

The unreachable enterprise



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The Internet-revolution has created a wealth of new opportunities allowing organisations to interact directly and in a personalised way with their customers. Marketing to the individual, the customer-focused organisation, it all seemed a bit more achievable and affordable. Unfortunately, this remains an unfulfilled promise. Even worse, the customer now understands what is happening.

Concepts such as "marketing to the individual", "one-to-one marketing" and "the customer-focused organisation" already exist for over a decade.

Unfortunately, the practical implementation of these concepts was much more difficult than expected and many ambitious initiatives quietly disappeared again. Still, the customer focus remained an important theme in later management and marketing approaches. A more recent example of this is the Six Sigma system where "a genuine focus on the customer" is listed as the top priority of the approach.

It all seems very natural, but the reality is often quite different. Of course, in many cases, this "genuine focus on the customer" is really implemented in a correct way. Still, most of these situations have to do with initiatives where the company takes the lead or where the company itself gains the most advantage. Far less of this customer-focused attitude remains in situations where the customer is the demanding party.

"Every customer contact is a potential business opportunity" is the well-known mantra of the marketing and sales gurus. However, most organisations are not very successful transforming their customer interactions into real business opportunities. Even worse, for several organisations, many customer contacts have the embedded risk of losing the customer. Companies simply seem to have a difficult time managing processes that they do not fully control or steer.

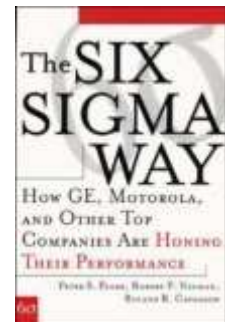
Today, this lack of efficient customer interaction management is the most visible in all interactions where the customer is the demanding party, without carrying the promise of an immediate purchase. Typical examples are all aspects of post-sales customer support.

I do agree, perhaps the Internet revolution has made things a little bit too easy for the novice user. Today's customers are complex and difficult human beings that consistently forget diagnosing their problem before calling the helpdesk, never read the manual or the FAQ pages, never check the knowledge base, etc. Therefore, it is quite normal that companies try to reduce this flood of e-mails and problem reports or at least, try to streamline and automate the processing of these requests.

However, while doing so, organisations must keep a delicate balance between efficiency and effectiveness (read: the way the customer perceives the support). Simply blocking all interaction will not help you.

To give you an example: recently, I had to discover that my current supplier of contact management software simply does not allow customers to pass a question or a problem report if they do not subscribe to a formal support contract.

Of course, I am not claiming that you have to do everything for free! We live in an economic business reality and also the support department has its cost. But simply blocking all communication or interaction? Not being interested in feedback? Not wanting to know when things go wrong?



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Well, I assume this company will have its reasons, but for a company that calls itself "the CRM company", it seems a very strange approach. But even an Internet-veteran such as Amazon.com sometimes has a difficult time achieving this delicate balance between efficiency and effectiveness.

A couple of weeks ago, I had a problem with two orders for a book. I am already buying books at Amazon for years, without any problem, but this time, things went wrong. I had placed two separate orders for a book and a couple of weeks after the "latest scheduled arrival date" nothing had arrived. Therefore, up to the "when things go wrong" pages of Amazon.com.

It took quite a while finding the correct link to post my problem. Amazon also understands the reality of all these donuts that try to contact the helpdesk for some kind of imaginary problem. Therefore, Amazon makes sure that you are well informed of all the things that might make that you do not really have a problem, before allowing you to post a problem report. However, for the persistent visitor, there is finally light at the end of the tunnel and you can drop your question in the appropriate box.

Within 24 hours, a very elaborate answer from Amazon. The first shipment probably got lost, so they told me that they had already shipped another, free-of-charge, copy of the book. As for my second order, they suggested to wait for another 10 days before taking further action. "Does this solve your problem?" they asked and spontaneously, I answered "yes", thinking, "Amazon still is the best..." Thank you!

A couple of weeks passed without further developments and then suddenly, the first book arrived. Inspection of the shipment made clear that this was the original first shipment. Obviously, the book never got lost. Of course, it arrived more than a month later than the "latest scheduled arrival date", nonetheless, it was there.

OK, being a good customer, I contact Amazon to update them on this development and to ask them what I should do, because there is yet another copy somewhere underway. As for the second book, I have to tell them that the status is still the same, but given the experience with the first book, I suggest to wait for another while. Apparently, these shipments take far more time than expected, but as we have seen, eventually they arrive.

Within 24 hours, again an elaborate answer from Amazon. The costs for shipping back the extra copy after arrival are prohibitive, so I can keep this extra copy without charge. As for the second book, the first shipment probably got lost, so they told me that they had already shipped another, free-of-charge, copy of the book.


The wording is exactly the same as in the first mail. No single word about my suggestion to give it some more time. Of course, you cannot plan for everything in your scripts. Who on earth can foresee that a customer who is happy with your support might be willing to accept some additional delay?

"Does this solve your problem?" they asked and after some hesitation, I answered "yes", thinking, "They are not listening, anyway. It doesn't make sense to continue talking to a computer." Thank you!

It is unfortunate. Once again, an Internet-illusion lost. Also for Amazon, this is unfortunate. In their support statistics, my problem will probably be listed as a problem that, according to the customer, was managed and solved in an appropriate way. In reality, they just lost a customer. Thank you!

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