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Providing Excellent Customer Support on a Small Budget

By Bill Platt

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An integral part of any successful e-commerce website is an effective customer support solution. Your online business must be able to quickly respond to inquiries from potential clients and from existing clients, and then be able to address those inquiries accurately and efficiently.

There is no other area of an e-commerce website that is as important as customer service and support. If your online business fails to address this one issue, your business is nearly doomed to failure.

Small business owners usually rely on a simple email address or a contact form on their website to direct inquiries. The reasons for this choice are obvious.

Most small businesses are one person operations. There is seldom any need to provide anything more elaborate provided there is only one person handling all communications.

In the event that the site is being managed by only one person, it is recommended that you provide your customers a simple contact form attached to a simple contact script which can be found for free in numerous places online. A good starting point is:

http://cgi.resourceindex.com/Programs_and_Scripts/Perl/

This is the recommended method because spammers ruthlessly use email harvesting software to gather email addresses from

websites for their spam games. If your real contact email address is hidden inside of a CGI script, then the spam harvesters cannot find your address, thus protecting your email address from large amounts of spam email.

Anyone who is operating a website for profit and has no intention of ever expanding his/her business beyond current levels should not worry too much about expanding beyond a simple CGI contact script to run their customer service and support.

However, if you find yourself growing to the point of needing something better, then please keep reading.

Small business people often find themselves in the mode of needing to add extra support staff, but still being small enough to not be able to yet afford a customized support software solution.

Software driven help desks can be an expensive proposition. WonderDesk is a decent application to serve this market, but starting at \$499 and going up to \$8499, it can be a really expensive solution.

<http://www.wonderdesk.com>

Facing costs like this, many small businesses choose to try bringing on extra staff and trying to manage incoming messages through various POP email accounts.

While this method remains the cheapest solution, it is not always the most efficient. Think about this.

If you have email going to Bob and to Steve --- in a theoretical scenario --- and you have Bob handling sales and Steve handling support, all would seem well.

But what if Bob finds himself extremely ill and unable to work? What then? Now you are stuck with the very real possibility of sales inquiries not being handled until Bob can return to work. So the way to handle this becomes making sure that everyone has access to the accounts that handle sales inquiries and support inquiries. So, you make arrangements for both Bob and Steve to be able to get the email from the POP accounts.

Of course, this introduces a whole brand new problem. Now, both Bob and Steve are getting email from both accounts. But now, if Bob answers an email, Steve really has no way of knowing that Bob has already answered the email. If both Bob and Steve answer the inquiry, then your company now looks as if it consists of a couple of bumbling idiots. That is definitely not the image you want to portray of your company. Additionally, you don't want Bob and Steve answering inquiries that have already been answered because it is a waste of human resources.

Facing this problem, it would seem wise to use a web-based email interface. Problem here is that you will have to constantly monitor a web-based email account for new inquiries. Can you imagine the pain of relying on web-based email for the operation of your business? Unless your web mail system contacts you immediately upon the arrival of new email, then you must

maintain an open browser window to your web mail account and continually refresh the window to see if there is new email to answer.

Relying upon your web email account for your support inquiries can become very time consuming and inefficient.

The advantages of having the ability to have one email account monitored by a number of people, and having the ability to move some emails to different folders should weigh heavily in your consideration of using web-based email for your sales and support inquiries.

Web-based email had seemed like the perfect solution for the cost-aware business person, but the disadvantage of the troubles of keeping an eye for incoming mail seem to eliminate this as a realistic solution to our problem, doesn't it?

I had argued with myself concerning how to solve this problem for many months. I needed an effective sales and support inquiries system without spending my entire budget to get it. But you know, if you stew over a problem long enough and keep your eye to the horizon, a solution will present itself.

As it turned out, a piece of software I had on my system for quite some time figured into the solution I had been searching for. With the last upgrade of the ePrompter software, I suddenly realized that the final piece of the puzzle was within my reach.

ePrompter is a handy little application that has always permitted us to check multiple email accounts simultaneously and delete messages as we were finished with them. With the last upgrade of ePrompter, the makers enabled us to have the ability to respond to email inquiries also.

With this development, I have handed out copies of the ePrompter to each of my support team members. ePrompter runs in the background and notifies us through an icon in the System Tray how many new messages are present in each of the accounts we monitor. As we answer each email, we either delete it from the server through the ePrompter software, or if we need to store the messages for future reference, we log into the web-based version of the account and move the email in question to the appropriate folders.

To get your copies of the ePrompter software, visit <http://www.eprompter.com> . This software is free to download and use, and will be absolutely essential to your low-cost (free) sales and support system.

Bill Platt is co-owner of Double Eagle Business Center (DEBC).By providing an honest and well thought out MLM Opportunity, DEBCmeets all the legal requirements for an online MLM plus offers products and services which can support any online business along with an innovative and a high percentage (75%) commissionpayout to Affiliates. <http://PathTrax.com/x.pl/BP121,17>

PUTTING THE "SERVICE" BACK IN "CUSTOMER SERVICE"

By Sean Cohen

PUTTING THE "SERVICE" BACK IN "CUSTOMER SERVICE" by Sean Cohen

The future of customer service is here. Technology has made seeking out support faster and easier than ever. But, has your digital age company sacrificed true service in the name of automation?

Today, finding customer support is as simple as writing an e-mail or picking up the phone. But, even though you're not face-to-face with your customers, you still leave a lasting impression. Do you come across as caring and competent, or menacing and mechanical?

Offering stand-out service on the Internet isn't as hard as

it is rare. Take these simple steps towards old-style service in the digital age:

- * Give Each Customer a Personal Response
- * Be Clear, But Sincere
- * Offer Live Customer Support
- * Make Sure Your Support Reps Have All the Answers

GIVE EACH CUSTOMER A PERSONAL RESPONSE

When a customer sits down to e-mail your company, it's because he needs help. He chooses e-mail because it's quick, but his request still warrants a satisfying and personal response!

Companies eager to save time and money often take automation too far in their customer support. Each customer has a unique question, and deserves a unique answer. Even if you save time by copying and pasting stock replies, change the opening and closing to make the message sound less robotic.

BE CLEAR, BUT SINCERE

When responding to customers' e-mail, be sincere and to the point. Before sending a message, try turning the tables. Ask yourself, "Would this answer satisfy *me* if I were the customer?"

Take that extra moment to give your customer the help he deserves. It might mean the difference between a satisfied customer and a credit card chargeback!

OFFER LIVE CUSTOMER SUPPORT

E-mail has become an acceptable form of communication. But, live customer support is still necessary. The plethora of information available online can be overwhelming to

customers, especially those new to the Internet!

Single your company out from the crowd by providing customers with a real person to talk to. Live phone support is an invaluable way to foster trust. When your customer has reached the end of his Internet rope, and just needs *help*, your toll free number is the answer he's looking for.

**MAKE SURE YOUR SUPPORT REPS
HAVE ALL THE ANSWERS**

The presence of phone support will do no good if your staff doesn't know your product! Customer support reps should be warm and friendly, and willing to help with any aspect of your product.

What a good feeling it is to talk to someone who feels confident in his product. It's even better if he's knowledgeable enough to solve your problem without transferring you all around the company!

**PROVIDE STAND-OUT SERVICE;
GAIN LIFELONG CUSTOMERS**

Too many e-businesses skimp on customer service, hiding behind web sites and message boards. Customer support is an integral part of every company, even those operating solely online. Be one of the few to offer stellar service, and gain customers for life!

Customer Service is becoming a lost art, but Sean Cohen wants to make sure that never happens at AWeber Communications! Find out what service is meant to be:
<http://www.aweber.com/a/p163/lcs.htm>



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