

I Hate Computers

By Bob Osgoodby

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I hate computers, especially when I'm trying to call a company for information or assistance, and have to fight my way through a seemingly unending maze of instructions from an automated robot. "For this press one; for that press two", and so on. Some companies take you several layers deep in options before you get the choice of speaking with a live human being. I understand the efficiency involved, but at what cost? Usually it is at the expense of doing business with me.

Auto-responders are also great tools, and there are a number of ways to use them to your advantage. If they're set up to provide information about specific things, they can be a great time saver. But when they are used improperly, they can do more harm than good. If I request information and receive an auto-response, fine. But don't send me the same information once a week for the next seven weeks. All you are succeeding in doing is aggravating an otherwise potential customer.

While I'm pretty tolerant about receiving unsolicited email, (spam) I do find it annoying to get the same ad over and over, all sent to a different address at my domain, day after day. It is pretty obvious that the sender has software to search the web looking for email addresses, and harvesting every one they could find. If you try to respond to their message, it is returned as undeliverable, and in my judgement is not an offer from a legitimate company - another customer lost.

Ever try to get a question answered at Microsoft's web site? They ask you to describe your problem, and then give you an automated answer, which may or may not solve your problem. Efficient - yes, helpful - possibly. Don't get caught up in this trap. Sometimes there is no substitute for interaction with other people.

Yes, the Internet is a vast, impersonal place. But if you are hoping to do business on the web, you have to inject the personal touch. Personalized email can be a great tool in your bag of tricks. If you get a question, take a few moments and try to answer it - if you do, you will most likely gain a long term supporter, and if they're a prospect, a customer.

Another thing that many are remiss at, is thanking someone who buys their product, or becomes a customer. Now if your business produces a lot of orders, it may not be possible to send a personalized thank you note to every customer. But you can have a "canned" letter hid away in your word processor that you can copy and paste. A little attention here goes a long way.

Many times you will receive comments or suggestions. Some may be positive and others could be negative. You should take the time to personally respond to these. Thank people for positive

comments. If it is negative try to address the issue, but don't get defensive. If someone has a gripe, and takes the time to write you, take them seriously. Maybe they are simply chronic complainers, but maybe their opinion has substance. Evaluate every comment you get, and surprisingly, you just might find a flaw in your approach that you never thought of, but someone else did.

Tread carefully when someone requests a joint venture. Many times these are thinly veiled pyramids. If you sell advertising in your publication or on your website, why would someone be willing to give you a healthy percentage of their profit, in return for your running an ad for them. Personally, I get offers like this all the time, addressed to "Dear Webmaster" and you know where they wind up. Once in awhile however, someone will have a legitimate offer, and be willing to trade off a percentage of their profit for your advertising efforts. But if you do this, remember that you are putting your reputation on the line as well. Affiliate programs do this all the time.

Well, I really don't hate computers, but I think you get the drift. Even in the cold world of the Internet, if you expect to do business, you must use a personal approach. Most people have the same reaction to some of the automated procedures in use that I do, and really appreciate the contact with a live human being. If you do offer this type of personal service, you will have a real advantage over your competitors, who believe that you can simply automate the process, and watch the money flow in.

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