

When customer service and marketing conflict

Yesterday, I wrote about how important email marketing has become to retailers. Yesterday afternoon, I found out first-hand that email marketing has become far more important to retailers than customer service, and that is a problem.



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Many large organizations have no bridge among their many departments. I remember when I was working with a large financial company back in the 1990s, and the public relations department (where I was) and the sponsorship department didn't really connect, even though both were ostensibly working on promoting the brand. It seems this way with customer service and marketing.

My experience was this: Yesterday, I went to White House Black Market to return a couple of items I had bought last week. I had the receipt, and the items were unused and had their tags on (nothing wrong with them, just didn't like them once I got home). At first, this clerk was friendly, but pretty soon she was having issues. It turns out that because I did not provide my email address to the clerk who had originally sold me the items, the clerk had put in a made up email, which apparently was connected with another customer's account.

The clerk called over another associate (let's call her Ms. Crotchety since she was a very unfriendly woman), who asked me my name, and of course, this did not match up with the customer name in the system. I explained that since I had no desire to be in their system, the original associate had put in that email address because she feared that she would be "dinged" by the company for not providing an email address with purchase. Ms. Crotchety proceeded to tell me that I needed to provide my address, and that if I were in the system, the system would just populate the fields with the right information (read: I am at fault for not being in their system and making Ms. Crotchety's life so hard).

In the end, I was forced to give them my address in order to get credited (in spite of having a receipt and the original credit card). To make matters worse, at no point were these associates helpful, apologetic or accommodating. I had originally thought I would browse the sales racks, instead, I walked out angry and with no desire to shop at this store.

As many people do when they have a grievance, I took to Twitter to air my dissatisfaction with the store. Let's just say that @WHBM were far more apologetic and understanding than the clerks at the store. I bet that the folks behind @WHBM are customer service folks and not marketing folks. The marketing folks probably have nothing to do with customer service. And there, in a nutshell, lies the problem. **Marketing is operating independently of customer service, with goals that do not take customer service needs into account.**

This is an example of a marketing imperative trumping good customer service. The imperative at White House Black Market seems to be that clerks must obtain email addresses no matter what. This means that the email address itself is more valuable than the customer. That's a flawed concept. Although email can be a very powerful marketing tool, it only is effective if the customer wants to receive those emails. There is a difference between asking for an email address and

making it impossible to buy something unless you provide an email address.

What do you think? Should marketing goals (grow email list in this case) be more important than customer service goals? Can the two co-exist?