

FEATURE

Customer Contact: How Much Is Too Much?

Everybody knows you need to reach out and touch your customers. The tricky part is figuring out just how often you can do so before you cross the line between attentive and annoying.

by Fred Bayles

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For many companies, customer relations are dictated by the long-held Gospel of Service & Sales: Thou shalt stay close to your customers by means of constant contact.

Adherents cling to simple dogma, such as the Precept of the Seven Calls ("Don't stop calling a customer until the seventh time you've been told no") and the Canticle of Saturation Mailing ("You can never send too many missives").

But customer-relationship experts warn that holding such absolute beliefs can do a lot of damage. Simply put, you can love your customers too much.

"People value their time and privacy now, but many company policies don't recognize this," says Scott M. Broetzmann, president of Customer Care Management & Consulting (CCMC), an Alexandria, Va.-based firm specializing in advising companies on customer relations. For many people, he says, all those calls, letters and e-mails cross the boundary between service and intrusion.

Broetzmann draws his conclusions from working with the Customer Care Alliance, a consortium of companies that gauge customer attitudes by conducting polls such as the National Customer Rage Study, which examines the incidence, causes and results of customer anger.

The alliance's 2005 survey of 1,000 customers found that 53 percent of those who complained about their contacts with companies felt that those interactions wasted their valuable time. The percentage of dissatisfaction grows with the amount of time wasted.

Broetzmann sees such numbers as a sign of growing frustration with the ever-increasing number of "follow-up" and "follow-through" calls. "Thirty years ago, businesspeople complained that you couldn't get hold of anyone when you called a company," he says. "Now, they say you can't get rid of them."

Some business advisors compare this tricky balance of too-little versus too-much in customer relationships to the awkward stage of a new romance, when a beau struggles with the overwhelming urge to call a new love 10 times a day. Sometimes, we learn the hard way that too much ardor can drive away the object of affection.

"If we call them even when they ask us not to call, that's not love, that's stalking," says Martha Rogers, a founding partner of Peppers & Rogers Group, the Norwalk, Conn.-based customer relationship management consulting firm.

The good news: Just as couples can figure out how much togetherness they need, so can businesses and customers. The key is taking the time and effort to learn how often and under what circumstances your customers want to be contacted.

At Arizona State University's Center for Services Leadership, a research center in the school's W.P. Carey School of Business, Executive Director Stephen Brown suggests simply asking your customers to describe what turns them on -- and what causes them to turn away. Is a weekly e-mail too much or too little? Will a phone call every quarter be sufficient -- or will they feel they're being ignored? Do they just want to hear about new products, or do they want occasional updates offering advice on making better use of their existing systems?

The customer profiles that result from such questions can become the basis for automating contacts based on individual preferences. But Brown, whose organization co-sponsors the Customer Care Alliance's customer-rage survey, warns that you can never entirely eliminate the human factor in such efforts: "These things have to be coordinated because customers are so protective of their time," he says.

Firms that use e-mails to stay in touch with customers often allow recipients to opt out with a click or two. But it's important to make sure that you're asking the opt-out question correctly. Rogers says that studies describe an interesting phenomenon that occurs when people are queried about staying on mailing lists. If you ask them whether they want to continue receiving your information, just 17 percent, on average, will answer "yes." But if you phrase the question to ask whether they want to discontinue, or opt out of, future mailings, the same subset -- only 17 percent -- will actively choose to sever communications. "If you say, 'We would love to continue talking to you unless you click there,' they start to feel a little guilty," Rogers says.

What else can you do to keep customers close, but not too close? Experts offer the following advice.

1. Don't send mixed signals.

Some firms trip up by sending a cookie-cutter love letter to clients and customers. Rogers says, "You're not getting the message across that 'we love you' when you start a communication with 'Dear Valued Customer.'"

Worst still are the corporate regimes that set up systems and quotas for contacting customers without fully considering the impact of doing so. A prime example: Dictating to your staff that every contact should include a sales pitch. Broetzmann says that approach can be disastrous when you're in the midst of trying to resolve a customer's problem. "Trying to mix customer care and sales objectives is a tall order," he says. "Some of these attempts have more to do with the fact that companies have engineered processes from a company-centric rather than a customer-centric viewpoint."

2. Look beyond what the customer actually says.

Don't take a customer's encouragement to stay in touch as the final word. Peggy Morrow, a Houston business customer-relations consultant, says she pulls back from talking with a usually pleasant contact if she senses that the timing is off. "You can tell by the tone of voice when you're turning off a customer," she says. "I know the statistics say you are supposed to make seven calls, but if by the second time I hear that tone, I just put them aside."

Rogers tells the story of a business-to-business client that was receiving high ratings from contact people at its own client companies. "Everything was fine until we talked to the bosses of those contact people," she says. "[The bosses] asked, 'Could your people not take up so much of my employees' time?'"

3. Tailor your approach.

Rose Business Solutions Inc., a San Diego-based Microsoft Gold Certified Partner, tailors its approach to customers by sorting its 300 customer firms into three different "buckets."

Company President Linda Rose says the first bucket is reserved for customers who want to remain on the cutting edge of the applications and services her firm offers in the areas of enterprise resource planning, customer relationship management and professional services automation. "Those we know want to stay current we make sure to connect with once a quarter," she says.

Customer firms with less ardor for the latest technology go into the call-twice-a-year bucket. And those companies that are more comfortable with the old and familiar are contacted once a year.

"You can tell based on meeting with them and seeing their buying habits," says Rose. "If you see they're still using an old server, it's a good clue they aren't interested in being constantly contacted. If you see someone staying current with service packs, it's a different kind of clue."

4. Offer value.

Morrow says businesspeople are in such a rush these days that they are quick to trash any generic-looking mail. Her advice: Use an envelope with a discernible goodie enclosed, such as a pen or gadget; such correspondence is far less likely to go straight into the trash.

"People like lumpy packages," she says. "Send something of value and they'll open it."

The value you add to your attempted communication doesn't have to be a material object; of course, customers also value information. Forwarding an article or news item germane to your customer's business or life will help you stay in contact without being perceived as an annoyance. As Morrow puts it: "If you send me something that is going to help me run my business, I'm going to have a warm and fuzzy feeling about you because I'll think you care about me."

SCS Inc., a Microsoft Gold Certified Partner, sends out a quarterly e-mail newsletter to its customers, a wide range of distributors, service firms and entertainment companies that contract with SCS for sales and service of two Microsoft Business Solutions enterprise resource planning products, Axapta and Navision.

"It has a pretty good following," says Helen Russell, SCO's president. She adds that the newsletter goes beyond just promoting the company: "There's advice, tech tips, news about new Microsoft products and individual success stories."

Customer Care and Feeding

Following are a few selected resources for more information on effective customer relationship management:

1to1 Magazine. Published by the Peppers & Rogers Group, 1to1 Magazine covers customer relationship management trends, best practices, initiatives, metrics and other issues. For details, visit www.1to1.com.

Building Great Customer Experiences, by Colin Shaw and John Ivens (Palgrave Macmillan, 2002)

Customer Experience Management: A Revolutionary Guide to Connecting With Your Customers, by Bernd Schmitt (John Wiley & Sons, 2003)


Managing Customer Relationships: A Strategic Framework, by Don Peppers and Martha Rogers (John Wiley & Sons, 2002)

Return on Customer: Creating Value From Your Scarcest Resource, by Don Peppers and Martha Rogers (Currency, 2005)

Although the company has sent out various mailings over the years, Russell says the 4-year-old newsletter has had a noticeably positive effect on business, especially from existing customers. "It generates more interest from those people," she says. It's one of those standard actions a firm should do."

Perhaps the most important rule in setting customer-contact boundaries is to

avoid any one-fits-all rule. Replacing the service dogma with some equally intractable new dictum will almost certainly do more harm than good. Individual definitions of what constitutes the right amount of contact vary too widely to allow for a single strategy.

"Customers don't want to be bothered, but at the same time, they do want to be nurtured and coddled," says Brown, of Arizona State. Your mission is striking just the right balance between those extremes -- for every single customer. 

Fred Bayles, a Boston-based freelance journalist, writes regularly about customer service and other business issues. He is a former national reporter for The Associated Press and USA Today. You can contact Fred about "Customer Contact: How Much Is Too Much?" at editor@rcpmag.com.

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