

Needle Inc.

Chat services firm
puts passionate brand
advocates to work to
create an engaging online
experience.

by **Susan Hash**, Contact Center Pipeline

If your company produces a quality product or service, then your customer base likely already includes a segment of brand advocates—those customers who love your products, are repeat purchasers and who enthusiastically pass along positive word-of-mouth to family, friends, coworkers and on social networks.

Customers are often much more engaged with a brand than the company's sales and service staff. Why? The people who would generally purchase and use the products typically don't work in the call center.

But wouldn't it be great if they did?

Enter Needle Inc. The Salt Lake City-based chat services firm provides companies with a cloud-based staff of their most passionate product enthusiasts to offer shopping advice, assist customers with the online experience and provide sales support. CEO Morgan Lynch calls it "fan sourcing," and it has had a remarkable impact on sales, customer satisfaction and Net Promoter Scores for online retailers like Skullcandy and Under Armour.

"There are fans and brand advocates out there who are willing to interface with your customers to provide sales and support," says Lynch. "They're the perfect people to talk to your customers because they own the products, they love them and they can offer a very unique perspective."

Connecting with Like-Minded People

A real-time chat with a knowledgeable product fan can be a powerful experience, especially among Millennials (those in their mid-teens to mid-30s), who prefer to interact with people like themselves. A recent study by voice-of-the-customer solutions provider Bazaarvoice and the Center for Generational Kinetics found that, when making buying decisions, Millennials increasingly turn to the opinions of like-minded consumers—especially those with direct experience of the brand, product or service—rather than recommendations from friends, family and colleagues.

So how does Needle make that distinction on its clients' sites? It starts with a more personal interface. Once a visitor connects to the chat application, they are presented with a photo of the individual with whom they will be chatting, along with that person's profile and how long they have used the company's products. Needle's system uses geolocation software to match customers with the chat agents—or "Needlers," as the company refers to them—who are in the same geographic region or area, "so that you're talking to somebody who should understand you and relate to you," says Lynch.

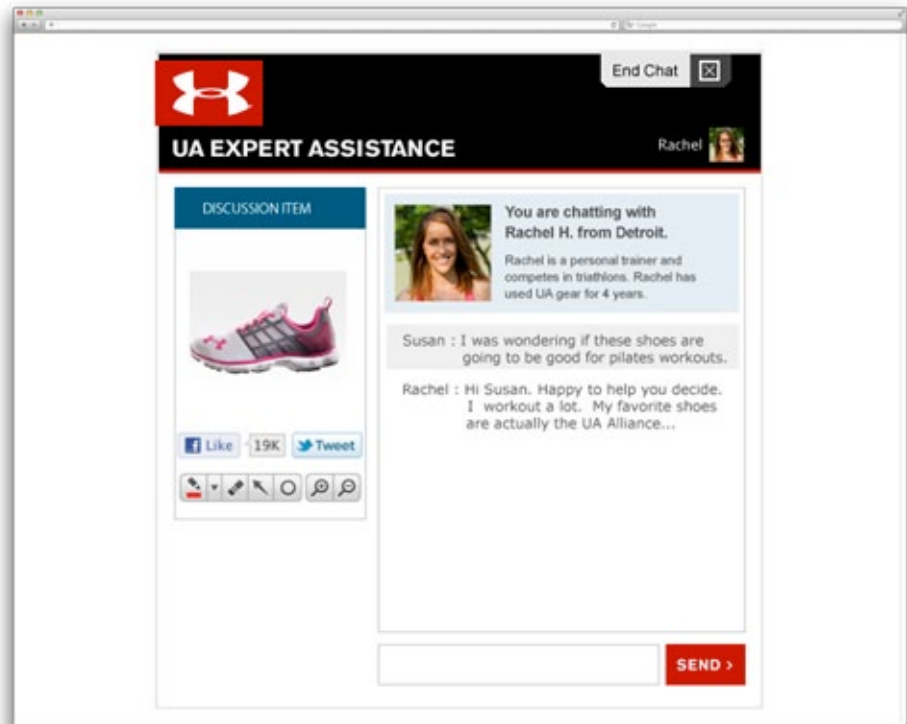
The interaction itself is focused on an unscripted, natural dialogue. In fact, Needle actually tracks and limits the amount of shortcuts that chat agents can use.

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“The brands that we work with want to deliver an authentic, incredible experience, so we’re targeting the opposite of the typical type of ‘robo-chat,’ where it feels like you’re talking to a robot because the agent is hitting function keys and providing canned responses,” says Lynch. “Our model is built around natural dialogue and letting the humans do what they’re really good at, which is talking, relating and helping to make powerful, personal recommendations.”

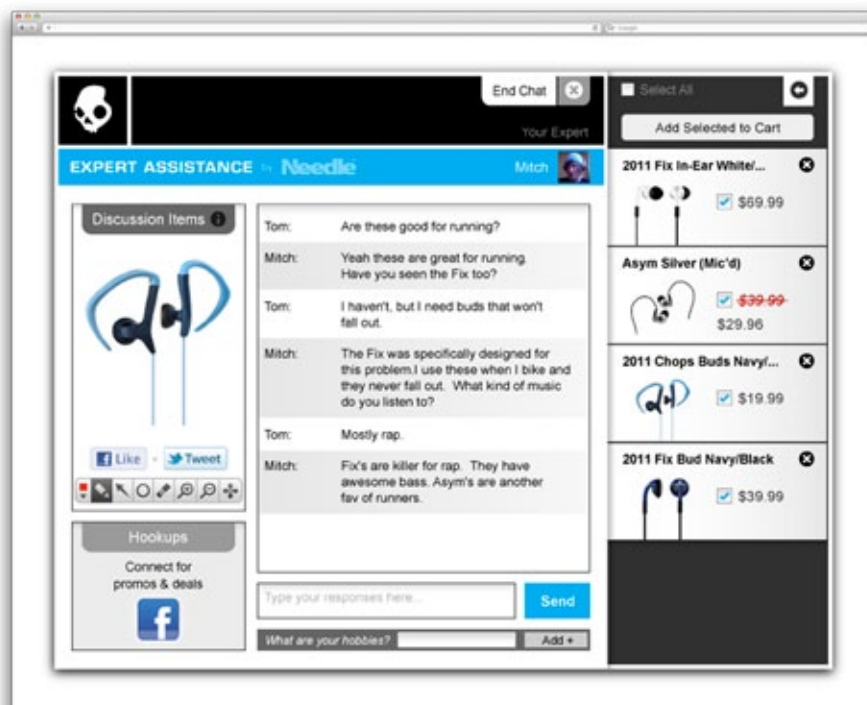
Recruiting Motivated, Knowledgeable Fans

Needle currently employs hundreds of Needlers—and that number is soon to be in the thousands, Lynch says. The company looks for individuals who are highly vocal and willing to share their experiences online through social media, blogs, review sites and by posting product reviews on YouTube. These are the people who enjoy providing advice on forums. They’re fans of the company or product on Facebook. They are knowledgeable about the products and they’re enthusiastic about helping others.

“We recruit from a lot of different sources on the web, but we always recruit the best, and the people who are already intrinsically motivated to talk about these products and services,” Lynch says. “It’s a huge advantage when you can find somebody who loves a product or service, and loves talking about it. You can imagine how good they are when they interface with customers.”

When recruiting, Needle looks for candidates who already have a Level 2 or higher under-

NEEDLE'S CHAT MODEL FOCUSES ON UNSCRIPTED, NATURAL DIALOGUE.



standing of a brand's products or services. They then add to that expertise with customized training modules developed with the client.



Morgan Lynch
CEO, Needle Inc.

Gamification Drives High Performance

Needle's remote workforce management framework is based on a model that Lynch developed for Logoworks, a graphic design services firm that he founded in 2001. It is staffed by a cloud workforce of experts, and applies gamification techniques like leaderboards and points systems to make the work fun and entertaining.

Needlers work on a part-time basis from wherever they have a laptop and high-speed Internet access. "It doesn't really matter where you are as long as you have the right skills, the right training and you're the right person," Lynch says.

That type of mobility is a significant benefit for Needlers, who enjoy the freedom that the at-anywhere work model provides. The firm also uses gamification techniques like a points system and leaderboards to generate excitement, motivation and positive internal competition. Here's how it works: While Needlers are paid an hourly wage that typically ranges from \$8 to \$13, they also earn points based on sales, customer satisfaction scores, etc., which can be redeemed for more of the products that they value.

In addition, top performers earn preferred schedules. Needlers' performance is measured by response time, the questions they ask, resolution rates—"all of the behaviors that are

important to drive high customer satisfaction and NPS," Lynch says.


The individual metrics are rolled up into an overall score, which is displayed on a leaderboard. Needlers can see where their performance is ranked relative to others. Those at the top of the leaderboard are rewarded with more hours and the privilege of scheduling their time ahead of those who are lower on the leaderboard.

As you can imagine, the competition is strong for peak time hours, so Needlers are motivated to perform well. "Those who are lower performers either step their game up and improve, or they get fewer hours," Lynch says.

Some clients, like Urban Outfitters, have been so impressed by Needle's scheduling and gamification system, they have licensed the toolsets to increase the effectiveness of their internal teams.

Fans Create More Fans

What type of impact do Needlers bring to the brands they serve? On post-chat surveys, which have a high response rate (close to 50%), net promoter scores are, on average, above 73% on any given month, says Lynch, which is significantly higher than previous scores for client companies, as well as industry benchmarks for each vertical.

"Our scores are off the charts because customers are dealing with people who really love the products and company, which makes all the difference in the experience," he says. 



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