

What Ever Happened to Personalized Service?

By Angela Wu

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If you've ever written to a company that over-uses automation or form letters, you'll understand the feeling of teeth-gritting *frustration* with canned responses that don't even begin to answer your question.

It's especially aggravating when you just can't seem to find a real human being to talk to. Inquiry after inquiry is greeted by an automated robot.

Yet more and more online businesses are using autoresponders to save time. And I can see why; they're wonderful tools. These special email addresses can be set up to send out 'pre-written' emails and save you from a lot of manual work.

For example, autoresponders can be used to deliver advertising rates, email courses, reports, free chapters or trials of your eBook or software. You can also use them to send out your sales letter and a series of automated follow-up messages.

They're extremely versatile ... and a great way to free up your time, keep in touch with your prospects, build credibility, and increase sales.

BUT autoresponders are only *tools*. They cannot - and should not - replace the personal touch that only a real, live human can provide.

Face it: the Internet is a vast, cold place. No one likes to feel like 'just another faceless entity'. Here are a few situations where a personalized email can work wonders ...

__1. Your Prospect Sends You a Specific Question.

If your prospect opens up your autoresponder message and hits 'reply', that reply should go directly to *you*.

Take a few minutes and specifically address your prospect's question or concern. She's interested enough to write to you; shouldn't you be eager for the opportunity to convert her interest into a sale - and possibly a loyal customer?

__2. Thank-You Letters.

Oh, I understand that businesses that process a lot of online orders cannot possibly send every single customer a personalized thank-you note. It's just plain impossible.

However, small tokens of appreciation can go a long ways. For example, send a quick thank-you note to your repeat customers.

Another time you want to send a personal thank-you letter is when you receive a testimonial. You've obviously done a great job with your product! Why not use the opportunity to build customer loyalty? A simple, personal note reinforces her positive feelings about her purchase - and about *you*. Remember that word-of-mouth advertising is some of the best free promotion available ... !

__3. Replies to Comments and Suggestions.

It is absolutely maddening to write to someone with constructive feedback and receive a response like,

'Dear Friend,

Thank you for your comments. We appreciate each and every one of them.

Regards,
Customer Care Staff'

To me, this shows a distinct and utter *lack* of regard for the customer.

Address the comment or suggestion directly. Call the customer by her name. Sign your own. In other words, treat her like a real *person*! It's so simple, and I can assure you that your customer will appreciate the effort.

__4. Requests for Help or Joint Ventures.

Part of your success online depends on your ability to build relationships -- not just with your customers, but with your 'online colleagues': other webmasters or editors within your own niche.

A few seconds of your time could mean the difference between a joint venture proposal that gets a response, and one that's ignored. Instead of sending out a generic email that says,

'Dear Webmaster, I was just visiting your site and was very impressed. Would you be interested in a joint venture?'

... try something more personal, such as,

'Hi Heather, I was just browsing yourdomain.com and saw that you offer international gourmet coffees (I especially love your sampler pack!). I also run a website for coffee lovers, and was wondering if you'd be interested in a joint venture...'

Okay, so maybe I'm 'old-fashioned' when it comes to service. But automation, to me, has its limits. Nothing can ever take the place of prompt, personal service! Try it - you'll be pleasantly surprised at how many people genuinely appreciate it.

Angela is the editor of Online Business Basics, an exclusive newsletter for eBusiness beginners. OBB features ongoing tutorials on how to build a profitable Internet business on a shoestring budget. You don't need a million-dollar budget to be successful! Find out how you too can join the thousands quietly earning a living online:
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