



By Brad Beiermann Ph.D.

Have You Experienced The New Digital Cold Shoulder?

Inbound correspondence continues to be a problem with organizations. For some, Web 2.0 has only thrown gas on the fire. The time is ripe for innovation in this business function.

Both Web based and traditional mortar businesses with a significant number of employees or Web traffic have not yet figured out how to filter the incoming messages from emails, blogs, forums, IM, social networks, media sites, snail mail, faxes, wireless devices, phones and just about anything else that allows somebody to communicate with a company. If you sent an email to a C-level executive at a large company such as Cap Gemini/Ernst Young with tens of thousands of employees, would they get it? Where would the email message go? What if it was a hand written letter? Where would it go? Would any of these correspondences reach their audience? Not likely. Customer service companies that are sincerely trying to field the inbound communication with a 24/7/365 call center are even struggling. Ever tried to call AT&T customer service at night to change something in your bundled service package? Then you know the issues. How about that resume you want to get seen by the Senior Vice President of Operations? Again, you have mostly likely experienced the issues.

Quite frankly, many of these inbound communication problems have existed over the years, but something has dramatically changed in the past several years. The growth of Web 2.0 with peer-to-peer capabilities has put a multiplier on these problems. Twenty or thirty years ago, companies were clamoring to hear more from customers, job candidates, and outside parties. Peer-to-peer communication amongst customers was virtually non-existent. Reaching out took much more effort as the channels of communication and territory coverage were limited. Today, the problem is a complete 180 degree turn. The amount of correspondence coming from the outside is enormous. Companies are drinking from a digital fire hose of collaborative and non-collaborative communications. Much of the inbound correspondence is left unanswered or labeled as unqualified. As a result, customers and prospects can get what we call here at Cimstrat the “digital cold shoulder experience”. This happens when inbound digital messages or comments are often left unanswered. This can happen on a forum, IM, email, blog, social network, or just about any channel. If somebody sends you an authentically written email response, you would be a fortunate soul. If somebody actually calls you on the phone to speak, you truly experienced a modern day miracle.

Many IT departments have done a fine job in setting up the technologies needed to enable Web 2.0 capabilities. The disparity resides in somebody managing the collaboration occurring within these multiple new channels. From a marketing perspective, it can be a runaway train in the branding world. Customers now have the ability to collaborate with each other online and share their experience for the rest of the world to see. Once it is published on the Web, it tends to stay there for years to come. Again, if you are trying to manage a brand, the train is going full throttle with or without you. Whose job is it to manage this new collaboration between the organization and the outside world? Mark Gambill, Chief Marketing Officer of CDW seems to have hit the nail on the head. Mark says, "The new age of CMO should be re-titled to Chief Collaboration Officer." There is a tremendous opportunity to set a new direction in corporate communication, branding, and correspondence. Technology has enabled so many means of communication that most organizations have not caught up in managing it. Much of the communication comes in a parallel manner. Yet, top level parts of organizations are still processing things in a serial manner. As one client put it, "Our company has T1 data lines, but certain parts of us are still operating in a carrier pigeon mindset." Getting the corporate climate in synch with this new era of collaboration will require iterations. An iterative change process driven by experimentation, curiosity, and an ability to adapt quickly will help lead the drive for innovation in this key area.

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