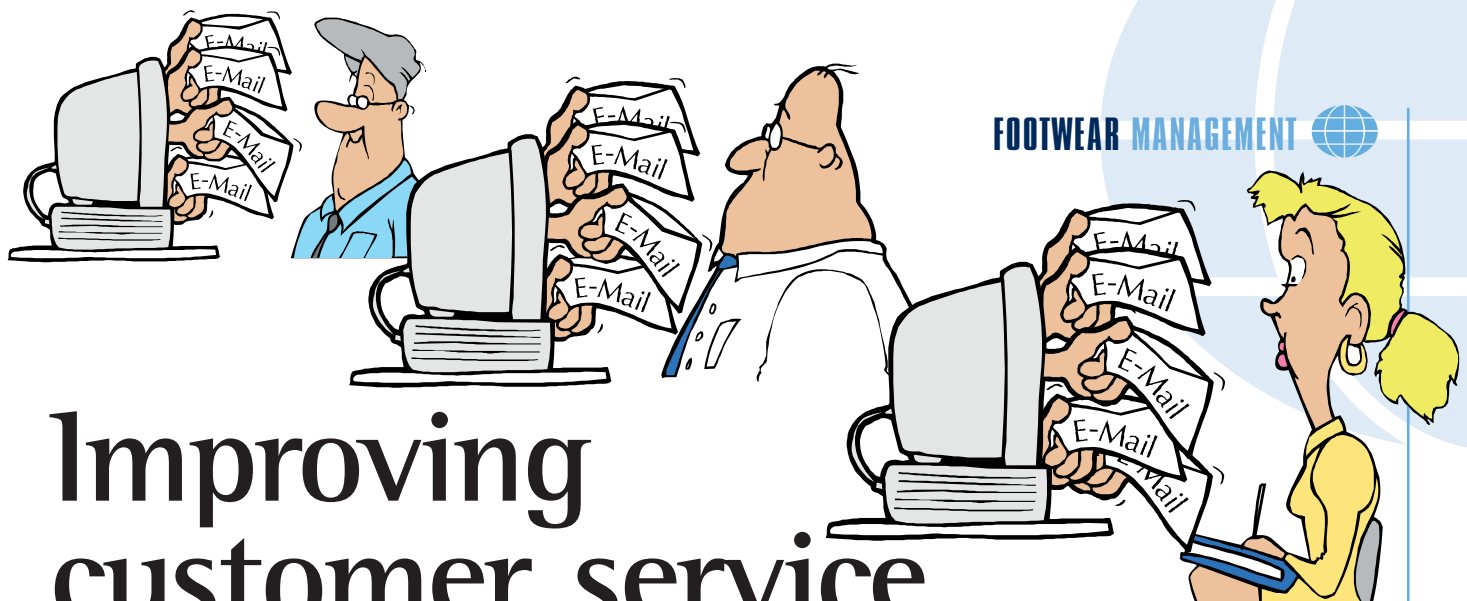




Improving customer service

Customer relations are all important and customer service departments are very much on the front line in this regard. The bigger the company, the greater the number of customers seeking answers to problems and questions. Rapid and accurate response is essential but is not always easy to provide. It is a problem that besets all organisations, so it is interesting to see how one major brand has managed to resolve it.

The Timberland Company is known worldwide for its extensive line of outdoor footwear and apparel designed for rugged casual comfort and outdoor athletic pursuits. In late 1999 the company introduced the Mountain Athletics brand, a line of technical footwear and apparel specifically aimed at aggressive outdoor activities like trail running, mountain biking, fast-packing, scrambling, bouldering and water sports. It was taken by surprise by the immediate and huge increase in email messages and quickly realised that current systems were inadequate.

Like many businesses that have expanded customer contact via the internet, Timberland started out using a standard application tool (Lotus CC) to manage email traffic as well as inquiries originating from the company's website. When the company decided that its on-line business was going to require a world-class electronic customer relationship management (eCRM) platform, consumer service manager Bill Bragger was instructed to identify the best solution.

Bragger and his team compiled a wish list of features and sought out companies offering software that they thought might handle everything they needed. Then they selected a small group of probables and ran comparison tests within the customer service department. The operators chose a system called

eGain as it was able to satisfy all Bragger's key 'must have' features.

He insisted that all agents must have access to the system, that it would be able to eliminate manual cut and paste functions and build a customer history file. It should also have robust productivity and reporting tools, such as being able to auto-categorise according to email types.

Because a large part of Timberland's business revolves around wholesale distribution, the company's specific consumer service needs are more complex compared to those of a traditional retailer. This was an important consideration during the search for a suitable eCRM platform. As Bragger says, "We are constantly touching customers through emails and on the website and that becomes the reference point for engaging the customer, regardless of the nature of the message." A further plus point was the ease and speed with which the system could be brought on-line in just six weeks.

Significant gains

Timberland says it has seen some significant gains. Despite the increased email traffic, consumer service department efficiency and productivity have reached all-time highs, both for individual operators and the team as a whole.

While email volume has increased at a rate of 30% annually to nearly 1,000 enquiries per week, productivity has risen by 50% and maintained an average response time of 24 hours without extra staff.

Where team leaders previously spent one hour a day manually compiling activity and productivity reports, detailed data is available on command and they are able to spend more time assisting customers and working with staff members.

Due to eGain Mail's easy user interface,

functional design and processing features, operator training that used to take eight hours now only takes 45 minutes. Team leaders can also have trainee responses routed to them for review before they are sent to the customer.

The company says it has found real advantages in the new system, including auto-acknowledgement of incoming emails, suggested responses based on previous experience and defining routing categories. Timberland is an international company and the majority of customers contact the company by email. The fact that emails can be automatically routed to a specialist in the geographic area and product concerned—allied with the fast response this also makes possible, has added considerably to customer satisfaction.

It is now in the process of redesigning the website, putting in more FAQs and making it even more user-friendly. There are around 1,000 customer sessions per week. Further applications for the system have been found beyond that of consumer services. The human resources department uses it to automatically advise potential employees that their resumés have been received, so creating a good impression in that person's mind. Corporate Communications and Investor Relations are seen as other areas that could also benefit in the future.

While eGain appears to have solved Timberland's problems, not every company is the same, so other software programmes may provide alternative answers. What is revealing, however, is the mental approach that Bill Bragger took in determining the best solution to his problem. His participational approach in having his operators involved in the selection process, would be a worthwhile model for anyone else faced with a similar situation. 