

The Ultimate Guide to SaaS Customer Onboarding (2021)



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Your customer picked your product over other solutions in the market because they believe your product is the best fit for their needs. It is, therefore, crucial that they start seeing value in your product at the earliest. Effective customer onboarding does precisely that: help customers realize they've made the right choice.

But what is customer onboarding?

Simply put, it is the process that a customer goes through to get comfortable using your product and sees value in your product. It is the stage where you can reassure your customer that they have made the right choice and provide an experience that will leave them confident about using your product for their needs.

What does a typical customer onboarding process look like?

A customer onboarding project, especially that of SaaS businesses, can broadly be divided into the following phases:

Handoff/pre-onboarding/pre-kickoff

From the vendor's side, the teams involved are typically the sales team, up to the pre-kickoff or the handoff stage where they formally hand over a customer account to the customer success or the onboarding team for the next phase. From the customer's end, the team or individuals who are the sales team's points of contact will be involved. The sales team introduces the customer success/customer onboarding team to the customer's team. Here's a handy guide to perfecting the sales-to-service handoff process and a free template for the procedure.

Kickoff

The kickoff meeting sets the tone for a customer onboarding project. This phase can establish goals, milestones, project scope, and set expectations with the customer.

Depending on the customer's needs, customer success, onboarding or implementation, and delivery teams are involved from the vendor's end. From the customer's end, the team that will be working on the implementation will be present.

Here's our [guide to planning and prepping for a great kickoff meeting](#). And here's another on [how to run a successful kickoff meeting](#).

Solutioning

This is where the onboarding team gets into the nitty-gritty of the product implementation: the features to implement, how the customer needs to prepare for the implementation, etc. This is where the SMEs, customer success, and product teams from the vendor end and the implementation team from the customer's end.

Account setup, configuration, testing

This is where the customer is walked through how to set up the product for themselves and configure settings and the various features. This includes creating their account, user roles and logins, defining access, getting their current data into the system, etc. This is also where the customer's team and the vendor's team test the product for their use cases.

Training

Some customer onboarding processes have training as an integral part, especially if the product is complex and the outcomes cannot be achieved without help from the vendor's side. This is also an essential part of onboarding for enterprise customers. Typically, many people in their organization will use the product and not just the individuals from their end who are directly involved in the implementation. Here's [Bill Cushard \(General Manager, ServiceRocket\)](#) on how customer education can drive customer success.

Implementation and integrations

In this phase, the customer's site/portal is rolled out. In addition, any advance integrations and tweaks to the implementation based on customer feedback are done here.

Check out [our podcast](#) with Sridhar Gollapalli (VP - Customer Success) and Sudheer Sharma Goda (Director of Professional Services) of Gainsight on nailing implementations.

Go-live

This is the phase where your product becomes available for use. Your customer starts using your product with actual, real-time data for their day-to-day business needs. The actual users on the customer's end and the implementation team from the vendor side are involved in this phase.

Why You Need a Good Customer Onboarding Experience

Many customers (90% to be exact) churn between signing up and realizing the value of the product. And the main reason customers churn is that they do not understand the product well enough or have decided that yours is not the solution they need.

Therefore, onboarding becomes a crucial phase that can be used to reduce churn—it sets the tone for customer experience and helps you gain their confidence and trust. This is also a phase where you can help them realize value. Check out [this post](#) on how you can ace your value delivery game in the customer onboarding phase.

Customer onboarding metrics

Tracking metrics for your customer onboarding projects can help you figure out where your process needs tweaking or where your team needs help. It will also help you measure the efficacy of your customer onboarding methodology. The metrics tracked vary based on the industry and goals. The following metrics are a great way to start.

Time to onboarding completion

Look at the duration your customer onboarding projects last. Once you have onboarded a few customers, you will understand what the optimal customer onboarding duration is for your product. While it is great to reduce the time to onboarding completion, keep in mind that a customer onboarding process aims to educate the customer on your project and help them see value in your product, so work with those goals in mind.

Time to First Value

If your product is complex, or if your customer has to go through a longer onboarding process, or if they have to wait after go-live to realize value, it helps to break down the goals into smaller wins and deliver some of them during the onboarding phase. This instills confidence in the customer and encourages them to stick on till they gain value. Quicker time-to-first-value (TTFV) equals lesser churn.

Check out [this First Value Delivery \(FVD\) framework](#) by Irit Eizips, CEO, CSM Practice.

Conversion to paid plans

If you offer a free trial, and your customers are willing to pay for your product at the end of the trial period, it is a clear indicator of your onboarding process's success!

For larger ACVs or projects that have a longer duration, it might help to demonstrate a POC and convert prospects into paying customers before you begin the implementation or onboarding process.

Adoption and Engagement

Daily Active Users (DAU) and Monthly Active Users (MAU) indicate how often your customers use your product. Higher numbers mean that more customers derive value from the ongoing use of your product. Conversely, inactive users are likely to churn.

Churn Rate

In SaaS parlance, 'churn' is when customers cancel or don't renew their subscription to a product. Churn rate is the percentage of customers who have not renewed their subscription to your product over a period of time.

Look out for churn within the first 90 days. Higher churn during this period might warrant a change in your customer onboarding approach.

Customer Satisfaction Score (CSAT)

The Customer Satisfaction Score (CSAT) indicates whether your customer finds your product valuable and how much of their goals have been met with your product.

You can incorporate a CSAT survey into your onboarding journey. This will help you understand what went well and what needs improvement from your customer's perspective. Use this information to improve your onboarding process.

Customer Effort Score (CES)

The Customer Effort Score (CES) measures the amount of effort a customer has to put in to get onboarded or to use your product. Typically, you ask a question, like 'How easy is it to use this product?' and ask the customer to choose between: Very Easy, Easy, Neither/Neutral, Difficult, Very Difficult. The CES is calculated by reducing the percentage of negative answers (Difficult, Very Difficult) from the percentage of positive responses (Easy, Very Easy). Use this metric to understand the ease of use of your product and to predict renewals (the lesser the effort required from your customer, the more likely they are to stick to your product).

Net Promoter Score (NPS)

This is a measure of how likely your customer is to recommend your product or service to others. You ask a single question, such as 'How likely are you to recommend this product in your network?', and asking the customer to choose a number between 0 and 10 as the answer, 0 being least likely and 10 being most likely.

Generally, the scores are categorized as follows:

0-6 - Detractors

7-8 - Neutral

9-10 - Promoters

Reduce the percentage of detractors from the percentage of promoters to get your NPS.

Crafting the ultimate customer onboarding experience

How to hold customers accountable in the journey

The customer onboarding journey is about helping your customers successfully utilize your product and derive business value from it. And helping them understand where they fit in in the process, and holding them accountable for doing their part to help the project move forward, is a part of it.

How to design your customer onboarding methodology

There is no one-size-fits-all customer onboarding methodology. The perfect methodology for your customer onboarding is the one you create to suit your customers and their needs. Nevertheless, some elements can determine the success of your customer onboarding process:

1. Onboarding complexity
2. Timelines and stakeholder plan
3. Project blueprint: phases and activities
4. Engagement strategy and communication plan
5. Onboarding goals and value delivery

We break down each element in detail and how you can take them into account while designing your customer onboarding methodology in [this post](#).

How to keep project stakeholders up to date

One of the significant factors that determine the efficacy of your customer onboarding is communication. Therefore, it is vital for all stakeholders to stay up-to-date on the goings-on of the project. Here's how to keep your stakeholders informed.

1. Understand your stakeholders' expectations

During the [project kickoff meeting](#), find out what your stakeholders expect to know about your project status and the frequency of your communications. For example, would they want daily updates? Weekly? Bi-weekly? This way, you can draw up a communication plan that is effective and serves its purpose.

2. Use a project status report

A project status report is a great tool to use as part of your project communications. It is a crisp document that provides visibility on the progress made on the project's milestones and timelines. It also calls out issues that need to be managed to ensure the project stays on track. Share this report at regular intervals (weekly, fortnightly, etc.) with all stakeholders.

Here's our [guide to creating the perfect project status report](#), complete with a free, customizable template.

3. Use a collaborative platform

Communications on the project do not all have to be manually done. Automating is a great way to ensure the individuals concerned are continually updated. Use a collaborative platform, add your project team as members, share documents, assign tasks and checklists, and ensure they get notified each time something is dependent on them. Rocketlane is [purpose-built for customer onboarding projects](#), and you can add your customer to your project workspace, too, helping them participate and holding them accountable for their part in the project.

Value of steering committees in large projects

A steering committee is a group of people involved in the project and are the main stakeholders of the project. This would usually be the project managers from your organization and the customer's, top executives like CEOs, and senior leaders. The role of the steering committee, as its name suggests, is to ensure the project is headed in the right direction. They validate crucial, often major, decisions. They also help bring issues to resolution quickly, resolve conflicts, and evaluate value delivery. Rocketlane lets you notify the right individuals who need to unblock progress on a specific task or decision.

[Give it a spin!](#)

How to keep onboarding projects on track

Nobody likes to see their project go off-track after investing their resources and time in it. Unfortunately, there are multiple ways a project can go off track, such as scope creep or changing priorities at the customer's end. There are factors that you can preempt and avoid, and there are others that are out of your control. Here are some ways you can make sure your project is well-managed and therefore stays on track.

1. Have a robust project plan

When you have an exciting new project waiting for you, it can be very tempting to dive right in and get things rolling. However, your project's chances of staying on track and

succeeding increase if you start with a plan in place. Here are things you can do to ensure you have a strong project plan:

- ◆ Arrive at the scope in collaboration with all stakeholders. You can do this during your project kickoff meeting.
- ◆ Use a project charter and use it to reiterate the project scope and important activities.
- ◆ Use a RACI chart to distribute responsibilities and to encourage ownership.
- ◆ Use a comprehensive checklist for every stage of your project. This will make sure you don't miss important details and account for crucial tasks and decisions.

If you are looking to better your customer onboarding experience, our guide on the topic can help.

2. Consistently follow-up with task owners/assignees

Establish a routine for checking in with your task owners. This can help spot bottlenecks on time and figure out how to help them complete their tasks on time. If the task owner is your customer, work this check-in into your engagement/communication strategy with them. This brings us to the next point.

3. Communicate

The most crucial factor that influences your ability to stay on track is communication. At the start of the project, ensure everyone is aligned on the goals and scope. Then, throughout the project, keep key stakeholders informed of the project's progress. A project status report is a great way to communicate the important aspects (such as milestones, deliverables, issues, etc.) and get timely help.

4. Celebrate milestones

While laying down the project scope and deliverables, call out milestones—indicators that the project is moving in the right direction at the right pace. Celebrating wins can motivate team members to stay on track and enthused about hitting the next milestone.

The Ultimate Checklist for Customer Onboarding

As we mentioned earlier, there is no one-size-fits-all methodology for customer onboarding. But it is a great idea to plan your customer onboarding thoroughly, taking into account each phase of the project. We've put together a comprehensive, [20-point checklist](#) covering all possible activities and decisions you want to nail for the perfect onboarding experience. It covers five important aspects of an onboarding process:

1. Scope, requirements, resources
2. Value realization
3. Stakeholder engagement and management
4. Onboarding methodology
5. Documentation and project tracking

Use this checklist as a guard rail to keep your project on track. Rocketlane is a collaborative platform purpose-built for customer onboarding that allows for creating and assigning tasks and checklists to the individuals concerned. You can collaborate on documents, spreadsheets, and files from within the app. You can also invite your customers to your Rocketlane workspace and get them to collaborate with you to make the customer onboarding journey a success.

[Check it out now!](#)

More useful resources

- ◆ [How WebEngage's Onboarding Approach Adds To Their Customer Experience](#)
- ◆ [How Innovaccer's Customer Engineering Team Handles Implementation & Onboarding](#)
- ◆ [How Pando's implementation team onboarded 20 enterprise clients in two years](#)
- ◆ [Cracking The Enterprise Code - Vishal Rana, VP - Customer Success, Snapdocs \(Podcast\)](#)
- ◆ [Checkbox Mentality vs. Value-focused Mentality for Customer Success - Stephan Howsepian, Citrix \(Podcast\)](#)
- ◆ [Reviving A Project When You've Been Ghosted](#)

