

It's not ... 'Just a Doorbell'!

When the customer calls, is there anyone prepared to answer?

If I hear the words "It's just a doorbell!" one more time I may come unglued. But, it's a description heard often from potential retail customers referring to customer-service automation systems. The perception of customer-service automation is like that, though ... simple. And it should be! An automation system should simply and easily facilitate getting the customer together with the service-giver where and when service is needed. It should give customers control of their service and associates control of the sale. It should increase the opportunities for the retailer to "touch" their valued and hard-earned customers. And it should reinforce the shopping experience and brand strategy the retailer is striving to convey.

The problem all too often is that it does none of that. A poorly executed automation strategy

to handle a rest room call that should be handled within a minute or two? In other words, what was the customer-service strategy that was to be automated? The response was a look of incredulous disbelief! The retailer had no intention of actually responding to the call in real time; it certainly didn't have the staff for that! This button was one of the top five requests listed by a focus group they had assembled. The retailer just wanted a button, for heaven's sake ... why overcomplicate it? This is when I want to scream, "It's not the button; it's the service, stupid!"

In defense of retailers, it's not all their fault. They have been asking the consumer for years what they want and have heard, "Lots of stuff, cheap." But now consumers are confusing retailers by telling them they want to know that the retailers "care about" and "respect" them, and that they want to be served. The net result for the retailer is that the paradigm has changed and tangible customer service is now in the spotlight.

The tough part is the *execution* of a standardized and measurable automated customer-service strategy. Sprinkling buttons all around a store is not good enough. The customer needs to understand why these buttons are there, what will happen when they press the buttons, and trust that they will *always* receive service as advertised! The associates need to understand that the buttons are there as a tool for them to service the customers, that they are expected to answer the call, and how they are supposed to do that within the context of their other duties. Voilà, the Customer Service Strategy!

Until recently, consumers had not been "punishing" retailers for unfulfilled service promises, but that is beginning to change. Retailers that properly execute in-store customer-service automation strategies will raise the bar of service-expectation among consumers. Retailers that don't will be left behind.

So remember, it might just be a doorbell, but it's a doorbell that rings more than one hundred times a day—if you're lucky! What's your plan?

Automated customer-service strategies are bound to fail without a realistic plan for actual customer service

can even exacerbate the disparity between the retailer's advertised love and loyalty toward the customer and the seemingly "couldn't care less" reality once the customer has entered the store.

Customer-service automation is, by definition, automation of a customer-service plan or strategy. No customer-service plan, no customer-service automation, it's as simple as that. What is found over and over again in many retailer automation initiatives is that there is nothing there to automate. There is no service plan.

Case in point: A retailer wanted to develop a system that would give its customers the ability to signal an attendant to the rest room when supplies are low or in case of equipment failure. This then brought to light many strategic and staffing-level issues. How would the attendants know what was needed? How could they tactfully execute the request? Would there be sufficient staff



Marge Laney is president of Alert Technologies, Houston.