



Pradeep Singh, CEO, Aditi Corporation, articulates the need for organisations to explore the new genre of customer service

Founded in 1994, Aditi Corporation has been providing technical support to software developers around the world through CompuServe Forums. With offices in Bellevue (Washington) and Bangalore, the company has handled over a million customers via e-mail and has recently released Talisma 1.0—its e-mail and Web form management software.

In an online interview, Pradeep Singh, the founder and CEO of the company, speaks about how companies need to re-examine and re-organise their customer service tools.

How important is electronic customer service (e-service) today?

Most people ask how important it will become. E-service is critical *today*. The Internet is fast changing the way companies communicate with their customers. Initially, companies found that featuring basic marketing information—brochures, press releases and so forth—on a Web site was adequate to communicate their corporate story. Then, sites began to offer

functionality for commerce and other transactions—e-commerce is at \$20 billion today and is projected to grow to \$200 billion in 2001. Almost overnight, a new type of customer appeared en masse—the e-customer.

The tools and processes have changed. Companies must adjust their strategies and address the needs of e-customers if they want to build strong relationships. They must provide e-service.

Can the customer expect his needs to be met through e-service?

The e-customer may need to interact with an organisation for a variety of reasons:

he may be looking for information before deciding to purchase anything; he may have queries about the status of his order, billing etc. E-customers prefer communicating via e-mail, for various reasons:

1 They cannot or do not want to wait for someone to assist them.

1 They will use the context of Web page information as the basis of their message inquiry or transaction.

1 They need the convenience of '24 hours a day seven days a week' messaging access.

1 They do not necessarily need to 'discuss' anything about the information they want or the transaction requested.

1 They want a well-documented audit trail of the two-way messaging interchange.

1 They want to eliminate the time, errors, and effort involved in transcribing detailed information during a live conversation.

1 They do not have the required second telephone line for an immediate live call-back while still connected to the Web.

1 They want to direct their communi-

cation to a very specific group or individual that may not be readily accessible real-time.

1 It is just more convenient and cheaper than a live connection.

Organisations need to recognise this and should be able to provide e-customers with reliable e-service. To the customer, therefore, e-service means customer service in the medium of his choice—electronic, in this case.

Web forms and e-mail are still being managed by people. Can we expect greater application of Artificial Intelligence in these areas?

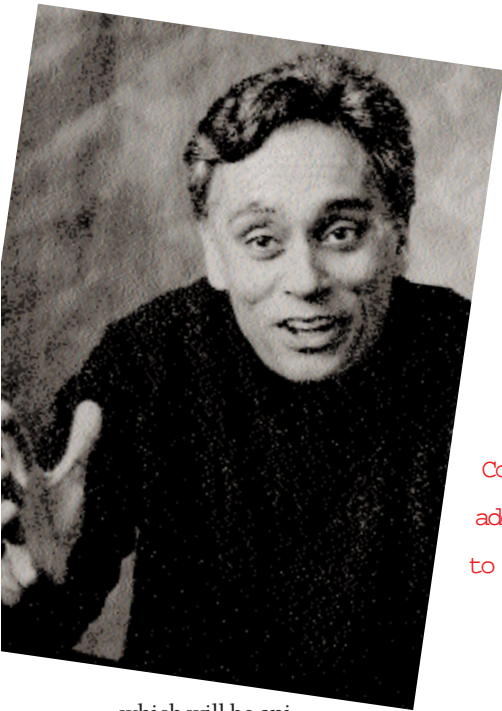
Are you being e-served?

Automatic actions (routing, categorising, responding) based on intelligent content identification are already here. They increase productivity and eliminate human intervention. However, you need to keep a few things in mind. For one, the more complex the AI technology, the more expensive is the solution.

Secondly, no AI technology is perfect today. So, the organisation needs to be aware of the accuracy levels and has to learn to live with the inaccuracies. And, finally, the element of personalisation is a very powerful factor in customer service. Automation, while increasing productivity, robs customer service of the personalisation angle.

How will e-service evolve to satisfy the increasing numbers of customers?

E-service will operate along three axes: e-mail, Web sites and other nodes of customer service like call centre, sales database etc. On the Web site, self-help will become popular. This can be through forms or through technological 'agents'



which will be animated characters and will guide the customer through the various steps in solving the problem. Customers who do not find the answer they are looking for, can use Web chat. For more details they can send e-mail, or even fill a Web form, which again will be sent as e-mail.

Web forms, being more structured,

will become prevalent. Automation and personalisation will co-exist as key features of an e-mail handling tool. Outsourcing of e-mail handling will pick up.

The e-mail handling tool will have to be integrated with various databases and applications in an organisation that has anything to do with customer records.

The tools and processes have changed. Companies must adjust their strategies and address the needs of e-customers if they want to build strong relationships

Call centre data, sales data, order tracking applications, will all be integrated. Eventually, there will be one pivotal customer database.

Relationships are becoming electronic —with e-commerce, e-business, e-mail, and e-service. Will we lose out on ‘the personal touch’?

E-relationships will be driven by person-

alisation. The advantage of an e-transaction (monetary or otherwise) is that the merchant can get information about a customer's preferences, choices, habits and personal needs. This can be done either through technology (pattern recognition) or explicit filling up of forms.

An example is Amazon Web site. If you search for a book, along with the details about that particular book, you also get a list of other books with a prompt “those who bought this book, also bought these books”. This is a great example of the level of personalised, technologically enabled, value-added service that can be achieved in an e-relationship.

Once the merchant has the information, he can leverage it to provide personalised service. He can display choice of goods relevant to his customer, at times convenient to him and provide personalised customer service. This creates a level of loyalty that is difficult to attain in the traditional form of doing business on a large scale.

NAINTARA JAIN 

1/2 Page AD