

Continued Decline in Email Responsiveness Creates Enormous Opportunity

by Scott Hornstein



I have this simple notion that customer care is one of the most powerful competitive differentiators in this flat world. If we create happier customers, they will stay longer and buy more. These patterns of preferential repurchase, and referral, increase the profitability and longevity of our businesses. One might call this a customer relationship and it is not what I generally experience as a customer of many companies.

This longer-term relationship is the rubric of CRM, but when we put it through the meat grinder of short term mandates, we create turnstile relationships. Our investment is in the immediate sale. Our attention to the individual customer is the blink of an eye, and then whoops, the doors spin faster and here's the next. I know you have a problem or concern that affects your satisfaction, but I think the customer behind you wants to buy. Please don't trip, you'll slow things down. The longer-term revolves out of sight.

Here's a good example:

Every year, my organization conducts an e-mail responsiveness survey, based on the observation that every one of us sends an email to a corporation with a customer service question, and every one of us would like an answer, preferably within 24 hours. Please stop me if you disagree.

The survey is simple, an email is sent, using my name and email address, to a list of the Financial Times' Most Respected Companies and Fortune's Most Admired Companies. The list includes Apple, Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Bristol Myers, Microsoft, Berkshire Hathaway, Nordstrom and Google. This year, we added The Reputation Institute's Most Respected Companies, which includes BMW, Cisco, General Mills, Walt Disney and Xerox. The subject line is Customer Service and the body copy is "What is your corporate policy regarding the turnaround time for e-mails addressed to customer service?"

The criteria is an answer to the question. That's the only thing that counts. I'm not trying to pull a punch or fool anyone. I just want an answer. Non-answers,

such as Travelers Insurance request that I send in my resume, or Xerox who requested the serial number of our machine, do not. Here are the results:

In 2002 (the high water mark), 86% of companies answered our question regardless of time frame. 2008 was 51%. 2009 was 45%, less than half of the total companies. The year-to-year decline is steady. Interestingly, 4 companies sent an immediate auto-response that said my inquiry was important and would be routed to the appropriate person, and then disappeared. I never received their answer. Intel sent an auto response that had a box entitled Related Resources positioned directly over body copy, so I have no idea what they said.

In 2002, 63% answered our question within 24 hours. 2008 was 31%. 2009 was 29%. The decline is, again, steady.

14% of companies stated a policy that targets 24 hours. Standouts are RedEnvelope who got back to us within 9 minutes and whose policy is ASAP. LL Bean who responded within 16 minutes with a policy of 20 minutes. Costco whose policy is 8-12 hours. And 3M who got back to us in 1 hour and 21 minutes with a policy of 24 hours.

Interesting circumstances:

- To send an email to P&G or Coke, you must use their web form. In each case a required field is age.
- US Airways' required field is travel date.
- The AMA responded within 9 minutes to tell us that their policy is 24-78 business hours. What the heck is that?
- The IRS' response (23 hours 57 minutes): "after clicking on this link, please scroll down to the bottom of the page. The answer to your question is in the sixth paragraph from the bottom". Wouldn't it have been easier to just say 48 hours?
- Home Depot can't tell us because the information is proprietary.
- Target invited me to call in to discuss my question.

continued

Some observations, which are probably my own personal crotchets:

- What happened to simple, grammatical, declarative sentences?
- Since when did a company earn the right to call me Scott?

Is all this intentional? Absolutely not. These are sins of omission. There's no one saying Scott is not important. Similarly, there's no one saying an investment in the differentiating care of our customers is a strategic product and success is measured by the interaction. Within a short-term focus, customer service is a cost, and costs should be controlled and minimized. Our friends in the financial community have shown us all what a short-term focus can wreak over the long-term.

Stated differently, you may be innovative and have great quality, but if you view customers as commodities, they will return the favor. And in this socially networked, viral world, they will be happy to tell their friends.

My conclusion — there is an enormous opportunity in the marketplace. ■



H O R N S T E I N A S S O C I A T E S

Scott Hornstein is principal at Hornstein Associates, a direct marketing consultancy in Redding, Conn. Clients include Microsoft, HP, The Phoenician. He is the co-author of *Opt-In Marketing: Increase Sales Exponentially with Consensual Marketing* (McGraw-Hill). Contact: (203) 938-8715; scott@hornsteinassociates.com.