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High-Touch Strategies for the High-Tech Environment

Many Organizations Are At Risk-They Miss The Whole Picture

The more "high-tech" systems we use, the more of a "high touch" balance we are going to need in order to avoid the danger of eliminating the important element of "human reasonableness." A healthy, "high-tech" "high-touch" balance equals money in the bank, while maintaining a "high-tech" "low-touch" atmosphere ultimately results in lost revenue and ultimate failure.

Although the increased use of technology is one way to lower costs, maximize productivity, improve service and increase revenue and profit, technology does not drive business-customers do.

The more our society interacts electronically, the greater the likelihood for people to experience personal alienation, which could ultimately lead to an environment where computers make all the decisions.

To create the balance we need, three elements are vital: technology, the user, and management. To promote these key elements, a vision, an environment that promotes this vision, a bottom-line of customer service, and the human equation must be considered. "High-touch" modification of the "high-tech" process encourages the individual to interact effectively, improving productivity by using technology.

Customer Service Vision And Its Environment

In order to be successful, every business must identify quality service as a vital part of



This Fixer-upper In Silicone Valley Goes for \$2.3Million

Web Annotation Can Become Graffiti On Your Web Site

Thirdvoice.com Is A Problem Waiting To Engulf Us All

There are a new set of tools that are available to everyone on the Internet that allows individuals to place comments not only on a web page, but at a particular point.

At first glance this sounds like a great feature. As a matter of fact this product is a strong challenge to IBM Notes. With little work, an enterprise or a

user can establish a notes forum that is based on a particular web page and its contents.

When Thirdvoice was first introduced in 1999 it made news with its "sticky notes" service that allowed anyone to post public, group or private notes on any web site.

They have continued to enhance the product under the guise of idea exchange and free speech on the Internet. People can highlight text on any web page and place a note.

What is to stop someone from posting false and

malicious information on any web site? As we drive around the country you do not have to go past more than one bridge or overpass to see graffiti. The same people who spoil our physical assets now have the ability to do the same with our intellectual one.

Fortunately there are some things that can be done in the short term to minimize the problem. However as this technology advances we come to a point where freedom of expression versus ownership of intellectual property will come into conflict. Who owns the data on a web site, the publisher or the reader? Under the guise of freedom of expression can an individual alter the presentation of someone else's property?

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their vision. That vision can include a professional attitude, interest in customers' situations, a commitment to answer questions or resolve problems quickly, pride in the delivery of products or services and a culture that appreciates the customer's business.

Since "high-tech" environments naturally lower the number of customer interactions, maximizing the quality of the remaining personal encounters is critical. This is the "high-touch" balance that can often overcome impersonal and electronic interactions.

From voice mail to email, if customers wade through too many menu options, are transferred repeatedly and are not treated with respect, dignity and appreciation, they will perceive the impersonal mode quickly and make their decision about the company accordingly.

The Human Equation

Another equally important aspect of this "high-tech"/"high-touch" philosophy, the human equation, encompasses every department function. When businesses fault on the side of "high-tech," the focus is often on eliminating human interface, when in fact, it may be the time to increase it. The danger is in looking for a "high-tech" solution to systems without understanding the ramifications.

For example, a clerk processing incoming orders sees an order on her computer screen for one million, one hundred thousand units and doesn't give it a second thought. If her computer says that's the right number, then that's what it must be. If, instead, the clerk had used her own, inherent "reasonable check," she would have realized that this customer generally orders eleven hundred units at a time. Someone obviously keyed in a couple of extra zeros by mistake.

A potential disaster could have been avoided before the order was processed, shipped and warehoused. This kind of mistake can promote chaos when the manufacturer thinks they don't need to produce additional product, which reduces the order for another supplier, which, in turn, reduces the order for yet another supplier and down the daisy chain.

Finding The Balance

Search engines Yahoo and Alta Vista have been seduced into letting the computer make all the decisions, thinking it can sort, select, and do everything – totally avoiding any human interface, which will ultimately reduce their viability.

Amazon.com is an excellent example of a company that undertook the technology called the Internet and e-business, and figured out how people can sit at their

computer and select books. To their credit, they have given their customer the ability to review all books and get assistance via feedback from other customers, not just pure data.

Service 911.com, a web-based computer support firm designed to bring real-time customer service to the online world, has done an enviable job balancing "high-tech" with "high-touch" strategies in their business operation. Their 100-percent web-based business uses the Web to offer live chat, how-to videos, information and on-site support to web visitors. Founded three years ago, the company initially launched as an on-site repair service in their home base of Dallas, TX. What set this company apart from the beginning was the ability to service all brands of computers and peripheral equipment.

"Two months ago, we restructured this human-based business and leveraged the Internet to provide a better business model," says a senior executive there.

"People need to be able to have 100 percent uptime, and a company like ours is able to actually talk to that person, fix the problem, and get them back productive. Technology cannot take care of people the way we can, with empathy as we reason, explore the problem, and solve it."

Checking The Balance

On an ongoing basis, evaluate the perception of your company and strive to balance "high-tech" and "high-touch." They are both very essential to the efficiency of the marketplace. "Those functions that are best done by technology should be done by technology.

Those which are best done by people, [should] continue to be done by people," reminds Richard Grasso, chairman of the New York Stock Exchange, in a recent conversation with Chris Wallace on the ABC News program, Nightline with Ted Koppel.

The Bottom Line

Employees in a "high-tech" only atmosphere also have less and less loyalty to their organizations, and, employers don't feel the need for long standing employment relationships because the "computer will do it." Operating under these conditions, the inherent set of information that defines the culture behind any organization gets lost in the shuffle. Computers cannot replace or replicate human creativity, empathy, or drive – a valuable commodity to lose.

Safeguards must be within the systems, which include checks-and-balances within the business. Just like the check-and-balance, which exists between the United States president and the Congress and Judicial systems, there needs to be a check-and-balance between the computer system, the operators using the system, and the management of the organization. 

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This will become a classic example of where our laws and regulations will be eclipsed by advances in technology. What is hard to understand is why there has been no "hue and cry" from anyone to this point.

Weakness of "Sticky Notes" Technology

One of the current shortfalls of this technology is the dependence on fixed format HTML pages since it depends on "positional" placement of notes. We have tried this technology on ASP and other "data based" pages and see that the current generation of products do not have the same abilities with them. That is not to say these features will not be there in the future.

The secondary weakness is the "server based" control of all notes. Once a page is viewed, the Thirdvoice site needs to be accessed to see if there are any notes for the page in question. If there are any they then need to be downloaded so that you can view them. The volume of traffic this will generate is almost beyond comprehension. You might say that there is no way that any server will be able to keep up. However the same was said about Yahoo when it first came out not all that long ago.

There can and will be "independent" providers that will provide this service. It will be very difficult for you as the host of the site to see what type of cross site matching is being done. What may look like a positive increase in traffic may be the exact opposite.

Should We Be Concerned?

One thing that is sure, is this technology will advance. It was only four years ago when the first of the "sticky notes" applications appeared. At that

time it was touted as a new wave application that would help the user to keep track of the things going on in his/her computer. At that time no one projected the migration of the application to the web with a remote server as the basis for consolidation of multiple notes for several authors and readers.

Less than a year ago the first of the web-based applications appeared and soon there will be others. As each of these new products come out they will push the envelope of technology. At the same time they will begin to add intelligence in the form of "neural networks" that will become the basis for a unique form of application intelligence.

Add to this the technology of SPIDERS that go out and mine the web for specific data and you will have some very unique forms of data gathering that will add a new layer of intelligence on all of the data that has been placed on the Web.

Summary

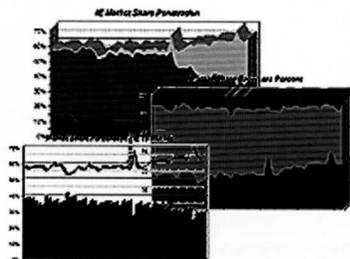
Already, Thirdvoice has created a process to FILTER out particular notes. They have even defined a SPAM filter. Given this, we should be concerned and need to look at the impact this technology can and will have on how our web sites operate. No longer do we only need to be concerned about what we put on our web site, but now we have to see if any of this new technology is being applied to the site.

This will mandate the creation of a process very similar to the virus scanning processes we all go through. Once the scan is completed, each of the sticky notes, if not all, will have to be reviewed and/or removed. With the notes residing at a third party site, the attorneys will have a new full employment program. The question they will have to answer will be, "Can anyone add content, in the form of a sticky note, to your copyrighted intellectual property?" That will have to be balanced with the First Amendment rights we all have.

And you thought technology was just about computer hardware and software. 

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Forecast for the National Information Technology Market

Change, More Change And New Set Of Opportunities Is Presented To Us

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In the last issue I addressed the leadership void that will begin to appear in the next few years. That is but a minor blip compared to the other changes that are about to take place.

As we proceed in this new century, there has never been a potential for so much change in such a short period. Just think about what the impact of the pending changes in administration in Washington are, the new found wealth of the nation from the massive appreciation of the stock markets and the pending retirement of the baby boomer generation. Individually these are major events. Collectively they will be a tidal surge on our society and the world economy.

Demographic Shift

The first shot has been fired by Washington with the recent "looting" of the Social Security Trust fund to give money back to retirees who chose to work. Based on the debate in Congress, it is clear they feel this proposal will cost the Trust Fund at least \$20 billion per year. The intent of this change was to encourage "seniors" to work because of the looming shortage as our population ages.

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While the government has noticed this the advertising media does not have a clue as to what is happening. For example, radio station demographics for the most part ignore the population over 55 years of age. Television stations are targeting the 18 to 30 year old audience. It is little wonder that the audience of both of these media types is declining at a precipitous rate.

New Application Needs

When new applications of technology are first thought of, the last audience to be looked at are the new leisure class. These are individuals over the age of 40 who no longer work day-to-day. They have more disposable assets than any other population group in history, they have good health, are well educated, and know what technology can do. Why is it that the tools we develop do not focus on their needs?

There have been some notable exceptions. The travel industry has opened its doors to technology and a greater population is now traveling with electronic tickets that at any time in the

past. Cars are now "configured" on line and the hassle of dealing with car salesmen has been eliminated. Home loans are shopped for on line. All of these use the capabilities of this new leisure class.

Old Industries Doomed

The new successes will be based on products and services that are focused on producing quality. Education has failed. With all of the funding that has been provided it will be one of the first bastions of the old way of doing things that will fail.

The seminal changes we face will doom the old industries including major networks and media channels. The opportunity for all of us is to understand how the dispersion of technology will change the way we do things.

My forecast is that we will start to go back to the basics. Things like "home schooling" and demand for products that are "crafted" will increase. The watch word will be quality. 

Vic

Location	Prospects Short Term	Prospects Long Term
Northeast	Excellent	Excellent
Mid Atlantic	Good	Excellent
Southeast	Good	Fair
South	Good	Fair
Midwest	Excellent	Excellent
Southwest	Excellent	Good
West	Excellent	Good
Pacific Northwest	Excellent	Good
Best Location	Northeast	Midwest