



Die Native-Speaker Agentur

newstalk 2, 2007: Toll-free lines

Quo vadis, German customer service?

Germany has made enormous strides in shedding its “service with a snarl” image. Stores are now open longer to accommodate busy lifestyle. More and more government agencies are pushing eGovernment.

Where the onus is on the customer

Still, service could improve. How do companies justify toll hotlines and 0180 numbers? Customers paying to call you? Customers funding your direct marketing campaigns?

Few communications activities are as counterproductive as spending money on a promotion, enticing prospects to share their jealously-guarded personal information...only to ask them to fork over at least 6 cents a minute for the pleasure. It's just as disingenuous to encourage existing customers to get in touch and expect them to absorb those costs.

Faced with this setup, customers in any English-speaking country will defect in short order.

A) They won't call. B) They'll vote with their feet. Pay for 10 minutes of tech support to sort out a fault in a product already bought and paid? Pay to ask a question about an order?

Gimme a break. At least 40% of all calls made in the US are toll-free.

Cut costs or create value?

Does the issue boil down to the animosity between marketers (help create a sense of value for money) and accountants (minimize costs and ensure ROI across the board)?

You could argue that toll hotlines maintain high service expectations and prevent a typical “you get what you pay for” scenario. Indeed, American companies now face “call center backlash” – customers fed up with service departments operating multiple time zones away, often unable to assist with “on the ground” concerns. (In the UK, a 2004 survey found that three quarters of people feel negatively about companies who redirect inquiries offshore and, as a result, a significant proportion would turn to a competitor.)

This price tag could cost your brand image points. Customers may see every call as an added cost, left out of the bottom line. Toll-free hotlines include service as part of your package, taking away those hidden fees. And “We want to hear from you” now sounds completely honest.

Best practice: NatWest Bank in the United Kingdom

Recently, a campaign for this high street bank highlighted how easy it was to contact the bank and how eager NatWest was to hear from customers. Key messages: A) All call centers are UK-based. B) Customers call their local branch, not a generic call center. C) Opening hours were shifted to work around customers' lifestyles. As it turns out, customers delighted in just *knowing* how to reach a local service rep or branch manager.

So what are we proposing?

Simple: give customers the 0800 option. Don't pass your direct marketing costs on to them.



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