



# THE ONE QUESTION NOT TO ASK YOUR STARTUP SAAS PROVIDER

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## When buying a SaaS solution, consider the neighborhood, not just the individual house.

There's a certain amount of risk involved for customers of startup SaaS vendor. There's also a benefit—when you're customer number ten, you are going to get a lot of attention and resources.

As the startup grows, customers and prospects begin to ask what they believe to be the key question, "Will we get all the attention we need?"

I firmly believe that this is not the question to be asking.

At first blush, that question sounds fair. With the current industry focus on customer success, existing customers want to know that they will continue to be special. Prospects want to know if as the company grows, there will be enough bandwidth to focus on them.

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This is natural enough. If you're at a busy hotel and they only have one concierge, certainly that one person may not be able to make the restaurant reservations, secure the show tickets or otherwise give you the personal attention you need to make your visit a smashing success. In that type of environment, that question makes sense.

But is it the best question you could be asking your SaaS provider? Not so much. There are better questions to ask. Here's why: Customer success with Software as a Service is not so much about individual attention as it is about a philosophy of scalable product development and delivery that codifies best practices that all customers can benefit from.

If a software vendor is building a custom system for you, yes, individual attention is important. But if a vendor is building a SaaS platform, drawing best practices from hundreds of customers and millions of data points and encoding them into the platform, what you should be most concerned with is how the company decides what those best practices are going to be.

This is true for both enterprise and consumer software. Facebook is a good example. You don't join Facebook because of the individual attention they're going to give you. You join and stay with Facebook because they're creating a huge community of users all over the world and figuring out the best ways to do that through continually optimized functionality. You've decided you've wanted to enter their world and trust them.

That includes trusting that when they make mistakes they will self-correct those mistakes. If they throw too many ads into the feed, people change their behavior, the data reflects those changes and they pull back. They learn and adjust. They take into account data from millions of users to make these decisions.

Of course, Facebook is free for the user, and enterprise software is typically not. There's a tendency to think that because you're paying a lot of money, you should get more individual attention. To a certain extent that's true. If you pay enough, you get special attention in terms of a louder voice in feature prioritization and ongoing services support. But, that does not make personal attention the key question to ask, or the key to success.

Think of buying SaaS for the enterprise as buying a house in a new development. Every house is going to have a roof and windows and doors and water and electricity running to the house. Roads will be built to navigate around the development and connect to nearby streets and highways and other transit. Parks and schools will be integrated into the neighborhood.

You may have a choice of single-family home, townhouse or condominium, but an engineer or architect or interior designer will have already pre-selected the best floorplans and finishes, leaving you with the opportunity to configure a few key critical areas while taking advantage of everything the neighborhood has to offer. What you're really buying is the neighborhood and the community, not just the house.

The questions to ask then become, does the builder have a good reputation? Do you like the architectural style of the houses? Are there plans for green space? Will it be well served by transportation? Will there be shopping or other amenities? What are the homeowners association rules? You need to know the vision, the plan for the long term and who is guiding it.

The same is true when buying into SaaS platform. Your success is ultimately driven not by individual attention, but by whether the software vendor is smart enough to figure out which elements will deliver customer success as both companies, yours and theirs, grow.

The questions for the vendor then become, what kinds of customers do you have? What is your philosophy for codifying best practices for all customers, and for the kind of customer that I am? What is long-term roadmap and strategy for your platform?

If you ask those kinds of questions, you'll be able to easily avoid the vendors that are just custom-code shops and find the ones that will deliver customer success—your success—over the long term. It's not so much about attention as it is about philosophy. It's not so much about the house as it is about the neighborhood.