

Olala Homes leans on Zendesk to compete with vacation-rental giants



How does a small, regional startup compete with global companies in a fast-growing and competitive space? Find a niche and own it. That's how Olala Homes, an upstart European business specializing in vacation rentals management in Spain, Greece, and Romania, grew from offering 4 properties when it launched five years ago to 150 in 2019. The niche? An unparalleled customer experience, with a focus on guest satisfaction powered by technology.

“Customer experience is the core of why we exist,” said Olala Homes CEO Ittai Savran. “Accommodation is an important part of a guest’s travel, and our products are not just short-term rental spaces but an entire experience within this context.”

The company launched in 2014 during Europe’s real estate downturn, when Savran and his partners recognized the opportunity to purchase several properties from a bankrupt developer in Barcelona, Spain. “It was really trial and error to see how we could implement a short-term rental strategy with the properties we bought,” said Savran, noting that the properties were located in residential neighborhoods away from bustling tourist hotspots. “Sometimes when we tell people from Madrid or Barcelona where



INCREASE IN SOLVED TICKETS

350%

PROPERTIES/APARTMENTS

150

CSAT

93%

TICKETS/MO

~9K

PRODUCTS USED



chat



explore



guide



support



talk



our apartments are, they hardly believe that travelers will choose to stay in these parts of town.” And yet Olala Home’s outstanding customer experience, coupled with the local vibe of each neighborhood, draws people in.

But Olala Homes goes the extra mile to provide a customer experience that rivals larger competitors, and the effort pays off in high customer satisfaction rates and a rapidly growing business (the company plans to offer 300 apartments by 2020.) “Sometimes the location factor is a bit challenging, but all the rest of our ratings are almost perfect,” Savran said. “It’s something we are very proud of, because it’s not that common to put people in middle-class neighborhoods—locations where before we came, there were hardly any tourists.”

In the beginning, Olala Homes had no customer engagement system of its own and worked with the various short-term rental platforms themselves, including Booking.com and Airbnb. But nothing was integrated—the platforms all had their own inboxes, email, and phone systems. The business was getting lots of inquiries but had no way of tracking whether or not one of its agents had responded. And that was a problem. “In the past, you may have been able to return a call or query after a few hours, but this is something that clients accept less and less,” Savran

said “In the hospitality and travel business, especially when they’re already at the property they booked, clients expect immediate attention.” And since public reviews are now such a prominent factor in people’s decision to purchase, they also directly impact revenue. “Major online travel agencies rank properties according to guest evaluations,” Savran said “So customer satisfaction is at the core of our business.”

Olala Homes realized that to get customer ratings high and keep them there, omnichannel support was crucial. Enabling customers to effectively receive help across different channels could turn dissatisfied guests into brand promoters. “This is the main reason we implemented Zendesk in 2018,” said Savran. “Zendesk lets you integrate all the channels you work with into one place.”

The company implemented a full suite of Zendesk products, including Support, Guide, Talk, Chat, and Explore. “We were looking for a solution that is not only a CRM, and that’s not just a tool for analytical data,” Savran said. “Zendesk Talk, together with Support, together with Chat—everything together is a full solution.”

Olala Homes started by building out interactive voice greetings with Talk and integrating its contact channels—including email, chat, Facebook, WhatsApp, and text—with Support one at a time to ensure a smooth transition and allow time for its agents to get up to speed on the new technology. “Facebook and WhatsApp represent around 15 percent of our total contacts,” said Savran, “and [those integrations] are a real plus for Olala Homes because we can troubleshoot technical issues in real time and resolve them more quickly by asking customers to provide pictures and videos.”

With a growing company and a small, geographically dispersed staff tasked with providing the personal touch and seamless experience its customers demand, it was important for Olala Homes to find efficiencies wherever it could. “Talk is one of our biggest solutions,” Savran said. “People call us quite a lot, and we’re working on reducing that.” Many of the calls are related to information and questions that could be resolved via a self-service knowledge base. “In this aspect, every call we get, we’re trying to tag,” said Savran. “We ask what was the reason for the call, and then we start to see where we can reduce the number of calls related to questions that can be handled in advance.”

Guide, which is integrated with the Olala Homes Support ticketing system, provides the knowledge base that helps to track and record new information, detect gaps, and coach agents about new processes and workflows. Olala Homes posted 100 articles just within the first half of 2019, and the company will enable the Web Widget functionality to its Guide instance before the end of the year. It is also looking into adding Answer Bot to help lead visitors find localized articles that help answer their questions.

Meanwhile, Olala Homes relies on Zendesk Explore to collect and analyze data from its channels. “The agility of Explore allows us to design specific reports that directly influence our decisions and the way we manage our operations,” Savran said. It was data from these reports that prompted Olala Homes to extend its workday by opening its business just one hour earlier, which enabled agents to answer 100 calls more per month that they had previously missed.

Explore also helps the company measure agent performance and track success against its KPIs, such as percent of calls answered within 20 seconds, first-touch ticket resolution, and customer satisfaction (CSAT) ratings. “These targets are relatively new for us,” said Savran, “but we are meeting them in most areas.”



The company has been using Zendesk Support as a communication hub to connect operations centers in Athens, Bucharest, Madrid, and Barcelona with its contact center. Olala Homes uses groups and ticket-assignment functionality to enable cross-regional collaboration—someone from Spain, for example, can move a ticket to an agent in Greece who may have the answer. “Think of it as a message center,” said Savran. “If someone needs my response on a ticket, they just assign it to me, I give it a look and answer the question, and I assign it back.” A year ago, the company was using WhatsApp for this kind of collaboration, but “it became too chaotic,” he said. Since Olala Homes began using Zendesk for the internal cross-region communication, resolution time on these tickets has been cut in half.

As Olala Homes fine-tunes the support team’s operations, it’s also scaling up its high-tech investments. Those innovations include a smart-lock app for easy check-in/check-out; smart TVs that help customers find information such as what’s in the neighborhood, how to get to the metro, and the location for the closest convenience stores; a smart luggage solution for customers wishing to secure their luggage in an onsite storeroom; and even Matterport 3-D videos of its apartments so potential customers can take virtual tours before booking their space.

Savran uses data from Zendesk to understand what improvement to make next. “We’re using Zendesk constantly as an analytic tool to understand where we can be more efficient,” said Savran. “Before we had smart locks for all the apartments, we had an enormous amount of calls related to meeting the client in person. Now clients download an app and then enter the apartment by themselves. There were calls related to issues with passports, so now we are using a smart solution to collect passports information.”

To ensure the kind of personalized experience and high-touch attention that’s at the heart of Olala Homes’ success, the company employs its own maintenance and housekeeping teams. A seamless integration between Zendesk and Olala Homes’ Asana task-management system helps the company make sure apartments are cleaned and prepared for visitors. If a customer reaches out about a hot water heater that’s not working, for example, a help ticket started in Zendesk immediately triggers a task in Asana that goes to the local maintenance team; when maintenance resolves the issue and closes the ticket in Asana, Zendesk shows the task as completed. Likewise, a ticket created with Asana feeds into the Zendesk system.



The company is also looking into integrating its Avantio property management system (PMS) with Zendesk. This is a major step for the company, Savran said, “because we would be able to cross-check customer-reservations data with customer contacts and better understand who is contacting us and why.” All these small but quite crucial things would help agents provide much faster and much more efficient service. It would also enable them to use Zendesk to proactively communicate with customers.

The company is also exploring Tymeshift, workforce management integration that is designed to enhance agents’ productivity. “We’re checking out the limitations of Alexa or other virtual assistants as well,” said Savran. “Communication like this can provide a different experience than was possible before all these technologies were available.”

Zendesk is allowing Olala Homes to sustain its vision for the future “by giving us the capacity to scale— from 2,000 solved contacts in January 2019 to 9,000 in July—and increase our productivity while improving the quality of our service,” Savran said. “Even if guests stay only for a night for a flight connection, we still want them to feel as comfortable and easy as if it were their own home. Without our emphasis on customer experience, a space is simply four walls and furniture, and we would not be as successful as we are now in this extremely competitive industry.”

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“In our business, we need to provide a seamless, personalized experience to clients without actually meeting them in person. Zendesk helps us connect with clients so they have an exceptional stay.”

– Ittai Savran
CEO