

8

WAYS TO ENSURE  
YOUR STARTUP IS

*focused on*

CUSTOMER SUCCESS

As a startup, if there is one thing you should never lose focus on, it's the customers. Ensuring your startup is customer-focused from day one puts a sustainable and successful model in place as your company grows. Not only that, but it allows for your company to maximize success for your number one asset—customers.

Startup Founders and CEO's know that their startup needs to be customer focused, but how do you ensure it? Industries all over the world—whether they're B2B or B2C—are building their businesses from their customers', or consumers', perspective. Knowing your customer's needs and developing solutions centered on those needs allows you to be proactive in innovating, solve problems effectively, and most importantly—build customer loyalty. The most invaluable assets to a business are customer advocates.

We've identified the top eight ways to ensure that you're setting your business up for success from day one—and they all start with putting the customer first.



## 1. It starts at the top

As a CEO of a startup, you're incredibly focused on growth—as you should be! You still need to make sure from day one that you've established your philosophy around customer success. Everyone gets it—an executive's time is valuable, making it all the more important to embed customer success into your company culture early on. When your organization lives and breathes a customer-focused philosophy, that focus is sustained throughout the growth of your company.

Successful startup executives know how to balance their time with customers in order to nurture and maximize relationships. When a customer is signed, it's not just for the number on the contract—it's for what that number will grow to be. Developing relationships with your customers from day one builds customer loyalty which transcends into renewals—and even better—referrals.

So where do you start? There are numerous ways for startup executives to be involved personally with each of their customers. Successful CEOs recognize that recurring revenue is built upon loyal customers, and ongoing touchpoints to nurture those customer relationships are key:

- At the 2014 SaaStr event, Box CEO Aaron Levie suggested that CEOs should spend at least 50% of their time with existing customers. Block time on your calendar each week to reach out to your customers to develop a relationship and open the lines of communication. You won't regret that time investment.
- Empower your team members to hold the CEO accountable for knowing their customers. Have customer success managers provide an executive summary to their CEO monthly (or weekly!), on the current lifecycle of their customers.
- Don't stop at being aware of your customers' success, acknowledge them for it. As the CEO, never lose sight of recognizing your customers. Find a way to integrate this into your lifecycle management process—what campaigns or programs can you have a consistent hand in?

The bottom line for startup CEO's: be committed to frequent engagement with customers, set concrete goals and measure them your success. Doing so will prove to the customers that the company genuinely cares about them from the top down—and that will pay big dividends in the future.

---

*“Good customer service begins at the top. If your senior people don't get it, even the strongest links further down the line can become compromised.”*

RICHARD BRANSON, VIRGIN GROUP

## 2. Empower everyone to pull the cord.

Having metrics in place to ensure the entire team is accountable to the end goal is great, but a truly successful startup takes it one step further. Early Japanese manufacturing innovations had their structure set so it wasn't just that everyone in the assembly line contributed to the finish product logistically, but they were a strategic contributor. If a team member thought something was going wrong, they could essentially, "pull a cord" and stop the entire assembly line. With quality and consistency as the two main focuses to deliver the perfect product, this model's foundation empowered all team members to be a leading contributor to the end-result.

Empowering employees is easier than it sounds. As a leader, it's about providing your team with the tools they need—then letting them succeed. So often leaders feel as though they have to run the assembly line themselves. The challenge is knowing what tools to provide your team and allowing them to run with it. Remember, as a startup the business is moving a million miles a minute—you need to make sure everyone is on board to be a leading contributor to success.

The Ritz-Carlton is famous for adopting this philosophy with their, "Gold Standard." The standard is based on two principles:

1. fully understanding how those who engage with our brands live; and
2. providing an experience specific to those needs. In order to achieve this "Gold Standard," we must not only fulfill what our client wants, but also anticipate what they want, as well as be a catalyst for the significant moments in their lives. (source: [The Agency Daily](#))

One blogger noted that while on vacation at the Ritz Carlton with his girlfriend, he lost his sunglasses while paddleboarding. After returning to the hotel one of the staff members approached him with sunglasses—which were indeed his.

“After overhearing that we returned from our outing one pair of (Ray Ban) shades short, the hotel did a little snorkeling recon and recovered them. No kidding. We never mentioned the sunglasses to anyone. We certainly didn’t expect anyone to look for them. That was beyond unexpected. Turns out, that is exactly the point!”

This philosophy transcends into any business. Know your customer’s needs, then empower your organization to deliver the ultimate product or experience. The philosophy is bigger than an individual team member, it’s the company culture. Make customer success and satisfaction a part of your brand, allowing for new, ongoing, and future programs and projects to be aligned with that very principle.

“It is a level of service that is neither contrived nor for personal gain, but true and genuine. No line is drawn between where the “brand” begins and the “person” ends, because the two have become one under the same philosophy.” (source: [“The Ritz Carlton Gold Standard,” The Agency Daily](#))

### **3. Have an escalation plan**

No matter how many bases you cover, or how you proactively plan for a problem, it’s inevitable that customer situations will escalate—especially your first group of customers. Whether it is a customer service issue, technical problem, or they just aren’t satisfied overall, having a solution framework is essential. Don’t just have it mapped out in the onboarding handbook, either—put it somewhere visible at all times. Knowing and living your escalation plan will organically spread through every task, project, and communication—allowing your company to sustain a customer-centric philosophy as it grows.

What does this plan look like? A simple and effective framework is centered around communication and transparency. Being left in the dark when a critical part of the business is hindered is the worst situation to leave your customers in. Set up the three P’s of a solution:

- 1. Problem:** Identify the problem or issue.
- 2. Progress:** Establish and communicate the steps to resolution.
- 3. Prevention:** Put preventative measures in place to prevent the same thing from happening in the future.

You need to know who the key stakeholders are for each phase of your escalation plan, ensuring an accountable resource to get to the solution. A simple framework to use with every escalation is making sure you are communicating to the customer with as much transparency as possible, and learning—know how you are going to make sure the same thing won't happen again.

Showing your clients that you not only care, but have a plan for their success - even when things go bad - transforms you from merely a vendor, to a partner. How you handle an escalation could be the deciding factor in truly gaining the customer's loyalty and advocacy.

#### **4. Embrace it: Early customer journey's will have bumps in the road**

You're a startup—even though you may have “done this before”, your first clients aren't without growing pains. The key in defeating this is always knowing your customers' needs and nurturing that relationship with those needs in mind. When you're working with your first set of clients, set your team up for success with the realization that it's not going to be perfect.

That doesn't mean there won't be wins either. What makes the wins even better is how you handle the hiccups along the way. You don't have to be an expert in solutioning—it's inevitable that a problem will arise you haven't experienced before. What seals the deal in driving loyalty and satisfaction is how far you'll go to find that solution, with the customer's critical needs in mind.

*“Your customer doesn’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.”*

DAMON RICHARDS

---

Take a look at the Lean Strategy, created by Silicon Valley entrepreneur Eric Ries:

“This strategy takes customer evaluations and demands into consideration, and encourages the company to stay flexible and adaptive until it locates the ‘best fit’ between its capabilities and the needs of early customers. Startups that utilize this strategy may intentionally “prepare for failure”, but quickly find their way out of it by constantly improving their products and adjusting their strategic direction.” (source: [Wendt Partners](#))

Embrace the rough roads, learn from them, work toward fluidity through responsiveness, rather than wishing for fluidity through absence of problems.

## **5. Calling all CEOs: You don’t have to do everything**

The greatest leaders know how to harness the strengths of their team and trusts in their ability to deliver. CEO’s don’t need to do everything for themselves—engage the entire team. Employees at early-stage companies wear a lot of hats—especially CEO’s. If a CEO tries to solve every problem, the rest of the organization will look at them as a crutch rather than a leader. You want your CEO to nurture your team’s ability to solve and drive success. You’ll never scale customer success past the first couple dozen customers if you don’t build the ability early.

CEO’s need to allow employees to be the hero—you don’t want customers to view the C-Suite as a point of escalation, but as a resource and partner of innovation and strategy.





## 6. Map out your ideal customer journey

Knowing your customer journey from day one not only allows your company to always have a view of the customer's perspective, but it aligns all facets of the business throughout the lifecycle of the customer. Make sure that your product, services, and sales teams are aligned with the customer lifecycle. When you know what your customer journey looks like, you can easily identify what the goals across your organization should be, and how each team contributes to those goals.

Understand how you want your customers to succeed. Knowing what their success looks like allows you to identify how you should work with them. Always understand the customer's perspective of their journey, too—making sure your vision is aligned with theirs. Grow with your customers, so you can refine what your ideal journey looks like over time.

## 7. Embrace your loudest customers

In the early stages of your company—and the later ones, too—you'll have customers that want to provide a lot of feedback, whether you ask for it or not. The best startups learn how to embrace their loudest customers (which may not always be their biggest customers). When customers have tons of feedback—or issues—it isn't always a bad thing. These customers want you to succeed, otherwise they wouldn't push you so hard. Encourage your team to have conversations with these vocal customers to understand their pain points. If you can tackle those, issues sufficiently, you will most likely solve problems other customers care about as well.

Embracing customer feedback is also an opportunity to learn and improve your customer experience. Nothing helps build loyalty more than delivering excellent customer experience, and listening to your customers is the only way to know exactly what they want (and need).

## 8. Know what to Prioritize

There are a million things to do, and not enough time to do them all. As an early-stage company, how do you balance what your customers are asking for while still staying hyper focused on executing your company vision? If you aren't careful, you can make the mistake of chasing the “nice-to-haves” you customers want without truly executing on your vision to deliver “need-to-haves” that your customers may not have the foresight to see. Encourage your customers to look at you as a strategic partner, not just a vendor. Know your customers' goals and educate them on how your vision is essential to achieving them.

1. Explicitly balance your vision and values for putting customers first in your company with your long-term strategy you want to execute.
2. Have your team list out their current projects—do they align with the vision of your solution and set your customers up for maximum success now and in the future?

From there, you can identify what your team needs to start, stop and keep doing in order to excel. Once you identify what projects and programs you need to drive momentum, be sure to tie them to clear KPIs. No task, project, or program is successful without a measurement of success.

## **Conclusion**

Think about why your startup emerged in the first place: a passion for solving significant problems for your customers and for the space you are in. Your customers feel the same way about their company. A shared vision with your customers in producing a true partnership is key to both you and your customers' success. Use the suggestions we've put together as the foundation for a winning, customer-focused startup.

# How are you focusing on customer success at your startup?

[Share your success with us at #success15](#)

This eBook was brought to you by ClientSuccess,  
The Customer Success Management Platform™.

To learn more about ClientSuccess or request a free demo,  
visit [clientsuccess.com](http://clientsuccess.com) or give us a call at 801.441.0805.

client**success**™