

Seven Simple Steps to Jump-Start Your Customer Relationship Strategy .

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Organizations are repeatedly hearing that they need to have a customer relationship management (CRM) strategy in order to gain a competitive edge. But the task of developing and implementing a CRM strategy can seem overwhelming when you consider technology, cost, corporate organization and culture. It is best to approach your CRM strategy incrementally, one step at a time. The following seven steps provide a blueprint to improve your customer relationships. This is not a complete user 's guide for a comprehensive CRM strategy, but provides ideas on how to transform the customer interaction management function from a cost center into a strategic resource for competitive advantage.

Build on existing systems

There are very few companies these days that are starting their CRM initiatives from scratch. Since most organizations already have a variety of customer contact systems in place, the challenge is to leverage a corporation 's existing technical assets to retain investments and decrease deployment time. When you evaluate customer contact system technology, look for systems that can seamlessly integrate with existing infrastructure so that you can realize the full potential of all of your investments.

Eliminate "bouncing customer "syndrome

A sure way to lose customers fast is to keep them holding for a long period of time or bounce them from one customer service representative (CSR)to another. Today there is a variety of technology available to ensure that calls are initially routed to the most appropriate CSR. Routing technology actually recognizes customers, identifies their likely area of interest and then routes the call or email to the best informed CSR. For example, if Mrs. Smith flies frequently on international business travel, a call to her airline automatically goes to a specialist in international air travel. Mrs.Smith is of course pleased with this service and the airline retains her as a customer.

Move the data with the voice

Often, when customers are bounced from one CSR to another, the second CSR does not know the caller 's identity or situation. To remedy this problem, employ technology that enables CSRs to pass a customer 's voice and data to the next CSR. If Mrs.Smith calls the airline about a family trip to Florida and her call is originally routed to the international desk, ensure that it can be transferred to the domestic pleasure travel expert, along with all of her background information. This makes Mrs.Smith feel valued and saves time for both parties.

Answer your email quickly, accurately and consistently

Few companies respond quickly to email and some companies don 't respond at all! Employing email response management technology allows a company to automatically "read "email messages, route messages to the best qualified CSR,and suggest a response from a pre-existing library. This technology allows CSRs to handle a greater volume of email more accurately and consistently.

Enable your CSRs

Customers now demand quick and accurate answers from CSRs. However, as routine questions are filtered out by self-service Web sites and product-sets become more complex (e.g. banks now offer mutual funds, insurance, etc. and telephone companies now offer long distance, local, and mobile service, as well as Internet and broadband access), a CSR 's job has become increasingly difficult. Empower CSRs with the training and product information necessary to quickly and knowledgeably answer customer questions. Automate routine tasks, such as sending confirmation letters or dialing the phone. Predictive dialer technology can increase the number of contacts made by a CSR by 300 percent, thereby reducing costs and increasing revenue potential.

Offer a live person with the Web

It is estimated that better customer service could have salvaged 7.8 percent of abandoned Web transactions on business to consumer sites. The research firm also estimates that \$6.1 billion in lost revenue can

be attributed to poor customer service. As many eRetailers are discovering a Web site alone is not enough to answer all customer inquiries, and often a live person is essential for closing a sale. Organizations such as Amazon and eBay have recently added telephony functionality to their customer contact centers. Consider adding a "Click here to talk " button to your Web site. This comprehensive, real-time delivery of information will help you enhance customer service, increase revenue and contain costs.

Deploy rapidly.

The sooner a CRM strategy is deployed, the sooner you 'll see the revenue savings. A single quarter delay could result in \$2.6 million revenue loss –which is a fairly conservative estimate at best.

But before you deploy a CRM strategy, be sure to align the technology with your corporate organization. In order for any CRM technology to derive results, an organization that allows communication between separate departments must be in place. That means the customer service department must communicate with the collections department and the call center must communicate with the employees managing Web contact. As the Internet accelerates the pace of technological change and marketplace innovation, companies need to achieve an even more rapid return on investment from their customer contact systems. But this is not a reason to feel over-whelmed.