

High-Touch Technology

High touch and high tech are often spoken of as if they were mutually exclusive with regard to providing superior customer service. Not true...in fact, technology, when properly used, can create a strong perception of personal service and the feel of dealing with a small company regardless of its physical size.

We've all undoubtedly done business with a local store where "everybody knows your name" – and your size, and your purchase history, and your style preferences, and your family news, and where you spent your last vacation, and so on, and so on. In addition, the small staff is uncanny in its ability to perfectly coordinate, accessorize or otherwise complete your purchase and to generally provide you with a shopping experience you'd like to repeat. There's no way a web site or a call center can compete with that kind of personal attention, is there? Obviously I believe there is; otherwise I wouldn't be writing this article.

The small store capitalizes on the repetitive shopping of a relatively few customers and on hiring personable, attentive sales people. Most direct marketing companies operate in an environment in which thousands of customers interact with hundreds of employees (or directly with a computer) on an anonymous and random basis every day. The good news is that most direct marketers are primarily competing with large retail stores, not the Mom and Pop shops that rely on the personal relationship for their competitive advantage. The better news is that most of the large stores have a reputation for unknowledgeable and unhelpful sales personnel. The best news is that direct marketers can use technology to not only replicate the personal shopping experience of a small local shop but to actually improve upon it by offering more convenience.

First and foremost, the hiring of the call center folks who will represent your company through direct contact with your customers is paramount. No one will be impressed by or loyal to a company whose front-line people are indifferent, uninformed or inconvenienced by the customer contact. Take a cue from the small local stores here and recruit employees who are articulate, pleasant and who genuinely want to help customers. Once the right people are on board, they must be trained in the usual areas of product, policy, procedures, courtesy, call control, etc. Additionally, they must become experts in assimilating available technology into the conversational flow. Computer screens that present shopping history, preferences, prior customer service issues and the like and pop-ups that suggest accessories, complementary purchases or alternative items for out-of-stock merchandise are all excellent methods for personalizing and enhancing the shopping experience. They are, however, only tools in which the call center employee must become proficient to achieve the desired effect.

Self-serve applications like web sites and Interactive Voice Response (IVR) are examples of technology that can enhance service by providing alternative and convenient ways for a customer to conduct business with you. Full e-commerce on the web allows the same opportunities for accessorizing, complementary selling and suggesting alternatives to out-of-stock items as those available on the call center rep's screen. In addition, both the web site and IVR provide quick and easy access for checking order and return status, finding a store location, responding to an FTC notification or conducting a customer survey. In applying self-serve technology, the following guidelines are imperative to a successful shopping experience:

- let the customer make the choice to use it – by allowing customers to control the technology the frustration of having it thrust upon them can be avoided
- keep it simple – offer user-friendly site navigation and a manageable number of IVR options
- provide an opt-out to a live person or, in the case of a web site, to assistance through a toll-free phone number, e-mail or chat

Technology, properly used, can not only provide a personal and rewarding shopping experience in the anonymous world of direct marketing, but it can also offer an effective way to stay small in the eyes of your customers as you grow your business.