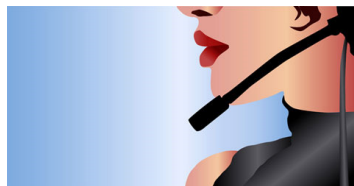
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Bringing "Sexy Back" to Customer Service Technologies

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Companies are crossing into the realm of technological goodies, employing anything from text messaging, to chat, to cutting edge CRM systems. But is customer service getting the shaft? Quite the contrary.



By Karen Yi

Companies are crossing into the realm of technological goodies, employing anything from text messaging, to chat, to cutting edge CRM systems. But is customer service getting the shaft? Quite the contrary.

As it turns out, customer behavior has radically changed in the past couple of years: We now live in an age of instant gratification and consumers want things fast, and they want things easy. Luckily, technology does just that.

The Cross-Channel Phenomenon

Corporate culture is hitting puberty, breaking tradition and beginning to dabble with the latest technological trends. Kevin Stirtz, a professional trainer and speaker known as "The Amazing Service Guy," says the use of technology today allows companies to "keep in touch with their clients and get to know their customers…by improving the flow of information."

But, Stirtz warns, companies should be wary of overloading with these technological gadgets. These tools "have this inherent weakness in really separating us from our customers," says Stirtz. In effect, technology removes face-to-face contact, eliminating that personalized touch.

How then can companies provide a better service to their customers utilizing the cost efficient instantaneous perks of technology?

David Randoff, director of public relations at Genesys, a contact center software company based in California, says that it's important to understand customer behavioral changes, keeping a strong focus on the customer experience while investing in cross-channel technology.

For Randoff, it's all about the "cross-channel phenomenon." "Customer behavior has changed fundamentally over the last two or three years," he says, "people are not starting transactions in a channel and finishing them in the same channel." It's important to execute well within the channel, but also to understand the context of the customer, "relying on the fact that they have probably already been in another channel," says Randoff.

Randoff cites some examples from Genesys that use cross-channel technology to deliver a high-end experience for customers. Some of their technology in the online channel identifies browsing behavior and, consequently, is able to invite customers to participate in a real-time conversation—a pro-active Web invitation to chat or call in order to connect the available resources to a customer.

Another example lies in the travel industry. Genesys is utilizing automated applications to personally react to customer needs. Travelers call in and the application is easily able to identify them and change the way it responds. Customers can check in, change information and be directed to the right contacts. It's about delivering a full experience for the customer by blending available resources.

Hunker Down with Your Customers

With the economy in shambles, customer loyalty is more important than ever. But companies tend to go into survival mode and hunker down. Randoff says, "Particularly in this environment there is far more emphasis on revenue." There is not an immediate rush to cost containment, but "in a downturn, they are very focused on capturing top sales," he says.

Stirtz says in hunker-down mode, companies tend to "stop spending resources" and "stop paying attention to customer service." The focus is primarily on "new customer acquisition because it's "sexier." But Stirtz reminds us that it's important to "use technology to engage more customers and employees," and if companies use some of the Web 2.0 technologies and new Internet innovations, it might just have a "sex appeal" of its own.

The "Amazing Service Guy" Says

"Most companies have a holistic view that they don't box customers in. They tend to see them as customers first and try to deal with them in a holistic way, rather than just remedying them to the channel they came in on," says Stirtz.

Instead of continuing business-as-usual procedures, Stirtz gives his recommendations on how technology can improve customer service.

1) Create a persistent and transparent flow of information between employees, management and customers. Companies like eBay wouldn't exist if not for the ability for customers to leave feedback about other buyers and sellers. Starbucks posted a forum on their Web site that encourages customers to offer their ideas, suggestions, complaints and compliments. This is gold to a smart company. It's customers getting engaged and saying "we really care about doing business with you and we want you to do better and here's what I think."

2) Use technology to deliver more content. Use Webinars, teleconferences and online courses to keep the learning going and motivation high. It's cheaper and it uses resources more effectively, enabling people to retain and use what they learn. Our past election was a good example of how organizations of any kind can use new technologies like text or SMS. The president elect did a fantastic job of building this network and pushing his message through text messaging and connecting with people in that way. It's real-time and gets the information through a number of different intermediaries. And the quality of service goes up.

3) Customers are more informed and want to be educated. They know they are in charge and they know that they have infinite options. They say, "Help me make the best decision by educating me."

4) Use an effective CRM. Get a real good basic CRM system and use it to capture information. Or use technology like Wiki or Web 2.0 that will enable you to store and track data in a structured way. Put your information into a system that that is designed to manage data in a friendly and acceptably structured way. Google, for example, utilizes tags that allows data to be structured. The more that companies can use current data storage and retrieval technology, the better off they'll be in being able to use that information effectively, to be able to reach out to customers on a regular basis.

Editor's Note: For more on customer service technology, read [Chatting Up Customer Service](http://www.salesandmarketingmanagement.com) at www.salesandmarketingmanagement.com.

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