

Taking Your Business From The Information Age To the Age of

Personal Touch

By Karon Thackston

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How many years has it been since the Internet launched publicly? At least 10 if not more. And as it goes with every life-changing invention, we all assume that it "just can't get any better than this"! And, as it always goes, we are dead wrong.

What has happened here is we've moved into an age where almost everything is at our fingertips. But in the process, we've secluded our clients and ourselves. Through the wonder of the Worldwide Web and email, we've put personal interaction on the back burner. While at first most thought automation and email were an excellent way to handle business, we are now finding out that clients just won't stand for it. We must now move from the Information Age to the Age of Personal Touch. But how?

Where Did We Go Wrong?

To answer that question we must first look at what has happened in the course of business over the last several years and where we stand now.

Over 10 years ago consumers were on the verge of realizing that they were the key to business - not the business owner. They were making the discovery that without customers a business would fail. This realization brought them to the point of demanding their rights as consumers.

No longer were they going to stand for companies that did not allow for returns or refunds. They stopped tolerating rude and pushy salespeople who thought they were doing the client a favor by selling to them. They began to expect choices and those choices were provided to them.

All of these changes in consumer behavior were the starting point for a customer service revolution. Customers were finally getting the treatment they deserved. Personal service, salespeople who knew their names and recognition for being the driving force behind company profits. Then came the Internet.

At first it promised more choice, greater opportunities for competition and the fastest service.

Consumers went wild and thought they had found Nirvana. However, their excitement was short-lived.

Online consumers began to have a different set of complaints. They found out quickly that it was difficult to determine whether online stores were "legit". They realized that making product returns to Internet businesses cost additional shipping. And they also discovered that cheap and sleazy salespeople also existed online.

What Do Online Consumers Want Now?

There are now a new set of demands. Online consumers want us to provide it "all"! While statistics show that most Internet surfers are pleased with the selection, the choices and the fast output of information - they also want to return to the old days.

In addition to a world of information, quality products at reasonable prices, and speed; customers want personal service. They kind they used to get at the local mall.

Totally automated sites that allow for no contact information are being mentally banned by online customers. Those sites that promise more than they deliver are being reported to online consumer agencies. And Internet businesses that can't or won't be flexible to customer preferences are dropping like flies.

So how do you ensure your online business is ready for the New Age Consumer? Simple. It doesn't take much to make them happy. Here are a few recommendations to get you on the right track.

Provide Contact Information - This should be a no brainer by now. Even most search engines require that your address or phone number be listed on your site. Provide some type of contact information in addition to email so customers can reach you in the way they prefer to.

Offer Choices - No one likes to feel as though there is only one way to go. Whatever you provide, give the client options. Perhaps you can accept credit card, checks or email payments. You might consider offering hourly or firm quotes on services you provide. Maybe you're in a position to allow for incremental payments instead of payment all at once. Or your shipping policy could provide several options to suit customers. Wherever possible, provide options.

Speed - Everyone these days is impatient. Do whatever you do as quickly as you can. One tip I've always followed in my customer service practices is to under promise and over deliver. For example: let's say you sell toys and a client places an online order for an out-of-stock item. If you honestly think the toy will arrive on the 13th, inform the customer that it will arrive on the 16th. This will accomplish two things. One: if your order to the manufacturer is delayed, the customer will not have to be inconvenienced a second time. Two: allows the customer to be thrilled when they receive their order faster than they believed they would. And lastly...

Respond Promptly - Short, sweet and to the point. If you receive email messages, faxes or telephone calls from customers, respond within 48 hours if at all possible.

If you put your mind to it, you will come up with other ways to merge the Information Age with the Age of Personal Touch. And when you do your customers will reward you with their business over and over again.

Most buying decisions are emotional. Your ad copy should be, too! Karon is Owner and President of KT & Associates who offers targeted copywriting, copy editing & ezine article services. Subscribe

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