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## Service Makes or Breaks Your Brand

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Industry watchers agree that for an online business to prosper, it must provide exceptional customer service.

However, achieving meaningful customer service in e-commerce is no small feat. An avalanche of negative publicity after the 1999 holiday season brought to the fore serious gaps in the quality and consistency of online service delivery.

According to a January 2000 Business Week survey, more than 70 percent of online companies took more than 72 hours to respond to customer e-mail inquiries, and 35 percent did not respond at all. Moreover, it is predicted that the number of e-mail messages will increase sixfold by next year.

Imagine that you want to return a defective item to your favorite store. You walk up to the counter and air your grievances. If the salesperson stands there mutely without responding to your complaint, would you tolerate it? Absolutely not. Yet this sort of laxity is pervasive on the Internet, as a recent survey commissioned by Business 2.0 revealed.

Independent researchers took to task 50 of the leading consumer retail Web sites (both clicks-and-mortar and true e-tailers). For example, when researchers asked questions about returning items, a shocking 72 percent of online customer service representatives took no action or provided no further assistance. And 40 percent of CSRs could not access data on orders immediately after they were placed.

The rising tide of dissatisfaction has created a need for a new breed of online executive leadership. According to a study by META Group, Stamford, CT, 25 percent of e-tailers plan to fill a newly created management position, the chief customer officer, who will be responsible for creating and implementing effective strategies that attract and retain online customers. Clearly, CCOs have their work cut out for them. Direct fulfillment contact centers no longer can afford to offer only one telephone-based method of contact. And online marketers must not forget the human side of support -- self-service on the Internet can go only so far.

While customers want options that define how they buy from or interact with an organization, the only service option customers want is excellent, consistent customer service.

Faced with these challenges, what can e-marketers do to ensure best-in-class customer service? Considerations include:

- Applying enabling technologies.
- Demonstrating a commitment to service as a cornerstone of branding.
- Making the customers' experiences as trouble-free as possible.
- Taking care of employees on the front lines of service.

Moreover, businesses that use innovative service as a competitive differentiator can reap tremendous gains.

### Steps to Success

Integrate multiple communication and information channels. Managing the customer relationship has become a 24-hour conversation in a multimedia environment. Smart companies seek to make every single point of interaction an opportunity to increase customer satisfaction and loyalty, and boost revenue. These are some of the reasons Internet protocol-based service and support applications are rapidly making inroads in the call center.

For example, according to Frost & Sullivan, San Jose, CA, IP-based automated call distribution is expected soon to be a \$10 billion industry. IP-ACD technology can enable contact centers to operate more efficiently and more cost-effectively and to better manage personal customer relationships. Benefits of IP-ACD include allowing customer contact centers to conduct all customer service activities (telephone calls, voice and video over the Internet, keyboard chat, voice mail, e-mail and all forms of collaboration) through all media (PC, regular phone, television and wireless devices) and all over an IP- or Internet-based connection.

Standardize the customers' experiences across all touch points. An ISO-9000 manufacturer of custom screws recently developed an online catalog. The company, whose customers range from woodworking hobbyists to NASA, has built its reputation on delivering custom products in as little as 24 to 48 hours. Preserving and enhancing that reputation was critical in the development of the e-commerce storefront. The storefront includes full ordering capability, but also employs IP-ACD, allowing customers to take advantage of online technical support.

This level of personalization and convenience mimics the offline shopping experience. The manufacturer's foray into e-tailing has been successful because it manages the Web customer touch point with an equal vigor and passion for quality. The bottom line: Online service delivery affects your brand and customer loyalty, so protect it.

Offer equal access. It goes without saying that e-tailers need to simplify customers' opportunities to browse, kick the tires and buy. However, all customers should have equal ease of access. This is especially important when a company is selling to a global customer base.

A good example is a U.S.-based e-tailer dealing in discounted golf equipment and supplies. The site features numerous functions, such as currency conversion tables, enabling customers to place orders from abroad. Live chat links customers to product experts for price quotes, recommendations and advice. All of this can be accomplished without the hassle or expense of an overseas phone call.

Use service innovation as a competitive weapon. An Internet leisure-travel site offers one-stop shopping for special-interest vacation packages, such as skiing, golf, fishing, adventure travel, casino gambling and yachting. Its booking capabilities support a 24-hour, toll-free customer service number and a nationwide network of numerous independent franchised travel agencies. Handling phone calls is paramount, but with the amount of competition in the travel business, the company is setting itself apart by providing multiple contact channels to agents and customers in the form of Web chat, e-mail, voice mail, voice over Internet protocol and URL collaboration. Offering a plethora of service options is allowing the company to rapidly increase the size of its franchise network, thus paving the way for increased sales to consumers.

Satisfied CSRs cultivate satisfied customers. You can't deliver good service without good people, and in today's tight job market, recruiting and retaining great employees is tougher than ever. The freedom to work at home is a powerful lure for many teleprofessionals. Thanks to the promise of IP, call centers can be freed from their traditional physical constraints. The call center can have multiple physical locations, all of them managed as a single entity; or it may have no physical location at all -- a truly virtual call center.

In the case of the aforementioned travel site, agents can be anywhere they have access to a multimedia PC and a connection to the IP network. They can work at home or be in offices worldwide.

Universal buying truths. People still buy from people. People always need live interaction with others. The challenge for companies today is to find efficient, productive and cost-effective ways of providing live customer care -- ways that integrate and harmoniously blend technology with the timeless value of live personal interaction. The most successful companies will be those that cost-effectively and consistently provide their customers with an exceptionally high level of responsive, personalized service.

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