



How to Turn Customer Problems into Opportunities

This transcript was lightly edited for clarity.

Chris: Today, I have the pleasure of speaking to a content strategist with extensive experience in the biotech industry. Since 2003, he's been working with marketing firms developing interactive content, websites, virtual laboratories, tutorials, apps, and more. He's currently working as a content strategist at Becton Dickinson. And today, we're going to talk about recognizing the business opportunities in problems. Alan Gerstein, welcome to Life Science Marketing Radio.

Alan: Thank you, Chris. It's a pleasure to be here.

Chris: I love this topic, recognizing the business opportunities in problems. Tell me exactly what you mean by that.

Alan: Sure. Something I'd observed before I went into interactive content. I worked at what was Pharmacia Biotech for almost 20 years, most of it in the tech support department. At one point, I was the manager of the molecular biology technical support group. And the responsibilities revolved around talking to hundreds of scientists every week.

And after doing that for a few years, you notice a couple of things. One, the issues usually have pretty common roots and aren't as complicated as the customer thinks. And number two, there are a lot of good things that can happen if you treat an unhappy customer properly, a lot of good things that could happen alone and also with the help of the sales rep.

Chris: Nice, so can you give me an example of an outcome, or not necessarily a specific one, but what kinds of good things happen when you treat those customers right?

Alan: So let's see. Imagine a customer calling up with a problem with their reagent kit. Some people will call in with the idea that they're going to get help. Some people call in with the belief that nobody cares, that the company took their money, and that's it. But if you work with them and by your actions show them that you're as concerned about their issue as they are, and through your actions you show that you're going to stick with them to make the situation right, even if it means spending the company's money, now you're a friend. You're no longer the enemy.

And if you can bring the sales rep into the conversation, then you can also make the sales rep look like a hero also. We used to do a lot of that, teaming up with the sales team and tech support to make the rep look like a hero.

Chris: I'm imagining these people call in, and it's a surprise that they're being treated well by you, because maybe they expect, as you say, that the company doesn't care. They're already frustrated. So their mindset is such that they're not necessarily expecting a good outcome. They would like help. They might not expect to get it. And I'm supposing that these are troubleshooting calls, so you're going to help them fix a problem. But I may not be accurate in that.

Alan: Okay. Yeah, much of the time it was troubleshooting. Sometimes, it turns into more of a sales-related call. It's not so much that they're having a problem with a product. I'm trying to think of a specific example. Sometimes, it can be the borderline between customer service and technical support. They might have done something wrong with the product, acknowledged it, and they're actually asking for help. What can you do to help them out, whether there's a mistake they made? And many a time, I would be speaking with people who acknowledge their own mistake. But they were just looking for help in the form, sometimes, of product.

Chris: Okay, so can I get another one because I blew it on the last one

Alan: Something like that. And on paper, it's not the company's fault. And the support person could be justified in saying, "Well, I'm sorry. It wasn't our mistake, so we really can't

do anything for you." But there's the missed opportunity. Here's where we would often get the sales rep involved, an opportunity to come in and, if possible, somehow work out some sort of a deal with the client. Not necessarily just a freebie, but maybe the rep might come in and somehow word it in the way, as a good rep will, that "Okay, I'll help you in this case. But I understand you've got a big project looming. Do you think it might be possible for you to introduce me to somebody related to that project?" if you see what I mean.

Chris: Right.

Alan: Okay? And so if you say, "Sorry, the policy is if you make the mistake, you have to eat the problem," there's the missed opportunity. You never have an opportunity to get the rep involved to see if there's some way that trying to help out the customer and looking like a hero, you can end up helping the company.

Chris: Right. So, yeah, that's smart thinking to say this person has a problem. The person who's typically dealing with them and could benefit from any solution we provide to them is our salesperson, and maybe open the customer's mind to thinking about different ways like, yeah, we can help you out. And maybe you can help us out as well because you're aware of other projects or other opportunities for the salesperson, right?

Alan: Exactly, exactly.

Chris: I like that. So it's just a great customer experience. And I would like to think every problem that calls into tech support or customer service could be turned into a great customer experience.

Alan: Most of them, I think, can. I think it just takes awareness on the part of the company to recognize the opportunity there.

Chris: Yeah. And I've written about this a little bit. But you change that customer's perception and their mindset about how they're going to be treated down the road. So now you've taken a situation where they might be looking at you and thinking they're just waiting for you to fail. They expect you to fail. Now, you've eliminated that for them. And that's almost better than having a good experience right off the bat. It's not quite that good, but it can have that kind of an impact on somebody. Wow. I think of the great companies I work with, and it's great support that really makes you feel good about having made a purchase, because you know you're never going to worry about getting help.

Alan: Right. And it's not rocket science. I think as long as there have been businesses...People have been doing this sort of thing. My family was in the commercial fish business for the better part of the 20th century. And when I would take care of the retail trade, if a customer would come in and be complaining about something they bought from us, you could see the look in their eye that they're expecting a hard time. And when you just say, "Well, I'm really sorry that happened. Let me see." And you could just see their face begin to melt a little bit. And then when you give them a replacement, it's like you could just hear the trumpets blaring.

Maybe one thing we need to do, maybe we should stop using the term troubleshooting and problems and just call them what they are, which is just another engagement, okay?

Chris: Sure.

Alan: And these types of engagements, they happen before the sale. They happen during the sale. They happen after the sale. After the sale, I guess, we get into the habit of calling them troubleshooting. But they're engagements. And if you step back and think about that for a second, it's like okay, it's an engagement now. And what directions, what paths can you take it? I think that's a pretty good start.

Chris: Nice. So let's move on to converting engagements into positive experiences. We're going to talk about converting problems into positives. But let's talk about post-sale engagements and making sure they're positive. So even though we said weren't going to talk about troubleshooting or use that word, you did write a book on troubleshooting, right?

Alan: Actually, no. I'm going to get a little nitpicky with the language here.

Chris: Okay.

Alan: It's really not a book on troubleshooting. And I'm even going to get a little nitpicky when you used the term post-sale, transforming problems post-sale. I think this could happen at a booth at a conference, at any time in the selling process. The title of the book is Molecular Biology Problem Solver. I guess I'm a little guilty there. That certainly implies troubleshooting, a laboratory guide. And yeah, it was.

Well, I wasn't the author. I wrote the proposal. I wrote one of the chapters. But I had to get the support of about two dozen researchers, many of them in the technical support departments of companies like New England Biolabs, at the time, Ambion. The book was written in 2001. But I reached out to the tech support companies for most of the major manufacturers at the time, told them what we were doing with this. We wanted to put together a book that could put their best thinking into the hands of the customers. And they bought into it.

And so, yeah, the word “Problem Solver” is in the title. But it's really a book that's meant to teach thinking, how to build better thinkers. That's really the purpose of the book. And to that end, if you were to look at the table of contents and the chapter headings, you'll see that every section, the content contains questions, because the theory behind the book was that if you can help people gain a better understanding of what the important questions are, they can solve a lot of the problems on their own. And so the Problem Solver's actually a book of questions from the people who develop the products, who resolve the problems when they do occur. So troubleshooting? Ultimately. But really it was designed as a book to teach better thinking skills before, during, and after you work with a product or an instrument.

Chris: Okay. So tell me a little bit more about that, if you would. So are there general principles that can be followed for this better thinking, problem-solving process?

Alan: There are. There are some general principles. I think the first one is when you talk to somebody who's having an issue or a problem, don't try and solve it right away, okay? It's more important if you try to understand it first, to really gauge what's going on. And that means understanding what's happening with either the reagent or the product but also stepping back and thinking about the customer's situation. Are they a graduate student, they just got there? Are they a post-doc in the middle of a huge experiment? Is there some huge grant riding on the results of this study? Because that creates the context of helping this person. Are you helping somebody who's in a really dire situation? And usually the people who would call in who are the angriest, they are the ones who are usually in the most challenging situation, okay? So that might suggest handling these people a little more carefully. But step one really is to understand the situation and the context of the person calling you. That's step one.

Chris: That's just good marketing and sales right there.

Alan: I never thought of myself as just a technical support person. There's a lot of selling and, like you say, marketing involved with it.

Chris: But I like what you point out, that there's an emotional component to the situation beyond how do we make sure they're using the product right, kind of the fact-based things. There's a bigger picture that involves someone's emotions, which has a parallel in marketing and sales and understanding what's going on, just as you would in tech support.

Alan: Right. There's a person behind the persona in marketing, and there's a person behind the complaints in technical support.

Chris: So you step back. You look at the general situation. You really try to understand what's going on. Then what?

Alan: Then comes the detective work of just trying to get as much information as you can. And again, you're not trying to solve the problem yet. You're just trying to understand it. And so many times, if you just keep asking questions, if we use the reagent problem as an example, you just keep asking about the real hands-on questions. How is it used? When was the last time it was used successfully? You just keep digging and digging, and you get a real accurate picture of exactly what's going on. Is this the first time the problem arose with this product? Is it the first time a problem arose with a tube? But you just get a lot of information. And that begins to help give you a clearer picture of what might be going on. Short answer, just gather information. Don't worry about trying to solve the problem yet. So that is step two.

Chris: I like that. So I have to say this. It seems like by asking those questions, one thing you might be doing is eliminating a lot of possible answers when you say, "When was the last time it was used successfully?" and so on. So you get a sense of what probably isn't the problem, right?

Alan: Yes. And the other thing you're doing is the people who are calling in are really bright, okay? These are really, really bright people. By asking all these questions, you're getting them to start asking questions. And many times, you can sense the light bulb is going off above their heads. And so what you're really doing is just getting a good conversation going, objective hopefully, to say, okay, well, this is what's happening. This is what isn't happening. And then the customer will start thinking about okay...They begin to think about things they didn't think about before.

If you think about it, some people who are experiencing problems will stop and think about it before they call. Some people, at the first sign of a problem, they will just call and either ask for help or complain, not that much different than, perhaps, the way I deal with computer problems, right? If something isn't going right, if I'm in a good mood, I might just stop and think about it, shut the machine off, come back five minutes later. If I am impatient and cranky, since I have AppleCare on the computer, I might just call that 800 number.

Chris: Yeah, that makes complete sense. All right, so now we've asked a lot of questions. And I like how you point out now you get the other person thinking about it too, so there's two people thinking. They're going to feel good about it if they figure it out. Is there another step?

Alan: Yeah, here's where deductive reasoning comes in, okay? You look at the facts, generate a list of the possibilities, look at the information you have, and just compare what the possibilities are with the information you have, and just continue to whittle away. And with science, a lot of times, there's not a black or white answer. The best you can come up with is a series of possibilities.

And here's another opportunity for some good customer service. At this point, if you have a good conversation going and there are several possibilities, some of them the customer can do on their own, some of them might require some investment by the company in the form of reagent or what have you. Imagine there are three or four possibilities, and a couple of them require a little more reagent or a different reagent.

Think of the potential for goodwill if you say, "Look, I'm going to call the sales rep," okay? "You do the first two experiments on your own. I'm going to call the rep about having him come over, drop something off so you can try the third experiment," okay? Now, you're a partner in trying to solve the problem. And you're engaging, and you're getting the rep inside. The rep doesn't have to beat the door to get into the lab. They're now welcome, okay?

And this goes back, again, I started out at Pharmacia in the '80s. And there were times when some Pharmacia reps, because they were very knowledgeable, hands-on, and they had an exquisitely knowledgeable technical support group...I'm thinking specifically of the NIH. The rep would be most welcome because he was a resource. He just wasn't a pest trying to push another product. He could bring something to the table.

Chris: Nice.

Alan: Again, it's just recognizing the engagement opportunity.

Chris: I like it. So let's shift gears a little bit because your specialty now is interactive content. And let's talk about applying interactive technology to that problem solving process we just described. So how does interactivity enhance that process?

Alan: Well, let's see. The most important elements are the intellectual, strategic teaching approach that we described. The nice thing about interactivity, it gives you a pretty wide and deep canvas to work with. It gives you the opportunity to gather lots of information, bring it together. It also gives you opportunities to present information in ways that might not be feasible in print. But it just gives you more capacity to bring in information. It gives you novel options for organizing that information. It also gives you novel options for presenting the information. And because it's interactive, just by the nature of the word, it creates another engagement opportunity.

Chris: Right. And I like what you said there. It makes things possible that you couldn't do in print. So what comes to my mind when you say that is some nonlinear way to look at things. So you could have a menu and choose what you want to look at, what questions you want to answer, or whatever. You would take them through a linear process, of course. But there might be resources that you could point out on the side when they answer a certain question and they go, "Oh, maybe I ought to go look at that sheet over there. That PDF might have the answer in it for me," right?

Alan: Right. And, actually, thank you for providing that segue. Most every company has a rich collection of information tools, whether it's a pamphlet, an instruction manual, a quick tips, FAQs. Most everybody's website has them. The other nice thing about interactivity is rather than leading the customer to even a well-organized online resource with all these different assets and asking the customer, "Okay, here you are. Choose the one you need," with interactivity and some proper planning, you can actually save the customer some trouble and say, "Okay, for this type of a problem, I need some information from that pamphlet. I need some information from this webpage. I need some information from this animation," and organize it together strategically based on what you know the customer's going to need and put it in their fingertips. You can make it a much more directed journey if you combine interactivity with knowledge of the customer's needs and some good planning.

Chris: Nice. I like that. So you're doing this online, and a customer is answering questions, right? So they're essentially putting data into your system, right? You could have that where not only do you ask them the questions, but you ask them to put their answers into your tool, right?

Alan: Exactly. As a matter of fact, a long time ago, I had put together a couple of prototypes, a couple of prototype interactive assets. And it was actually for an amino precipitation troubleshooting section. And what we did was to gather the questions that the tech support people routinely ask everybody facing amino precipitation issues and created a form with it such that the customer's going to be asked these questions if they called in. Put it out in front of them, okay? The information is then put online. You could click Send. It could then end up on the screen of a tech support person. Or after the researcher puts the information into this troubleshooting form, sometimes they say, "Oh, I see where this is going." And they have an opportunity to figure it out for themselves. So, yes, there's definitely an engagement opportunity there like that.

Chris: And an engagement with a dual benefit. So by pre-sending the answers to a tech support rep, for example, you have saved that time for the rep going through all the questions. They could look at it ahead of time and then call the customer, for example, and look at their answers. And in the case where the customer solves their own problem, still that feeling on the other side that he or she solved it themselves, and you made it easy for them. So it's a win for both of you, right?

Alan: It is. And there's also another downstream application, again, using computer support. When you pay for some after-purchase support, every time you call in, they have a record of the conversation. They know what happened with this machine before, okay? They've got a history of it. It's not much different than going to a physician for a checkup. So now, you're accomplishing the same thing during a troubleshooting session. Yes, you could do that when you're calling in. And, perhaps, most companies are doing that now. But here it can be done proactively with removing one step.

Chris: Right. And you get the data even if they solved it themselves. You have that possibility. You could say, "Even if you solved your problem, please send us your answers to these questions. It may help us again in the future if something tangential pops up."

Alan: Exactly. And plus, looking at it from a product development point of view, okay? You now have a rich collection of feedback on product use and what's happening in the customer's hands. When it's time to update the product, the product development team can do a review of what kind of calls have come in. And maybe they see some trend that they could change with a mild tweak to the system and improve the product.

Chris: Nice. I like that.

Alan: Yeah. For some reason, I think information that comes in as a troubleshooting issue or as a problem, somehow, it's treated differently than other forms of marketing information. But I don't know. I just don't see it being that much different. It might be a different form, but it's still feedback.

Chris: Oh, yeah. I would think so. Well, I have two thoughts crashing through my brain right now. One is that the cheapest marketing you can do is to make an existing customer happy. And the other is that, wouldn't a product manager want to know what are the key challenges with the existing version before they go off adding new untested features? Wouldn't you want to make sure that the thing you're already selling is as good as it can be?

Alan: Right. As you know better than most, with content marketing or content strategy, it's all about planning and taking a look at the big picture. If you're producing a marketing piece, how does it interact with all your other marketing assets in your information universe? I think the same thing needs to be done from a product point of view. And when you're planning your customer support function, you're getting information. And think about how that information could be applied within tech support, within product development, even within marketing, within sales. Talk about lead generators.

Chris: Yeah, fantastic. So, Alan, I want to thank you. This has been a fascinating and enlightening conversation about problem solving and the opportunity for companies to turn problems into better opportunities or positive engagements.

Alan: There you go.

Chris: You mentioned that you developed a couple of prototypes for this interactive problem solving tool.

Alan: Yes.

Chris: How can people contact you if they're interested in finding out more about that?

Alan: The easiest way would be by email, and that would be A-L-A-N-dot-G-E-R-S-T-E-I-N@Verizon.net. And I'd be happy to speak with them. I'd love to see this go from prototype to reality.

Chris: Excellent. Well, I'll put your email. I'll code it so you don't get too much spam. But I'll make it clear it's Alan with a @ in quotes, they'll know what to do, in the show notes. And it'll show up also in the transcript. And thank you, again, very much for talking to me today.

Alan: It was a pleasure, Chris. Thank you for having me.

Chris: Excellent. Bye-bye.

Alan: Take care.

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