

**THE OPPORTUNITY UNDER OUR CORPORATE NOSE:***Results of our 2011 email responsiveness survey**by Scott Hornstein*

Call me crazy, but I think the foundation of any relationship is conversation. At a high level, it might be an exchange of ideas. At its simplest, I ask a question and you answer. Seems to me it's the basis of respect, which I believe is a component of the longevity of the relationship.

Yet, when the conversation is between a corporation and a customer who is not in the immediate buy cycle, something goes awry.

I've been doing an email responsiveness survey annually since 2001. I put on my customer hat and ask companies a simple question by email, on the premise that every one of us emails a question to a company at some time, and fully expects an answer. So I wait and see who answers me. It's really a litmus test of how well a stated commitment to CRM filters down to the individual customer. The subject line of the email is "Customer Service" and the question I ask is "What is your corporate policy regarding the turnaround time for emails addressed to customer service?" One customer, one dopey question. I only tally the answers.

The database I use consists of the Financial Times' Most Respected Companies, Fortune's Most Admired Companies and The Reputation Institute's Most Respected Companies. This includes Apple, Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Bristol Myers, Microsoft, Berkshire Hathaway, Starbuck's, Google and more. This year we added a new segment to the database—Business Insider's list of Most Hated Companies, which includes companies such as Bank of America, Dish Network, several cable companies, several utilities and several airlines.

Results have never been worse—34% of companies answered our question, and the average was actually raised by the Most Hated Companies' performance. Answers include Amazon telling me that they no longer accept incoming emails. The high water mark was 2002 when 86% of companies provided an answer. Last year it was 51%.

The quickest response came from the AMA. The longest from the LA Department of Water and Power at 35+ days—guess which list they are on. Home Depot

called after their email to make sure they had answered our question.

I wasn't surprised by the companies who will only correspond with active (paying) customers. If I did have an account, I used it. Here are two things that did surprise me—

- 16% of companies provided a web-based form for me to use to submit my question (so you can be reasonably assured it was received) and then did not answer. Not even the obligatory auto-response that assures us how important we are.
- Several companies who did answer defined their policy by business hours. How many business hours define a customer day? Last time I looked, I was the customer.

OK, by any one's measure these are terrible results—1 in 3 odds of getting an answer is crazy. It also appears out of sync with the tools and sophistication in the marketplace. The trend lines are exact opposite. What's going on? Here are two clues:

- Looking closer, almost 8 out of 10 of the answers we received specifically referenced a corporate policy of responding to customers within a 1–2 day period.

The timeframe is certainly important because after 2 days, even the best of us start to get testy. But what's really resonant here is that a tightly defined corporate policy exists. Which implies that both measurement and reward systems are present.

- While the fewest companies in numbers answered our question, there is a core team who answer us every year. Companies such as AMA, Apple, Barnes & Noble, LL Bean, Red Envelope, Berkshire Hathaway, Home Depot and 3M.

My take:

Corporations tend to embrace CRM and shy away from the individual interaction, which can be messy and time-consuming. CRM drives profit, the interaction is a cost. Here's a good example of how crazy this seems to me:

*continued*

- Arguably, online retailers stand to gain by using customer service as a competitive differentiator. Recently, Tealeaf conducted a survey among attendees at Forrester's Customer Experience Forum and found that 87% believed online customer experience management was 'more important now than ever before'. However, only half had implemented strategies and methods for measuring results.
- Many customers reevaluate their relationship with a company with each interaction. How that moment is handled will either reinforce, or blow-up your future potential with that individual, and more. Unhappy customers not only go away... they post, and blog, and tweet, and text. Here's a useful exercise. Google "I Hate (Name of My Company)" and see what's out there. At one time, that kind of a search using Dell would generate over 8 million hits.

Companies that implement their commitment to the customer as a strategic product, with measurement and reward, recognize, whether implicitly or explicitly, the contribution towards sales and profits. (I mean really, is it not common sense that happier customers stay longer and buy more?) Thus, the strategy drives focused and vigilant attention to the customer interaction, however dopey. An insight from our core team:

"Our internet response mechanism is just one of several customer on-line support features 3M uses to provide information to our customers. Acknowledging the importance of strong customer support, 3M is continually developing additional avenues—click-to-call, co-browsing and chat—to align with the specific mode in which a customer wishes to engage with us."

"3M provides global capability to support global brands—with over 500 responders in 47 countries—using the exact same system which allows us to share knowledge and customer insight to respond in a localized way."

*Shelley Hinderscheit, Global Email Management Program Coordinator, 3M*

The bottom line is that there is enormous opportunity right under our corporate nose. Tools are ineffective without strategy, and nothing in the corporate world

reaches the level of strategy unless it has both measurement and reward.

In a world gone flat, how you handle the customer interaction becomes a defining part of your brand. It can be a powerful differentiator, a lever for success, or not.

Call me crazy. ■



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