

Using the Web to
Maximize Customer Service

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Humanizing the Web..... 3
 Frustration.com.....4

The Win-Win Answer: Virtual CRM..... 5
 Making it work together6
 The Bottom Line7

Contact..... 8

HUMANIZING THE WEB

How is it possible — with computers doubling in power every 14 months, encyclopedic knowledge existing on tiny chips, and high bandwidth reaching offices, homes, and even handheld devices — that our experiences with the web can still be so frustrating? Simply put, the web lacks human intelligence, insight, and flexibility.

As the web becomes the primary medium of exchange between businesses and their customers and partners, the sheer inhumanity of the web has a tremendous economic impact. Despite of years of talk about the importance of the customer experience, the web still lags far behind most other communication channels in its ability to provide quick customer satisfaction. This shortfall is the reason many people would still rather pick up the telephone than try a web-based transaction. It's also the reason many web users end up expressing their frustration to (human) call center representatives. The result, in striking economic terms, is a potential customer who could have bought a product or obtained information at a transaction cost of about 10 cents, who instead requires 10 dollars worth of human handholding. And even then, this shopper might go to the competition because the web experience felt so dehumanizing.

When referring to the web experience as inhuman, not only do computer systems fall far short of achieving human intelligence, more importantly, the websites they support fall short of treating people as people. Humanity includes aiming to please and catering to human needs. The common failure of the web is in the ways in which it treats us — ignoring our wishes and requiring us to choose among inflexible scenarios. In the defining paper on the importance of the web customer experience, Mark Hurst describes this inhuman treatment as the “Customer Experience Gap”:

Clearly, there's a difference between what the web gives its customers and what they actually want. Customers want simplicity, but the web gives them complexity. Customers want service, but the web offers technology. Customers want to accomplish their goal, but the web offers “compelling features.” In each case, the web doesn't offer the experience the customer wants. This is the “customer experience gap”: the difference between what customers want and what they get.

Smart business executives are aware of the Customer Experience Gap and its importance, and they are treating their websites as a high priority. Website managers are impaired primarily by two forces: (1) a deluge of vendors who claim to solve their customer relationship management (CRM) problems but in fact often perpetuate the Gap, and (2) organizations that are slow to change, making it difficult to apply on the website the same kind of customer focus that is generally established in a sales office or contact center.

These organizational and technological impairments have led to a state in which companies spend liberally on their websites, support rich content, and generate ever more traffic, while making little progress in closing the Customer Experience Gap. Customers on the web still get technology and features instead of service, complexity instead of simplicity.

In a recent report from Forrester Research “*Build Customer Experiences, Not Relationships*”, Paul Sonderegger suggests that instead of focusing on activities and relationships, firms should concentrate on fulfilling customer goals, and should change their organizations to suit their customer needs, rather than trying to change their customers. This report not only acknowledges the continued existence of Hurst's Gap; it also recognizes the fault of the CRM industry in perpetuating the Gap.

Recognizing how far we are from really humanizing the web is a good way to start tackling some first steps. These are the steps we can take, with today's technology, to give customers a better experience by paying attention to their goals and focusing on the success of each web interaction.

FRUSTRATION.COM

Of course, the web has given an incredible bounty of convenient services to businesses and individuals, including the ability to buy plane tickets, books, or stocks, to track packages, and to research nearly any subject. The web continues to grow as a popular communication channel based on its great strengths: convenience, economics, omnipresence, and interoperability, to name a few.

But as a business-building tool, the web has one major weakness: the frequent frustration of customers. This breakdown makes it impossible for a company to meet its needs, in Hurst's words, to "develop brand, increase loyalty, and grow revenues." Even companies that spend hundreds of millions of dollars on advertising and on their websites generally fall short of seemingly simple goals like increasing web customer satisfaction, simplifying interactions, and fulfilling user objectives. Why? Organizational boundaries prevent the marketing, technology, and customer service organizations from collaborating effectively to give the customers a better experience.

Here's a typical example:

An auto manufacturer with a strong brand spends many millions of dollars on corporate sponsorships, and is publicizing a \$2002 rebate to spark sales. This offer is prominently displayed on a portion of the website, but if we go to the "Search" box on their site and type in "cash bonus offer" (all three words exactly match the words used on the page that contains the offer), we get the following message: "Search for 'cash bonus offer' found 0 documents from 243 in this subject."

This simple example (by no means unusual) illustrates several of Hurst's customer experience no-nos. Not only does it give the customer technology rather than service, it rubs salt in the wounds by displaying an incomprehensible error message. Is the customer interested in how many documents weren't retrieved? Of course not.

This is an example of the website's marketing function being limited by counterproductive uses of technology. The marketing people responsible for the site probably had, or felt they had, no control over the technology that produced this frustrating search result. Instead, the message was probably written by an engineer who was unaware of the website's primary purpose: marketing. The customer experience would be improved by allowing customer advocates (i.e., marketing people) drive the technology behind the website.

Hurst's report makes the following recommendation:

If your search function makes customers wade through thousands of results, it would be better if you didn't offer search at all.

This may not be the best solution for most websites. Replacing search with something better is certainly preferable to removing it entirely. Although we concur that the search experience is a bad one when applied blindly to content collections, at least half of site visitors favor search rather than other forms of navigation.

Some firms, however, have chosen to remove search altogether rather than improve it. A major financial services firm recently deployed a new, comprehensive, state-of-the-art website. On their previous site, the Help feature was connected to an advanced search system. On the new site, the Help button goes to a page titled, "Got Questions? Find the answers here ... fast!" How do you find the answers "fast"? By scanning through a long list of FAQs. If you don't see your question on the list, you can click on the "A-Z Index," a list of hundreds of additional questions. Under the letter W, we find the question, "What do you report to the IRS?"

It's hard to believe any customer would prefer scrolling through a list instead of conducting a simple and successful search. This is a reactive rejection of search technology — this firm had bad results with search, and, unsatisfied with search results that were beyond their control (like the auto company's), they dispensed with search altogether.

THE WIN-WIN ANSWER: VIRTUAL CRM

Businesses that have successfully enabled and expanded their online brand presence, increased online sales and expanded their market and wallet share understand that CRM is critically important to their ongoing success. More than that, businesses have begun to understand that the web offers the ability to be an effective virtual CSR – providing 24-hour service that has historically been handled by humans. By deflecting customer calls to the website, these companies know that if questions are answered adequately on the web, everyone wins — the customer gets a better experience and the company saves money.

Of course, nothing is as simple as it seems, and effective online CRM requires company commitment, planning, and long-term dedication to refining and improving the process. However, as the Figure 1 below illustrates, following a few key steps can help your enterprise improve online CRM and see measurable results.

Figure 1:

Steps to Improve Website Experiences	
<p>Insist on search and navigation capabilities that put marketing in control of the site, and put customers in control of the results that they see.</p>	<p>Technology is available today that cannot only respond accurately to customer inquiries, but that can insure that the most useful responses to common requests are displayed flawlessly. There is no technical reason that a customer should miss your \$2002 bonus offer. Marketing must insist on a search and navigation experience — for example, using natural language question answering — that is simple, interactive, easily customizable, and makes the user feel in control.</p>
<p>↓</p> <p>Plan and budget for measuring and analyzing results.</p>	<p>The Customer Experience Gap results from the disparity between web user desires and website results. To close the gap, get to know your users better. This doesn't mean just measuring traffic and click-through on your site. It means knowing what your customers are thinking, what they're asking, whether they're satisfied, and why. It's hard to improve the customer experience when you don't know what the experience is. You need tools for gathering input from site visitors, analyzing customer needs and results, and making constant improvements.</p>
<p>↓</p> <p>Build change into the system.</p>	<p>The majority of large corporate websites, especially those of companies with significant consumer brands, have content management systems that help them manage updates. But most website managers still feel that they can't change much, or that updates take too long. If your contact center is deluged with calls because people can't find an important piece of information on your site, or your prospective customers are going to the competition because they've missed your promotion, you have to be prepared to detect these problems and correct them right away.</p>

Consider the work of a typical CSR. They take scores of incoming calls per day. They have a computer linked to the company's main server. As customers ask questions, the CSR interfaces with a legacy data system to get the answers on-screen. The CSR then reads the answers over the phone to the customers. In essence, the CSR gives information and takes orders- something that, when developed correctly, the web is perfectly adapted to do.

When analyzed in terms of COB, a typical call to a CSR costs a company \$6.50. But in most cases, a well-crafted web site can replace a high percentage of this CSR function. *The answer lies in effectively giving the customers the same access to information as the CSR.*

MAKING IT WORK TOGETHER

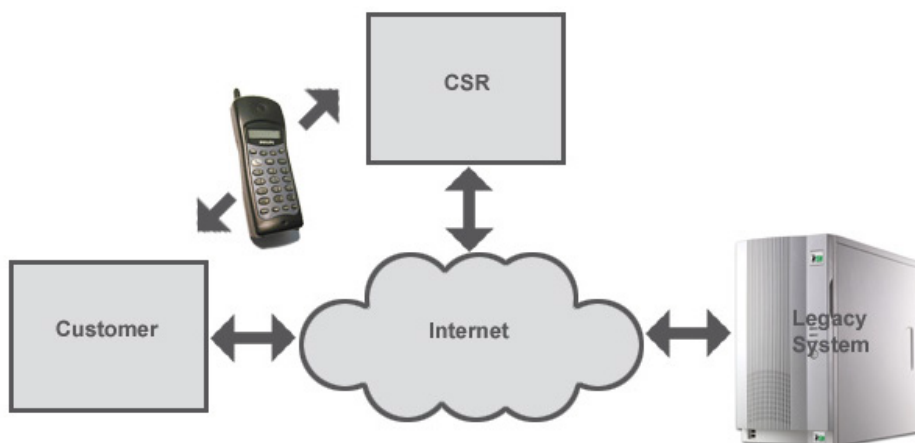
Empowering your customer with the same information as your CSR requires the ability to easily and flexibly control data. *Figure 2* below illustrates the traditional way in which CSRs interacted with both the customer and the (legacy) data system. Thanks to the pervasive presence of broadband connectivity and data-integrated web technologies, the opportunity to merge legacy systems and web technology into a cohesive and intuitive interface are here.

Figure 2:



Figure 3 below shows the basic systematic evolution that is required to give your customer (and the CSR) the information they need.

Figure 3:



As shown above, the web provides the ability to both compliment, and in some cases eliminate the need for the CSR. Now, customers using the web site see the same information that the CSR can see. The result is significantly reduced CSR resource requirements without compromising (and in most cases enhancing) the custom service level. Order issues are resolved in a real-time, mutually recognized manner by both the customer and the service provider.

THE BOTTOM LINE

One company spending almost \$50 million per year on CSR functions recently estimated that if they could shift only 30% of their CSR work to their web site over a three year period (assuming a 15% annual growth rate) they could save more than \$20 million per year in three years. That is the promise of the web. These are numbers that go right to the bottom line.

Profits like this can come about only if customers feel more comfortable using the web than calling a CSR. The following are key factors to accomplishing this:

- ◆ The web site has to be as good as, or better than, the services provided by a CSR. Study what your CSRs are doing and saying. Design your web site to do the same thing, but then go one step further. Provide the customers with lookup functions that are on par with or more sophisticated than anything that a CSR could do.
- ◆ The web site has to be humanized. It has to have the same friendly personal relationship that a good CSR has. Amazon says, “Welcome back Arthur” not just because it is a neat thing to say. They say it because it keeps Arthur coming back.
- ◆ The web site has to intuitively reflect content and data in a manner that makes sense to the customer, while providing pathways to additional relevant data as necessary.

Once your web site is as good as a CSR, you can measure your success by the percentage of your customer service and orders taken on the web versus those by a live agent.

This Just In:

A recent survey by AMR Research concluded that, while online shoppers spent on average 25 percent more than their offline counterparts, 20 percent had a bad experience online and would not be returning to those sites.

The report also contends that damaging customer loyalty online can seriously damage loyalty through all channels.

Ultimately, remember that the web is not a panacea. The web will support but, most likely, never fully replace the need for human support services. It can be a very important channel, but only if the company already has other profitable channels for sales that the web will supplement. Using the functionality of the web to compliment and augment your current resources while at the same time improving upon them is not only realistic, it is another viable path to significant profits and cost savings.

CONTACT

Whether you're looking for significant online revenue, increased traffic and brand recognition, business process streamlining, or all of the above, we can help. Our open source technology and award-winning designers and engineers will give your eBusiness the power of content, commerce, and control, with a best-of-breed solution that will give your customers a reason to come in- and come back.

Give us a call today. We'd like to make you our next success story.

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