

Corporate Email: A Look at its use in Jamaican Companies as a Customer Service Tool

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Introduction:

“The complexities that accompany quality e-service delivery through many channels – and the risk of losing customers through poorly planned implementations – have companies thinking more strategically about the tools they use” (Gilhooly, 2006)

The Internet has undoubtedly changed the way companies look at customer service. The options that are available for providing service have been greatly expanded but most companies fail to grasp this opportunity. Live customer service agents are a great idea but at what cost. Each communication channel must be effectively managed in order to provide excellent customer service. There is no one way to communicate these days so it is quite common to have customers bouncing between fax, phone and the internet while trying to get their questions answered. Any company that is not able to effectively communicate across all channels, can and will lose repeat business. Whatever method is easiest to communicate is what the average person will use, so to limit communication to just phone or fax is asking for trouble. Companies have to be able to stop isolating the communication channels because Internet use continues to grow and customers are using the web with more frequency.

Electronic mail (E-Mail) is a low cost service channel that can easily resolve routine customer queries. Of course this has to be properly managed in order to maximize all the benefits. According to survey done by Jupiter Research in the article (Vanishing Customer Service E-mails, 2003) “Customer service e-mail enquiries will rise from 1 billion in 2001 to 3.3 billion in 2008.” The author continues to say, “If online customer service fails, the impact will be lost revenue and higher customer service costs”

“According to a 2006 survey from Wellesley, Mass-Based Service Excellence Research Group LLC (ServiceXRG), 60% of high-tech customers attempt to solve their own problems through self service knowledge bases before trying interactive channels”. (Gilhooly, 2006). The same survey found that 94.4% of the respondents said customer satisfaction was the primary driver for self service.

In another survey by the Customer Respect Group (Adams, 2004) it was found that approximately 13% of companies surveyed did not respond at all to any online queries. 15% of those same companies only responded to half and 72% claim that they responded to all online inquiries received.

“While email and self-service remain fixtures of the on-line service, such features are doing little to reduce staff-intensive call volume. Yet consumers have high expectations for a speedy e-mail response.” (Daniels, 2003). Daniels believe that persons in the higher

income bracket (\$100,000 and more) as well as new internet users and mature customers are more sensitive to e-mail response timing. Most persons in this grouping expect a six-hour turnaround.

Most companies in Jamaica now have a presence on the internet. They also include a section where customers can contact them via email. Very often however when an e-mail is sent to a company no representative is available to reply. With this in mind an investigation will be carried out to see how Jamaican companies really deal with e-mail communication.

Literature Review

“Priceline.com Inc...., the online travel service, has bet his business model on the fact that web-savvy customers like to help themselves” (Gilhooly, 2006). Gilhooly posits that companies all over the world are utilizing e-service technologies as an alternative to the phone in order to interact with customers.

“The internet and e-mail are so much a part of everyday life, you’d think that electronic discourse between bank customers and their institutions of choice would be as commonplace as a telephone call” (Adams, 2004). The author states that e-mail has become such a critical part of most organizations that many call centers are now referred to as contact centres.

According to the article Vanishing Customer Service E-mails, 2003 “ Customers continue to have difficult experience with companies that fail to service their needs via e-mail and this results in the lack of repeat business for that company.” Many things contribute to poor online customer service. Many companies utilize automated email and in a lot of instances this is misused. While most companies revolve reps throughout the day, many do not dedicate reps to deal with this online channel. Reps are allowed to chose which emails to reply to instead of using the first-in, first-out method.

(Giafonte, 2003) in his paper states that “ people communicate through multiple channels. We talk on the phone. We visit each other. We send greeting cards. Similarly, customers use different channels at different times. They use the phone. They use e-mail. They use the web. They use chat. Unfortunately, at most companies, these communication channels are separate “stovepipes”. The phone channel is managed by a call center platform. The E-mail channel is managed with an e-mail manager system. Chat, if provided at all, is managed by a chat system.” The author believes that a multi channel contact center will solve such a problem. Using such a system, customer service representatives will be fully aware of all channels that the customer is using to interact with the company. At the moment, each channel is isolated from each other.

“In the business-to-business world, how u handle customer e-mails is of utmost, critical importance, “said Al Diguido, CEO pf e-mail solutions provider Bigfoot Interactive” (Slavens, 2003). He goes on to say that organizations that repeatedly drop the ball could jeopardize their relationship with major clients.

(Olzytnski, 2004) encourages companies to use e-mail correspondence more. The author advises them to make a habit of using e-mails for routine communications with employees, customers and suppliers and all other persons they come in contact with on a daily basis. It is less time consuming to reply to dozens of e-mails than replying to the same amount of phone calls. He cautions businesses to use good judgment when it comes to time sensitive or critical messages as these are best conveyed face to face or over the phone.

Another author in his discourse claims that “ the problem with today’s approaches to e-mail based customer service, however, is the very costly level of human involvement and the resulting penalty for consumers” (Rodenstein, 2004). On many occasions a response to a customer’s e-mail submitted via the “contact us” page takes more than a day. This can lead to lost business as well as low customer satisfaction. More often than not consumers will just move to another site rather than play e-mail tag. Rodenstein believes that when companies force consumers to wait so long for a response or fail to respond at all, it is a sure way to not only lose customers and receive negative word of mouth.

“Online customers, when they come to do business with us, Mr. David Stone said they often do not want to interact with a real person, and they typically expect to find answers within just one or two clicks” (Wolfe, 2004). The author points out that some banks try to respond to e-mails within 24 hours but in a lot of instances the response is out within two to four hours. He goes on to say that a large amount of banks continue to ignore inquiries they receive via their websites.

“You would think that corporations would have already learned that customers want and expect swift responses to e-mail enquiries. Our research on the subject, conducted yearly since 2001, however, has shown just the opposite- a poor trend that is hurting brands” (Hornstein, 2005)

Husted (2005) in his article claims e-mail customer support is even worse than customer service via the telephone. “Obviously it is cheaper for a company to answer questions and complaints by e-mail rather than using the telephone. That way the workload is even. Rather than trying to answer a phone as it rings, the customer support workers can reply to e-mails as they have time. Saving money by doing a poor job of answering questions from customers is shortsighted. You save big money, but I think you also risk losing big. It’s a good way to lose a customer”

“It’s not enough to tie technology together said Jeff Pulver, VP-Worldwide Marketing for CRM vendor Siebel Systems. It’s about strategy. It’s about getting a dialog with the customer and making all of your business decisions based on results of all communication – direct mail, e-mail, your customers coming to your Web site.” (Bannan, Jan 17, 2005)

(Bailor, 2005) is of the opinion that numerous organizations are not capitalizing on e-mail. Instead they allow sluggish response times to customer queries via e-mail and risk

harming customer relationships. “Responsiveness is absolute godliness when it comes to customer service, and if you send an email to a company and they don’t respond, there’s a message there that’s probably not a good one”

According to (Gonsalves, 2006) “companies are not doing a good job of handling the onslaught of E-mail messages coming from customers” He points out that even though it is not easy to manage e-mails ignored customers tend to take their business elsewhere. “Eighty five percent of online customers say they would be less likely to buy from a merchant again after a poor customer experience. There is also a threat to offline sales, since 55% would be less likely to buy from the merchant offline”

Karen J. Brannan (2006) in her expose states that an increasing number of companies are beginning to realize that email is not just for sales pitches. A lot of companies are recognizing that it is a great customer service tool.

“Now is a good time to take a second look at customer service e-mail, to recognize that it offers many marketing opportunities. Customer service e-mail may be the last wide open channel companies have for communicating with customers” (Rudick, 2005)

(Strauss, 2001) believes that because e-mail is easy, free and gives instantaneous access to companies most customers are fascinated by it. The author states that e-mail communication is not free for firms but is still a lot cheaper than telephone call centre communication.”E-mail’s asynchronous nature allows customer service reps to bulk process and thus handle queries more efficiently”

In her paper (Mackay, 1988) describes a series of interviews that focus on the many ways workers use e-mail on a daily basis. “Electronic mail is more than just a communication system. In addition to supporting information management, it provides a mechanism for supporting a variety of time management and task management activities”

Methodology and Results

This study was undertaken to measure the response rate of Jamaican companies to e-mail queries and to find ways to make them aware of the importance of using this as a customer service tool.

Two hundred and thirty (230) Jamaican companies were contacted via email from April – November 2006. Companies were drawn from educational institutions, government ministries and agencies, professional associations, churches, hotels and financial institution.

Of the 230 companies contacted 120 (52.17%) did not respond at all to the e-mail sent. 36 (15.65%) were returned due to an incorrect email address on the site or an address that does not exist.

The percentage of companies that did not reply to the email (up to the completion of this paper) is still way too high. It is far better for companies not to include an email on their

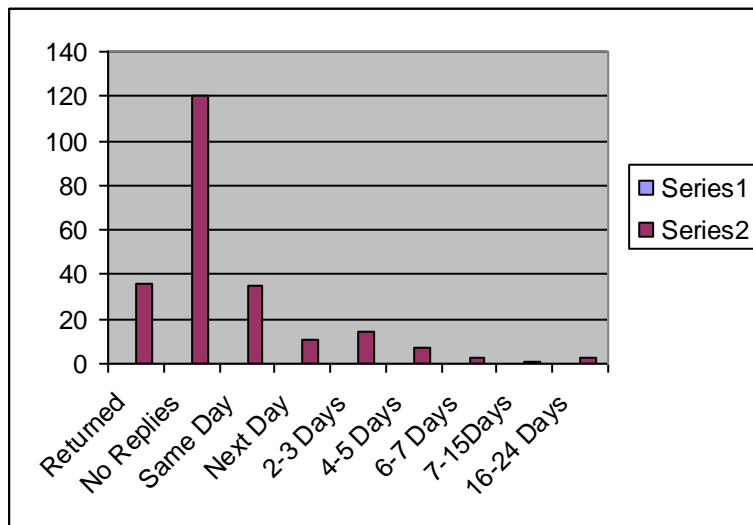
websites than to do so and not respond when the customer decides to use that venue. At the very least the correct e-mail address should be listed on the site and should changes occur in terms of the website then this should be updated as soon as possible.

For those companies that replied to the emails:

- 15.21% replied the same day
- 4.78% replied within the next day
- 6.08% sent back a reply within 2 – 3 days
- 3.04% responded within 4 – 5 days
- 1.30% replied within 6 – 7 days
- 0.43% replied within 7 – 15 days
- 1.30% sent a reply within 16 – 24 days

There is some amount of encouragement, in that, the majority of companies that did respond early to the emails did so on the same day. Two companies sent an explanation as to why the reply came so late and the reasons were in fact acceptable reasons. Another company actually called with the information that was requested via e-mail.

In most instances, the quality of the information received was excellent and a few companies even managed to send a follow up e-mail.



Conclusion and Way Forward

Customer service representatives require e-mail training just as they require phone training. Companies need to ensure that they are doing the best they can to respond to e-mail queries in a timely fashion in order to keep their customers happy.

There has to be an entangling of phone, web, e-mail and chat in order to deliver great customer service and cut costs. It is critical that these channels be managed collectively as customers bounce from one medium to the next on any given day.

“Handling e-mail workflow is fundamental to anyone whose business relies on the web – and these days that’s just about everyone” (Gilhooly, 2006)

Way Forward:

1. Respond to e-mails within 24 – 48 hours
2. Be consistent when replying to e-mails
3. Measure performance and learn from this
4. Utilize instant e-mail deflection
5. Substitute E-mail for time consuming types of communications such as faxes, letters, memos and telephone calls
6. A member of staff should be responsible for replying to emails on a daily basis
7. Try to check company emails several times throughout the day

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