

# Customer Complaints and Your Web Press Room...Should You Care?

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Prior to the Internet and the Web, life was fairly easy for PR people.

You put out releases, placed articles, scheduled interviews, set up product reviews, made a big deal about trade show PR and measured your success in pounds of audio, video and print clips.

Then the company put up a Web site. You carved out your niche called an online pressroom and suddenly you had a new fun way to spread your pearls. You not only posted the announcements but you could instantly email them to people around the globe. Your name, phone number and email address were posted for everyone to see. It was a little like having your own by-line, your own publication.

If you are on the agency side you had even wider exposure. Your name was spread across a number of Web sites.

Life was good.

Trouble was you suddenly started getting inquiries you hadn't anticipated and didn't want.

You became the lightning rod for customers who were having problems with the company's products or services.

You could take the position that they have contacted the wrong people and simply pass the inquiries along to customer service or customer support. But if you do, you've missed the point of the inquiry.

You're also doing the customer and your company a disservice.

Public relations is a lot more than simply working with the media. It's about the public and your most important public should be customers.

At the end of the day whether your organization stays in business it has to sell something – lots of something – and that means the financial health of your firm relies on satisfied customers.

For the uninitiated, finding the company's media contact on a Web site takes work. That means the customer has already tried to get assistance through the "normal channels." They've used the company's 800 number and sat on hold for a long time. They've emailed customer support and haven't received a response or assistance.

In short by the time they contact you they are more than a little irritated.

Rather than a lightning rod for complaints you should really be an early warning system that the company has a problem that needs to be fixed...quickly.

We recently had a discussion with a client CEO who complained that he didn't want us responding to these queries because he was paying us considerably more than the \$20 an hour he was paying his contract customer support firm. The volume of emails and phone calls weren't overbearing – five to ten a week – but he thought it was poor use of the PR budget for us to acknowledge the customer and raise the visibility of his or her inquiry to the appropriate product manager or senior engineer.

So we went over the basics of public and customer relations:

- happy, satisfied customer tell a few people of their favorable experience and usually only if they are asked directly
- Dissatisfied customers traditionally told 10-25 people about poor products or support. With the Internet they post their problems/complaints on the Web and thousands – hundreds of thousands of people see the information
- At the end of 1999 more than 108 million people were on the Internet (prospective customers) and more than 64,000 were added each day...more than 2,600 every hour
- According to analysts with The Yankee Group an average of only 60% responded to queries in 48 hours
- According to Juniper Communications 46% of the Web sites contacted with a simple e-mail request took five or more days to respond or never responded
- According to Forrester Research less than 30% of the on-line orders initiated over the holidays were completed. The majority of the aborted orders were attributed to bad first impressions

In other words the five to ten people who searched the Web site and contacted us weren't just a few public or customer relations problems, they were indicative of a much larger business problem.

The company was running the risk of not simply losing a few customers but losing customers in droves.

Trust us, refocusing the customer support request issue from a PR budget to the company's bottomline gets the attention of your CEO.

Before he could rush in and make changes, we agreed that our challenge was to determine the depth and breadth of the problem.

While some readers might recommend an extensive and time consuming research project, our recommendation was based on Internet time.

At the next staff meeting we asked every senior manager – engineering, manufacturing, marketing, product management and accounting – to write down five product installation, application and support questions. Next they were asked to list 10 people – family members, friends or good acquaintances – they thought would be interested in making two customer support calls or sending two customer service requests.

By noon of the following day we had 15 “researchers” pinpointed around the country and had emailed, faxed or overnight mailed each two support questions as well as a number of other questions tailored to whether they were calling in for support or sending an email query.

Four days later our CEO had the basic inputs. Fifty percent of them mirrored the frustrated calls and emails we had received.

While the technology and tools for what the Internet industry likes to call customer relationship management was readily available, our CEO recognized that this was a people issue, not a hardware/software issue. He couldn't simply sign a check for \$500,000, have the products installed and the problems would suddenly disappear.

Instead, people had to have additional training and development so they understood what the customer expected of them.

To get the company on the right track we put the CEO in touch with a long-time editorial acquaintance, Dana Blankenhorn who specializes in Internet issues and publishes a-clue.com. Dana in turn recommended some quick-study assistance from Martha Rogers, senior partner with Stamford, Conn-based Peppers & Rogers.

Our CEO set down a new set of customer relations guidelines. First and foremost is a prompt response. Even if that response is "I don't know but I'll get back to you with an answer in three hours." If the solution wasn't available in that time period the support person got back to the individual with a progress report and followed through until resolution was complete.

Even if the process took several weeks.

The key was customers were informed. Customers knew the company cared and was addressing the problem. Customer complaints virtually stopped – even when the solution wasn't in the customer's favor.

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