

Many Happy Returns for Retailers this Holiday Season

How Companies Can Benefit from Returns, Complaints, and Unhappy Customers

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The Christmas season is a time for giving. It's also a time for receiving and inevitably, a time for store returns. Whether it's a book a customer already has or a stereo that doesn't work, customer service groups at both bricks and mortar and online stores will be at their busiest after Christmas.

While most companies are ready to sell during holiday time, many are not prepared for the return season. While they are generally well staffed in the weeks before Christmas, they can end up snowed under and losing business well after the New Year as many call centers and stores remain understaffed in these weeks.

It's not always a bad thing for companies to get their customers through the door a second time. It may even be some customers' first visit, especially in the case that the original gift was bought by a friend or relative. Nevertheless, businesses should seize the opportunity to get customers to come back to their store.

Companies have the chance to make an even stronger impression and create a highly positive customer experience during the return process. If handled properly, a return or complaint can turn into a gift.

The idea of the customer always being right still rings true today, as it did decades ago. And if it's true when they approach the check out, then it should be true when they pick up the phone 10 days later or send an email the day after Christmas. There may be reasonable cause for customers to complain, as no company is always perfect, and no supplier or third party delivery service gets it right every time. Even in such cases, the customer wants to know that he or she is valued and respected.

Service agents at the frontline need to be able to record, as well as handle customer inquiries as they arise. Whether working from a branch location or the call center,

knowing what customers are saying will ensure that issues are dealt with immediately and major problems do not go unnoticed or stay hidden from senior management and key decision makers.

Unless all channels of communication are integrated, whether letters written to the manager of a store complaining of bad service or a fax back to a warehouse to arrange return of a damaged product, companies will never see the whole picture and will lose the chance to improve specific areas of the enterprise. All communication channels can (and should) be melded into one centralized system in order to optimize customer relations and staff efficiency.

Comprehensive databases that store and log every contact, regardless of the communication channel, need to be accessible by every customer-facing agent who may take a call or inquiry. If customers are already dissatisfied, for whatever reason, and then have to go through a long process of identifying themselves (what they bought, when, where, and how much), they will not look any more favorably on the company in question.

However, if a company knows that Mr. Brown bought a new cell phone for his wife, paid cash in the retail outlet, but pre-ordered the latest hands-free headset online with his credit card, you already have an idea of some of the problems that may exist. If he returns the headset to the store, but his online account is not credited, he will need to contact customer services. Late delivery of the headset, or trouble setting up the phone perhaps - an agent can proactively ask or seek to discover the reason, even if Mr Brown has never spoken to them before, or even contacted the call center.

There are some easy steps you can take to make sure that contact agents gather the information they need post-Christmas, as well as handle the customer in a way that will encourage him or her back:

- Personalize contacts so that when a long-term customer comes online or picks up the phone, you show immediately that you value him or her.
- Design the feedback forms that agents utilize with the customer in mind, NOT the board of directors. What you seek to get out of the data collected is primarily for

the benefit of the customer, although sales, marketing, and all other functions of the business can use it too.

- Integrate pre-Christmas contacts into one data mine, so that you know the customer's situation and understand the issue before he or she has to tell you. This set-up will prove ideal for after-sales support.
- Ensure there is always the option to contact the business through multiple channels, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, whatever the method of original sale or contact. Remember that although a customer may buy at a store that is open during regular business hours, he or she may want to email the company at midnight to voice a complaint or concern.

What questions should your company consider in the aftermath of Christmas in order to prepare for the next season? How can your organization improve the service customers receive now and also fix problems encountered in the sales process? Ask yourself the following questions:

1. *How did most of my customers contact me?*--This will show whether a business needs to make allowances or extend capabilities to encourage more feedback through a particular channel (i.e. email, phone, Web form, etc.).
2. *Have we evaluated the trends and patterns in customer feedback?*--This can identify areas of weakness or strengths within the company, whether it is the accounts, the delivery, or the customer service department, for example. Information like this is valuable not just to the customer service department, but it is important to building strong brand identity and creating good marketing opportunities to sell on the brand and re-emphasize the company's value.
3. *Did I reward the staff members who handled customers effectively?*--Depending on the business model, this may not mean the agent who took the most calls. Closure and customer satisfaction need to be aligned with the logistics and the ability to answer as many inquiries as possible.
4. *Did I actively encourage my customers to come back?*--This isn't just about the next sale, although that counts, but more about the customer's overall experience.

Businesses need to understand that if they can handle that second contact, whether a return, a product swap or a complaint about a faulty good, then they can create a loyal customer who will return again to purchase. At Christmas, more so than any other time, retailers and other service organizations can make the greatest impact on customers. Offering a high standard of service before and after Christmas is a giant step to creating a long-term *two-way* relationship with customers--and that's a gift.

Swallow Information Systems' approach to creating a successful customer feedback strategy is to focus on building systems to empower your customer service representatives to provide a faster, more comprehensive response to your customers, regardless of how they choose to contact your organization. Swallow Information Systems' solution, CHARTER continuum™, has the ability to create a data wake of valuable information that can be extended enterprise-wide across multiple departments, including customer service, sales, marketing, and operations. CHARTER continuum™ also provides fingertip access to powerful customer tracking and record management, from inquiry to fulfilment to handling customer issues and feedback.

Established in 1990, Swallow Information Systems has corporate offices in London, UK and Beverly, MA, USA. The company's client list includes Staples, Rowenta, Canandaigua Wine Company, McDonalds Restaurants Ltd., Toyota, Harrods, Laura Ashley, and Mitsubishi Motors UK.

You can learn more about customer feedback management by contacting Swallow Information Systems at (800) 647-9460 or via email at marketing@swallow-us.com. Visit us on the Web at www.swallow.com.