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"The New Age of Customer Service: Web Pages, E-signatures & PATH" by
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Business owners in all industries have one thing in common, they like to think that their companies are good at customer service. The component manufacturing industry is no different. Because deadlines are met and a quality product is sold, component manufacturers may assume that the customer is satisfied and will return for a future sale.

Unfortunately, like most things in life, customer service is not that simple. All companies have dissatisfied customers, but most are not aware of them. Consumers will rarely contact businesses to let them know about a bad experience. As consumers, we have all been part of this "silent majority" at one point or another. For example, you may have thought that the salesperson was rude when you bought your last car, but you said nothing. Instead, you bought your next car at another dealer. This "silent majority" is large. It's believed that for every customer who voices a bad experience, there are 25 more customers who are not telling us about their displeasure with our company. What is even worse, these unhappy customers will tell between eight and 13 other potential customers about their bad experience. (Dietz, 1998)

Some businesses feel that customer loss is acceptable. Lost customers will be replaced with new ones and the cycle will continue. However, customer retention is a must in to-day's competitive market. It is estimated to be five times more expensive to create a new customer than to retain a current customer and it may cost 16 times as much to bring that new customer to the same level of profitability as the lost customer. (Dietz, 1998)

Today the issue isn't that the competition can build a better mousetrap. It's that there are many more competitors who can build the same mousetrap, for the same price. Businesses have to find a way to differentiate themselves from their competition, and customer service may be the best way to give a company the unique edge that it needs to set itself apart.

Customer service doesn't have to mean a super-human effort in every interaction with the customer. Consumers are reasonable people. They don't want the world on a plate and they don't expect that their vendors will give it to them. On the other hand, they do expect competent and friendly service, quality products and innovations that are at least at the same level as the competition offers.

The ability of your company to achieve the same level of customer service as your competition is expected by consumers. "Customers automatically expect the highest level of service and value they receive from one vendor from all vendors...Even if your industry is behind in providing e-commerce, for instance, if customers have a positive e-commerce experience in any industry remotely related to yours, they will wonder why you can't do the same." (Brandt, 2000) As impossible as it may seem to keep up with every advance in service that your competition offers,

your customers will perceive this to be a normal level of service.

The expectations of customers make it important to understand the newest industry developments. There are opportunities on the horizon in the component industry to help your business become a leader in the area of customer service. Some of these advances are still on the drawing board, but they are coming. They will usher in a new age of customer service and you won't want to suffer the consequences if you are left behind.

The first step is to understand how these new tools are capable of helping you and your customer complete everyday tasks more quickly and easily. After that you can begin to implement them in the ways that best suit the needs of your business.

PATH

While many of you may already be familiar with the work being done by the **Partnership for Advancing Technology in Housing (PATH)**, it really is "the wave of the future" for the construction industry. PATH is developing a series of "roadmaps...intended to serve as guidelines for the investment of private and public resources to speed the development and deployment of technologies." (Heitzmann, 2001)

PATH will shift residential construction to be a process centered on electronic technology instead of "white paper." There are numerous benefits to the PATH road-maps for all areas of the construction industry, including homebuyers. The information technology model that PATH roadmaps recommend will help to build better homes, at lower costs and in less time. In addition, it will help create a more smooth-flowing production process.

The PATH project is not as simple as getting an email address for every company involved in residential construction. It is a group of related plans, each with many facets. It involves such goals as industrialization of the jobsite, even flow construction, real-time digital quality assurance, contractor certification, computer-based field inspections and much, much more. It will be a move made by the entire industry—one affecting all aspects of business. Quite simply, PATH oriented technologies will be where your customers expect you to be in the very near future.

For current updates about PATH please see the NAHB Research Center's web site at www.nahbrc.com.

E-SIGNATURES

On June 30, 2000 President Clinton signed the Electronic Signatures in Global and National Commerce bill into law. The concept of an e-signature is simple. An e-signature is a scanned image of signature that can be used on, among other things, contracts. More specifically, the electronic signatures law allows the use of electronic technology to form and sign contracts, collect and store documents, and send and receive notices and disclosures.

Currently, there are many legal caveats dealing with the use of e-signatures and each state can develop or revise its own rules and law regarding the use of them. But component manufacturers should watch for developments in this area. The speed of service that e-signatures can offer will revolutionize the construction industry. Contracts and changes to plans will be signed and returned instantly saving you and your grateful customer days of time in the construction process.

WEB PAGES

By now everyone has heard about the Internet and the business potential that it offers small companies. Despite this, some component manufacturers have been reluctant to get running on the World Wide Web. And for obvious reasons—no one is going to buy a truss over the Internet [yet].

However, a web site can be a valuable investment for component manufacturers right now. It can be one more place for your current and potential customers to learn more about your company, new things that you're doing, and additional services that may be valuable to them. "Business to business sites are clocking a 214 percent annual growth rate in the number of visitors to their sites, with the number of customers logging into customer support information database rising 190 percent." (James, 2000)

A web site can offer basic information about products and locations. It can also offer customers a place to email questions, find company policies and references, provide sales support information and tools or have online chats with customer representatives at a time that fits the customer's schedule, and all at less cost than traditional customer service methods.

CONCLUSION

These three e-commerce-oriented ideas, PATH roadmapping, e-signatures and web pages, are the customer service tools of the not-too-distant future. If you haven't heard much about them before, you will—and soon.

Each of these tools has the potential to make business simpler and more cost effective for the component manufacturer and the customer. They also have the potential to differentiate your business from the growing number of competitors in the component industry and outside of it. Finally, adopting these tools as they become available will help to minimize the culture shock that comes with any advance.

A single article does not allow enough room to cover PATH roadmapping and e-signatures in much detail. Please look for articles on these topics in the November issue of *WOODWORDS*. If you would like specific information about any of the topics mentioned in this article please contact your WTCA staff at 608/274-4849 or by email at wtca@woodtruss.com.

SOURCES

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Web Site Development Basics

The average high school student can tell you the nuts and bolts of building a web page. On the other hand, this same high school student probably can't tell you how to make a web page into a useful marketing tool for your company. Continuing developments in computer languages and graphics make the potential for your web message limitless, however, the trick to a good web page may be knowing what to exclude as much as what to include. Following are a few common sense rules to make your web site practical and useful for visitors.

SURF BEFORE YOU BEGIN

It would be difficult to produce a television commercial for a company without having watched at least a few hours of TV. The same is true of building a web site. Take some time before starting to check out the competition, visit the sites of some of your favorite products, and try some online shopping. This first hand knowledge will help you to decide what is necessary on your own site.

MAP YOUR SITE

Draw a layout of your ideal web site with as much detail as possible before building it. It doesn't have to be art, but the more precise the idea of the final product, the easier it will be to complete.

DESIGN FOR THE AVERAGE USER

Not everyone has a 21-inch monitor and a high-speed DSL line. To design a site that uses these advantages without thinking of the average user could cause some frustration. Graphics that are too large for smaller monitors or that take too long to download may turn-off users.

K.I.S.S.

K.I.S.S. is a rule used in writing to remind potential authors to "Keep It Simple Stupid." Don't hide your message. Know what people are looking for on your site and provide it. Obscuring a web site's purpose behind too many unnecessary graphics and menus takes away from its best asset—ease of use. It also diminishes the core message that the web site was intended to communicate.

CHANGE/UPDATE

Now that you've got them visiting your site, you need to keep them coming back for more. One way to do this is through good maintenance. Make sure that all phone numbers and addresses are up to date, web links to other sites are live and that product information is accurate. This will make your web site a valuable source of information for potential customers. Another way to encourage repeat visits to your site is by changing it a few times throughout the year. This will capture the user's interest. The changes can be minor but they will give the site a whole new look.

[SBC HOME PAGE](#)

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