Level: B2: Upper Intermediate

Skill: Reading

Don't hang up!

The strange death of the company phone number

"We have removed our telephone number," said a note on the website of a photography business I needed to contact in a hurry last week.

"It's because we've noticed customers prefer to chat online, via email or by filling in the form below," it added.

Yeah, right, I thought, as I grumpily filled in the online form and hit "submit", sending my query off to some digital netherworld where I doubted it would be seen by anything as costly as a human.

As it happened someone did respond, quite quickly, by email. But by then I had already spoken to a rival business that had a phone number on its site, and a person who quickly picked up – a fact I relayed to the first company with a degree of triumph I am not proud of.

The thing is, the numberless business was at least being open about its intentions. A growing number of organisations have quietly dispensed with website phone numbers, or made them so hard to find that they may as well not exist. This was happening long before the pandemic spurred a wave of digital commerce. Reaching a person at places like Facebook has been so famously difficult that even police officers have complained.

But it has reached the point that today the sight of a prominent company phone number is becoming notable and having a call answered quickly by a person feels like winning some sort of jackpot. We all know why this happens. People are expensive. For Covid-battered businesses, cost efficiency is crucial. A lot of queries can be easily answered online. Nuisance calls are rife.

Still, a backlash is taking shape. Spain this year moved to require companies to answer customer calls within three minutes, with a flesh-and-blood employee, and similar efforts are afoot in the UK. The question is, why don't more companies seize on the deepening fury about clueless customer service and make a competitive virtue of offering better support?

II wondered about this earlier this year on a visit to Australia, where the Telstra telecommunications group was boldly advertising its decision to bring all its call centres back home. The move follows years of complaints from fed-up customers, which can become especially acute during big floods and other weather disasters that have battered the country in recent years.

The UK telecoms group BT finished a similar call centre onshoring effort before the pandemic hit, and says it has seen big benefits. Customer gripes have plunged so much that BT, which once had some of the worst levels of complaints in the sector, now outperforms industry averages. Call centre efficiency is also higher. "We are about 30 per cent more efficient and effective," a spokesperson told me last week, adding it was a mistake to think that only older people wanted to talk to a person on the phone.

While a lot of queries can be dealt with online, calling remains the first preference for customers for any complex or sensitive problem and "this does not really differ by demographic".

The advantages of offering decent customer service has always been obvious to business leaders such as Tony Hsieh, the late US founder of the Zappos online shoe empire. He believed repeat customers and word of mouth were crucial to driving sales revenues up from less than $2mn to more than $1bn in just 10 years.

"On many websites the contact information is buried at least five links deep, because the company doesn't really want to hear from you. And when you find it, it's a form or an email address," he once wrote in Harvard Business Review. Zappos took the "exact opposite approach", putting its phone number at the top of every page on its website and training staff to go out of their way to help people. "As unsexy and low-tech as it may sound, the telephone is one of the best branding devices out there," he said.

Hsieh sold Zappos for $1.2bn in 2009 to Amazon, a company that also lacks prominent phone numbers but ranks highly for customer satisfaction thanks to its online service.

Few companies match the might of Amazon but thousands could follow the ethos of Tony Hsieh – before governments force them into it.

LIVEWORKSHEETS

Level: B2: Upper Intermediate

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Choose the best way to complete each sentence according to the information in the article.

1. In the writer's experience, ...
a. customers prefer to chat online rather than fill in a form.
b. a phone call is better, even though some companies do reply quickly to online queries.
c. it is better to leave a message when you call a company and they take forever to pick up the phone.

2. Even police officers have complained about how ...
a. difficult it is to talk to a real person at companies like Facebook.
b. long it takes to receive a reply to an email from companies like Facebook.
c. terrible digital commerce has become after the pandemic.

3. After the pandemic, many companies chose to ...
a. go all-digital so people would not have to interact with each other.
b. put their phone numbers at the top of their website.
c. cut costs, which meant fewer people answering phones.

4. In Spain, companies now must ...
a. reply to emails within three days.
b. have an automated reply menu.
c. answer phones within three minutes.

5. Telstra and BT are examples of companies that ...
a. have brought their call centres back home.
b. focused more on older customers.
c. got rid of their company phone numbers.

6. Zappos believes the key to success is ...
a. a high-tech approach.
b. always helping customers.
c. burying contact information.

LIVEWORKSHEETS