Data and the holy grail of customer self-service

By Jarred Cinman

Customer data. It’s one of the most sought after commodities in the market. Companies spend millions a year buying it from marketing list specialists. They spend similar amounts on data cleansing applications and with data scrubbing specialists to ensure their customer data is reasonably clean and accurate.

And, having gone through the process of acquiring customer lists and cleaning them, they start the process all over again.

Lesson: Today there are more touch points and channels than ever through which to engage customers.

Part of the problem is that customer data is out of date almost as soon as it is cleaned, removing duplications, redundancies and plain old inaccuracies.

Another is age-old finger trouble: people are notoriously inaccurate when it comes to capturing customer data. If there are two ways of spelling a name, most people will go the wrong way.

Poor customer data has an inevitable and predictable knock-on effect on customer engagements.

Which brings us to the Holy Grail of customer self-service. This is where customers will, of their own volition, provide information that simply cannot be bought from anyone:

• Correct spelling of full name;
• Address;
• Telephonic contact details;
• Email address, including secondary email contact;
• Birthday, along with photograph and personal interests; and
• Track record of sites visited

The very essence of CRM (customer relationship management) is a quality engagement between a potential or existing customer and a vendor or service provider.

In this regard, most, if not all, people hate being interrupted, or being spammed with unsolicited phone calls, SMSes or emails. They react almost without exception with anger to these overtures, yet still these interruptions come. This is not surprising: if a marketer sends out 2 million emails and enjoys just a 0,001% response rate, that equates to 2 000 responses, an almost unheard of response level for effectively zero investment. Little wonder so many companies have decided on spam as a legitimate delivery vehicle for future customers.

However, quality companies do not deploy spam as a means of contacting potential or deepening engagements with existing customers. What they do is combine the best of classic marketing techniques with the best that today’s convergence opportunities represent.

Today there are more touch points and channels than ever through which to engage customers, and through which customers can interact with companies. Here we are talking about:

- Account histories, including all interactions, transactions and credit history, including approved and declined applications.
- Account inquiries, including those which led to less than ideal outcomes for either the company or potential customer.
- Helpdesk and other contact centre inquiries, including complaints, resolved and unresolved customer queries, and the full audit history related to each of these.
- Web-based forms, where people have submitted personal information so as to be able to engage with an organization.

All of these interactions are permission-based, or ought to be. People only submit accurate information, and a lot of it, if they want to, or if they perceive value in doing so. And here is the key to obtaining customer data easily and accurately: users need to feel safe and secure, and have the assurance that their data will not be abused in any way. And they must feel they are getting something of real value in exchange.

This has been the great party trick of social networks: people submit their data as freely as they do because they discern compelling value in doing so. If being part of a network that involves friends, or music sharing, or the ability to post photographs, or buy music or books online, then that is what millions of people will do.

The key, then, for any marketer seeking to obtain accurate customer data through self-service channels is to offer perceived value that exceeds the nuisance factor of entering the data.

Based on its accuracy, this data can then form the backbone of CRM initiatives. It can be used as the cornerstone of other customer data initiatives, and be used to deduplicate, scrub and otherwise improve customer data management.

Data from accounts, the contact centre and other channels can be submitted against this new database, and a master data management initiative launched. Business intelligence programmes can be used to slice and dice and target ever smaller market segments - right down to the CRM dream of the market segment of one.

One caveat: having set in place privacy principles, an online business should not at any stage violate it. Word of mouth – and word of mouse - can undo value as quickly as it has been built.

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