

Interactive

Software can tame message onslaught

Many marketers are finding the influx of incoming customer service-oriented e-mail to be just as daunting as outbound marketing messages, forcing them to turn to specialized software and outside experts to cope.

"Before, it was a haphazard process," said Allen Graber, VP-business development for Hypermart LLC, an Atlanta-based Web hosting company for businesses.

"We couldn't see how employees were communicating with customers ... [and] people with expertise weren't necessarily getting the right e-mails."

So Hypermart turned to Intellimedia Commerce, also of Atlanta, which charges \$2 to \$10 per transaction to monitor and respond to inbound e-mail messages for clients.

Another e-mail management company is Matrixx Marketing, which recently signed up direct-broadcast service DirecTV. Two full-time customer relations reps from Matrixx field the 600 to 700 comments and questions e-mailed to DirecTV each week.

Andrea Jacobs, VP-customer service for DirecTV, said, "DirecTV once handled e-mail requests internally,

but as the volume increased we were overwhelmed."

Matrixx, which charges \$1 per transaction, provides an online help system and responses to frequently asked questions.

All messages are tracked to capture response-time data.

While some marketers find that outsourcing e-mail response can save time, others are taming their incoming e-mail with a new breed of software. These packages, from companies such as General Interactive and Mustang Software, provide some of the following capabilities:

- Analyze incoming mail.
- Determine whether the messages are hostile or friendly.
- Send back an automated response to straightforward questions.
- Route more complicated messages to the appropriate expert.

Randall McComas, VP-telecommunications for IBM Global Telecommunications & Media, is using General Interactive's Echo Mail to respond to messages sent to the Internet service provider area of IBM's Web site, and generated from IBM telecommunications trade shows.

Echo Mail examines the tone of the message as well as the context. For example, it looks at whether the sender wants to purchase and if the message is time-critical.

Echo Mail generates an automated response if there is more than a 95% confidence rating that a prewritten response will answer the question.

Otherwise, it immediately forwards the message to a customer care representative, said Mr. McComas.

While many marketing executives say this kind of service can help improve service and increase customer loyalty, some see the current batch of customer service programs as limited.

"To be honest, I haven't seen any study that shows that these products are wildly successful," said Kay Khandpur, a customer service consultant for Promentis Solutions in Santa Clara, Calif.

"They work fine in relatively simple situations — order status, account balance, shipping status — but not in complex customer support matters."

However, she added, "If you're having e-mail volume problems, you should look at these services or software packages real hard."

— Noah Shachtman