

How Easy Is It to Do Business with Your Company?

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I could write a book about customer service, but since there are already over 109,000 such books listed on Amazon.com I'm going to focus on an oft overlooked element of customer service: the ease or difficulty of doing business with your company.

Whether it's about how the culture works at Southwest Airlines or how United Airlines breaks guitars, the press is full of stories on the people and interpersonal communication aspects of customer service.

Having good customer service programs and people helps, but it does not guarantee a good customer experience, and that could be damaging your brand reputation and costing you sales. Many businesses seem to approach customer service, and even their sales process, from the standpoint of making it easier for their own company rather than easier for their clients to do business with them.

When is the last time you drove through your restaurant's drive through, ordered a product on your website, tried contacting

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customer support through your phone system, or attempted to perform any number of tasks you expect your customers and prospective customers to do every day?

Some e-tailers (retail websites) make it very difficult to place an order. The search function might be poorly organized. Product descriptions and photographs are often lacking. If you persevere and try to place an order, you might have to enter your contact information for billing address, shipping address, and again to register for an account so you can track your order (and they can flood your inbox with promotions).

The Good and Bad of Amazon.com

Amazon.com, on the other hand, makes it very easy to find what you want (some would argue too easy) and place an order. All my credit cards and shipping addresses are stored for future use. Product descriptions are thorough and helpful, as are other shoppers' reviews. The free "Prime" shipping (that I happily pay \$99 per year for) is great. A couple of clicks and I can get almost anything in two days.

Returns at Amazon are relatively easy and painless...until you want to try to contact somebody. It takes at least ten clicks to get from the Amazon home page to a page where you can have somebody call you about your issue (you can't find a number to call them). On the other hand, when you do finally connect to a customer service representative, they actually have the information they need to help you, know why you're calling, and usually speak English fluently.

Contacting Amazon can be one of the better customer service experiences. I've frequently encountered companies that require you to enter account information and go through a phone tree (oh for the day when saying "representative" or pushing "0" connected you to a real person) only to find that the person you connect to after 15 minutes doesn't have a clue why your calling. Then after another 15 minutes of frustrating attempts to explain your problem to one representative, you get to start all over again when you're connected to tier-two support. Then your call is disconnected and you have to start over. When you call back, another representative won't connect you to tier-two support until she tries to help you and gives you a completely different

response than the first representative. And then you have to try to find the cell phone you just threw in the lake.

How Do They Stay in Business?

According to eMarketer, time spent on mobile devices now exceeds desktop devices by 25 percent, and is growing every year. Is your website responsive and optimized for mobile devices (tablets and smart phones)? Is key information, such as an overview of your firm or how to find your location, easy to see or find from the first screen on a mobile device?

If you own a restaurant and serve take-out, having your menu available online is critical. Equally (if not more) important is having a click-to-dial phone number for people looking at your website from their phone. One Salinas restaurant recently redesigned their website, and while they included an online menu, their phone number was not listed anywhere on their website. Oops.

If you have a business (such as a produce company) that frequently has truckers looking for your shipping location, presenting a clickable address and directions could make it easier for them to find you.

Some online services offer free trials. Great, but it's not free as I need to invest my time to see if it is going to work for me. Before I do that, I really want to know what it is going to cost if I continue, but several cloud-based websites don't provide that information. Nor do they provide a physical address or phone contact information. And they want my credit card so they can charge me some undisclosed amount if I don't read the fine print and cancel within 72 hours. How do they stay in business?

Added Costs Can Increase Profits

Online or in person, what forms of payment do you accept? Are they the same forms your customers prefer to use? You'll get faster corporate payments if you take the few minutes to setup Automated Clearing House (ACH) payment acceptance with your bank. If your clients want to pay by credit

card, the increased business and reduced accounts receivables could be worth the small percentage you have to pay to process the payments. Adding a payment portal to your website could also make it easier for your customers to do business with you. You might even be able to increase your price to offset the added costs.

If you have a professional service business, do you make all your clients come to your office? Yes, it's more productive and convenient for YOU if they do, but what about your clients? Perhaps they'd even pay more for the convenience of having you visit them.

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Hello. Is Anybody There?

How quickly are phone calls and emails returned by your company? How easy is it for people to get the information they are looking for? Last week we needed to get updated media kits for a couple of our clients. One trade publication had their media kit prominently displayed and available online, providing all the information we needed. The other, a local publication, no longer publishes their media kit online – you have to fill out an online form to request a media kit. And wait. Two days. Three days. One week. We are still waiting.

Revenue Enhancement or Elimination?

A number of years ago I took a job that required weekly travel from San Jose to Phoenix. At the time, America West Airlines offered competitive fares with Southwest and the added advantage of reserved seats.

So why did I fly Southwest every week for six years? Because America West charged a one hundred dollar fee to make a ticket change, and I was changing two or three flights per month. Since then Southwest

implemented group boarding, you can choose to pay a small premium if you want even earlier boarding, your bags still fly free, they text you if your flight is delayed, they still give you free peanuts and the flight attendants still crack jokes. I still fly Southwest whenever possible (and America West is no longer an independent business).

What Would Your Customers Do?

Every now and then it's important for every business owner or manager to navigate their website, call their phone system, attempt to do business with their own company and experience their business from their customer's perspective.

Better yet, you can actually see how your customers experience your company by periodically employing usability testing which involves observing typical customers as they try to navigate your website, operate your products or stumble through your automated phone system. It only takes a few people in a well-designed usability test to get incredible insight into the barriers and frustrations you have inadvertently created.

Would You Refer Your Friends or Family To Your Company?

I hate that question when asked on customer surveys because I rarely impose my commercial beliefs on friends and families – unless asked. A better question is: "If asked by friends or family, would you encourage them to do business with us?" After you have experienced your company as a customer, how would you answer that question? If your answer was anything short of "absolutely," you have some work to do. **CG**