

## The Good, The Bad, And The Ugly Of Web Site Customer Service Response Time

### *What We Tested*

It was a slow day at Blue Penguin Development headquarters in the winter of 2001, when we decided to see just how responsive commercial web sites were to the inquiries of their customers.

Choosing a mix of 36 national and New England brand name companies, we visited each company's web site, found the "contact us" button, and emailed in our question, noting the date and exact time of our inquiry.

**The purpose of the test was to measure response turnaround time at each of the sites**, so we kept the questions simple, asking for either the nearest store location or the corporate mailing address of the company in question.

**When the answers came back, we noted the date and time again, and then simply calculated the time interval.**

18 months later (what can I tell you, we had another slow day), we did the test again with the exact same list of 36 companies; this time asking for the URL of the company web site.

*At Blue Penguin Development, we believe that the cultivation of a company's core relationships is fundamental to its success and profitability. We specialize in developing useful, interesting, and effective E-Newsletters for our clients.*

No penguins were harmed in the production of this report.

## *What We Learned*

### Response Time

- **The bad got worse:**
  - In the first test (Round 1), 7 of the 36 companies tested (19.4%) never even replied to our email! In the second test (Round 2), the number nearly doubled, with a full third of the companies (33.3%) not responding.
  - In Round 1, the longest time interval for a response was 169 hours (**Tower Records**). In Round 2, the longest interval grew to 174 hours (**Starbucks**).
- **The good got better:**
  - In Round 1, the fastest reply came back in just 9 minutes, from the **Massachusetts Registry of Motor Vehicles** (no, we're not kidding). In Round 2, the first place winner was **Bright Horizons**, which came back in *less than a minute*.
  - In Round 1, the top five companies came back with an answer in 55 minutes or less. 18 months later, the top five replied within the first 14 minutes.
- **Top 5 winners:**
  - Round 1:
    1. **Massachusetts RMV**
    2. **Fleet Bank**
    3. **General Cinema**
    4. **Mulberry Childcare**
    5. **The Boston Globe**
  - Round 2:
    1. **Bright Horizons**
    2. **Nordstrom**
    3. **Massachusetts RMV**
    4. **New England Cable News**
    5. **Amazon**

- **Little Consistency:**
  - Only the **Massachusetts RMV** scored in the top 5 in both studies.
  - Only **HBO** and **Oracle** failed to respond at all in both studies.
  
- **Promises Made (and sometimes broken)**
  - Of the companies tested, fewer than half (15) offered any indication on their web site as to how long it would be before an answer would be received.
  - Among those which did make a promise, the degree of commitment and time frame offered was all over the map, ranging from **Radio Shack** which simply promised a reply, "soon," (and then failed to respond at all) to **Nordstrom** which promised "one business day," and came back with an answer in 5 minutes.
  - Of the 9 companies that offered a specific time frame for a reply, 7 of them kept their promise.

### Customer Friendliness

- **Of the 22 Round 2 companies that replied,**
  - Only 15 included a personal salutation in the email (e.g. "Dear Michael").
  - Only 16 signed the email with the name of a real person at the responding company.
  
- **Are you authorized to ask that question?**
  - 10 of the companies required certain additional information from us before they would accept our question, even though all that was *needed* to answer the question was our email address.
  - **SAP** "won" the overall award in this category, requiring us to provide, "first name, last name, phone number, position, relationship to SAP, company, industry, street address, city, state, and zip," before accepting an inquiry. We couldn't help but wonder how much more information would be required if we actually wanted to give them our money.

### Miscellany

- **Can you guess who I am?**
  - Of the 22 companies that responded in Round 2, only 13 of them displayed the company name in the "from field" of the email.
  - The remaining 9 companies used a variety of approaches to populate the "from field," including, individual customer service rep names (5), generic terms like "feedback" (2), or names with no meaning at all (**Walmart's** reply for example, was sent from "help53.")
  
- **We don't really want to hear from you anyway**
  - The **Gold's Gym** web site suggested that if we got no response in a week, we should "check with our local gym," since "not all locations have the ability to retrieve email from their suggestion box."
  - **Grand Circle Travel** and **Terra Lycos** provided no way to communicate with the company electronically from the corporate web site .
  - **Dell Computer**, despite responding to our question in under two hours, cautioned on its web site that, "we may not reply to your inquiry."
  - **Pepsi** replied immediately with an automatically generated email that suggested we contact their customer relations department by phone, since it, "does not have a publicly available email address at this time."

### *What it Means*

- **There is still no standard regarding what constitutes an acceptable online response time.** Never mind the range in *actual* response times experienced, the range in promises made is just as wide! From "24 hours" to "48 hours" to "two business days" to the pathetic, "as quickly as possible," there is virtually no agreement regarding what the appropriate business rule should be.
- **The demise of the dot coms has caused many companies to completely take their eye off the online ball.** Despite 18 months more experience doing business online, many of the companies in this study performed much worse than in Round 1. And although it offers tremendous cost advantages relative to other inbound channels, online communications continue to be treated as nonessential parts of the customer care mix. In doing so, these companies are driving their customers back to the phones, if not away entirely.
- **Many companies continue to miss the point.** Rather than viewing customer generated online communications as an opportunity to open up a dialogue and strengthen relationships (thereby increasing marketing efficiency and blocking the competition), many businesses are building the same barriers online between themselves and the outside world as they've built with their impenetrable automated phone systems.
- **Say what you like, the Registry of Motor Vehicles is doing something right over there.**

## *What We Recommend*

1. **Look For Opportunities To Build Relationships.** As consumers, we're all tired of dealing with big (or small) impersonal businesses, and whatever you do to humanize the interactions with your company – particularly given how frequently this opportunity is missed by your competitors – the more you'll benefit.

*Greet customers by name in your emails; sign your correspondence with the name of a real person in your company; and above all, when somebody knocks on your "front door" with a question, answer it.*

2. **Don't Be Mistaken For A Spammer.** Companies like **Walmart** and **Tower Records** spend a great deal of effort testing the effectiveness of various "from fields" and subject lines in their email marketing campaigns, to ensure that their messages are not mistaken for spam and quickly deleted. When responding to a direct question however, these same companies pay little attention to how their email arrives, apparently forgetting that even a response to a question can be mistaken for spam when it shows up hours (or days) later.

*Just because you're replying to my question rather than sending a promotion, if it's not clear who you are, I'm just as likely to hit the delete key. Always make the name of your company visible in your email (without my having to open it), so that I know it's from you.*

3. **If You Want Feedback, Set The Bar As Low As Possible.** There is no cheaper or more efficient means for collecting real time, uncensored feedback from customers than inbound emails. The more barriers in the way however, the less of this you'll receive.

*It's fine to ask customers demographic and other questions on your "contact us" page, but don't require this information simply to accept a question.*

4. **Keep Your Promises.** The only thing worse than getting no reply, is being told that one is coming soon and *then* getting no reply.

*Develop clear business rules for email response turnaround, communicate these to your staff and the outside world, and then get organized so that you can meet your commitments.*

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Blue Penguin Development Web Site Feedback Tracking  
Round 1

Site	URL	Send	Received	Interval (Hr:Min:Sec)
MA RMV	<a href="http://www.massrmv.com">www.massrmv.com</a>	2/1/01 16:52	2/1/01 17:01	0:09:00
Fleet Bank	<a href="http://www.fleet.com">www.fleet.com</a>	12/2/00 22:30	12/2/00 22:50	0:20:00
General Cinema	<a href="http://www.generalcinema.com">www.generalcinema.com</a>	1/9/01 9:58	1/9/01 10:43	0:45:00
Mulberry Child Care	<a href="http://www.mulberrychildcare.com">www.mulberrychildcare.com</a>	12/5/00 10:36	12/5/00 11:26	0:50:00
Boston Globe	<a href="http://www.bostonglobe.com">www.bostonglobe.com</a>	12/18/00 9:39	12/18/00 10:34	0:55:00
Grand Circle Travel	<a href="http://www.gct.com">www.gct.com</a>	2/14/01 10:58	2/14/01 12:32	1:34:00
Eddie Bauer	<a href="http://www.eddiebauer.com">www.eddiebauer.com</a>	12/18/00 9:35	12/18/00 12:14	2:39:00
Pegasus	<a href="http://www.pgtv.com">www.pgtv.com</a>	1/12/01 14:17	1/12/01 17:03	2:46:00
Gold's Gym	<a href="http://www.goldsgym.com">www.goldsgym.com</a>	1/9/01 9:53	1/9/01 13:01	3:08:00
NECN	<a href="http://www.necn.com">www.necn.com</a>	1/17/01 10:48	1/17/01 14:30	3:42:00
Target	<a href="http://www.target.com">www.target.com</a>	12/7/00 9:46	12/7/00 15:03	5:17:00
Black and Decker	<a href="http://www.blackanddecker.com">www.blackanddecker.com</a>	1/31/01 17:40	2/1/01 7:49	14:09:00
Legal Seafoods	<a href="http://www.legalseafoods.com">www.legalseafoods.com</a>	12/2/00 22:30	12/3/00 18:51	20:21:00
CD Now	<a href="http://www.cdnw.com">www.cdnw.com</a>	12/18/00 15:59	12/19/00 15:08	23:09:00
Bright Horizons	<a href="http://www.brighthorizons.com">www.brighthorizons.com</a>	1/9/01 9:56	1/10/01 15:16	29:20:00
Federal Express	<a href="http://www.federalexpress.com">www.federalexpress.com</a>	2/27/01 0:00	2/28/01 10:29	34:29:00
Shaws Supermarkets	<a href="http://www.shaws.com">www.shaws.com</a>	12/2/00 22:30	12/4/00 14:32	40:02:00
The Container Store	<a href="http://www.containerstore.com">www.containerstore.com</a>	2/21/01 12:31	2/23/01 14:41	50:10:00
Radio Shack	<a href="http://www.radioshack.com">www.radioshack.com</a>	12/18/00 9:37	12/20/00 14:40	53:03:00
Lycos	<a href="http://www.lycos.com">www.lycos.com</a>	12/18/00 17:43	12/21/00 11:35	65:52:00
Amazon	<a href="http://www.amazon.com">www.amazon.com</a>	12/2/00 22:30	12/6/00 2:22	75:52:00
Kmart	<a href="http://www.kmart.com">www.kmart.com</a>	12/7/00 9:48	12/10/00 20:24	82:36:00
Macaroni Grill	<a href="http://www.macaronigrill.com">www.macaronigrill.com</a>	12/4/00 16:48	12/8/00 11:04	90:16:00
Nordstrom	<a href="http://www.nordstrom.com">www.nordstrom.com</a>	1/4/01 10:28	1/8/01 10:34	96:06:00
Finagle A Bagel	<a href="http://www.finagleabagel.com">www.finagleabagel.com</a>	1/17/01 15:49	1/22/01 9:34	113:45:00
SAP	<a href="http://www.sap.com">www.sap.com</a>	1/10/01 12:14	1/15/01 17:20	125:06:00
Pepsi	<a href="http://www.pepsi.com">www.pepsi.com</a>	1/31/01 17:46	2/6/01 13:02	139:16:00
Starbucks	<a href="http://www.starbucks.com">www.starbucks.com</a>	1/31/01 17:41	2/6/01 16:37	142:56:00
Tower Records	<a href="http://www.towerrecords.com">www.towerrecords.com</a>	12/5/00 11:39	12/12/00 12:42	169:03:00
Boston Biz Journal	<a href="http://www.bizjournals.com">www.bizjournals.com</a>	12/28/00 10:58	NA	
Dell Computer	<a href="http://www.dell.com">www.dell.com</a>	12/21/00 11:42	NA	
HBO	<a href="http://www.homeboxoffice.com">www.homeboxoffice.com</a>	1/9/01 10:34	NA	
Office Max	<a href="http://www.officemax.com">www.officemax.com</a>	12/28/00 14:27	NA	
Oracle	<a href="http://www.oracle.com">www.oracle.com</a>	1/17/01 12:54	NA	
Toyota	<a href="http://www.toyota.com">www.toyota.com</a>	1/31/01 17:44	NA	
Walmart	<a href="http://www.walmart.com">www.walmart.com</a>	12/2/00 22:30	NA	

Blue Penguin Development Web Site Feedback Tracking  
Round 2

Site	Send	Received	Interval (Hr:Min:Sec)	Turnaround Promise	From Field	Personal Salutation?	Signed?
Bright Horizons	6/6/02 11:27	6/6/02 11:27	0:00:00	no	Individual's name, no company	no	yes
Nordstrom	6/4/02 12:20	6/4/02 12:25	0:05:00	qualified 1 bus day	<a href="mailto:orders@nordstrom.com">orders@nordstrom.com</a>	Yes	yes
MA Registry Motor Vehicles	6/4/02 11:54	6/4/02 12:03	0:09:00	no	Feedback, no company	Yes	No
New England Cable News	6/6/02 11:39	6/6/02 11:49	0:10:00	no	Individual's name, no company	no	no
Amazon	6/6/02 11:31	6/6/02 11:45	0:14:00	usually within 24 hours	<a href="mailto:cust.serv02@amazon.com">cust.serv02@amazon.com</a>	yes	yes
Boston Globe	6/4/02 12:07	6/4/02 13:13	1:06:00	qualified 2 bus days	<a href="mailto:bgep_feedback@boston.com">bgep_feedback@boston.com</a>	no	no
Tower Records	6/6/02 12:15	6/6/02 13:23	1:08:00	as soon as possible	Feedback, no company	yes	yes
Boston Biz Journal	6/6/02 12:02	6/6/02 13:29	1:27:00	no	Individual's name, no company	no	yes
Dell Computer	6/6/02 11:59	6/6/02 13:53	1:54:00	we may not reply	<a href="mailto:csd@dell.com">csd@dell.com</a>	yes	yes
The Container Store	6/6/02 12:06	6/6/02 15:10	3:04:00	soon	contain	yes	yes
Fleet Bank	6/4/02 12:01	6/4/02 16:04	4:03:00	qualified 1 bus day	<a href="mailto:onlinesupport@fleet.com">onlinesupport@fleet.com</a>	yes	no
Office Max	6/6/02 12:04	6/6/02 16:18	4:14:00	we should reply in 24 hours	OnlineCSR16	no	yes
Eddie Bauer	6/6/02 11:43	6/6/02 20:55	9:12:00	promptly	<a href="mailto:customercare@csc.eddiebauer.com">customercare@csc.eddiebauer.com</a>	yes	yes
Target	6/4/02 12:14	6/5/02 8:11	19:57:00	will do our best. . Within 36 hours	Target Guest Relations	yes	yes
Legal Seafoods	6/4/02 12:09	6/5/02 9:07	20:58:00	no	Individual's name, no company	yes	yes
Finagle A Bagel	6/6/02 11:14	6/7/02 9:28	22:14:00	no	Individual's name, no company	yes	yes
Black and Decker	6/6/02 11:33	6/7/02 15:18	27:45:00	two business days	<a href="mailto:support.blackanddecker@bdkmail.com">support.blackanddecker@bdkmail.com</a>	yes	no
CD Now	6/4/02 12:16	6/6/02 7:14	42:58:00	24 hours	CD Now Order Info	yes	yes
Pegasus Communicatons	6/6/02 11:47	6/8/02 15:45	51:58:00	no	<a href="mailto:customerrelations@pgtv.com">customerrelations@pgtv.com</a>	no	yes
Toyota	6/6/02 11:24	6/10/02 16:24	101:00:00	you should receive a response	<a href="mailto:toyota_cares@toyota.com">toyota_cares@toyota.com</a>	no	no
Walmart	6/6/02 11:18	6/11/02 2:23	111:05:00	48 hour response	help53	yes	yes
Starbucks	6/6/02 12:13	6/13/02 18:55	174:42:00	will respond as quickly as possible	Customer Relations (Starbucks)	yes	yes
Federal Express	6/6/02 11:28	NA		no			
General Cinema	6/4/02 12:03	NA		no			
Gold's Gym	6/6/02 11:51	NA		no			
Grand Circle Travel	Does not accept	NA		no			
HBO	6/6/02 11:16	NA		no			
Kmart	6/6/02 11:55	NA		no			
Lycos	Does not accept	NA		NA			
Macaroni Grill	6/6/02 11:56	NA		no			
Mulberry Child Care	No longer in business			NA			
Oracle	6/6/02 12:17	NA		no			
Pepsi	6/6/02 12:11	NA		NA			
Radio Shack	6/6/02 11:30	NA		soon			
SAP	6/6/02 12:10	NA		soon			
Shaws Supermarkets	6/4/02 12:17	NA		no			



**Blue Penguin Development Web Site Feedback Tracking**  
Round 2

Site	Notes
Bright Horizons	
Nordstrom	Required first, last, phone, email. Rejected my comments saying "special characters not allowed," until I removed all punctuation (4 attempts)
MA Registry Motor Vehicles	cryptic subject line almost made me miss it.
New England Cable News	
Amazon	
Boston Globe	
Tower Records	
Boston Biz Journal	
Dell Computer	Required first and last, "while all messages are read, individual replies may not be possible."
The Container Store	Required first and last
Fleet Bank	autoreply promised 1 day turnaround
Office Max	Required first, last and phone number
Eddie Bauer	Required first, last, street, city, state and zip to ask
Target	
Legal Seafoods	
Finagle A Bagel	
Black and Decker	Required first, last, phone and "creation of account"
CD Now	
Pegasus Communicatons	
Toyota	Took 10 minutes to find where to submit. Required name, address, city, state, zip, are you a toyota owner, and "creation of account."
Walmart	
Starbucks	Required first and last
Federal Express	
General Cinema	
Gold's Gym	Told me to check with local gym if no response in a week, as "not all locations have the ability to retrieve email from their suggestion box."
Grand Circle Travel	Would not accept email inquiry. Only gave address and phone number
HBO	
Kmart	
Lycos	Now Terra Lycos. Could not find a place to submit a question.
Macaroni Grill	Required first and last names if I wanted a reply to my comment
Mulberry Child Care	Mail returned. No longer in business
Oracle	
Pepsi	Replied with an autogenerated email to say I should call their consumer relations department, who "does not have a publically available email address at this time."
Radio Shack	
SAP	Required first, last, phone, position, relationship to SAP, company, industry, street, city, state, zip and topic area selection
Shaws Supermarkets	