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Customer Rights

By David Kelly

Like it or not, the benchmark of your company's ability to deliver top-quality customer service probably will be defined by someone else. "Today, people are comparing your level of customer service with the last place they got good customer service, whether it's in your industry or not," says T. Scott Gross, author of the Positively Outrageous Service books. "Because some companies are so good at it, the ones that aren't really stand out."



A huge investment in customer relationship management (CRM) software and consulting services isn't always necessary for tuning your customer service and optimizing customer relationships. Something as straightforward as making sure the e-commerce capabilities of your Web site are up-to-date or adding customer discussion forums can have a positive customer impact.

Another key step to enhancing customer service is to make effective use of the data you already have. "The important thing is to get the data into the hands of the people who can make a difference with the customer," Gross says. "Remember, the best customer to recruit is the one you already have."

The following four profiles highlight companies that have learned this lesson well.

MGM Mirage bets on consolidated customer database

In addition to the MGM Hotel, MGM Mirage counts Bellagio, the Mirage, New York-New York and Treasure Island among the Las Vegas hotel-casinos it owns. When the Las Vegas-based entertainment, hotel and gaming company thought about how to fill its properties with customers who keep coming back, it placed its bet on a consolidated customer database.

"Visitors to Las Vegas have lots of choices for eating, gambling and seeing shows," says Laura Fucci, vice president and chief technology officer of MGM Mirage. "So we've designed a consolidated customer database [CCD] to help build more customer loyalty by making sure that when customers walk into any of our properties they'll be treated differently from when they walk into one of our competitor's properties."

MGM Mirage's CCD collects customer data from the company's 19 casino properties and makes it available to appropriate on-site personnel, including front-desk clerks, pit bosses and concierges. The CCD uses eXtensible Markup Language (XML) and Microsoft Message Queuing Services (MSMQ) to route customer transaction data from each hotel into a central Microsoft SQL Server 2000 data warehouse. XML provides a standardized format for the data coming from a variety of systems; MSMQ provides guaranteed delivery of that data as it is sent from each location to the data warehouse or central data store.

Thanks to the CCD, visitors can gamble, eat, drink and shop at any MGM Mirage property and have the charges forwarded to their main hotel. And customer service personnel now have a bevy of information to help them be more proactive in keeping their customers happy.

For example, a pit boss at Treasure Island could see that a card-playing visitor was registered at Bellagio and that his favorite restaurant is one at the Mirage. The concierge might then give the customer a complimentary dinner at that restaurant. Similarly, the VIP concierge at the Mirage might analyze the customer's history and line up complimentary tickets to his favorite show at New York-New York.

"Our CCD system brings us a higher level of visibility and understanding of our customer base, and it's something we can't do without technology," Fucci says.

Jelly Belly's Web site upgrade hits customer sweet spot

The Jelly Belly Candy Co., famous for those small, intensely flavored specialty

jelly beans favored by former President Reagan, was in a sticky situation. The company, based in Fairfield, Calif., had the U.S. rights to manufacture and distribute a special line of jelly beans based on J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter books, with flavors such as grass, black pepper and sardine. But with the release of the first Harry Potter movie approaching last year, the company feared its Web site and online ordering application wouldn't be able to handle the expected onslaught of "Pottermania."

"Our old Web site was missing basic e-commerce functionality like address books for memorizing 'ship-to' addresses and simply wasn't convenient," says Ryan Schader, director of corporate strategy. "People expect a Web presence and a good shopping experience that matches what they see when they buy Jelly Belly at a store. If we don't deliver on that, it reflects poorly on our brand and image."

In a three-month crash program, culminating prior to the 2001 holiday season (and just after the movie release of Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone), Jelly Belly redesigned its Web site with help from Microsoft Consulting Services (MCS) and Accenture. The company added capabilities that customers expect and need, like having multiple ship-to addresses on a single order for gift giving. It also rolled out new features such as the "Taste Bud Club," to promote brand evangelism. Members can sign up to receive samples of select new flavors before they are released, get free shipping and obtain customized catalogs, the result of new content management technology that was part of the upgrade.

In turn, Taste Bud Club members give Jelly Belly valuable feedback. "The members are pretty vocal about communicating back to the company what flavors they like or are interested in seeing," Schader says.

With its increased performance, more sophisticated functionality and features tailored for repeat customers, Jelly Belly's Web-based orders have increased 35%. "Repeat buyers who purchase a lot of gifts like the new functionality," Schader says.

Portal keeps customers revved about Honda

Despite the millions of dollars automakers spend on advertising to gain new customers, customer loyalty—defined as the intention to purchase another car of the same make—is often cemented by the combination of product quality and satisfaction with service delivered by the car dealer.

To better engage customers and to ensure their satisfaction, American Honda Motor Company Inc., headquartered in Torrance, Calif., created the Owner Link customer portal (www.ahm-ownerlink.com), which ties information from the automaker together with service records supplied by dealers, which are independent companies. "Owner Link presents the owner with complete pre- and postpurchase information resources on Honda products," says Pete Moran, managing director for Genex, an Internet consulting and development company based in Los Angeles that helped create the Web site.

If you own a Honda Accord but can't find the owner's manual or recommended service schedule, you can get all the original documentation specific to your model on Owner Link, along with information on service and warranty updates. Customers who own other Honda products (such as motorcycles, watercraft and lawn mowers), will soon be able to register them all under one account and have a single resource for ongoing, personalized product and service information, including service records. In the future, customers will be able to set preferences, including whether to receive service reminders via e-mail or regular mail.

Owner Link runs on a Microsoft platform and relies heavily on the XML data standard. XML enables Owner Link to exchange data with independent dealers, which use varying systems for keeping customer and service records. XML also helps unify the presentation of product data and standardize vehicle information and records, so that they are consistent whether viewed on the Web, in the dealership or in product brochures.

"The Web has enabled us to bring the information available from the manufacturer together with the service records and service capabilities of the dealer for the convenience of the customer," Moran says.

"When they hear the turnaround time is only 10 minutes, even if they don't have a computer they go to the local library or a friend's house" to apply online, McHale says.

Microsoft finds Xbox users game for an online community

Increasing customer satisfaction and loyalty may require more than simply answering the phone faster, especially if you're marketing to a hip, young customer group. With the release of its updated Xbox.com Web site late last year, Microsoft Corp.'s Xbox business unit found out how powerful peer-to-peer communications can be in managing customer satisfaction.

Xbox, Microsoft's next-generation video game console targeted at 16- to 26-year-olds, went on sale last November with a huge launch campaign. Users snapped up the consoles and games. The Xbox.com site generated over 3 million unique visitors in November alone. An important component of the site is its support for online communities, where players can share information and trade tips on individual games.

Soon after the release of the game Blood Wake in December 2001, it became apparent from discussion forums on Xbox.com that players were frustrated by the difficulty of level 8 of the game. Xbox support personnel worked with the game's developers to provide tips to overcome the difficulties. Microsoft posted these suggestions to the forum, and found customers greatly appreciated its responsiveness.

"Loyalty is often driven by some of the small things we do for our customers," says Don Hall, director of Xbox.com. "By using our Web site to facilitate a dialogue among customers, we were able to proactively provide workarounds, avoid a large number of customer support calls, and turn around a feeling of frustration to satisfaction."

David Kelly is a business and technology writer in West Newton, Mass.

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