

Automating the Personal Touch

By Suzanne Aimee

Instant information... most of us have become accustomed to it and somewhat expect it, but have we lost something in the transition to automation? Not necessarily if you have mastered the techniques of creating the personal touch using technology.

Teleconferencing, web meetings, online collaboration space, email and other forms of electronic communication have transformed the way we work, and as technology continues to advance, our dependency on these services as a primary resource for conducting business continues to grow. Once reserved for the techie guru, the availability of such resources to the general public has become a convenient and affordable solution allowing for even greater competition in any given space. So, how do you differentiate yourself from the crowd using all the conveniences of automated services to create the personal touch?

The thought of all the devices and gadgets available on the market can be overwhelming but it's easier than you think, and just by implementing some (or all if you like) of the suggestions outlined below, you can create an automated campaign that is both a favorable and personable experience for your current or potential customers.

Automated Phone Services

If polled, auto-attendants would be at the top of the list of annoyances for most consumers; however, by taking a few extra steps and utilizing some of the flexibility automated phone services now provide, you can create a pleasant experience for your caller.

- Greet your callers with a pleasant introduction - a human voice is preferred to a computerized one.
- After the initial greeting, provide callers with the option to reach their desired party by entering an extension. State this option up front so the caller does not have to wade through any menus or dial by directory functions.
- Give callers the option to hit "0" at anytime for operator assistance. If you do not have a live person to handle operator functions for your company, there are plenty of affordable answering services you can forward this function to.
- Menu options should be useful and concise. Automated phone banking is a good example of building useful and concise end-user menus.

- In the general greeting or as an option on the menu, state your address, hours of operation, web site address, or take it to the next level and add fax-on-demand services.
- Make sure you have activated the call forwarding feature if you know you will be away from your office and available to take calls. This little step provides a subtle convenience to your caller by eliminating the need to redial another number.
- Voice mail options should include an alternate number where you can be reached or an alternate person to contact in your absence. Sometimes people just want to leave a message and that's just as well too. The important thing is to provide options.

Electronic Mail (Email)

Email is probably the most popular tool used in the automated world. It is instant communication, it is convenient (accessible anywhere there is an internet connection), and affordable (several free services). The ability to retrieve pertinent information quickly, flag items for follow-up, and send file attachments are just some of the automated functions that make it an invaluable tool for business. Because of its widely accepted use, make sure you are utilizing your email to its full potential.

- Use a signature block – standardize it company wide. Things to include your signature block: name (title optional), company name (for branding purposes, use the company logo where ever possible), mailing address, phone number(s), and web address (if applicable). Add this same signature block to your BlackBerry or other mobile device to keep your look unified.
- Avoid wallpaper or backgrounds and icons in your emails. These tend to clog up the recipients email and can cause formatting issues for the respondent.
- When responding to a new contact, make it easy for them to include you in their contact manager by attaching an Outlook vCard (an electronic business card).
- Use out of office replies or auto-responders when you will be out of the office. Be sure to include information on the length of time you will be out of the office and who to contact in your absence. Additionally, you can utilize auto-responders to create a marketing message. Announce changes in service, product launches or upcoming events.
- Use email to pass along articles or items of interest with a personal note.
Caution: Busy executives can receive up to 200+ emails a day, only messages of real relevance should be sent. Refrain from sending jokes or other items that might offend or annoy.

An alternative method for sending this type of information might be to print the article and send a handwritten note to the primary business location of the individual. Although not the automated way, it's still a nice personal touch.

Collaboration Space, Webinars, Video Conferencing.

More and more companies are taking advantage of the cost savings and conveniences these newer technologies afford. However, for the not so tech savvy person, they can sometimes seem intimidating and unwelcoming contributing to lost attendance. Offer your audiences a set of electronic instructions or have a representative of the service you are using provide training. Most will do this for free.

For co-contributors or guest presenters, do a run through to ensure everyone is comfortable with the technology and your presentation goes off without a hitch.

Web Sites

Your web site is your calling card to the world. Make it easy for interested parties to get in contact with you. The Contact Us page should be available throughout the site. A static link at the top or bottom of every page is suggested.

Information to include on a Contact Us page:

- Address information with a map or a link to a map.
- Telephone numbers.
- A Contact Us form that when submitted will return a formatted auto-response indicating a designated timeframe in which you will respond to inquires.
- Use your auto-reply as an opportunity to make those marketing announcements e.g., changes in service, new product rollouts etc.
- Verbiage alluding to the FAQs page as an alternative to submitting a support request.
- Add a live online chat (where applicable). Much like live phone support, this service is one that can be outsourced. Use Google to perform a search with the key phrase "outsourced live chat support" from there you should be able to research a provider that meets your particular needs.
- **Note:** If you choose to implement a live chat, either list the hours of availability or indicate whether the service is on or offline.

Customer Visits

Put your customers at ease. No matter how seasoned the professional, there is always a bit of anxiety when visiting a new place and meeting new people.

- Send the meeting agenda in advance.
- Include a map to the meeting location.
- Provide a lunch menu if lunch is to be included in the session.
- For extended stays, include a list of things to do and dining establishments in the area.
- Ask the hotel if welcome baskets are available for your guest's room.

Start by implementing some of the steps above and you'll soon find that creating an automated personal touch comes naturally... its how we all would like to be treated 😊

QUALITY

Countless, Unseen Details Are Often the Difference between Mediocre and Magnificent

This article was written by Suzanne Aimee, President and Founder of [Able Web Professionals](#). Ms. Aimee has 15 years of administrative and business support experience and has been helping small businesses develop successful online strategies for over 5 years.