

THE CUSTOMER WHISPERER | BY GREG BILLINGS

Communications 2.0

A new customer recently told me a great story about how award-winning author David Ritz got Ray Charles to agree to let him co-write the biography, *Brother Ray*. For years Ritz couldn't get past Ray's manager. Finally, he decided to bypass the manager by sending Ray a telegram. When he asked Western Union if they could deliver the telegram in braille they said, "Sure, for a small extra fee." In a time before cellphones, Ritz spent days sitting in a Los Angeles motel room hoping the phone would ring. Ray eventually called and agreed to the book, a breakthrough for Ritz who went on to write biographies with Marvin Gaye, Aretha Franklin, Lang Lang and many others. His story got me thinking about how we use today's communications technology to get past artificial barriers and communicate with our customers.



'The world of communications technology has exploded. Today, we have so many choices it's hard to know where or when to use what.'

Email is quick, easy and there's not much risk of rejection. But, will it get through their spam filter, and if so, will it be opened? If it is opened, will it be embraced or treated as a distraction? Everyone has their cellphone on at all times. But everyone also has caller ID. Will they pick up or will they let the call go to voice mail purgatory? Will they even listen to the voice mail? Is a post on their Facebook page intrusive? Is a handwritten postcard intimate or archaic? The world of communications technology has exploded. Today, we have so many choices it's hard to know where or when to use what.

EMAIL EXACTITUDE

If we just sit here and and wait for customers to come in, call or click our Adwords link, we are going to have a long, lonely day. We have

to reach out. But how? A good rule is to use the last form of communication our customer used. It's their obvious preference.

If Mr. Businessman sent an email, return an email. We know it will be expected and will get through. The bonus is that we have time to think things through and finely craft our message.

Perfect grammar and spelling, links to supporting evidence and maybe even a picture, make an impressive message. However, in a world of malware, viruses and cookies many people won't open attachments. Use them sparingly and be sure to tell your correspondent what the attachment is and why it should be opened. If our message is ignored, we can just wait a few days and resend it. The little automatic "resend" message at the top is a subtle, third party, reminder that our previous message was ignored.

Since we all scroll our email list before opening, the subject line is critically important. It needs to be clever, engaging and enticing. The best example of email marketing success was the 2012 Obama campaign. Their research showed that the most effective subject line that got the most emails opened was, "Hey." Think of your message line as a headline. And because half of your recipients will be using mobile devices, message lines should be less than 25 characters.

TELEPHONE 101

The telephone is our workhorse. Of course they probably won't answer, but that may not be all bad. If we are using our business line they will see

our store name. In advertising terms, that is considered an impression. Impressions are expensive and this one is nearly free. Also, like an email, voice mail messages can be carefully crafted ahead of time. Good voice mail etiquette is to speak slowly and clearly, leave the phone number at the beginning and at the end of the message, and keep the message short.

A cellphone that doesn't display a name, just a number, is really handy. This gives the option of either calling on the business land line, with the benefit of an impression, or calling with a blind number. Don't forget the power of not leaving a message at all if you are on a blind line. Some people just can't resist calling back to find out who called them.

A soccer mom who sends you a text message has just invited you into her inner circle. Text messaging is personal, immediate and effective. And best of all, text messaging is a great way to send pictures. People really like pictures. Recently, I was trying to get a prospect we met before Christmas back into our store. She had ignored my emails and voice mails. As a last resort, I sent her a text message with a picture of a grand piano and the single word "Likey?" Three days later she visited with her family and bought a high-end grand piano. There is always something in a music store you can take a picture of and send to a prospect.

Whatever communication route you chose, be sure to end with a question or statement requiring response. Even something as simple as "please let me know."

Like David Ritz, we have to be creative and persistent to connect with our clients. Ritz tried to get in touch with Aretha Franklin for more than 20 years. Every time he published a book he sent her a copy and each time he traveled to Detroit he sent her a note saying when he would be in town, where he would be staying and that he would like to meet with her. One day she just called and said she was ready to do a book. Maybe it is a text message, maybe it is a post card, maybe it is a note in braille. The key is to just keep trying, and keep mixing it up until you find an approach that works. **MI**

Greg Billings whispers to customers at the Steinway Piano Gallery in Naples, Fla. He welcomes questions and comments at greg@steinwaynaples.com.

+ GETTING THROUGH

- Send a short thank you note the day you get a customer's email address.
- Use a clever, enticing message line.
- Resend an email a day or two later if you don't get an answer.
- Call a customer who ignores an email.
- Always leave a voice mail on an identified line, but never more than two.
- Don't leave a voice mail on a blind line. See if they can resist the urge to call back.
- Send a text message to someone who ignores a voice mail.
- Send a postcard to someone who ignores all forms of communication.
- Always end with a question or statement requiring a response.



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