

E-mail Sabotage: Killing the Brand Softly

By Lewis Green

Stop and think before you delete! If you don't, you risk killing your brand and ultimately your business. In today's marketplace, ignoring the e-mail inbox could shorten your business lifespan by killing your brand image.

Think about it: Would you intentionally ignore your clients and send messages saying you don't care about them or their business? That is exactly what you do when you ignore e-mail or respond slowly or inaccurately.

Brand image is built from the inside out. Every communication that takes place between a company and a client, potential client, vendor, consultant and even competitor results in a positive or a negative brand impression. And when those impressions are added together, they make up brand image.

As consultants, our brand images are our lifeblood. They must reflect near perfection, if we expect businesses to trust our expertise and to want our advice and recommendations. Furthermore, we need to ensure that our clients understand the dangers of messy e-mail communications, both inbound and outbound.

A recent survey of the retail industry tells the tale of what looks like an approaching trend in the business world. Current numbers from this survey indicate that most businesses are in a lot of trouble when it comes to their "customer e-service." Twenty-six percent of retailers surveyed failed to respond to e-mail inquiries from customers seeking to make a purchase.

In the same study, conducted by Benchmark Portal and sponsored by eGain Communications Corp., the cross-industry response rate of 41 percent shows that businesses in general have a pretty abysmal record. Forty-seven percent of retailers, for example, fail to respond to customer e-mails within 24 hours, against a cross-industry rate of only 61 percent.

Conducted in July 2005, this study also benchmarked the quality of company responses to client e-mail inquiries. Among companies that do respond to client or customer e-mails, 35 percent of retailers sent e-mails rated by Benchmark Portal as "good" at answering customers' questions while the cross-industry rate is a sad 17 percent. Twenty-eight percent of retailers sent e-mails rated "fair," compared to a cross-industry rate of 26 percent; and nine percent of retailers sent "poor" e-mails, compared to the cross-industry rate of 14 percent.

Another study provides even worse news for e-centric clients and customers and ultimately for overall business success. This one, reported by Internet Retail, shows that 51 percent of small- to mid-size companies and 41 percent of large businesses do not respond to customer or client e-mail at all. And of those who do respond, 70 percent of

small- to mid-size companies and 61 percent of large businesses do not respond within 24 hours.

These studies of the retail industry and larger companies may seem remote to small, specialized consulting firms. But brand image depends on every single communication with a company, and deleting or responding badly to e-mail communications creates a destructively negative impression to the person who sent the e-mail. Because every external and internal communication creates an impression that impacts the brand, those communications also impact marketing and sales results, and consequently the bottom line.

eMarketer's Senior Analyst David Hallerman also recently surveyed the state of business e-mail marketing and reports that more than two trillion e-mail messages will be sent out this year and nearly 2.7 trillion by 2007. Businesses cannot afford to ignore those numbers, even if only a tiny percentage of these e-mails fall into the commercial category. Alienating even one client hurts brand image and eventually sales.

When businesses respond badly to e-mail, they risk such responses as anger, rejection, hurt, frustration and revenge, and may generate harmful word of mouth. When done right, word of mouth grows businesses, increases sales and expands margins. When done badly, the opposite occurs, and a brand begins to die a slow and painful death.

As consultants we must take an active role in solving communications problems that may batter either our brand or our clients' brands. Here are a few tips for turning e-mail into a business "growth tool" rather than a weapon for business suicide:

1. Respond accurately to all e-mails with 24 hours.
2. Embrace e-mail as a marketing tool.
3. Use SPAM filters, if necessary (but only if necessary), to block e-mails originating from Spammers, but do so cautiously. These can block e-mails from legitimate clients, which will hurt your business in the long run.
4. For best results and greatest returns on investment, employ some kind of consolidated client and prospect database that allows you to specifically identify client groups' needs, wants and desires.
5. Communicate customized outgoing messages that meet the needs, wants and desires of those client groups.

In conclusion, by embracing e-mail, a consulting firm can grow sales by melding ingredients gleaned from its client data points and managing them so as to:

- ✓ Collect the right data,
- ✓ Craft the right message,
- ✓ From the right sender,
- ✓ Through the right channel,
- ✓ At the right times.

First and foremost, customers and clients count. They measure your value and develop a perception around that value. By ignoring e-mail or practicing it poorly, opportunities for

positive perceptions may be missed, dismissed or destroyed, shortening your business's lifespan. Treating e-mail like the winning tool it can be, however, holds the potential of extending your business's lifespan (and profits) indefinitely.

Lewis Green is the Founder & Managing Principal of L&G Business Solutions, a full-service business consultancy, focusing on marketing and sales. He is the author of four books and hundreds of articles in magazines and newspapers throughout North America. For more information, visit www.l-gsolutions.com.

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