



Misplaced marketing

Meanwhile, at the service desk: “Hello! Is anyone here?”

Herbert Jack Rotfeld

Professor of Marketing, Department of Marketing & Transportation,
Auburn University, Alabama, USA

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Abstract *Discusses the problem of poor customer service. Asserts that the introduction of new technology into the system does not necessarily improve the process. The more common situation finds that the new technology is being misused in ways that mimic the failures of no-tech services: toll-free numbers create long waits and Web sites provide an advertising platform rather than a customer service platform. Asserts that new technology provides excellent marketing opportunities for customer service but are often misused.*

In her character as the prissy telephone operator Ernestine, comedienne Lilly Tomlin said: “We don’t have to be nice, sir. We are the phone company. We are omnipotent”.

That line was first spoken more than two decades ago, before the breakup of the nationwide regulated monopoly and the entry of competition into telephone service. Back then, customers’ only choice was to use the ubiquitous AT&T company or do without a telephone: the company owned almost all local networks, long-distance lines and even the phones in people’s homes, since customers were only allowed to rent the equipment.

Theory

In theory, no company with competitors could ignore the basic dictates of marketing’s consumer orientation in planning its service activities. Yet, surprisingly, research has found that consumers dissatisfied with a customer service experience might still patronize the same firm (Feinberg *et al.*, 1990). In order to provide the lowest possible prices, bad service might sometimes be part of a deliberate business plan. Bad service, whether unintentional or not, seems to be both common and counterproductive to what should be basic marketing perspectives, and yet, it is so pervasive that many people almost expect it. Even with firms advertising their strong help for customers on the road, the supposed well-informed and helpful customer assistants most likely would be clueless, helpless, rushed, untrained or just plain rude.

American Express

While I was visiting New Zealand, my wife received notice back home that my American Express corporate card had been canceled. She called me and I called the international toll-free number, and after a series of waits and referrals, I was only told that the card was canceled because “Your company had terminated your employment.” I tried to explain that they could not fire a tenured professor without his knowledge, but the woman was clueless as to what might have actually occurred. In fact, she was confident that her information was correct and I must be mistaken.

As a customer of a company that advertises its help for people away from home, it was more frustrating that no one contacted was interested in providing assistance for a traveler. As I was handed off to different people claiming “supervisor” rank, one person finally admitted it was “an error” that they did

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Toll-free phone lines

not keep a record of who told them I was no longer an Auburn employee. And yet they remained confident that the apparently anonymous information was correct, even though it had the face validity of the Psychic Friends Network. No one was willing to try and discover the source for the problem. (And, as you can see by the top of this article, I am still employed by Auburn.)

As a melding of mass and personal communications, the Internet possesses great potential for improving consumer contact with companies, making all marketing efforts more efficient and effective (Richards, 1997). In theory, firms could use technology to maintain and improve customer service, but “use of technology” should mean more than just putting technology into the system. So far, the more common situation finds that the new technology is being misused in ways that mimic the failures of no-tech service systems of long waits and no help.

Increasing numbers of companies have toll-free phone lines and Web sites, both of which are promoted as ways to keep contact with consumers. Unfortunately, the special phone lines are usually just a promise of an afternoon of busy signals or long waits. Consumer hot-lines are mostly anything but hot; Internet Web pages have more information and irrelevant links than information. A “mystery shopper” study of 200 companies’ Web pages found more than half of them as poor or, at best, “only fair” (Duncan, 1999).

With international businesses, plus the Internet, a “lifetime” guarantee should have special meaning for even an international traveler. But that depends on being able to contact the company who sold the product.

Getting to the hotel, a traveler discovered that his new Samsonite suitcase had sustained a major hit on the frame. It held together for the trip, but now it could not be closed. The bag claims a lifetime guarantee, but information on where or how this promise can be fulfilled when the owner was away from home was not known. Carrying the ever-present laptop of today’s business traveler, the Internet seemed to be a logical way to hunt out the nearest service centers, or, at least, instructions on how to get it repaired. The company does have a Web site, but the designation was not on any of the materials. When some searches finally found the business pages, there wasn’t any e-mail information for direct contact and no service information was to be found. All that could be seen were announcements of new products and other advertising materials.

Internet

This instance was not atypical. While the Internet is touted as a major resource for consumer contact, many of the Web locations for major firms are mostly just more advertising and slogans. By computer or phone, technology holds great opportunity for major improvements in customer contact and service, but it should be intuitively obvious that failures to follow through can result in relations being worse than not doing anything at all.

The marketing opportunities for customer service are great, especially with modern technologies, and old-style service of customer problems goes to the core of many businesses. Therefore, it is all the more perplexing when this primary area of marketing misplaces the consumer focus.

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