

# Customer Service From a Kiosk?

Trying to automate all customer service interactions is a poor long-term strategy. Sometimes staying in touch with customers is a good idea.

By Bryan Rader / *Bandwidth Consulting LLC*

Everything is automated these days. It doesn't matter what business you're in. Automation has become the operational mantra for reducing costs, streamlining, eliminating errors and improving service.

The problem is, automation doesn't always work.

Over the holidays, I tried to pick up my rental car from the Hertz kiosk at our hotel. No need for a phone call, a long line at the counter or a tutorial about why I shouldn't waive my insurance coverage options. I'd just key in the confirmation number and be on my way.

Except that the kiosk wasn't working that day. The entire computer system was down. Renting a car suddenly went from automated bliss to a slow, time-consuming headache.

Luckily, Hertz had planned ahead for such situations and left a phone number just above the kiosk where a customer could contact a real, live person if the automated solution wasn't working. This is so 20th century, I thought as I dialed the number. "Hello, Hertz?"

"Hi, our entire system is down," the rep said. "We will have to do this manually and bring the car and contract to you. So sorry for the inconvenience."

The young rep owned the problem. He arrived at the hotel in 30 minutes, called my cell to let me know where to meet him and offered big discounts for the hassle. I was thoroughly impressed with his empathy, his concern and his passion for his company.

Automation would have offered none of these traits in my transaction with Hertz.

Today's technologies allow service providers to automate almost every customer interaction. For many time-starved customers, this is a real benefit. Why wait in a long line if I can click a few boxes on a smartphone app and place my order?

And yet this approach is commoditizing the entire service delivery process.

Consider how some big cable companies approach automation. They work very hard to get their customers to stop calling, complaining or scheduling any visits with a live person.

Comcast bragged last year to its shareholders that almost half its new installations are self-installed and don't require a truck roll. More than one-third of its customers don't need

to call anymore because they manage their accounts online. Great for margins but not great for customer service.

## WHEN TO AUTOMATE

Some applications of automation can be great. I like giving a new customer the ability to track a technician's arrival time or get an email or a text update about a temporary outage. This is a very productive way to automate processes, and it provides real benefits to users.

Another appropriate use of automation is in properties that have bulk services because it allows owners to activate service as soon as residents move in. Making residents wait a day or two to get service activated defeats the purpose of offering bulk service.

However, many customers, especially those in the highly competitive multiple-dwelling-unit market, want to see a live person install their new services or want to speak to a help desk specialist about an Internet issue. Automating those processes is not the best approach to quality customer care. Can you imagine overnighting a DOCSIS 3.1 modem with a wireless gateway device to a technophobic senior living in an apartment and asking her to read through a list of steps and instructions on how to set things up?

I know this happens successfully sometimes, but it will likely cause frustration and unnecessary anxiety for a new customer. It may be good for profit margins, but it's not a good way to delight a new user.

Using automation as a way to stop talking to or meeting with customers is a very bad long-term strategy. This presents a perfect opportunity for private cable operators to use personal customer service as an area of opportunity. Let the big guys stop answering their phones and sending technicians. Private cable operators should personalize their service. I was certainly pleased that Hertz did.

I hope you "personalize" your way to a very successful 2015! ❖

*Bryan Rader is CEO of Bandwidth Consulting LLC, which assists providers in the multifamily market. You can reach Bryan at [bryanrader@yahoo.com](mailto:bryanrader@yahoo.com) or at 636-536-0011. Learn more at [www.bandwidthconsultingllc.com](http://www.bandwidthconsultingllc.com).*