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HORIZON
H O B B Y . C O M

Hobby Advocates Exceed Customer Expectations

When customers demanded more than their call center or email could handle, hobby advocates delivered.





Founded in 1985 in Champaign, Illinois, Horizon Hobby started out distributing a broad selection of products to hobby shops around the U.S. Over the next two decades, they steadily built a successful model.

“I look at it as shipping quality time,” explained Beth Wileaver, Horizon Hobby’s consumer sales manager. “It’s the guy who’s stressed out at work all day long, and this is his chance to hang out at the field and just fly his RC airplane. Or it’s the grandpa who used to build balsa models when he was young and now he’s taking his grandson out and showing him.”

This customer-centric approach earned the company a loyal following among hobby shops and hobbyists alike.

“We’ve always hung our hat on great customer service.

– Beth Wileaver
Consumer Sales Manager
Horizon Hobby

Wileaver said, “We’ve always hung our hat on great customer service. It was the innovation, the quality of our product, and ultimately, our people—how our interactions helped those folks out there, our customers.”

As their influence and reputation grew, however, the company also saw a growing need. More and more hobbyists were finding themselves without the luxury of a local hobby shop. In response, Horizon Hobby obtained several exclusive product lines and developed their own product lines, which they would market themselves and sell via their website.

On Horizon Hobby’s website, they began to provide extra content beyond the typical product information, including videos and how-tos, to continue to strengthen the company’s bond with its customers.

They also continued to build up their product and technical support call centers to answer the questions their customers would have.

“Our website was designed to be a destination for our customers,” Wileaver explained, “and to show them that we were a company full of people just like them.”

Even as they built one of the best websites and support centers in the hobby industry, Horizon Hobby also began to see a shift among their customers—a shift that would test their ability to meet their customers’ needs.

WANTING TO TALK IN REAL TIME



Even with a top-notch website, the Horizon Hobby team was intent on continuing to improve. They wanted to serve their customers better and interact more with them. Even as they made plans to rebuild their website to fit the needs of their core customers—RC enthusiasts—they realized that the way customers wanted to interact was changing dramatically.

“The world was moving away from phones and the other tools we had been using to help our customers,” said Wileaver. “Suddenly, the last thing customers wanted to do was call somebody. For them, even email took too long. They wanted to talk with us in real time right from our site. They wanted live chat.”

In response to this need, Wileaver’s team found a cloud-based live chat solution that could be implemented quickly on their site and would be staffed by Horizon Hobby call center team members. Unfortunately, difficulties soon arose. Because staff members worked only during the day, the chat platform was unmanned during evening hours, when demand was greatest. Perhaps their biggest challenge was in measuring even their most important metrics.

“We didn’t have any tracking of conversion,” Wileaver said. “Nor did we have the time to manage or monitor them as closely as we wanted to.”

This left the Horizon Hobby team unsure of how they could continue to fulfill their commitment to provide expert advice and assistance to their loyal customers.

A CHANCE MEETING

As Horizon Hobby commenced with building their new RC-focused website, the team continued to search for solutions to their chat problem. While attending Shop.org's annual conference, they had a chance meeting with [Morgan Lynch](#), CEO and founder of Needle Inc., and immediately recognized how the platform could be the solution they had been looking for.

With so many avid fans and a culture of sharing among hobbyists in general, [Needle's advocate-driven chat platform](#) seemed to be a natural fit for Horizon Hobby. Wileaver's team knew from their experience monitoring the company's Facebook presence that there was no shortage of knowledgeable Horizon Hobby customers who were willing to help answer the product questions of other customers. They also knew that customers trusted each other's judgement, seeing a definite value in an unbiased opinion.

"The advocates we selected already knew our products," Wileaver explained. "They already had all the answers. And they had the desire to help others, too."

Any concerns the Horizon Hobby team had about having to spend extra hours supporting the advocates on the Needle platform were assuaged. They concluded that Needle could easily provide a perfect channel for continuing their tradition of top-notch customer service.

"As we learned more about it, we discovered that there were such great systems in place; the training was there, the FAQs were there, and it was all managed by Needle," said Wileaver. "It gave us the opportunity to take our interactions with customers and our sales to another level."

In early 2014, Horizon Hobby began their partnership with Needle, starting with a search for the right advocates to man the live chat platform.



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A FORTUNATE SELECTION

Since the age of 14, William Martin had been hooked on the hobby of building, maintaining, and playing with radio-controlled vehicles. In it, he saw something that everyone could enjoy, whether a child, a working adult, a retiree, or a diehard competitor.

“I loved how RC allowed me and others to express our interest in real cars, planes, and helicopters, but at a fraction of the cost of working on the real thing,” said Martin.

In his years as an RC hobbyist, the Chino, California native had become quite an expert in the field, often jumping in to answer technical questions for other hobbyists on social media. He also had a strong affinity for Horizon Hobby, which he saw as one of the leading brands in the hobby industry—a dream employer for Martin, if not for his location.



William M.

National Champion Drag Racer | Pro RC Car Racer | Horizon Hobby Advocate



“Horizon Hobby was a very diverse company that focused on pushing the technology envelope while having fun,” said Martin. “At the end of the day, Horizon wanted all of its customers to have fun and be happy. That really resonated with me as a hobbyist.”

Unfortunately, Martin’s home location prevented him from working at Horizon Hobby.

That is, until he saw a posting on LiveRC.com looking for RC advocates to assist in customer-facing chats for Horizon Hobby as a contractor. Jumping at the opportunity, Martin applied and soon found himself being interviewed and assessed to determine his fit and expertise. After thorough vetting, he was chosen to join an elite team of Horizon Hobby advocates.

“After going through the process, I learned that over 900 people applied,” Martin remembered. “I felt very fortunate to have been selected.”



SOLIDIFYING CUSTOMERS AND ADVOCATES

Needle and Horizon Hobby's initial recruitment drive for advocates was met with an overwhelmingly positive response from RC hobbyists across the country. They now had a team of some of the most qualified, passionate product experts in the industry ready to chat with their customers and were ready to launch the Needle platform on the Horizon Hobby website.

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Horizon Hobby Advocate

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After a startup period of testing and optimizing the platform for Horizon Hobby's needs, Wileaver saw immediate improvement in their ability to serve their customers.

“With Needle advocates, we were immediately able to staff longer hours and be there to serve our customers when they needed information,” Wileaver said. “We could see the metrics for every conversation that took place. And both Horizon Hobby and Needle were able to review those metrics to look for opportunities for improvement.”

For Wileaver's team, however, the biggest strength that the Needle advocates brought to the website was the quality of their conversations.

“I loved that Needle refused to allow any canned answers,” she said. “Everything was real-time and sincere. The advocates took their responsibility to help people very seriously, going out of their way to create a great experience and making sure that customers selected the right product.” The Needle platform allowed them to show product images, circle important features, and more—which would have been impossible over the phone—to make their conversations as natural as possible.

Results

69

NET PROMOTER SCORE



+26%

AOV INCREASE



AVERAGE CSAT

Because of their own backgrounds with the products, the advocates were able to understand their fellow RC hobbyists and speak their language in ways the website itself could not. Along the way, the advocates found themselves part of an elite, tight-knit community.

Martin said, “The camaraderie and teamwork were incredible. We truly enjoyed helping the customers and prided ourselves on making sure the customers got exactly what they needed within their budgets. Whether it was a two-dollar part or a 500-dollar kit, we wanted to make sure we exceeded our customers’ needs.”

The customer response to this new service offering was unequivocally positive. “People were saying things like, ‘Horizon Hobby has done it again,’ or ‘I’m a Horizon Hobby customer for life now,’” Wileaver recalled. “The response exceeded our expectations.”

For Horizon Hobby, this new service translated into a very tangible lift in their most important e-commerce metrics. From March to August of 2014 alone, advocate chats yielded an average CSAT score of 9 and a 69 NPS, placing them among the most efficient companies. Conversion from those chats was seven times average site conversion and average order value saw an impressive 26-percent lift.

“Needle has really given us another channel to interact with our customers,” Wileaver said, “and I think that’s just solidified the customer loyalty and increased the level of service that we’re already known for.” But the benefits did not stop at sales, in her opinion. “I really feel like the advocates themselves are more solidified, connected more powerfully to our brand and to each other. And then that has extended out to strengthen the hobby industry overall.”

A GREAT PARTNERSHIP

As the relationship between Needle, Horizon Hobby, and their advocates continues to grow, Wileaver has found herself working more and more closely with her team of advocates and community managers at Needle. The advocates receive the added perk of learning about upcoming developments at Horizon Hobby and being able to offer their feedback.

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– Beth Wileaver
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Horizon Hobby

“My job is really to support them so they can continue to help our customers,” says Wileaver. “So I make sure that I’m an ear for them and listen to them. I talk to them like I do to my own team and I couldn’t be prouder of the way they represent us.”

Having seen the value of Needle’s advocate-driven platform, Wileaver is eager to see how it can be applied to other challenges faced by Horizon Hobby.

“It’s such a great partnership,” she remarks. “We’ve seen what it can do for sales. We’ve seen what it can do for customer loyalty. I think this is something that’s going to help us grow for a long time to come.”

No matter which direction Wileaver and Needle pursue next, Martin will be along for the ride if he has it his way. “We strive to do whatever it takes to make our customers happy,” he says. “Honestly, when you’re helping people and working with such a great bunch of people, it’s not work. It’s just fun.”

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