

Customer Service Via the Web

By Philippa Gamse

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Customer service is increasingly seen as one of the most valuable uses for a commercial World Wide Web site. Your Web site is available on a 24 hour, seven days a week basis. So it is well worth exploring ways in which your customers can virtually "serve themselves," without the need for overtime staff, or lengthy voice mail procedures.

James Feldman is President of JFA, Inc., an online business offering high quality and unique gift items including automatic watch winders, Grundig shortwave pocket radios, and nitroglycerine pill fobs. The JFA Web site has been online since 1997, and has doubled its income every year - it's now a multi-million dollar e-commerce enterprise.

Jim, who's also a professional speaker and expert on customer service, highlighted for me how the online buying experience differs from the bricks-and-mortar model.

Buying online eliminates the physical presence and personality of the salesperson from the process. This makes the Web site copy critical in creating a one-to-one relationship with the customer or prospect.

Which echoes one of my favorite mantras:

Every page of your site should be written from the visitor's point of view, not yours.

A visitor should be able to look at your offerings, and immediately answer the questions:

"Why me?" - that is, is your Web site the right place for me?

"Why should I care?" - does this copy convince me that you can meet my needs?

It's much easier and immediate to jump from Web site to Web site than to move between real-world stores. So the visitor has far more freedom of choice online. Jim says that the challenge for customer service is therefore very clearly to focus on one customer, one purchase at a time. E-customers expect great service, with little or no direct interaction. They will tolerate some mistakes, but not many.

Jim offers five rules for effective online customer service:

1. Be accessible. Show very clearly on your site all the ways that your customer can contact you - including e-mail, phone and fax numbers, and your office hours.

And, if it's practical for your business, be personal - give your visitors a real person to call who has a name, as opposed to sales@mycompany.com

Of course, if you're really upscale, you can include a "Call-me" button on your site.

2. Return every e-mail or phone call in the same day, as far as reasonably possible. This may sound simplistic, but a recent experiment with the top Fortune 100 companies showed that nearly a third failed to respond to e-mail sent through their Web site within one month! Some of these companies still don't provide a usable e-mail address on their sites at all.

3. Acknowledge all orders. Send e-mail confirmations (this can be done very effectively with autoresponders), and if you're shipping actual products, give tracking numbers and expected delivery dates.

4. Provide a clear return policy, honor it and learn from it. This may give you more information about what's working and what's not. Jim's products are sometimes returned with no explanation, so his staff always call the customer to establish and resolve the problem.

5. Expect more phone calls. Jim says: "Customers can't read or write!" If your Web site traffic and response rates grow (which is, of course, what we want), so will the volume of phone calls, whatever your business or industry.

Regardless of the site quality, clear returns and privacy policies, secure servers, etc., people still require human interaction. All of my clients report talking to customers on the phone, and walking them through the Web site, where their questions are clearly answered. Maybe these psychological barriers will lessen over the next few years, but right now, they are very much there.

If you can get the customer service aspects of your business working well, there'll be a definite bottom line impact. Jim is quite clear that his business has grown substantially through repeat business and referrals from satisfied customers.

And in contrast, we can see the impact of poor customer service and fulfillment procedures in many of the dot.coms that are currently failing. Jim says that people buy things online in the expectation of getting something more valuable than the actual money they spend.

Does your Web site do this??

JFA Inc. can be found at <http://www.jfainc.com/>

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