

EBOOK

Close the Loop

Improve collaboration between Customer Success and Product and work better together to close the feedback loop.



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Introduction

Customer feedback is one of the most powerful tools in your growth arsenal. But unless listened to, and more importantly – acted on – it's completely useless.

Typically, customer feedback lives in multiple tools across several departments. It's in your email. It's jammed up in Intercom. It's on a Trello board somewhere. Spreadsheets. (So. Many. Spreadsheets.) And let's not forget about Slack.

Perhaps it's in all of the above and then some?

While Product and Customer Success both find themselves at the forefront of the customer experience, all too often they work in silos.

But they have a common goal: **create the best customer experience possible.**

And the best way of doing that is by closing the loop on customer feedback – together.

Customer feedback, when listened to, managed, and prioritized correctly, is what paves the way for sustainable growth.

But the tricky part is creating an effective workflow. You need buy-in from relevant departments in your organization, you need the right technology, and you need to build a feedback loop that you can actually close.

In this eBook, we uncover how Customer Success and Product can work better together, why your customer community should be at the heart of product development, and how you can establish a Customer Success-driven feedback loop.

We hope you'll enjoy it!



The challenge:

Who owns customer feedback?

The 21st century has been dominated by one particular business model: the subscription-based model. It's a model that (often) offers great flexibility for customers but poses a fair few challenges for businesses.

In order to retain and grow their customer base, businesses have to become Customer Success organizations before anything else.

This is when customer feedback becomes imperative. While anyone can run a CSAT, this is about taking a proactive approach to collecting, prioritizing, and delivering on customer feedback.

Customer feedback is your guiding light for growth.

Customer Success is the most valuable channel for customer feedback

Your CSMs are the face of your product. They will sit on some of the richest and most valuable information your company has. From interacting with customers over email, phone, in your [customer community](#), and QBRs – they will have insights that go far beyond any data points the product team is analyzing.

Yes, this qualitative data from honest and transparent conversations with customers is your goldmine. As it so happens, **this is the very beginning of the feedback loop.**



Product: Going beyond data points

Most product teams will have some version of a product feedback loop in place. They collect data. They analyze product usage. They do user interviews. They improve features. They launch new and improved products. Customers start using them.

Huzzah! Success.

But that's not always the case, is it? Many feature launches fall flat. Often, because **there's a lack of understanding as to what the customers truly need, how they actually interact with the product, and what they're trying to accomplish when using it.**

What tends to happen is, Product gets overwhelmed by data points. Or perhaps they're suffering from that ever so common tunnel vision fueled by a prematurely established roadmap? But also, let's not forget that the feedback from Customer Success can be unstructured and (very) contextual, making it difficult for Product to extract insights.

Ultimately, all of the above makes it hard to identify the value customers are looking for, and the big picture disappears. As a result, Product may end up building features customers never wanted in the first place. Worst case scenario? You lose customers.

So how do we solve this?

Easy.

Time for Product to think like their Customer Success peers.



Thinking like Customer Success

At this point, we all know that qualitative feedback, often more so than quantitative, is critical to the success of a product.

But Customer Success has a clear advantage over Product. They are not hindered by an ever-growing product roadmap or product vision. Instead, they're completely focused on the customer, the use case, and the experience the customer is having – and how that experience can be improved.

Now, what Product requires in order to fully understand their customers and be able to add value to their experience is (in theory) simple. And that's for CSMs to not only have a full grasp of an experience, a problem, or the need for a specific feature – but also for them to communicate that effectively to Product.

Because how that customer feedback is shared with the Product team, is what separates the hyper-growth startups from the unicorns. **It allows Product to think like Customer Success,** and by doing so they can show customers that not only was their opinion valued, it was an integral part of the product development process.



Community at the heart of product development



It's hard to capture all the ideas and suggestions that come in across tools and teams. And ultimately, when it's time to prioritize, decisions are often riddled with bias.

So how can you democratize the customer feedback process and build transparent relationships between Customer Success, Product – and your customers?

The answer is: a customer community.

Customer communities operate at the very core of your product. They drive engagement, discussion, and ideas – they're the ideal place to collect customer feedback. Plus, they facilitate collaboration between Customer Success and Product.

All products spark questions, suggestions, and ideas from customers. But collecting, organizing, and acting on that feedback can be a tricky task for any business.

Customer communities offer a secure, transparent space where customers can ask questions, start discussions, submit feedback and request features – all in one place. All you have to do is collect it.

Customer communities operate at the intersection of what your product does, and the two main things your customers want:

1.
Get maximum value
from your product

2.
Have their feedback
taken seriously

The best thing about this? It's exactly what your Customer Success and Product team want, too.

Open lines of communication

The foundational element of a customer community is communication. Not only can you have an open dialogue with your customers, but you can also facilitate dialogue between your customers. This engagement often leads to a wider context, deeper insights and a better understanding of their needs.

Customer communities allow Customer Success and Product to communicate effectively with customers to collect qualitative feedback. Pair this with quantitative engagement data such as number of votes and replies, and soon, **your customer community will paint the full picture of what they need.**

This quantitative and qualitative data will give Product the insights they need to be confident in the prioritization of what feedback to incorporate in the roadmap – and what to leave out.



Establishing a Customer Success-driven feedback loop



Together, Customer Success and Product can close the loop on customer feedback by delivering the right features.

So how do you build a Customer Success-driven feedback loop? We've broken it down into seven steps to help you get started.

Step 1: Identify the best way to collect and organize customer feedback.

While you can collect customer feedback across numerous channels, tools, and teams – if all that feedback isn't hosted in one centralized place, it can be difficult to put all the pieces together. Leverage your [customer community](#) or use a tool like Productboard to collect customer feedback and feature requests. It's important to choose a tool or process that can easily fit into existing workflows in your Customer Success team as well as Product. For example, you might want to make sure it offers integrations with other tools you use daily, such as Salesforce, Gainsight, Slack, and Mixpanel.

Step 2: Create a standardized format for sharing customer feedback with Product.

Identify exactly what information you need from customers to fully understand the feedback, and what business goals it would contribute to. You also need to define what information you need in order to qualify the feedback. This will help you determine the importance of different types of feedback and help you communicate this to Product. For example, if Product requires you to come up with a high-level business case, it might be good to know the ARR backing a specific feature request. Make sure to always use the same format so there's no confusion.



Step 3: Establish the best way to analyze and prioritize feedback.

Choose one [centralized feedback hub](#) where Customer Success and Product can both get a complete overview of the voice of the customer. While Customer Success often has more intimate knowledge of customer needs, Product has the advantage when it comes to product capabilities. Level the playing field by making sure that the actual discussion or feedback from the customer is given in an accessible and open environment for both teams. Other customers can participate, and both teams can help qualify feedback and requests before it's discussed internally.

Step 4: Manage expectations and communicate updates.

The most important aspect of collecting feedback is to manage the expectations. All product feedback and ideas should be welcomed. Not all ideas can be implemented, either because they are too complicated, too specific or because they do not fit the product vision. Ideas that can be implemented might take some time to investigate and execute on. Explain to your customers what Product is working on, how they prioritized feedback, and what customers can expect to be delivered.

Step 5: Incorporate feedback into product roadmap and implement.

Once Product has reviewed feedback and prioritized requests, it's time to get to work. But let's not forget where the feedback came from! Invite customers – especially the ones that gave the feedback – to participate in Beta groups to help your product team make sure the new feature, bug, or general product feedback is solved to full satisfaction.





Step 6: Close the loop by communicating product updates to customers.

When you successfully deliver on product feedback and ideas it's time to close the feedback loop. Inform your customers what's new, improved or changed based on the feedback they gave you. Always make sure to mention or reference the original idea or piece of feedback that sparked the update, and the customer who came up with it.

Step 7: Measure the success of new releases qualitatively and quantitatively.

Send a customer satisfaction survey after the release, specifically to customers that were involved. Or catch up with your customer advisory board, and specifically ask them about the newly released features or product updates. Finally, quantitative measurements could be through MAC (Monthly Active Customers) of the new product/feature, or adoption specifically.



Customer-centric ideation at inSided

Four years ago, ideation was already up and running on our [inSpired community](#). At the time, our Customer Success team was encouraging customers to submit their feedback and ideas while the Product team was in charge of handling the feedback submitted.

But there was a slight problem: We hadn't really worked out how to balance delivering towards our product vision while providing quality-of-life and platform improvements for key user segments on our platform.

So what happened? Well, Product of course wanted to work on these ideas, and we even communicated that we'd added a bunch of them to our product backlog, but they got consistently pushed behind work towards the product vision.

This was far from ideal. Because if you're not going to actually act on customer feedback, it's essentially useless.

Internal friction

Soon, our Customer Success team started to feel awkward about pushing customers to our ideation portal, since there was nothing happening. Or well, plenty of ideas were submitted, but none came to fruition.

There was a lot of mutual frustration and a few heated meetings between our Product and Customer Success teams around certain top-voted (and not super complex) ideas in the community e.g. [manually awarding badges](#). (Note that you need to be a member of our Inspired community to view this page.)

These ongoing conversations (at times, arguments) made it hard to have focused and productive discussions about product strategy and achieving bigger outcomes for the business.

Things had to change.

But that change didn't come from the teams – it came from our own community.



Customer-driven change

Everyone reaches their breaking point. So did our loyal and idea-submitting customers. After submitting a certain number of ideas, and patiently waiting for updates on top-voted ideas – our customers had had enough.

The most engaged customers spoke up about it [in the community](#). (Note that you need to be a member of our Inspired community to view this page.)

And we're forever thankful that they did!

It's **this kind of transparent feedback from our community members that triggered a much-needed shift in thinking** among the Product teams.

That said, let's fast forward to 2019.

“I was wondering if there are any updates on today's anniversary of this topic?”

“What's is the status of this idea? It's been a year since Daniel and his team were working on it.”

“I already voted but came here for a status updates as I desperately want this feature!”



A shift in thinking

We realized that our existing approach was unsustainable and we had to either drop ideation or dramatically step up our game.

But it really wasn't much of a choice. Given we were recommending customers to use our own product to do ideation – we had to lead by example.

Previously we had only worked on ideas when they fit with a roadmap theme towards our vision. But even then, they were often treated nice-to-haves, not essential needs to solve.

So what did we do? We started looking at customer ideas as a primary source of opportunities for our roadmap.

This was the beginning of a new era: Customer and Product collaboration.



Customer and Product collaboration

The product team collaborated with customers who had submitted and voted on the ideas throughout product discovery to make sure we nailed the solutions.

Here's what we did:

- ✓ **We delivered some of the top ideas to the community within a year** (e.g. file attachments, draft articles, the ability to manually award badges).
- ✓ **We linked back to the ideas delivered in our community product updates to make it transparent** when an idea came from our own user base.
- ✓ **We @mentioned beta customers/users who helped us** discover the best solutions when announcing delivered ideas.
- ✓ **We were transparent with customers about how we had done a bad job**, and hoped they were starting to see the difference.
- ✓ **We surprised our customers with a feature launch** (team notes) at a customer event.

The Customer Success team was of course delighted as ideation re-established itself as a valid place for customers to submit their feedback.

But it wasn't just Customer Success who loved it. Our engineering team was thrilled as new ideas were referenced directly in JIRA tickets. This way, they could go and check out the context and understand how many customers had a certain need.



Gainsight's community-centric feedback loop

When Gainsight launched their community on the inSided platform, one of their main goals was to close the loop on product feedback. But a big part of that was also to show their customers that not only was their opinion valued, but it was also an integral part of the product development process.

Back in 2014 Gainsight had roughly 150 customers and 120 employees. They also already had one of the largest communities in the Customer Success industry.

The problem? Their Customer Success Managers were inundated with product feedback from their customers.

At the time, the answer to this problem was to channel that feedback through their Customer Support department. As you can imagine, this was far from ideal, especially given the fact that support agents are usually not equipped to respond to customer feedback.

So Gainsight turned to community for a solution, with its primary function being to serve as the heart of the product feedback loop, and ultimately – closing that loop.

The mission? As Denise Stokowski, Group VP Platform Products at Gainsight puts it “To provide a forum for customers, partners, and Gainsight employees to provide product feedback that impacts the roadmap, and to receive product support and solutions from peers.”

They realized immediately that one of the most important aspects of making this work was to get their Product team committed to the goal of the community.

Stokowski, continues, “It’s not that complex a use case, but the workflow is extremely important. We wanted to make sure the community wasn’t just for Customer Success, but also for our Product team.”



“We wanted to make sure the community wasn’t just for Customer Success, but also for our Product team.”



Having a platform that made it as simple and as effective as possible for all teams to work together was key in Gainsight's decision to go with inSided as their community vendor.

It was the buy-in from Customer Success, Support and Product, that really started them on the path to success. As Denise states, "Community is a team sport." If you want your customers to keep coming back to your community and giving their feedback, you have to have your product teams on board, willing to reply and be transparent about their processes.

When teams take the time to respond to customer feedback it makes them feel heard, respected, and ultimately more likely to come back again. As Denise puts it, "We wanted our users to get more return on investment for their time when coming to the community."

Of course, Gainsight also has a number of great ways to show their appreciation for customers giving feedback. For example, they use gamification in the form of leaderboards and badges in the community to reward the most active contributors. Plus, they celebrate a "Star of the month" for the best idea in the community.

As a result of this gamification, the ideas come in thick and fast. In 2019 alone, Gainsight gathered—and implemented—over 70 customer ideas from the community.

So finally – after years of ups and downs – Gainsight can finally build a feedback loop they could actually close.

With the right technology in place, a scalable customer feedback workflow, and with an engaged customer community, Customer Success and Product can work together to deliver the best customer experience possible for Gainsight's customers.



Conclusion

A scalable customer feedback model is not a nice-to-have – it's a vital part of any company that wants to build a sustainable growth engine. One that's driven by the voice of the customer, rather than vanity features.

The transition from an ad hoc customer feedback process to a well-oiled feedback loop where Customer Success and Product work in symbiosis won't happen overnight. The road will be bumpy. But with [the right technology](#), the right processes, and with a relentless focus on customer needs, Customer Success and Product can maintain a continued feedback loop that will deliver the value customers ask for – and as a result, predictive and continued growth for the company.



Do you want to discover how inSided can help you leverage customer feedback and improve collaboration between Customer Success and Product?

[Book a demo today →](#)



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