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**Customer Service: Your Advantage**

**By Bryan Marye**

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So, you don't have a multi-million dollar advertising campaign? You don't have a staff of hundreds, venture capital backing or someone from Star Trek as your spokesperson? Then perhaps it's time to look into one of the advantages that you do have over these e-commerce giants..... customer service.

You might wonder how a small company can hope to give better customer service than these heavily staffed, heavily funded e-giants. Believe it or not, it may be your lack of size, that just might give you the edge.

Think about your average customer service experience in an off-line setting. Where do you usually have the kinds of customer service experiences that are so positive, you come away raving to your friends and co-workers? While I can't answer for you, I can tell you that the overwhelming majority of my experiences of this nature have come with small businesses, often very small. Conversely, I can also say that as a rule, my biggest CS (customer service) nightmares have come with the biggest companies. Of course, there are always exceptions, but this theory has proven to be surprisingly consistent for me. I would bet that if you compile a quick mental list of your best and worst experiences as a customer, you might find this to be true for you as well.

The problem with large companies is usually a volume issue. Many of these businesses have such a large volume of CS inquiries, that they simply don't have the manpower to adequately provide timely and efficient service. Often, it is difficult to even find the proper channel for which to take your CS issue. Large e-commerce companies aren't immune to these kinds of issues. In fact, they are often even less prepared to handle the flow of questions and comments that come in from their site on a daily basis. Many of these companies experience massive volume of traffic to their sites. A nice problem to have, but a problem that can often leave the customer out in the cold.

## Customer Service: Your Advantage

A recent Gartner study surveyed 50 top-rated internet retail sites on their customer service readiness and effectiveness. The results were very telling. Not one of these 50 sites ranked as excellent with regards to customer service readiness. 23% graded out as average, and 73% were rated below average, and 4% rated poor.

Cnet quoted another recent study by Resource Marketing which showed similar results. "Wal-Mart online is a maze, Williams-Sonoma makes customers fill out applications every time they shop, and KBkids.com automatically sends new customers its electronic newsletter, whether they ask for it or not." Caroline Cofer, a spokesperson for Resource Marketing added that many of these large merchants are "making some scary mistakes."

Now, with many of these large e-tailers streamlining operations in order to stay afloat, it is difficult to imagine customer service improving. In fact, customer service issues on-line have become such an issue, that an entire sector has evolved to deal with the problems. Companies such as Egain Communications and Kana Communications offer automated, CRM (customer relation management) solutions. Many of these automated services are ASP (application service provider) models that feature multi-channel response e-mail systems. In other words, software that attempts to emulate a real human. On one hand, these companies should be admired for their vision, and will probably be rewarded with booming sales. On the other hand, the technology has a way to go before it is a replacement for human interaction. Have you ever sent a question to a site's customer service center, and received the answer to the wrong question? More than likely, this was the result of automated CRM software that was unable to properly interpret your question and send the correct response.

This is where your advantage as a small company comes into play. While you may not enjoy the volume of these sites, you can create a higher percentage of repeat visitors/buyers with superior CS. Generally, when you hear people talk about improving CS, you hear things like: "make yourself available" and "give good contact information." This is true, but it goes beyond that. What people really want is speed. People want their questions answered now. People want their CS issue resolved in a hurry. Providing a phone number is a must, but chances are, people don't want to go off-line and call you for the answers to their questions unless it is a last resort. In the e-world, people want an i-response: Immediate, internet response.

Of course, you can't be everywhere at once. Managing a small business or website is already a full-time job. But making CS a focal point of your website can pay immense dividends for your traffic and or profit. Think of it this way, if you can respond to a customer's question within 24 hours, you are beating about 50% of the large e-companies already. If you can respond within 12 hours, I would estimate that you would be beating somewhere around 80%. If you can respond within 6 hours, you are providing customer service that most e-commerce giants

only dream about.

A quick list of ways to improve your customer service:

1. Speed: We all know as customers, that few things are more valuable to us than time. Standing in line is no fun at the supermarket, and waiting for a response from a CS center is no fun either.
2. Contact information: Make it easy to find. Make it an address that you or an employee checks on a regular basis. Don't make the customer work to find you.
3. Live chat: Offer your customers the opportunity to use instant messaging software to contact you. MSN Messenger and ICQ are two widely used formats that work on almost all platforms, and it's 100% free.
4. F.A.Q and search options: Make them thorough. Not all sites need F.A.Q (frequently asked questions) pages, but if your site does, then make it thorough and easy to understand. If your site has a search box, be sure that it gives adequate results. Test it out. It's surprising how many high-profile websites have inadequate

in-site search functions.

5. Customer is always right: We all know that this is bull, but, the old adage still stands the test of time. Whether or not the customer is "right," our job as CS managers is to put out fires. Quick, pleasant responses to even the most irate customers will almost always cool the situation. In fact, an efficient CS agent can turn even the most irate customer into a loyal customer

Take the work out of it for your visitors. Encourage them to ask questions and reward them with quick, friendly responses. Your customers and visitors are the most important asset you have. Make them feel that way.

Bryan Marye, IMR <http://www.imr-central.com> Receive articles like this every week free, by signing up for the IMRResourceletter: <mailto:subscribe@imr-central.com?SubscribeA>

## **Customer Loyalty in the Technology Industry**

**By Richard Cunningham**

For technology companies, service after the sale has emerged on equal footing with innovation as a competitive advantage.

As technology-related products and services touch nearly every area of our lives and our businesses, technology has become integrated in how we communicate, learn, work, and entertain ourselves. Our appetite for technology products is growing, even in today's economic climate.

Traditionally, technology companies competed for this business by delivering more innovative, reliable products and services at lower prices. In the audio book, "Sound Advice on Customer Loyalty," author

## Customer Service: Your Advantage

Steve Walker says customer expectations are changing.

"Contracting markets and increasing commoditization of technology products have combined to give the customer the upper hand," says Walker. "Technology companies must become more responsive to the ever changing needs of their customers."

According to recent customer studies, this translates into a demand for improved customer support.

"Customers are expecting better technical and non-technical customer service," says Walker. "Our research shows that service after the sale has emerged on at least equal footing with innovation as a competitive advantage for technology companies."

"While the potential for technology companies is great, the need to manage customer loyalty in such a dynamic market is even greater," says Walker. "For technology companies, a focus on customers will only add more value to the innovative products and services they are expected to deliver."

Steve Walker offers advice on managing customer loyalty each week in the free audio newsletter from What's Working in Biz,

Richard Cunningham is a principal of What's Working in Biz,

, a publisher

of business audiobooks and online audio programs on marketing, sales, and small business strategies.

Customer Loyalty in the Technology Industry

Customer Service – A Lost Art?

What's really different about your company, product or service?

Feature Your Benefits

Customer Satisfaction

How to Gain and Retain More Customers

Pay Per Text Marketing

Web Audio Plus Software

eBarteringTactics

Build Your Own Mail Order Empire



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