

Recently, I had an eye opening experience as a customer of an online store. The company, which sells bulk video tape, just launched a new website. From their homepage, I could see that they sold the products I needed. To my dismay, there was a product listing and an order form, but no real-time ordering capabilities. I thought it was strange for company that sells a small price-driven product not to offer ecommerce. So I called the President. He informed me that the site was a newly launched. I was relieved. I asked when they would be adding the ecommerce module. "Never", was the reply. "Never"? I answered perplexed.

Never Say Never!

The President said, "Never! We pride ourselves on good customer service so we always want to talk to our customers before they buy." I informed the President that he was missing the point of having a Web site. A major benefit of a Web site is to facilitate purchasing products, not impairing the purchasing process. A Website is successful when it allows your company to do something easier, faster, cheaper, better. In this case, the Web site was adding another step to the ordering process and made the process more cumbersome, because I had to wait for someone to call me back.

In terms of defining what good customer service means, it is an interesting question. This company, whose brand is defined by stellar customer service, did not want to rethink how to translate its stellar customer service to their Website. Instead, they made their Website a lame-duck and continued trying to do business as usual.



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What should a company do to translate its customer service to the Web?

Here are some ideas:

- Define what exceptional customer service means. Essentially, it is providing support to your customers as they purchase and use your products—when they need it.
- Understand how your Website can improve your current customer service capabilities. Discuss this with your Web and Marketing teams.
- Modify procedures in your office to support how having a Website has altered your operations.
- In the case of the company I spoke with, we would suggest:
 - Implementing real-time ordering through credit card, accounts or company check.
 - Provide customers with the ability to track their order status.
 - Provide customer account information with order history and the ability to re-order from a previous invoice.
 - Allow customers to create a shopping list.
 - Provide real-time chat/phone access and be sure someone is available at least during your normal hours of operation.

If it is important to your company to retain employees that formerly were taking orders, promote them to a sales position to generate new business or bigger accounts. Or, let them provide phone support for questions customers have with the Website. Let your Website do the dirty work.

Try to be sensible and open to new business systems when implementing any new technology. Remember that the technology's function is to improve, not to impair.