

Who's Minding the Store?

What can a business do to reduce the no-response rate of their web inquiries?

A recently-published study about the response rates from businesses to web inquiries has stirred one of our personal complaints about providing virtual customer service via your company web site. Often, it just doesn't work! The bottom line of the study was that 41% of Fortune 100 businesses never respond to a web inquiry. This leaves a lot of room for improvement.

What can a business do to reduce the no-response rate of their web inquiries? If closing every sales opportunity is your goal and your volumes are high enough, a clearly marked phone number with 24x7 on-duty operator is one sure way to respond to every type of web inquiry. The person or group responsible for answering the phone should also have the direct responsibility for making certain that the web inquiry is resolved in a reasonable period of time. Of course, in real-world operations with limited budgets, this is often not a viable option and also defeats your prime objective in providing enough information on your web site for visitors to self-qualify. So what is an alternative to providing expensive phone coverage?

Improve the information flow of your web site. Your home page should not only be an introduction to the company, but the starting point in directing visitors to the right section of your web site. Think of your home page as the "triage" procedure at a hospital emergency room - quickly assess the situation, determine the urgency of the need, and get them to the right "specialist." You don't know their background or intention, but asking a few simple questions (or providing self-explanatory links) will help provide more direction. Are they interested in you because they are an investor, business partner, job seekers, or a customer with a need today or just looking for more information?

Once you point the visitors in the right direction, focus that section of the web site to their needs. Don't rely on a single "Contact Us" form to collect all web inquiries, but develop multiple forms and customize them according to the context of the particular web location. In larger organizations, multiple customized "Contact Us" forms become more critical. By using e-mail routing or the workflow capability of your CRM, you can route each request to the specific individual or department in the company. Use the group providing the first-line phone coverage as a "watchdog" to ensure leads that are being followed up.

After the web inquiry is routed to the right individual the next task is figuring out how to respond. Many web leads can be classified as "junk," but this does not mean they don't warrant a response. A balancing act now comes into play regarding how much time to dedicate to custom responses versus general form letters. Each inquiry deserves a response, but in many cases a typical form letter and additional information pointers will be sufficient. Have a pre-set list of responses scripted as a frequently asked questions format and encourage the prospect to continue to self-qualify by directing them to specific web site locations. Any custom response that must be generated more than once is a candidate for "boiler-plating."

By feeding back actual frequently asked questions into the content of the web site, more self-education will occur and fewer questions will be raised that cannot be answered by information

readily available on the web site. The best way to respond to a question is to anticipate it and enable the visitor to find the answer on their own.

Always remember that your web site is like a physical store. If a customer asks you where the milk is, as the owner, would you ignore them and walk away without a response? However small or large your company is, every visitor deserves a response.

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