



The Customer Returns (Again)

By John Reiss

Every so often the customer returns as a major focus in business marketing. It seems to follow the business cycle. During the fat years, companies talk about technology and efficiency. During the lean years, they talk about friendly and personal service. Take banks. Not long ago, Citizens Bank ran a TV ad showing children playing a game—counting ATM machines—while riding in a car. More recently, the bank’s ads have taken a different spin. They show a man standing in his kitchen telling his wife he plans to drive to a nearby branch to transfer some money—on a Sunday morning. The wife says, “But honey, you can do that over the phone—we even have an ATM machine on the corner.” To this the man replies, “Oh, well, call me old-fashioned.”

Clearly, what is now in-fashion is doing business when, where, and how the customer wants—even if it’s in a way that seems irrational to everyone else.

Take the most basic part of a business, its brand identity. Some people may not think of design as an element of customer service. Brochures, websites, packaging—these things might seem more related to customer presentation than to customer service. But how you actually present yourself to your customer is a big part of providing great service. We live in a time of huge message clutter from TV, print, the web, and other media. A strong identity keeps customers from feeling confused or even abandoned. It was not because of laziness that The Wall Street Journal kept a consistent visual identity for 75 years. It was because the traditional layout provided an efficient and comfortable environment in which to navigate the day’s business news. Obviously the graphic design is a strong element in the overall brand. But in the Journal’s case, and in almost all cases, the identity also serves a functional role. It helps create the connection between the product and the customer that the customer wants.

An Ongoing Process

There’s another reason people often don’t think of visual communications and customer service together: the two can seem disconnected from each other. Customer service (or lack thereof) happens continuously and in real time. It’s like watching a movie in full motion. Visual communications, on the other hand, is too often conceived, executed, and received by the customer in starts and stops. First, there’s a letterhead, then perhaps a brochure, then a website, then maybe some datasheets, and so on. It’s like watching a movie frame-by-frame. Not only is there lack of continuity, but what you look like and what you do are always out of synch. The ideal is to communicate visually as well as operationally the message you want customers to see. That means managing all the visual elements in concert with product updates, new service offerings, corporate restructuring and other milestones.

Not Just the Customer

Another common misperception—one not just confined to graphic design—is the idea that customer service is only about customers. Great customer service, of course, also involves the sales channel. Distributors, resellers, retailers, catalog stores, online discounters—they are customers too; and they also represent you to customers. This dual role requires careful attention especially in visual communications. A simple example would be a channel newsletter, one that is edited specifically for channel members apart from “regular” customers. Another



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example would be a special password protected section of the website. The simple fact these forums even exist says that you care about the channel and recognize its special needs.

A Mental Image

Ultimately, the best way to service customers is to roll up your sleeves and actually serve them. But you can't do that without communicating with them visually. Even a phone call will conjure up a mental image of what your company stands for. How clear and how positive an image the customer sees is something only you can determine. Here's the point: The customer may be back in focus, but are you?