

Supporting the web savvy

Is your sales force ready to support highly informed internet customers?

By Stephen R. Wells

When I bought my new car, I went through the entire sales process online. From my selection of a dealership, to first sales contact, to final negotiated price: the entire sales process happened online.

What I learned? Automobile dealers are not supporting internet customers.

With the penetration of high-speed Internet access in Canada, a growing number of tech-savvy consumers are researching and buying online. Between 2002 and 2003, there was a 25% increase in Canadian online consumer purchasing (Comscore).

After reviewing manufacturer websites to find a vehicle that suits my needs and budget, I contacted every relevant dealership in BC to see how responsive they were to e-mail.

Of the 30 British Columbia dealerships listed on the manufacturer's national website, less than a third ever responded to my inquiry. Over half of the dealers who did respond failed to return my message within two business days by phone or e-mail.

Customers looking to buy online have a high level of product knowledge, and they are motivated to buy. All these customers need is service - and dealers are not ready to help them.

So what can dealers do to earn these customers?

Empower your staff with appropriate tools: Can your sales force receive and respond to e-mail quickly? Does your website make it easy for customers to contact your sales force? Can customers reach key contacts for specific types of requests?

If up-selling features such as coatings and warranties is a component of your sales, providing details on these options through your website is an excellent way to avoid push-back from customers resistant to add-ons or up-sales.

Informative features such as customer testimonials that attest to the value of these options and cost-benefit analyses that show the advantages are further methods rarely employed on the internet to support the sales of these features.

A website can turn customers into evangelist for your product: advocates who have bought in mentally before they ever sign on the dotted line.

Are online customers my customers?

Long-term, supporting online sales will be essential to every business' success. However, when creating a technology plan for your

business, it is important to know how much of a priority online sales should be.

If your customer base is part of the core online consumer base, 25-40 year old males with university level education, then supporting online sales should be a high priority for your business.

However, if your business' target is outside of this group, then support may be less essential. However, remember that as time goes on, web communications will only increase. It is important for all businesses to incorporate online sales support and e-commerce into the long-term technology and marketing plans.

Making the most of online sales

If your sales force is empowered with access to individual e-mail accounts and associated productivity tools, your company has made a start toward preparing to meet online customers' needs.

An understanding of digital consumers will help you take customers from the information superhighway, and get them driving down the real highway.

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