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Catalog Success

There's Always a Way to Improve Catalog Customer Service: My Top Five Tips for 2007

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Continuing my discussion from the previous *Corner View* on companies' treatment of customer service and CSR empowerment, this week I bring you my Top five catalog customer service tips, based on my observations throughout this past year. Some of these are more topical with the times; others are age-old issues that must be addressed.

It's easy for someone in my position to demand catalogers do more of this and that in customer service. I realize that some — if not many — of catalogers' limitations in customer service are budget-driven. So, I promise not to make any bold (and expensive) recommendations here. But considering that catalog shopping's primary allure is convenience and a positive shopping experience, are you really in a position to skimp on service?

Upon reading this, I'd really like to hear back from you. Tell me what's the most noteworthy change you've made in your customer service policies recently that's worked for the better.

The 2007 Top Five Customer Service Tips

5. The precious catalog request. I actually start this list off with something that's old and not directly related to customer service. But it's an issue so simple and not all that expensive that I thought it was germane to this list.

Scenario: Prospect calls your 800 number to request a catalog. Your rep takes down the prospect's information then says, "You'll receive our catalog in the next seven to 10 business days." STOP! Yes, it costs more than a dollar to stick a catalog in the mail First Class. Yes, it costs even more to overnight a copy. Yes, it's a whole lot more efficient to make weekly bulk-batch mailings for catalog requests.

The mistake: Sure, you could save a couple of bucks by batch mailing your requests. But many of those prospects who go to the trouble of calling for your catalog probably want something right now. Send them a catalog next week and there's a good chance they'll have long since forgotten they wanted it. And an even better chance you lose the opportunity to gain a new customer.

4. Complicated online order forms. Go over your online order form with a fine-tooth comb. Do you need every detail you ask for? If not, delete whatever you can do without. Minimize the chance for customers to fill out your form, hit the

submit button and have an error message appear. You're always walking on eggshells when it comes to Web-placed orders because clicking that little box in the upper-right or left corner is so easy to do.

3. Keep customer service in-house if you can afford it. I didn't spell this out in as many words in the Oct. 19 *Corner View*. Poor Chapter 11-plagued United Airlines apparently can't afford to handle all those customer complaints in-house. But hopefully a well-managed, appropriately capitalized cataloger can.

Domestic CSRs are just naturally more in-tune with what a cataloger is all about. They know your product line better than a third-party staff because *you* trained them. And in all likelihood, they don't live too far from your warehouse and headquarters, so they feel a greater sense of belonging to your company. All of that will rub off on customers in a positive way.

I sat through a day's worth of presentations given by offshore, third-party customer service provider Cyber City Teleservices on Oct. 30 in New York for its clients, and the company's setup in the Philippines impresses me quite a bit. But I'd still say that if you can have your own local people who feel they have a direct stake in the welfare of *their* company, that always should be a first choice for any cataloger.

Cyber City and other offshore customer service firms provide first-rate training, no doubt. In Cyber City's case, reps are put through a rigorous training program that includes heavy training on American culture and American accents. Still, as well-trained as these reps are and as crystal clear as the phone reception can be, some customers still are going to realize that they're not really part of the catalog company and could be put off.

Using third-party CSRs is a fact of life, particularly for off-hours and weekends. And for these purposes, I realize there's often no better alternative. But for that holiday rush, have locals handle those crucial calls if you can.

2. Reps must be multichannel-fluent. Train your CSRs so they know everything going on in your catalog and Web site. They should be prepared for questions about more than just issues with your products. If a customer is having trouble placing an order on your site, train your reps to handle the matter.

If that's not a reality, make sure that if they have to transfer customers to technical support staff that the techies are on hand to pick up those transferred calls quickly. Don't give customers a chance to jump ship.

And remember you're in a multichannel world now, so if you operate a retail chain, your reps should know if your store is running sales or other matters involving the merchandising of your stores.

1. Drop those dreaded call prompts and voice activation. Aside from the convenience factor, one of the biggest reasons a growing portion of catalogers' orders are coming in online is because people don't want to talk on the phone anymore. If they have a problem with one of your products that causes them to

dial your customer service line, they're probably not in a good mood and aren't dying to talk very much.

If they have to start responding to several voice prompts, that could annoy them enough. And if you force them to verbalized these options and your system responds with an "I can't understand what you just said," now they're doubly annoyed.

Make customer service calls as easy for customers as possible. They have a problem they need solved, and you have the opportunity to solve the problem and create an event in customers' minds that could turn them into lifetime customers if you handle it right.

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