Customer service: To automate or not to automate...

By Marie Yossava , issued by Grapevine Communications

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Automation is a reality of the digital age in which we are living. Many customer services have been streamlined and made more efficient through call centre and email automation, which has allowed for huge call volumes and queries being attended to and proved cost-effective to companies who now need fewer employees manning their call centres. When it works, it saves time and frustration; when it doesn't, a company runs the risk of losing customers.

The question is, when is it appropriate for a customer query to be handled by an automated response and when does a customer need to interface with another human being?

When dealing with some call centres, the frustration customers experience is often that of holding on for ages with annoying music to listen to or a voice promoting special deals, which makes them wonder if they are on hold for this exact reason - to be part of a captive audience for this messaging. In the meantime they are also ringing up a huge phone bill.

They can also go through any number of steps and press #1 for this, press#2 for that, only to find that there isn't another human being on the other side or that they get cut off and have to start the process all over again.

Somewhere along the chain of automated emails and call centre recordings there needs to be a human being to assess the query and identify the approach that it requires. Issues like overbilling, shoddy service or non-delivery of service cannot be relegated to an automated system and the same goes for positive enquires like new business enquires, requests for rates etc. These need to be handled personally.

US customer service guru John Tschohl, in his article *How to Maintain a Personal Touch in Spite of Technology*, says, "I estimate that 95 percent of customers prefer to dial in and talk to a human, but 98 percent of companies prefer to use interactive voice response systems." He goes on to point out that while "technology has provided companies with the ability to sell their products and services to millions of people throughout the world, it is the human touch that improves the customer experience. And it is that experience that will build loyalty and drive your business".

At Grapevine Communications, we believe in the personal approach and building relationships with our clients and the media. Nothing can replace a face-to-face meeting or briefing session. In terms of automation, we have seen it time again that clients phoning the office after hours are daunted by the answering machine and don't leave a message with no recourse. Clients who phone during office hours enjoy speaking to someone who can advise when is the best time to call back or with whom they can leave a message.

In the competitive business world, companies cannot afford to sacrifice the human element in order to keep up with technology. Customers will always gravitate where they feel they are not a number but that their queries and issues matter. It's human nature...

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Marie is founder and managing member of Grapevine Communications (Grapevine), a communications consultancy based in Johannesburg, focusing on media relations. This targeted approach has won Grapevine the respect and support of the industry, which enables the company to acquire clients (former and current) such as AVI Limited, Samsung Electronics, Nokia (RF Group) and Alexander Forbes Risk Services. Follow Grapevine on Twitter @Grapevine_Comms or visit their press office on Bizcommunity.com

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