

## **Leveraging E-mail and the Web to Manage Customer Interaction**

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With the growth of the Internet, customers have multiple channels of communications to leverage when interacting with you, and more outlets than ever to seek out goods and services. With this in mind, direct marketers have a greater challenge in managing customer contact. Driving customers to your Web site is the “name of the game” as companies develop new e-business strategies. But the question is how do you manage the customer relationship and continue to entice e-customers to return instead of clicking away to the online competition? And how do you retain e-customers?

Companies looking to leverage e-business have to consider e-mail and the Web as an integral part of their overall business strategy. For example, e-commerce sites need to look beyond closing a single transaction via the Web, and instead focus on managing the entire customer relationship to ensure long-term loyalty. This includes capturing data when a potential customer first visits the Web site, tracking areas of interest, up-selling and cross-selling products or services, providing self-service environments, and continuing to interact with that customer before and after a purchase. Each contact with the customer must be managed and the data captured, to provide a comprehensive history of each customer relationship.

Web and e-mail outreach has to be customizable and personalized to meet each customer’s need. Interacting with customers on a personal level is what brings them back again, and again, to purchase more products. And the secret to effective online customer communication is e-mail.

### **A Closed-Loop Marketing Strategy**

To succeed in the online world, electronic relationships require the same attention, if not more, as face-to-face relationships. On the Web, competing on price alone is very difficult, especially when competitors are only a click away. Customers still want good service, and service is only one way that businesses can distinguish themselves.

Consider that although the typical e-commerce site may engage visitors, it does not interact with them once they have left the Web site. In a recent study, Forrester Research examined what drives traffic to a company’s Web site. E-mail was cited as the second biggest driver after search engines. E-mail is the best approach for bringing previous customers and more qualified prospects back to a Web site. E-mail closes the loop and enables companies to continuously interact with visitors even after they have left, and it allows companies to capture information about each interaction to develop a history of each customer relationship.

### **Five Approaches to Customer Service Using E-mail and the Web**

Interaction-based e-business applications can be used in a number of ways to maintain customer relations and extend customer service:

- **Customer Care** -- support customers by ensuring that both e-mail and Web requests are dealt with quickly and effectively and that Web self-service is an option. Notify customers of all product/service changes, product orders and shipping details, etc. Automatically escalate and attend to any issues. E-business applications can also be used to remind customers, for example, "it's time for your next oil change," or "your vehicle lease is up in a few months"
- **Product/Service Registration Application** -- enable product registration via an incoming e-mail or through a product registration Web form. The information is collected and automatically entered into a customer database, followed by a personalized confirmation sent to the customer. The customer's information will be remembered for all future interactions, helping a company serve the customer according to his or her needs
- **Campaign Management** -- drive revenue growth and acquire new customers, or cross-sell or up-sell existing customers, by personalizing and targeting online campaigns. Immediately adapt messages based on a customer's response. Companies can effectively use customization and interaction management to create high value, ongoing communications
- **Customer Survey** -- provide a form to survey targeted users about a product or service. A personalized survey can be constructed and attached in an e-mail message or a URL provided to link customers to a survey Web form. The customer's response is recorded in a customer database and an e-mail confirmation is sent to thank them. This is the perfect opportunity for a company to learn more about their customers, and provide them incentives to visit again, such as offering \$10 off their next purchase for completing the survey
- **Newsletter Distribution** -- register customers for the distribution of newsletters. This is a great opportunity to deliver a self-service environment where a newsletter can be personalized according to the specifications a customer sets out at the time of registration. Give customers the opportunity to select the content they are most interested in

Good customer intelligence leads to better service, service leads to trust, trust leads to loyalty, and loyalty leads to repeat sales. Using e-mail and the Web to automate and manage ongoing interactions with customers will strengthen relationships, increase customer loyalty, and lead to increased revenues and reduced costs.

### **Finding the Right Tools to Manage E-customers**

E-business applications that leverage e-mail and the Web to automate, personalize and manage customer interactions are the best means to manage the customer relationship. Companies such as Amazon.com and Dell have already made significant investments in automating electronic interactions and in creating their own e-business applications to manage customer interaction, store intelligence about customers gathered online, generate automated e-mail responses, alert customers of order status, special offers, and other targeted opportunities.

Most emerging e-businesses lack the resources to develop their own e-business applications, so they shop for third-party applications that typically only address one particular problem, such as e-mail response management. The challenge, therefore, is finding solutions that can be easily integrated into your existing infrastructure. E-business applications should:

- Be implemented in days and weeks, as opposed to weeks and months. Speed is not only critical in the time to get applications up and running, it is also important to be able to respond and react rapidly to changes within your business environment or the economy
- Yield a substantial ROI. Be sure you get a rapid return on your e-business investment. Calculating ROI can be done in a number of ways, from generating additional sales to savings realized in, among other things, administrative overhead and postage
- Be able to provide you with an interaction model that can be applied to every department across the organization, including marketing, sales, human resources, finance, technical support, operations, and a variety of other business areas
- Integrate with your existing infrastructure. Web and e-mail should be linked to installed e-mail systems, transaction processing software, databases, and other business-critical systems within your enterprise.
- Automate common customer interactions. When a customer makes a purchase, the system should be able to generate a simple e-mail response indicating the order is on its way. If a customer sends in a complaint via e-mail, the system should be able to flag the message and forward it immediately to sales or customer service. Remember that e-mail interaction is valuable only if it supports ongoing interaction
- Be customizable to meet your needs. Many off-the-shelf packages are hard to adapt to your installed technology or, more importantly, your workflow. Remember, e-business should be an extension of your existing business infrastructure. If you have to change your business model to accommodate the Web, then the tail is wagging the dog
- Be scalable. As your business grows, your e-business applications should be able to grow with your needs
- Be extensible. As your business needs change, the e-business solution you implement should have the ability to adapt and extend to support those changes