

Computer says Maybe

by Chris Gledhill, Managing Director, PDMS

What a joy! I discovered this weekend that somehow or other I had been paying £7.95 a month for an online service from Which (noble guardian of the consumer), not once but twice. Quite why we were shelling out over fifteen quid a month for a service we were unaware of consuming was something of a mystery which needed to be investigated immediately.

The first step was to try and find out how long this had been going on. With a choice between the byzantine complexities of the Gledhill filing system (I don't do paper) or the Mint Credit card call centre, I reluctantly picked up the phone. You know the score, ringing up a large call centre operation tends to mean clearing a couple of days in your diary and pre booking an anger management therapist.

So, I settled into an armchair with a cup of tea took a deep breath and dialled customer services. The initial conversation with the machine was efficient enough – a couple of random menu selections, then enter card number and some security stuff to get an automated read out of current balance and available credit. It is the next bit that usually goes horribly wrong as you get passed around between departments and systems which seem designed to frustrate. But no, I got straight through to a friendly and helpful chap who already knew who I was and didn't need to ask any more security questions. Not only that, but he also had access to all of the information I needed without having to complain of 'slow systems' or give me a different number to call.

With regard to the saintly Which it transpired that my wife and I had both independently signed up for a one pound trial offer without taking sufficient notice of the small print which no doubt clearly states that we will automatically move to a full subscription at the end of the trial period. This would have been fine if either of us had actually been receiving the weekly emails they supposedly send you as part of the package, at least then we might have remembered to cancel a little earlier or even recognised some value in the service...

The experiences I am describing good and bad, are just a small sample of the interactions we all have on a daily basis with the systems used by virtually every organisation we deal with to conduct their business with us. When they get it right, with 'joined up systems', the largest organisations can provide a very direct and personal service in a way which minimises my frustration and their cost. On the other hand simply translating a questionable sales technique into an online environment without adequate checks on the success of the delivery mechanism is a great way to alienate customers.

One of my favourite examples of good practice is ticketless air travel because it is such a rational simplification of the process, you need your ID to travel anyway and the system at check in already knows who is expected to fly – so it's one less thing to forget as you stumble out of the door five minutes before last check in.

On the other hand another pet hate is those phone calls from a call centre somewhere in Asia, in which some hapless individual attempts to sell me a new mobile phone contract from an operator who has no network on the Isle of Man. Just because their hourly rate may be less, there is absolutely no excuse for giving someone a block of 01624 numbers to call with a product we can't buy.

Anyway, having discovered the extent of our incompetence in falling for the trial subscription gambit we decided to cheer ourselves up with a meal out, so rang directory enquiries to get the number of a local restaurant which has inexplicably changed its number since we got our latest copy of the yellow pages.

The phone was answered by a pleasant lady who appeared to know the number by heart and commented on how popular this restaurant had become since a recent change of management. This reminded me of the first time we phoned 192 on the Isle of Man, fresh off the boat, some time last century, on that occasion we were informed that our chosen eatery did particularly good sticky toffee pudding... I am delighted that so little has changed, the number – 118 695 – is a little longer but it's the same great service - the information economy at its very very best!