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E-mail Sabotage: Killing Your Brand Softly

By Lewis Green

Would you intentionally ignore your clients or send messages saying you don't care about them or their businesses? That is exactly what you do when you ignore e-mail or respond slowly or inaccurately.

In today's marketplace, mismanaging e-mail could shorten the lifespan of your business by killing your brand image.

Brand image is built from the inside out. Every communication that takes place between a company and a client, potential client, vendor, consultant, and even a competitor results in a positive or a negative impression. When those impressions are added together, they make up your brand image.

As consultants, our brand images are our lifeblood. They must reflect near perfection—if we expect clients to trust us and ask for our help. Furthermore, we need to ensure that our clients understand how careless e-mail communications endanger their brands.

Researchers at *eMarketer* report that 2.7 trillion e-mail messages will be sent in the year 2007. Businesses cannot afford to ignore those numbers, but many are doing just that. A study by analysts at Benchmark Portal indicates that most businesses are in a lot of trouble when it comes to their "customer e-service." Of retailers surveyed, 26 percent failed to respond to e-mail inquiries from customers seeking to make a purchase.

A report by *Internet Retail* points to even worse news: 51 percent of small- to mid-sized companies and 41 percent of large businesses do not respond to customer e-mails at all.

For companies that do respond to e-mail, speed apparently isn't a priority. For example, 47 percent of retailers fail to respond to customer e-mails within 24 hours. When other industries are included, the number of respondents who take more than 24 hours to respond to e-mail jumps to 61 percent.

Business managers may not understand the risks of mishandling e-mail. And it's important to remember that a relevant and accurate response to an e-mail inquiry is as important as a timely one. In the Benchmark Portal study, only 35 percent of retailers sent e-mails rated as "good" at answering customers' questions, while the cross-industry rate of "good" responses is a sad 17 percent.

How businesses manage e-mail can be a looming crisis or a golden opportunity. In our pervasively online age, more and more people choose e-mail as their preferred method of

communication. When businesses treat e-mailers badly, they risk responses of anger, rejection, frustration, and even revenge. In addition, ignoring e-mailers generates harmful word of mouth, which can lead to a slow and painful death for a business.

Embracing e-mail, on the other hand, can open new opportunities for businesses. One study suggests that businesses may miss up to two-thirds of their potential audiences by excluding e-mail from their marketing tool kits.

As consultants we must take an active role in solving communication problems that may damage either our brands or those of our clients. Here are a few tips for turning e-mail into a business growth tool rather than a weapon for business suicide:

1. Respond accurately to all e-mails within 24 hours.
2. Embrace e-mail as a marketing tool.
3. Use SPAM filters, if necessary, to block e-mails originating from spammers, but do so cautiously. Blocking e-mails from legitimate clients and others will hurt your business in the long run.
4. For best results and greatest return on investment, customize outgoing e-mail messages by employing a consolidated client and prospect database that allows you to specifically identify client groups' needs and desires.
5. Communicate customized messages that meet the needs and desires of those client groups.

When they use it correctly, businesses bask in results-oriented e-mail marketing and brand building. Home Depot, for example, has grown its client e-mail database from 500,000 to 5 million contacts in just the last two years. Each one of these 5 million e-mails represents solid future sales.

First and foremost, customers and clients count. They measure your value and develop perceptions based on that value. By ignoring or bungling e-mail, you may miss or destroy opportunities for positive perceptions. Treating e-mail like the winning tool it can be, however, holds the potential to extend your business's lifespan (and profits) indefinitely.

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