

Online Customer Service

Closing the loop to close the sale

In the early days of Internet retailing, merchants debated the value of customer service for shoppers who clearly wanted to do it all themselves. Online shoppers, they argued, didn't care about human contact and in fact preferred to have complete control over the transaction. As a result, many hid their 800 numbers—or didn't offer one at all—or offered customer service only through e-mail, which might or might not get answered.

Today, the debate is mostly over. Not only do online shoppers expect customer service for everything from simple questions like Where is my order? to more complex queries about product details and one product's compatibility with another, but they also expect to be served in whatever way they want to ask the question and whenever they are shopping, whether it's 2 in the afternoon or 2 in the morning.

Around-the-clock availability

And if that's what customers want, that's what retailers want. "The biggest shift that we've seen in what our customers are asking for is more availability—making customer contact available in different ways all the time," says Greg Fettes, president and CEO of 24-7 INtouch, provider of outsourced customer service.

From relegating customer service to a low priority, online retailers today have come to realize that they need to allow customers to contact them by phone, live chat and e-mail around the clock.

Even the lowly phone has gotten the attention of online retailers. "We've always provided 24-hour voice support, but that has become a really big focus for our customers," Fettes says. "Our customers are saying it absolutely has to be 24 hours, which makes a lot of sense for online shopping."

Live chat, which was considered a leading technology only two years ago, is becoming more mainstream. "The percent of our customers who are participating in live chat has doubled in the last two years," Fettes says. "And it's even more in online

retailing. Significantly more of our online retailing customers are trying live chat."

Even in an era of instant answers via live chat, some customers still prefer to get in touch via e-mail—or some retailers prefer to deal in e-mail rather than live chat. And so even e-mail response has undergone changes. "A year ago, just getting the e-mails off the web site was considered success," Fettes says. "Now, our customers are requesting to have a guaranteed response time." 24-7 INtouch's average response time to e-mail is 37 minutes.

Broader spread

Fettes expects both live chat and e-mail to become even more widespread. "Companies who don't put in live chat or e-mail will be left behind," he says. "The key to the online shopping experience is all about being available to the customer whenever and wherever the customer is. If they want to call you, they should be able to call you. If you have a younger demographic and they want to shoot you a text message, they should be able to do that. If you're not offering all the ways of customer contact, you could be neglecting a certain segment of your customer base."

He adds, however, that while many retailers get the idea about customer service for online shoppers, not all do. "The Internet retailers are far more open to it than the traditional bricks-and-mortar retailers," he says.

But while customers are definitely interested in contacting retailers whenever and however they want to, retailers must also be aware of the benefits of self-service, including lower costs and giving more control of the transaction to the customer. "We are making a huge effort in that area in 2007," Fettes says. 24-7 INtouch is working on ways to connect customer information databases to web applications that customers can use, Fettes says. "It's the way of the future, but no one has found a way yet to provide that to small and medium-sized businesses in an affordable way and integrate it into systems they have in place."

But, he adds: "That's where the industry is going." ■

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