

CCR

# INTERACT WITH CUSTOMERS

It is important to maximise the number of communication channels available for your customers to engage with you

By Andy Hughes

TRADITIONALLY speaking, particularly in the banking world, in the good times a customer will have any number of methods of communication available to them – from traditional methods like letters and the telephone, to technology-based options such as e-mail, SMS, and web portals.

However, if the customer should fall into difficulty, they have tended to see these options restricted to the telephone and letters.

Possibly they were being pushed into a default channel for collections, or it was felt that these communications were too serious for newer methods of communications, but, surely, in the modern collections industry, such attitudes have no place.

Rather, we should be seeking to keep our options for communications as open as possible – so that any time that they want to interact with us, we should be open for that interaction. Whatever interaction our customer wants to carry

out with us over the telephone, should also be available to them by all other methods of communication.

Everyone knows that, in the UK, we can be somewhat reserved, so is it sensible to insist that customers should have to bear their souls about their debt problems over the telephone? Would it not be better for them to have the option to self-serve over the internet or another channel of their choosing?

Also, web or SMS options can be taken up at any time of day, thus providing a 24-hour service.

Companies really need to think about the roles that these new interactive channels can play and how their customers want to interact with them, rather than pushing them down one or two routes.

The key is to understand our customers' preferences and to match our services to that – if we give them the services that they want, then that should encourage them to interact with

us more. In this way, providing them with a self-service option is not only more cost-effective for us, as an industry, but more convenient for them.

Let us be clear – if we are not willing to provide our customers with the options that they want, then someone else will, and we will lose out. If a customer has £5 to pay all their creditors, they will pay the one who makes it easiest for them.

In all of this, I do not mean to suggest that telephone or letters will become irrelevant, rather it will be about doing the right thing at the right time. So, for example, if your customers can make an offer or arrangement over the telephone, should they not also be able to do so through your website?

It is all about building those conversations and interactions. **CCR**



Andy Hughes is head of collections strategy at Cabot Credit Management  
E-mail: [ahughes@cabotfinancial.com](mailto:ahughes@cabotfinancial.com)

## THE VALUE OF TREATING CUSTOMERS WELL

RECENTLY I heard, for the first time, about treating customers fairly (TCF); an initiative that seeks to ensure companies and their staff deliver customer outcomes relevant to their business. I am all for it.

As a consumer, I have often been dismayed by the service I have received. Purchasing goods and services is sometimes such an unrewarding experience it feels like I cannot give my money away. The old adage about the customer always being right seems to be long forgotten.

We have made a conscious decision to avoid these pitfalls. Customers are the lifeblood of any business so we set about establishing a culture, from senior management down, to not just treat our customer fairly but to treat them well.

To that end the company ethos

published on our website states "We believe the client is all" and "We believe in exemplary customer service".

Living up to that ethos is not without its challenges. Running a business requires a degree of structure and process that is sometimes at odds with the flexibility required for client responsiveness. We had to confront some existing attitudes and re-examine some working practices. We provided a lot of training and support so our staff could comply with our stated aims.

Sometimes the needs of the business and the needs of the customer can seem mutually exclusive. An example of this is when a customer requires their invoice in a specific electronic format or via an appointed value-added network. Meeting these requirements in-house can often require an effort that outweighs

the value of the order. Clearly the customer's needs have to be balanced against the needs of the business. Being treated fairly is a two-way street and should be mutually enjoyed by customer and supplier alike. Ultimately TCF will always come down to common sense.

I believe treating customers well is a commitment worth making. It is not easy, but if it was easy, everyone would do it. Indeed, the fact that it is not easy, means treating customers well is not just a good idea; it is a valued commodity.



By Lee Allen, founding director, Netsend.com  
E-mail: [lee@netsend.com](mailto:lee@netsend.com)