@ JIM CARROLL
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Discovering new ways to interact with customers



BY JIM CARROLL

Really progressive organizations are learning that digital marketing involves a massive degree of two-way communication

When thinking about digital marketing, you've got to think beyond the box. That means realizing this isn't just about dreaming up cool interactive campaigns or neat ways to use Flash technology to get the attention of an online user.

It's about learning how to take advantage of new and innovative ways of interacting with customers in order to enhance your product or brand image. Indeed, the world of digital marketing provides for a level of customer interaction that has never previously been possible. I've come to realize that few organizations have yet learned how to truly exploit this new reality.

Why? Because I haven't encountered many organizations that are willing to go so far as to actually listen to or converse with their customers online. The result is that much of what is considered today to be "leading-edge digital marketing" is still the same old one-way affair. Marketers develop a message and dump it on customers, but then don't listen to what they have to say.

Really progressive organizations are learning that digital marketing involves a massive degree of two-way communication. I just witnessed an extremely powerful display of the real opportunity of the Web as a marketing tool on FlyerTalk (www.flyertalk.com). It's an online bulletin board–a haven for travel junkies, particularly those who belong to airline or other customer loyalty programs. People go online and converse about all kinds of things in this site.

I had checked into the Starwood category–a section of FlyerTalk where people exchange stories and tips about the Sheraton/Westin Preferred Guest program–looking for an answer to a specific question. I spent a few moments browsing through a few "threads" or short discussion items, and noted one item where someone was complaining about a problem they had with the Sheraton Seattle. That's not atypical. Lots of complaints can be found in every forum.

In most industries and for most companies, this would be just another customer complaint, ignored by everyone who might actually care about what a customer might say. Not Sheraton. To my amazement, within a matter of minutes, someone from the Starwood program had posted a note, indicating that they would immediately follow up with the hotel in question. They also provided a detailed answer with respect to the potential reasons why such a problem might have occurred, in order to alleviate the concerns of this customer. Other people online responded with amazement that this company would actually listen, and started to praise Sheraton. That's one powerful means of building loyalty–and gaining new customers.

Now, it takes a certain degree of courage for a company to get involved in an interactive discussion with customers in this way. Indeed, there's always the possibility that online interactions could spiral out of control in a series of complaints and recriminations. But to me, what Sheraton was doing–using Web technology to listen to and interact with customers–is far more powerful than any other type of online branding exercise.

That's not the only example I've seen. Anyone who has read my past columns knows that I'm an MP3 nut. I've converted all of the CDs I own over to MP3, and have a massive music library of some 12,000 tunes on a couple of computer servers.

A few months back, I purchased an AudioTron, a revolutionary piece of home audio gear that plugs into my home network to access those tunes. It's sold by Turtle Beach, a company that normally sells computer hardware, which means that it should come as no surprise that the company sponsors an online discussion forum via a mailing list for the product, as do most other hardware companies.

Through the mailing list, Turtle Beach can listen to customer concerns, offer solutions and generally enhance their support. But Turtle Beach did even more.

Over the last few months, quite a few suggestions came in from AudioTron owners as to what Turtle Beach might do to enhance its functionality. The company listened. One day, it posted a note informing owners that it had prepared a software patch. All users had to do was download it to a computer on their network, and the AudioTron would update itself.

What was fascinating was that Turtle Beach took this $299 device, applied some software to it and enhanced it to a huge degree. It now plays Internet radio stations in addition to any MP3s, meaning that I've ended up with two products for the price of one. Anyone who owns an AudioTron, including me, was blown away.

And that's another example of the power of online interaction. The age of digital marketing online permits companies to listen to their customers in ways that have never previously been possible. Too bad other organizations aren't willing to make the leap.

JIM CARROLL is the Mississauga, Ont.-based author of more than 29 books related to the Internet and e-commerce.