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Top of Mind: Don't Pull The Wool Over Customers' Eyes

May 23, 2005

By Scott Hornstein

YOU'D think that corporations would have already learned that customers want and expect swift responses to e-mail inquiries. Our research on the subject, conducted yearly since 2001, however, has shown just the opposite—a poor trend that is hurting brands.

Independent studies by the likes of Jupiter Research and Genesys Telecommunications Laboratories corroborate that customers expect a reply to an e-mail inquiry within 24 hours, and that most customers at one time or another send a question to a company via e-mail.

And yet the number of companies who answer our customer responsiveness survey keeps going down. Each year we send a simple e-mail query with the following question to a list of 38 leading organizations including IBM, Compaq, Dell, Apple, Amazon.com, DoubleClick, several airlines, L.L. Bean, the IRS, the Direct Marketing Association, etc.:

"What is your corporate policy regarding the turnaround time for e-mails addressed to customer service?"

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A response is defined as a return e-mail that was sent to answer my question. A "dodge" or "delay" message ("your

e-mail will be answered in the order received") doesn't count. A referral to a Web site is read as "we're too busy, go do it yourself," or a nonresponse.

There's a lot of detail and nuance in the results, but here's the big picture on how many companies responded:

YEAR Percentage of respondents

- 2001: 66%
- 2002: 76%
- 2003: 72%
- 2004: 65%
- 2005: 64%

The trend line is interesting but the bottom line is astounding. Well over half of these companies did not bother to respond within a 24-hour period. While this year's tally marks a decline of a full third since 2002, let's not pat ourselves on the back. These results are still horrible. Responsiveness hasn't even made it back to the pitiful baseline.

Oh yes, one company said they reply within 24 business hours, a curious phrase that I had not heard before. Unraveling the mystery, I assume that a business day is eight hours. Thus, 24 business hours must be three days, in customer terms. Last time I looked I was the customer, and three days is too long.

Here's how many didn't respond at all, within any time period:

YEAR Percentage of non-respondents

- 2001: 34%
- 2002: 24%
- 2003: 28%
- 2004: 35%
- 2005: 36%

A 50% increase since 2002 and going strong. It seems to be the inverse of companies who are verbally and financially committed to "customer relationship management." Or is that just another "dodge" term? This was certainly an easy enough question to answer.

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It's time for marketers to wake up and redefine what they do for a living. There appears to be an ever-widening gap between companies and customers. Customers are turning to government to protect them from marketing's perceived predatory practices. Customers have changed, yet marketing hasn't. Neither marketing nor sales own the customer. They are intelligent, independent, online and plugged in. They've got lots of choices. A brand is now a concept that is built or destroyed with every interaction.

Customer relationship management focuses us internally on how to use re-sources to maximize short-term sales. We've got to concentrate on Customer Fulfillment, providing a clear and compelling competitive differentiation by using customer care as a strategic product, by viewing it as driving revenue versus incurring cost.

Customer Fulfillment is based on the pillars of trust and respect, each of which is measured over the long term. We can talk all we want about customer centricity, but if we only recognize and reward short-term sales we, by definition, will walk over every customer we can until we find one with money to spend. We must learn to measure, with a direct connection to the bottom line, customer satisfaction, retention and lifetime value. That is the most profitable business model.

The ball is clearly in marketing's court. Cultural and business historians will record that this was the age when marketing became consensual, where both sides commit to and invest in ongoing value. Or, they will record it as the moment when marketing self-immolated.

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, 2004). Contact: (203) 938-8715; scott@hornsteinassociates.com.

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