



Tripping Over Technology

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Like many people, I have a Palm Pilot that keeps track of all of my important information: phone numbers, addresses, upcoming events, family/friend birthdays, anniversaries and the like. What it can't do is actually mail out the card or make the calls. This illustrates the difference between CRM—*Customer Relationship Manager*—and what I call CRE—*Customer Relationship Experience*. Having the information in my Palm is CRM. Using the information to make sure that Mom gets her Mother's Day card is creating the right CRE.

Right now, CRM is all the rage. Companies spend millions to create CRM software, data mining and voice recognition tools. They build immense databases to combine a person's multiple experience (online/offline buying, surfing habits, etc.) into a single record. New wireless technologies will allow companies to track where you go and deliver location-based advertising to you in real time, while you're there.

CRM is often used as a tool to help the company touch the customer. Unfortunately, customer service is all about the customer touching the company! Many companies implement CRM to add bottom-line savings or to provide better sales opportunities. If that's the case, it should really be called PRM -- Profit Relationship Management. CRM has little to do with the customer, and even less to do with the relationship. In fact, it often stands in the way of customer relations.

I traveled last year and sadly, my luggage didn't make the same trip that I did. Since I had taken two different airlines, I spent the first several hours of conversations with the customer service reps of both not to solve the problem, but to correctly assess blame. Finally, I was directed to the United Lost Baggage number, which uses the latest in voice recognition technology. The sweet voice would ask “What airport did you depart from?” and I would say “San Francisco, CA.” In a very sweet voice, she would say, “I think that you said London, is that correct?” I spent HOURS

doing this. I started using words that I'm sure were not programmed into its database. It would ask “What airport did you depart from?” and I would respond ###**@#@@!!! “I think you said Honolulu, Hawaii,” she would calmly reply.

I tried calling the United reservations line, but each time I was told that I had to call the lost baggage number. I finally reached one of the best customer service people I have ever dealt with. Linda spent at least 15 minutes on the phone with me, dealing with a problem that was not hers, that she had no control over—and she had to use the same lost baggage system they were forcing me to use! Not once was she anything but polite, apologetic, extremely helpful—and focused on repairing the damage United's CRM had done to my relationship with the company.

Later during that trip I arrived at a beautiful Hilton Hotel at 11:30 PM. While I checked in, I asked about food options. I was told that they didn't have any food service available. When I asked why, I was told it was inconvenient for them to provide those services after 11. Hmm, I asked, isn't their job to provide hospitality for me, not for me to travel on a more convenient schedule for them?

At the end of the day, it's the people, not the technology, that will make or break the relationship. My all-time worst experience? Being told by Jim Keating, a Customer Service Supervisor at AT&T Wireless that “it's not our responsibility to meet your customer service expectations!” With all the dollars AT&T has spent on CRM, how long do you think it took before I found another company who would meet my expectations?

Increased business value used to be a byproduct of good customer service. Today customer service is a byproduct of trying to increase the business value. Consumers are smart. If you want to look into a crystal ball for your company's future, take a look at where you fall. If you're closer to lip service than real service, get your resume out today. Your future doesn't look very good!