Dead Trees
A PUBLICATION OF QUESTIONABLE VALUE FROM William Blinn COMMUNICATIONS

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We want it now!

And we want it delivered.

Keeping up with clients is difficult. It takes days, weeks, or months to convince someone to purchase your product or service, but clients often make a decision to buy and then expect immediate delivery. In this regard, the Internet hasn't helped.

We stay in touch with colleagues by e-mail, sending a question and receiving a reply in minutes. For even faster communication, we use instant messaging. Some of us even carry wireless devices that allow us to send and receive e-mail from a taxi or a restaurant.

Many of today's consumers aren't old enough to remember writing a letter to request information about a product or service. The best companies replied the same day they received your letter, but still a week could pass between the time you mailed the letter and the time you received the reply.

Even those of us who do remember those days now expect companies to respond to our e-mail messages the same day we send them. I suspect that most of us really want to have that reply within 15 minutes. Or less.

Are you ready?

Some companies "get it", although many still do not. Have you ever waited 2 weeks or more for an answer to a simple question that you submitted by e-mail? Yogi Berra (who didn't say half the things attributed to him) might have had 2 words for this practice: "un acceptable".

Slow responses mean lost opportunities.

When I'm in the market for something, I usually narrow the field down to 2 or 3 suppliers. Inevitably, I have a question or two late in the sales cycle — questions that will help me decide who gets the business.

I was helping my older daughter choose an insurance policy a couple of years ago. The 3 agents I was talking with all provided e-mail addresses. Two answered a question promptly, but the reply from the third agent arrived nearly a month later. By then I'd already signed with one of the others.

At the start of the shopping process, the agent who lost was at the top of my list. His slow response gave me some insight into his business practices and suggested how much assistance he might provide in the future. The business was his to lose, and that's exactly what he did.

I replied to his tardy e-mail with a polite note (*Honest! It was polite!*) explaining that he lost the business because I assumed he wasn't interested. You'll probably not be surprised when I tell you that he didn't reply to that message at all.

Recently when I was in the building where his office was, I noticed that it wasn't there anymore. Nor was he in the phone book. Losing enough sales will do that to you.

Be available

If you operate a small business, you probably can't afford to have people sitting at computers waiting for e-mail 24/7, but you can at least reply to messages the same day you receive them.

That, in fact, has been one of the tenets of direct marketing for as long as I can remember: Reply within 1 business day.

But that's not quite enough.

When someone sends an e-mail message, it's important that you send an immediate response of some sort. If somebody sends a message at 3 in the morning (your time) because it's 2 in the afternoon (their time), you should fire a reply back to them by 3:01 (your time).

How? Easy: Use your e-mail system's "autoresponder" function. This is a process that runs on the e-mail server, not on your PC, so it's always there. The instant a message arrives for you or for one of your special accounts such as "sales" or "info", the server replies for you.

The autoresponder doesn't have any intelligence, so it can't give the user a detailed reply. It can at least acknowledge receipt of the message and give the sender an idea about what to expect. *Thanks for your message. We will reply within 1 business day* is enough.

Making it smarter

If you use a "mailto" link from your website to invite prospects to send questions, you can use a little trick that will allow the autoresponder to be a little more intelligent. On a page about nuts, the e-mail address can be *nuts@yourdomain.com*. The bolts page would have a link that sends mail to *bolts@yourdomain.com*. Then the autoresponder can say *Thanks for your message about nuts. We will reply within 1 business day.*

What the heck is this?

Dead Trees is the **William Blinn Communications** newsletter. It's published whenever I feel like it, although I generally feel like it when I'm preparing the month's invoices. If you didn't receive an invoice with this newsletter, kindly contact me and we'll rectify that situation. Please note that despite the name, of the publication, I bear no particular animosity toward trees. The name is simply an acknowledgment that paper is made from, well, dead trees.

Many website hosts let you set up an unlimited number of virtual mail boxes with autoresponders. Because all of these virtual mail boxes can forward their messages to a single physical mail box, you can have 1000 autoresponders attached to 1000 addresses without having to check 1000 mail boxes for messages every 10 minutes.

Beware!

Every e-mail address you put on your website will attract a certain amount of spam. So if you use this technique, it's a good idea to create the mailto links in a way that they're disguised.

Yes, I know how to do that. Briefly, it involves creating a tiny JavaScript process that accepts an e-mail address in 3 pieces, re-assembles it, and writes it back out to the screen.

Example: `addressHere('bill','blinn','com')`. You might recognize that as the components of an e-mail address, but a spammer's robot will be looking for something that looks like "bill@blinn.com" — and that never appears in the HTML. It's generated on the fly by the JavaScript procedure (not illustrated). People who visit your site and click on the link can use it, but spammers won't see it.

It's an easy, relatively elegant solution to two problems!

E-mail, IM, cell phones, and Blackberry help us weather a tragedy

On Tuesday, September 11, at 9 o'clock, I was standing in a conference room outside Boston, ready to begin a talk about hidden treasures in the Corel Draw box. One of the people in the session came in and said "The World Trade Center has just been bombed." My initial thought was that this was some sort of sick joke, but her expression told me it wasn't. Before the talk began, we knew only that 2 planes had hit the WTC.

Before the session ended, an hour later, my cell phone had rung twice. I had messages from my wife and my elder daughter. By that time, everyone with a cell phone was trying to make or receive a call, so getting through took a few minutes. But the technology worked.

Nearly two weeks later, we've learned a little more about how technology helped on that horrible day.

The long distance telephone network immediately began to be flooded with calls. The blast at the World Trade Center destroyed perhaps tens of thousands of connections, but cell phones were functional if you could get access to a cell. Some of the victims were rescued because they were able to tell rescue workers where they were via cell phones.

Telecommunications officials say the system held up surprisingly well. Several companies brought in temporary cellular towers to replace damaged or destroyed equipment. Verizon managed to keep long-distance lines open for New Yorkers who wanted to call relatives elsewhere in the country to say that they were all right. Internet connections were slow, but communications got through. E-mail and instant messaging were intensely active.

I am the co-owner of an e-mail discussion list for editors. While I still haven't read all of the messages from that day (I was out of commission in Boston) I know that subscribers from all over the world offered condolences and prayers. As subscribers watched television or listened to the radio, they also discussed the tragedy on-line.

As for failures, perhaps the most surprising was New York television stations. Service was disrupted during the first World Trade Center attack and most of the stations promised to have back-up systems in place. More than a week after the attack, over-the-air television had still not returned to New York City.

The World Trade Center was a hub for distribution of electricity throughout lower Manhattan as well as for phone lines and fiber optics. Verizon quickly provided nearly 2400 spare circuits to the City of New York, nearly 1000 to the state, and 2600 to federal agencies and the military.

Because of the way the Internet works — packetizing data and sending it via any route available — many people had better luck getting messages through that way than depending on the phone system, which requires a point-to-point connection. According to the New York Times, Paul Baran, a former computer scientist at the RAND Corporation, who is widely considered the co-inventor of packet switching, said that the Internet's ability to stay up after the attacks was proof that the "route around the trouble" model worked.