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BUILDING A DIGITAL CUSTOMER SUCCESS PROGRAM FOR B2B SAAS COMPANIES

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Introduction to Digital CS

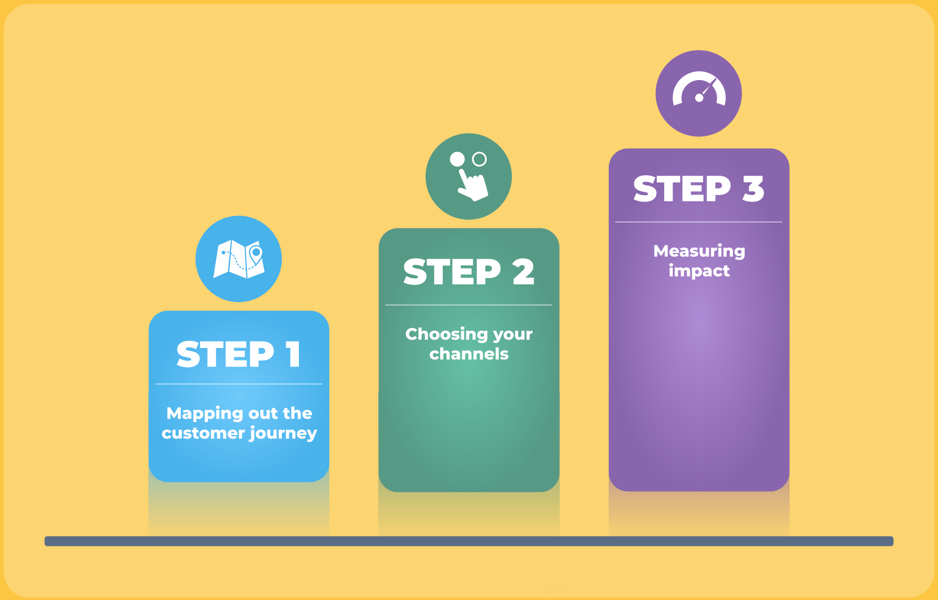
The evolution of Customer Success (CS) towards digitalization has been ongoing for years, but recent economic uncertainty has accelerated this shift. The global pandemic, increasing inflation, and fluctuating interest rates have driven digitization across industries. Subscription-based SaaS companies, in particular, have sharpened their focus on their customer base.

In response to instability, businesses are now prioritizing customer retention and expansion as a more dependable revenue source. They are actively seeking new methods to enhance the efficiency of their CS teams, with Digital Customer Success emerging as the solution.

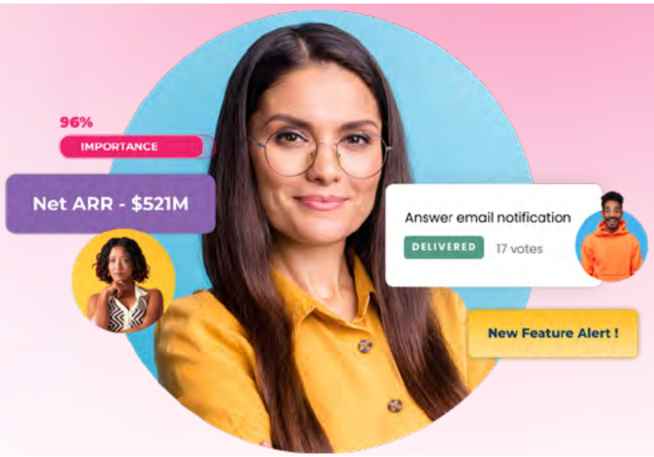
As the majority of businesses transition to a primarily digital-led CS model, teams are empowered to deliver superior customer experiences on a larger scale. This shift will also solidify CS as a strategic function that bolsters customer retention and facilitates growth in an efficient manner.

With the emergence of Digital CS, we can empower users to self-serve in a personalized manner, leveraging digital tools for effective scalability. A robust digital-led strategy equips CS teams to serve their entire customer base with the efficiency required to propel businesses forward sustainably.

This guide outlines the steps to establishing your first Digital CS program from the ground up.



Building Your First Digital Customer Success Program



STEP 01:

Mapping Out the Customer Journey

Customers in today's world expect vendors to know them. They know that vendors constantly collect information—when they visit our website, how they use our product, what content they read, and much more. And they expect us, as the vendor, to use that information to create a better experience for them. However, the challenge is leveraging all that data from many different systems holistically. Vendors need a consolidated view of all the information they have on their customers so that they can deeply understand them and what they need.

Mapping out the customer journey is about more than just understanding what happens in each phase. It's about identifying the outcome that will enable your customers to experience and realize recurring value from using your product.

What does a holistic, digital customer journey look like?

Start by identifying key product behaviors customers need to achieve to obtain value.

Identify Key Product Behaviors

To move away from a disjointed user experience, monitor production adoption, and gather feedback at scale. Instead of customer journey mapping in its traditional sense, where you focus on activities—you'll do behavior mapping.

Behavior mapping comes down to one simple question: What customers are achieving what behaviors in what period? You'll identify:

- What customers (or customer segment)?
- What behaviors?
- What time period?

Start with quantifiable product behaviors. Product adoption and usage are the prerequisites that create value for customers. Identifying key product behaviors and when they need to happen will ultimately drive success.

Data is crucial to building value in the customer journey at all stages. Some of the information you'll need about how customers derive value from your product will come from exploring large customer segments with multiple use cases.

Tap into your customers' preferences, connecting data about product use with marketing and CS interactions. In-app messaging is one way to learn from your customers, but you can also look at usage rates, time spent in specific areas of your product, and unused features. To go deeper into customer desires outside the product, use marketing methods like A/B testing on email subject lines. Experiment with different levels of personalization. Assess click-through rates. For example, do your customers prefer instant access to videos or invitations to a webinar? Data from clicks can give you this information. Knowing your customers' preferences makes for more successful communication in the future.

Create Hypotheses

To identify key product behaviors, you first need to create hypotheses. Gather people from Customer Success, Sales, and Product and start formulating hypotheses for behaviors that are

1. Time-bound
2. Trackable

A good starting point is to map out what behaviors customers need to achieve during the first six months. You could map this on a 30-day or weekly basis, depending on the nature of your product or service.

Collaborate across your organization to identify customers' challenges as they move through each stage. Is there any unnecessary crossover? Miscommunication? For example, do your marketing and customer success teams contact the same customer with similar information? Collect customer data from marketing, customer support, the community team, and sales renewals. Collaboration among teams lets your organization take a step back and connect the customer journey steps. Analytics tools can help integrate data from across the organization, bringing together otherwise siloed touchpoints for a clear view of every customer at each stage.

Test Your Hypotheses

If you have a data team in place—great! Hand over the hypotheses and ask them to do a cohort analysis to see if the key behaviors you've mapped out lead to greater retention and expansion.

Working with limited resources? As long as you can track product usage and can tie that into your CS platform, that's all you need.

Your data will come back in two formats:
- **Positive indicators –** greater engagement, adoption, or retention
- **Negative indicators –** less engagement, adoption, or retention

Once you know what behaviors are positive indicators, you have an idea of what "good behavior" looks like for your product or service. Now you have a roadmap that tells you exactly what behaviors you need to help customers achieve in a certain time period.

That means you can start looking at what channels you can use to help influence and drive those behaviors. Whether it's in-app guides, email communications, webinars, or a customer community, your next step is to identify what digital channels will be the most effective in helping customers take the actions needed to drive those behaviors.

Create a Human-Centric Digital Customer Journey

Once you can aggregate your customer data and create a true, 360-degree view of your customer, you can better understand your customers' journeys and the outcomes they need to achieve at every stage. For example, leveraging usage data will help you understand where customers get stuck in adopting your product and might need extra guidance.

Support your Customer Success Managers (CSMs) to create the prototype processes using high-touch approaches and integrated data analytics. First, CSMs can use a high-touch approach to build knowledge bases, common responses, and customer experiences for self-service customers, just as they did for corporate clients. Companies can begin automating their most successful processes later, once leaders understand the four pillars of the customer journey and how they interact.

Let CSMs respond to challenges directly with customers in these four areas:

- **Onboarding**
- **Adoption**
- **Value realization**
- **Renewal**

Consider assigning separate health scores to each of the four pillars. By building your Digital CS operations from the ground up, your CSMs can help identify risk and growth signals where a human or hybrid interaction might help a customer through a challenge. With integrated data on the customer journey, CSMs can automate processes to focus on key pain points.

With a deeper understanding of which outcomes your customers need to realize along their journey, your team can more effectively support and guide them through it. You'll also be able to better understand where human touchpoints are most needed and where you can leverage digital engagement, such as emails or in-product communications.

For instance, you can automate their onboarding journey—sending automated emails, videos, and in-app engagements to guide them through the onboarding process—but, down the line, if that customer is coming up on their renewal and the account health isn't excellent, you'll want to reach out directly to discuss the renewal.

By intelligently combining human and automated touchpoints, your customers will still have a personal experience while your team can work more efficiently.

STEP 02:

Choosing Your Channels

You've completed the first and most crucial step in building your Digital CS program: mapping the customer journey. You have a roadmap for what behaviors must be achieved in a given timeframe.

Now it's time to start thinking about the digital channels to help drive those behaviors.

Orchestrating an end-to-end customer journey across multiple channels doesn't have to be difficult. But it does require understanding where your customers live every day: in the product, on email, in your community, or elsewhere.

Audit Existing Behaviors and Channel Performance

When you start developing the channels for your Digital CS program, there are a couple of things you need to think about:

1. What channels are you currently using and which ones work well for you?
2. What channels could be the most effective in driving the behaviors you've identified?

This is when you go back to your roadmap and carry out an audit. Look at the key customer behaviors and ask the following questions:

- What actions did customers take to achieve those key behaviors?
- What channels did they use? Is there a pattern?
- What type of content did they engage with? Did that content cover certain sections of your product or areas of interest? And what can you learn from that?

If you have enough data to identify trends, use it as a baseline to develop your channels and the content you're pushing through them. If your CS organization is less mature, start simple, work with what you have, and iterate as you learn more about your customers and their preferences.

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Develop Channels for Your Digital CS Program

One of the most important aspects of Digital CS is to have the resources in place for customers to self-serve. It's simple, your customers don't want to call your CSMs for every question, and your CSMs also need the time to focus on high-value conversations.

When developing your digital channels, one thing to remember is that every touchpoint is an experience. The goal? Make every experience through those touchpoints positive while your customers work toward the key behaviors.

So how do you choose the most effective channels?

1. Ask your customers

Always ask your customers what works for them. Do they want email prompts? In-app guides? Or are they perhaps happy to self-serve using a knowledge base? Do it consistently to understand how preferences might change as they mature with your product.

2. Evaluate your tech stack

Your channels will only be as good as your tech stack. As CS adopts more and more marketing and product metrics as their own, their tech stacks also need to reflect this. And while your tech stack is likely to change over time, the best tech stack is one that scales as you scale.

3. Track, measure, and test everything

In a Digital CS program, data is in the driver's seat. Whatever channels you choose, you need to make sure that everything can be tracked so that you can measure impact and keep improving.

4. Clarify ownership

Whose responsibility is it to build out the digital channels? Who is the best person to create the content? This mostly comes down to resourcing. In a smaller company, it'll likely be one single person, whereas in a larger company, the responsibility would stretch over a set of teams, such as CS, Customer Marketing, and Product.

A fully developed Digital CS program consists of channels and content that allow customers to onboard, adopt, and reach a high maturity level. Most of us don't just want automation—we expect it. Customers often like to create their own experience and get set up; they don't want our help. However, our job is still to guide them toward meeting the behaviors we have identified as achieving value for them.

STEP 3

Measuring Impact

Digital CS is all about data. Your ability to succeed is determined by your ability to leverage your customer data in a scalable manner.As you build out your digital-led program, you'll likely have plenty of data points to tell you if you're on the right track.

Your Customer Journey Milestones Dictate Your KPIs

Your customer journey milestones are the key to identifying your KPIs for your digital-led program. Once you know what they are, you can assess what data points you need to track against those milestones.

For example, during the onboarding phase, the bigger questions you'd want to answer are probably:

- How quickly are we onboarding customers?
- How good are we at onboarding customers?
- How soon do customers see value from our solution(s)?

But within those sits other questions such as:

- Are we reaching the right contacts?
- Are we using the right channels?
- Are we reaching out at the right time?
- How effective is the content we're using? (Do customers take the actions we want?)
- Are we using the best format? (Can/should the content be delivered in other or multiple formats?)

The ultimate question you want to answer is this: how fast was the Time to Value (TTV) during onboarding?

Next, during the adoption phase, you'll want to know:

- Are customers successful in using the product?
- Are customers using key product features? Are they utilizing all of the features they paid for?

When you mapped out your customer journey, you identified key product behaviors that you hypothesized would make customers successful with your product. Now, what KPIs should your CSM look at when they log in every morning?

Your Digital-led KPIs: Reach, Effect, ROI

In a digital-led approach, your KPIs can be split into three main categories that represent a simplified customer journey:

- **Reach: Did I manage to identify and reach the right contacts? (Leading indicator)**
- **Effect: Did I manage to make them do what I wanted them to do? (Leading indicator)**
- **ROI: Was the outcome what we wanted it to be? (Lagging indicator)**

Reach: Leading Indicator

Getting your message in front of the right people is the first step.

Your first KPI should answer the question: Did I identify the right contacts?

Reach comes down to effective segmentation. You have your contacts, and now it's time to determine what type of content should go in front of whom.

So what do you want to segment by? It should come as no surprise: behavior.

You want to ensure your customers are getting closer to the journey milestones. You'll track this against the key product behaviors you've mapped out. But it's not just about product usage, you also want to track behavior on all relevant platforms to better understand what content they're consuming.

Effect: Leading Indicator

Define your effect metrics based on your unique customer journey milestones.

For example, during onboarding, you'd want to look at:

- Did the customers attend training sessions and webinars?
- Did they access your knowledge base?
- Were they active in your customer community?
- What content did they consume and did it achieve the desired outcome?

This is where you want to look at both engagement metrics and product usage metrics to answer questions such as:

- Can your customers easily find your content? (Pageviews, interactions per visit)
- Are your customers consuming your content? (Time spent on page, % exit, scroll depth, content downloads)
- Is your content perceived as valuable? (Video views, drop-offs, and interactions, webinar signup, attendance, and drop-off rates)
- Does your content achieve the desired outcomes? (Product logins, feature usage, actions, revenue)

ROI: Lagging Indicator

This is the moment of truth. If you've reached the right contacts and delivered the right content, this is when you reap the rewards.

This could be:

- Increased logins
- Increased product usage
- Feature adoption
- Added integrations
- Upgraded user permissions
- Increased revenue (added seats, plan upgrades, renewals)

These should always be tied to a specific time period, if they're not it can be more difficult to identify the specific actions that led to those outcomes.

Final Thoughts on Digital CS

At Gainsight, we believe a cross-functional Digital CS program is increasingly a must-have as organizations are pushed to do more with less in order to scale.

There are a lot of moving parts in a Digital CS program, no doubt about it. And while the goal is to marry the aspects of personalization, automation, content, engagement, and data, everything doesn't have to happen all at once.

We've simplified the journey. Now it's easier and clearer than ever to embed CS as a key growth engine of your business — from start-up to scale-up and beyond.

Start with the customer. Start with what you know. Building out the first iteration of your Digital CS program (especially with limited resources and budget) will take time—but it will be worth it.

A robust digital-led strategy empowers CS teams to serve their entire customer base with the efficiency necessary to drive durable businesses.