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Journey to nowhere? E-mail customer service by travel agents in Singapore

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Abstract

This exploratory research used Diffusion of Innovations (Rogers, Diffusion of Innovations, 4th Edition, The Free Press, New York, 1995) to examine and benchmark organisational use of the simplest and most prevalent Internet technology, e-mail. The answers, by 200 Singaporean travel agencies, to a mock customer's e-mail reflect poor e-mail customer service. This study found odds of one in four of receiving a reply and a minuscule three chances in 100 of receiving a response that followed suggested guidelines for treating e-mail as business communication.

Managerial implications include benchmarks and guidelines for e-mail customer service, and shifting organisational resources from websites and towards e-mail. Academically, the results support organisational adoption of innovations in stages, organisational age as an independent variable and branded e-mail addresses as a dependent variable related to e-mail adoption, and possible bandwagon effects in adopting websites.

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1. Introduction

The fictitious Ms. Wenyong Zhang is finally online and thrilled to experience what her friends and school-age children take for granted. She has a computer at home, an e-mail address and access to the World Wide Web. Ms. Zhang hopes to use this Internet access to arrange her family's upcoming vacation in Bali.

Websites and e-mail should make vacation planning—a potentially tedious process discussing prices, tour packages, etc.—easier. Instead of calling or visiting travel agents during business hours, travellers find relevant information on the Web and e-mail questions any time of day. Likewise, agents update their websites and reply to travellers' inquiries at their convenience. "Information technology will drive a brave, new world of marketing—provided marketers figure out how IT can help them" (Dev & Olsen, 2000, p. 55). There is a need for research into the dynamics of technology and

tourism (Hjalager, 2002) as well as online service quality (Zsidisin, Jun, & Adams, 2000).

Five years ago, most organisations questioned the necessity of going online. Today, most organisations question how to leverage their online presence (Porter, 2001). From obtaining a free e-mail address with Hotmail or Yahoo! to a stage three personalised website (Hanson, 2000), today's quest is better returns on the time and money invested in online technologies.

New technologies enable more effective tourism marketing, releasing staff from back-office tasks in order to spend more time on personalised customer services (Poon, 1993). The Internet may transform the tour agents' traditional role from transaction processor to consultant (Raymond, 2001; Bloch & Segev, 1996; Milne, 1996). Threatened by disintermediation (Standing & Vasudavan, 1999) and large online travel companies, increased personalisation may help travel agencies survive (Raymond, 2001).

Yet, as organisations tend to misuse technology in the short run (Fidler, 1997; Rogers, 1995), are travel agents misusing the Internet by failing to provide personalised customer services such as properly responding to e-mails?

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This paper uses diffusion of innovations (Rogers, 1995) as a theoretical base to benchmark and investigate how travel agencies use e-mail for customer service. The methodology avoids a common limitation of organisational diffusion research—relying upon stated behaviour (Rogers, 1995)—by e-mailing travel agents and measuring their actual behaviour.

2. Literature review

2.1. Technology and tourism

Globalisation, de-regulation and the Internet have given consumers more information, increased expectations for specialised trips, and subsequently increased tourism industry competition (Rayman-Bacchus & Molina, 2001; Raymond, 2001; Bloch & Segev, 1996). As Internet access becomes a global reality, information becomes increasingly relevant in tourism (Doolin, Burgess, & Cooper, 2002; Raymond, 2001). Information-intensive industries such as tourism are, and will remain, inviting candidates for Internet transformation (Bloch & Segev, 1996; Raymond, 2001).

An emerging market, wired tourists may be big spenders. A study of 80,000 Australian tourists found that those using the Internet spent double that of their offline colleagues (Bolin, 2002). Furthermore, about half those with Internet access at work browsed the Web for tourist information (Rayman-Bacchus & Molina, 2001).

Scholars differ on how the tourism industry has embraced this new medium. On the one hand, the general state of technology is poor in tourist information centres (Connell & Reynolds, 1999) and hotels (Namasivayam, Enz, & Siguaw, 2000). On the other hand, regional tourism organisations in New Zealand and Australia “are at a similar, relatively sophisticated stage of development on the Internet commerce road-map” (Doolin et al., 2002, p. 560).

To remain competitive, travel agents are shifting towards becoming comprehensive sources of travel information (Raymond, 2001; Bloch & Segev, 1996; Milne, 1996). Agents find and assess online and offline information, then advise their customers. How well businesses convey information, mutually exchange values and fulfil promises influences customer relationships and subsequent repeat business (Grönroos, 1994; Payne, Ballantyne, & Christopher, 1993).

2.2. Relationship marketing (RM)

A leading marketing approach, relationship marketing (RM) veers away from customer acquisition and towards customer retention; keeping customers is less expensive than acquiring them (Grönroos, 1994; Payne et al., 1993; McKenna, 1991). Furthermore, there is a

strong correlation between customer retention rates and profit (Newell, 2000; Reichheld and Shefter, 2000). A prime RM catalyst, Internet technologies helps firms rethink their businesses as customer-managed relationships (Newell, 2000; Reichheld and Shefter, 2000).

The Internet’s interactivity shifts customers away from passive receivers of information towards active searchers (Hoffman & Novak, 1996) and adding interactivity may increase the stage of development of tourism websites (Doolin et al., 2002). Marketing may evolve from *actively* seeking customers to *reactively* providing information to customers and then cultivating these curious customers (Schultz, 2002). The Internet helps organisations deliver information, enhance customer relationships, build the customer-base and improve after-sales service (Barnes & Cumby, 2002; Barwise, Elberse, & Hammond, 2002; Newell, 2000; Reichheld & Shefter, 2000; Wang, Head, & Archer, 2000).

A more cautious view though, holds that the Internet is a relationship-marketing tool but not a dedicated channel for achieving firms’ goals and objectives. People like to deal with people, not machines, as in customer service (Barnes & Cumby, 2002; Zemke & Connellan, 2001). The Internet opportunities for closer customer relationships come with a corresponding need for tourism organisations to be constantly accessible and available; this need should increase in the future (Buhjalis & Licata, 2002).

2.3. Electronic customer service or eService

Customer service has a strong link to customer satisfaction, which then yields customer loyalty and long-term profitability (Szymanski & Henard, 2001; McKenna, 1991). Successful businesses offer superior goods or service, but when products are similar, customer service is the decisive factor (McKenna, 1991; Bitner, 2001). The Web, chat and e-mail are new electronic customer service—eService—tools for enhancing customer relationships (Barnes & Cumby, 2002; Zemke & Connellan, 2001; Newell, 2000; Reichheld & Shefter, 2000).

E-mail, according to Wei, Ruys, vanHoof, and Combrink (2001), is the leading Internet application among global hotels. Similarly, for consumers—from silver surfers to teens—the most frequent Internet activity at home and at work is e-mail (Anon, 2002; Pastore, 2002; Ramsey, 2001). Research has shown that e-mail replies influence perceived customer service with both consumers that have purchased and those that have not purchased (Yang & Jun, 2002). Strauss and Hill’s (2001) study of e-mail customer service found that responding promptly, addressing the question and closing with an employee’s name resulted in higher customer satisfaction.

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