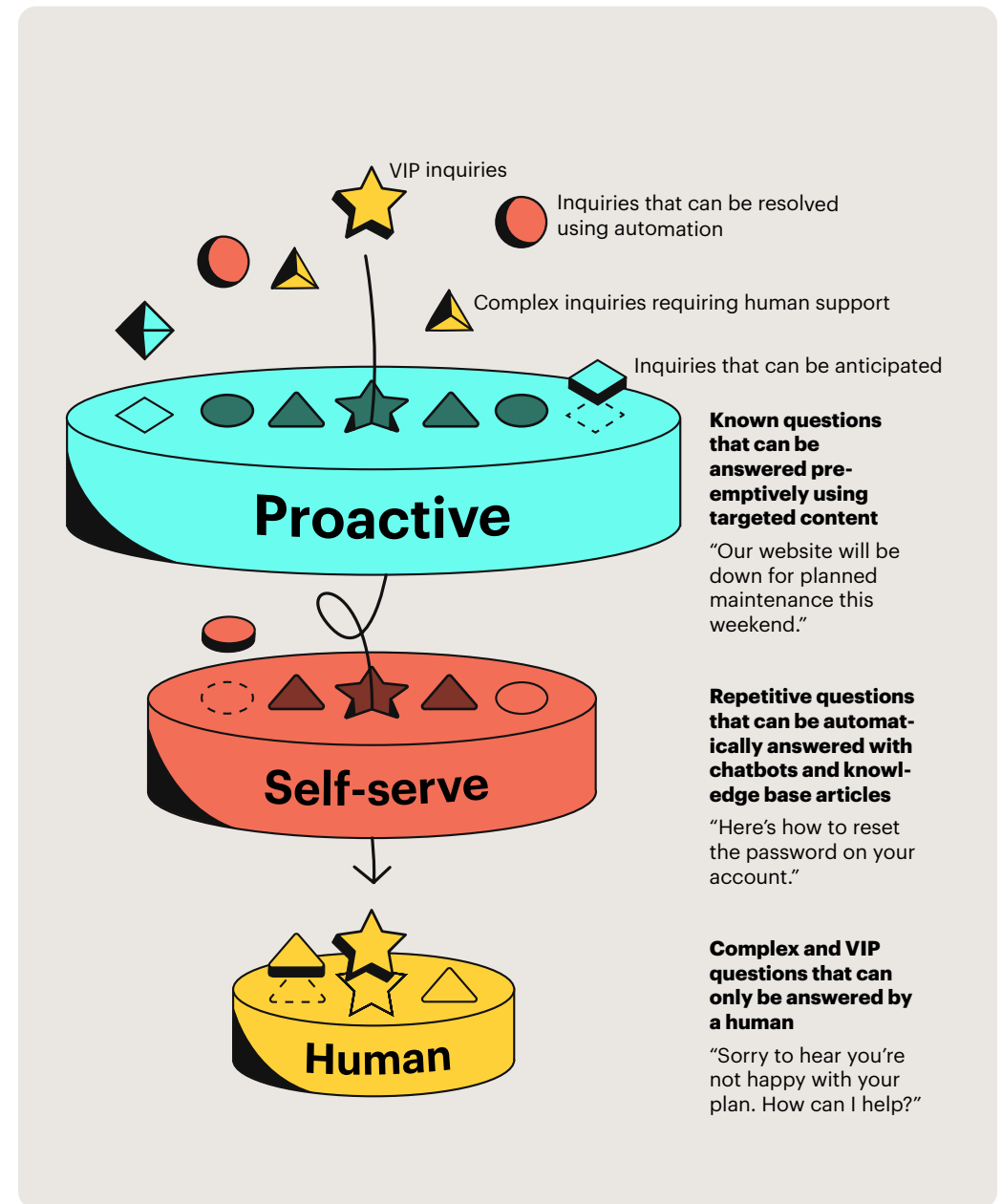
Get the framework: Intercom's Conversational Support Funnel

Some support teams are worried that by adopting a conversational support approach, they'll open the support floodgates. That fear is completely valid if all you do is add a messenger to your website and let your support team manually answer every question that rolls in, regardless of priority. Of course, this approach is a recipe for conversation overload, which will result in longer wait times and customer dissatisfaction. Not to mention team burnout!

Instead, what you need is a clear framework that helps you scale conversational support. That means that no matter how much your conversation volume grows or whatever resources you have to hand, you can still excel and provide customers with the fast, personal support they deserve.

At Intercom, we use a framework called the Conversational Support Funnel that combines three support layers:

- **Proactive support** which helps you get ahead of known problems before they arise using outbound messages and product tours.
- **Self-serve support** which resolves simple, repetitive queries through automated bots and contextual help content.
- **Human support** which helps you resolve complex and VIP issues seamlessly with apps and automation.



The funnel is the most effective, efficient way to deliver a great customer experience, at scale.

Each layer (proactive, self-serve, and human support) excels at different tasks, with each one interacting seamlessly with and boosting the others.

The Conversational Support Funnel is the modern way that the most customer-focused organizations are efficiently harnessing the power of messenger-first experiences. Why not join them before your competitors do?

Where proactive support excels	Where self-serve support excels	Where human support excels
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pre-emptively answering known questions • Educating customers on your product • Flagging critical issues and updates • Reducing conversation volume 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Automatically resolving common questions • Reducing hold times • Quick routing to the right place • Reducing conversation volume 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Managing complex questions • Solving technical problems • Managing high-value accounts • Handling emotionally charged conversations
<p>Better efficiency and a better customer experience</p>		

You can learn all about the Conversational Support Funnel and how to get started with it **here**.

