



Misplaced marketing of product “life” after the sale

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Keywords Product life cycle, Consumer marketing, Consumer behaviour

Annual reader surveys in *Consumer Reports* magazine increasingly find people discarding and replacing microwave ovens, VCRs, radios and other basic appliances instead of having them repaired. These consumer decisions are not unexpected or necessarily bad. Better products are often available at a lower price than the original, while the old items are technologically archaic by the time problems arise. Yet even for inexpensive products, potential consumer ire is great when inexpensive or minor components cause grief or early “death” of an otherwise useful product. Marketing questions during product planning and design anticipate how products are used so that consumers are not forced to trash a product for minor problems that could be readily expected.

Thoughtless product design

Yet with thoughtless product design, messy repair systems or confusing not-so-hot hotlines, marketing often seems not just misplaced but totally lost.

For example, many expensive portable stereos have belt clips that can't handle the normal stresses of actually being worn on a belt. Fine leather briefcases have connecting hooks for shoulder straps that rip free under normal use. Potentially confusing new computer systems charge consumers for calling technical support lines while new software seems guaranteed to have problems the company plans to “work out” as customers call in. Many consumers report a pet peeve with the small light bulbs that would burn out in clock radios long before any other component had the slightest hint of difficulty, with replacements a near impossible or unduly expensive repair job. And yet, not all firms misplace marketing in that some brands now seem to (finally) anticipate this latter problem, with easy access panels to the light bulbs and General Electric clocks and clock radios – whose company, not coincidentally, also makes the bulbs – including a replacement bulb in the panel cover.

Opportunity to build customer rapport

Anticipating or serving these problems should be a simple task. They should be an opportunity to build customer rapport instead of a source of consumer anger.

The Casio fliptop data bank watch is a high-end product, list price US\$250, with a stylish gold face and leather band. When my battery died in slightly over a year, it was logical to believe that battery replacement would be trivial for such a ubiquitous brand. Unfortunately, it wasn't.

Three jewelry stores in town were afraid or unable to open the extra-thin battery casing which also has a unique and specially designed backing connection. The fourth store opened it, but discovered that it used a special type of battery that they did not carry. A call to the national chain store in a nearby city that sold the watch also did not carry the battery.

Long list of new phone numbers

Since the campus community of Auburn, Alabama, is a far cry from being a major metropolis, it was logically believed that a battery would readily be found when we went to New Orleans for a conference. Unfortunately, the largest jewelry store in that city also did not have the battery, referring us to the Sears watch repair and a man who seemed to be everyone's standard for an expert. He had the battery, or a battery that seemed a close enough match, but the watch remained inactive after installation; a situation he knew not how to correct.

At this point, the Casio service phone line was the only option. After an afternoon of busy signals, we finally got through, only to find an automated answer system that provided a LONG list of new phone numbers, mostly consisting of mail order sources for parts and batteries for all different types of Casio products. And on the list – though not clearly labeled – were numbers for customer information.

This then required another afternoon of busy signals trying to call the watch version of tech support and, once a connection was achieved, we were waiting on hold for more than 20 minutes. After that experience in waiting, we sought as much information as possible from the service representative.

As with many major brands, the company has a list of authorized service centers. But, as is also often true with these lists from many other companies, they had only one in each state and not many were readily accessible even if you lived in the state's largest metropolitan area. The repair center for Louisiana was not in New Orleans; for Alabama, it was Mobile at the southern most tip of the state, not the centrally located Montgomery or much larger Birmingham in the north. In Chicago, the location was the west suburbs and in Atlanta it was an area well away from the city in an industrial park. Mail order was a possibility, but it seemed unreasonably costly and trouble-prone for just a battery.

A frustrating mess

Fortunately, the one in the Chicago suburbs was near where close friends lived whom we would be visiting the next month. And when we had the service representative on the line, we received detailed instruction on the nature of the reset buttons, two near-invisible small dots on the face of the internal calculator, both of which must be held down at the same time for a few seconds with the tips of a paper clip after a new battery is installed. In Chicago, we found the batteries, a repair shop knew how to open the watch and insert them, and we all knew how to restart the watch.

But what a frustrating mess. Replacing the battery in an electronic watch, especially an expensive one, should be expected and anticipated as part of marketing product planning. Overall, the experience could discourage many people from ever buying the brand again. The battery, access panel and restart information might have been covered in the owner's manual that was lost after a year, but post-sale support systems should not presume that all customers will act in an optimal fashion and even the battery installer called the reset buttons "bizarre."

Marketing planning should be involved at all stages, from engineering to customer support. It involves anticipating how customers actually use the product or seek minor expected repairs and maintenance. Unfortunately, engineers sometimes seem incapable of understanding that the neat features they find so interesting and special might eventually result in consumer pain.

