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## TECHNOLOGY AND THE HUMAN TOUCH

By John Tschohl

There is no denying the impact technology has had on business. It has allowed companies to market and sell their products and services to customers in every corner of the world, and to do so 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

That technology has a downside, however. In far too many cases, it has replaced real people and become a barrier to customer service. When, for example, was the last time you called a company and a live person answered the telephone? And how many times, after making a purchase via the Internet, have you been unable to locate a telephone number for the company when you have a problem?

The popularity of the Internet clearly shows that consumers appreciate the ability to comparison shop—and make their purchases—at any time of day or night and to do so without having to leave home. When they have a problem, however, they want to talk to a live person. All too often, the opportunity to do so is either non-existent or frustrating.

Here are three technologies companies are using today, along with their pitfalls and how to deal with them:

**Interactive Voice Response Systems:** 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 (IVRs). Callers to those companies have to deal with a variety of options, which is frustrating and time-consuming: Press 1 for English, press 2 if you have a question about your account, and on and on and on. IVRs send a message to customers: We do not want to talk to you.

If your company has more than 100 employees, you should have a real person answering the phones 24 hours a day, seven days a week. This might cost you a little more than an IVR, but it will allow you to grow your company. Go Daddy, an Internet domain registrar and Web hosting company, is a high-tech company, but it has real people answering its phones and available to help its customers with whatever questions and problems they might have.

Amazon also has perfected the combination of technology and the human touch. You can go to its web site, select “contact us,” ask to have someone call you, and your phone will ring within a couple of seconds. The success of that quick response time and Amazon’s dedication to serving its customers is apparent in the company’s sales, which reached \$34.2 billion in 2010, a 40 percent increase over the previous year.

**E-mail:** Many customers find it faster and more efficient to contact companies by e-mail rather than by phone, especially if those companies use IVRs. This technology, too, needs the human touch. If a customer contacts you via e-mail, it is critical that you respond quickly, preferably within five or 10 minutes. Even when not responding to a request, several companies use e-mail to communicate with their customers. Redbox is one of them. Within minutes of renting a DVD or video from the company, it sends you an e-mail confirming the transaction and does the same when you return the item. Redbox customers also can call the company 24 hours a day, seven days a week and talk to a real person.

**The Internet:** The Internet has changed the way companies connect with customers and potential customers. In order to use this technology successfully and to grow your business, however, you must understand how consumers use it. They use it to learn about products and services and to compare prices.

If a potential customer visits your web site, is interested in one of your products, but has a question about it before making a purchase, you better be sure you provide her a way to contact you and get the information she needs. If you don't, she will quickly turn to one of your competitors.

It's critical that you remember this: You are just one click away from oblivion. The company that responds to a consumer's question first is the one most likely to make the sale. You absolutely must back up your technology with people. You must offer consumers a way to contact you—either by phone or by e-mail.

The bottom line is this: Technology has provided companies with the ability to sell their products and services to millions of people throughout the world, but it is the human touch that improves the customer experience. And it is that experience that will build loyalty and drive your business.

John Tschohl, the internationally recognized service strategist, is founder and president of the Service Quality Institute in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Described by USA Today, Time, and Entrepreneur as a "customer service guru," he has written several books on customer service and has developed more than 26 customer-service training programs that have been distributed throughout the world. John's monthly strategic newsletter is available online at no charge.