

The Absurdity of Technology

A while ago my name found its way onto a mailing list. Well, no, not my name exactly – my office address but not my name. In fact, the letters that arrive via this mailing list are addressed to:

The Occupier
Vacant
20 The Broadway...

I chuckle every time I see one of these letters. They remind me just how much damage can be done with a badly maintained database. After all, the letters are trying to sell me something, but who could take the contents seriously when they're addressed to "The Occupier, Vacant"? It's bad enough that the details are wrong, but such a hilarious self-contradiction smacks of complete indifference on the part of the sender. Whatever tool that particular business uses to check the integrity of its data clearly does not pick up mistakes that would jump out at a casual reader.

Any IT service management professional reading this column will probably be convinced – as I am – that we owe a great deal to technology, and that we have spent the last few decades using it to fine-tune the level and breadth of service that we can provide to colleagues, to existing customers, and to potential customers. In reality, though, many of the true absurdities dished up by IT only occur because we have lost that element of human contact between service provider and customer.

I took another trip to the outer limits of techno-absurdity a couple of weeks back. I tried to phone a friend of mine who works for a large IT company. (I won't identify the enterprise in question but there aren't too many three-letter companies making mainframes these days.) Imagine my surprise when I found that the guy's phone number had been discontinued. A robotic voice instructed me to call another number. Dutifully I complied and reached the company's "Auto-Dialler", manned by a fellow-robot who asked whom I was trying to reach. I spoke my friend's name, as instructed, and was given another number to call – yes, you've guessed it, the discontinued number that I started with. Desperate to break out of this Kafka-esque mind-prison, I was relieved when the robot went on to say that she could connect me if I wished. "YES!!" I pleaded. There was whirring sound, five sounds of discordant music, and then I was disconnected. Even a Big Blue robot, it seems, couldn't cope with the logical improbability of phoning itself.

I did eventually reach my friend, and he gave me an explanation. Apparently, as part of the sweeping reorganization that the company is undertaking across the European continent, it had hastily closed his office, re-located him, and re-routed his calls (and those of his colleagues) into limbo. The problem only lasted a few days. But what if I had been an important customer, I wondered.

I guess we have all been driven to the verge of madness at some time when we try to contact a call center, only to be greeted by a badly configured interactive response system. You listen to the options on each list and desperately try to select the correct button as you plunge deeper and deeper through the hierarchy of menus. Then, finally, you reach a dead end. There are no more options available, no chance of reaching a

real person who might understand the subtle distinction between your query and those stored on the computer's database.

So how come an industry that talks at such length about best practices fails so often to implement them?

Well, there is an upside of course – that feeling of sheer unrestricted joy we feel when we phone a support line and get straight through to a friendly voice. We are, after all, a gregarious species, and we prefer the shoulder that we cry on to be made of flesh and not chips.

It's human nature to remember the nightmares, but there are plenty of good service providers. The good ones are not those who have rejected technology. Far from it – the IT industry has enabled businesses to perform near-miracles as they transform plodding supply chains into fast, flexible routes to market and find new ways to slice and dice customer information to improve and refine products.

No, the good service providers are those that have found the right balance between technology and direct customer contact. They are the ones who look out for the absurdities that occur when technology is simply thrown at a problem; the ones that use IT to support and inspire the company's greatest asset – the people that it employs to serve the customer.

People don't come cheap, as we all know; and specialized support staff can be very expensive indeed. But maybe, in an age when true differentiation is hard to achieve, some companies are underestimating the return on investment that comes from first-class customer service.