

The science and art of successful customer communications

Successful communications with customers – interactions that drive sales or improve service retention – are dependent on contacting the right person at the right time with the right message.

Digital marketing company Marketing Delivery believes that that success is dependent on having a detailed customer contact plan, a willingness to use whatever platform the customer is using and a rigorous approach to customer data, a view endorsed by three of its dealer group clients.

Contact plan

Whether a customer has been with a business for several years or a would-be car buyer has just enquired about a vehicle, ongoing, personalised, relevant contact is vital to improving sales conversions and service retention.

There's also another benefit. Fully mobile-optimised, rich content messages drive measurable traffic to clients' websites.

Swansway Group, which represents 14 car brands in more than 23 locations, has been a partner of Marketing Delivery for four years. An ongoing communications plan swings into action as soon as a person makes contact, tailored according to the nature of their enquiry and their response.

Marketing manager Anna Ling said: "We contact the right person at the right time with the right message. The contact plan is continually evolving and we adapt it slightly all the time."

For service, Swansway converts 35% of inbound traffic while enquiry-to-sales conversion rates are 6% higher than those for people who are not placed on the contact plan at 34%.

Ling said: "Our communications plans have become quite complex depending on where a person is in the buying cycle and how they respond to previous communications. Likewise, calls are triggered according to customer behaviour depending on their response to our eCRM messages. I don't think we will ever stop tweaking our strategy. It has to evolve constantly to meet changing customer behaviour and different market conditions."

Endeavour Group, which operates 10 Volvo and Hyundai dealerships in and around London, has been fully operational with its communication strategy for about a year.

Alasdair Jakes, Endeavour's group marketing manager, said: "We communi-

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cate in a structured way, but there's flexibility, allowing sales executives to make personal contact between the email communications.

"The strategy has focused us on logging every lead and ensuring we have the right information. We are much more disciplined at collecting the information and customers receive consistent, regular and relevant communications.

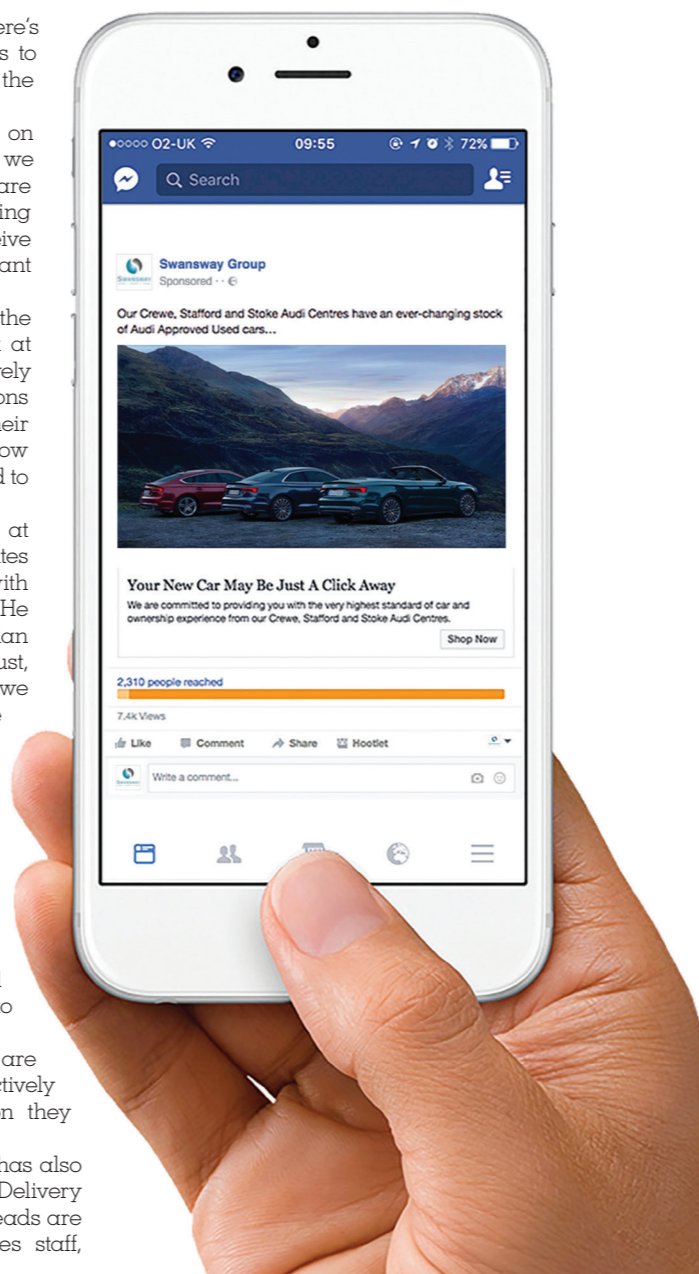
"It has changed the culture of the business in terms of how we look at leads and that has been massively important. People still make decisions about a business based on how their enquiry is handled and we are now confident every enquiry is managed to a high standard."

Dean Adams, head of marketing at Sinclair Group, which operates 20 sites across Wales, has been working with Marketing Delivery for four years. He said: "We had a customer contact plan in place and we felt it was fairly robust, but it was labour-intensive. Now we have a seamless system and we can look at a whole range of performance data such as open rates in real time. It means we can continually fine-tune our communications according to how they are performing."

Adams believes Marketing Delivery's communications strategy has helped boost conversion rates by about 5% and email open rates have risen from 35% to the mid-50s.

He said: "It is because we are targeting people much more effectively and sending them the information they want to receive."

Resurrecting so-called lost leads has also delivered results. Marketing Delivery research shows that while 64% of leads are typically marked as 'lost' by sales staff, about 40% remain in-market.



A 'lost' sale is often the result of a car that doesn't match the customer's desired specification. Car Alerts acts as a 'silent salesperson' by auto-subscribing customers who haven't progressed their enquiry to updates on the latest similarly specified stock.

Jakes estimated that the system resurrects about 150 enquiries a month that would otherwise potentially fall by the wayside.

"Around 25 to 30 go on to make a purchase. That's a good return on investment in the Marketing Delivery system on its own," he said.

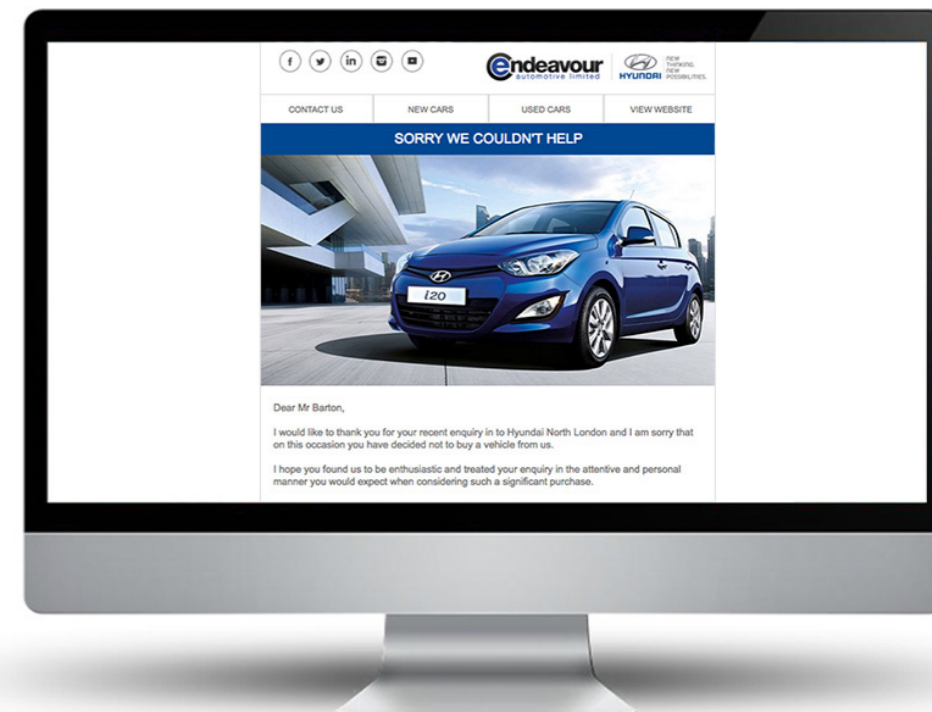
Adams said: "If someone has made an enquiry, but doesn't progress on the journey, we send them a follow-up email after eight weeks to see if they are still in-market. We have definitely seen customers come back as a result. A sales executive knows there's a safety net if a potential buyer drops off the radar."

Incorporating social media

To deal with the increasing number of consumers engaging with brands via Facebook, Marketing Delivery advises dealers to incorporate the platform into its communications mix. Sinclair Group and Swansway are two of those which have done so. Marketing Delivery's Social Relationship Management (SRM) programme cross-checks customer data and places targeted adverts in prospects' social media feeds.

Adams said: "We are now taking a much more integrated approach. By linking the customer journey across social platforms, and being able to do that seamlessly, we have seen more traction from our SMS and email contact campaigns. If a customer's car has an MOT due, we will send out the usual text and email reminders, but back that up with messages in their social media feed. Where we are communicating with customers across all platforms we are seeing higher conversion rates.

"We are in a world where customer preferences are changing. Not all customers want to be spoken to in exactly the same way, so being able to talk to them using multiple methods means we are more likely to reach



more people. The next level will be understanding exactly how each individual wants to be contacted and just speak to them in that way so we create a genuinely personalised journey."

Ling said: "Our Facebook advertising is highly targeted, so there is no wastage. We use Facebook to support our ongoing customer relationship management plans to target customers with appropriate messages. So if someone had enquired about an Audi A4, they would receive emails and SMS messages according to the contact plan, but we would also show them Facebook adverts relating to the vehicle. Likewise, if a customer's MOT is due, we can reinforce the messages we send according to the contact plan using targeted Facebook advertising."

Data

Driving both a dealer's customer contact plan and its integrated Facebook campaign is accurate data.

Ling said: "Our directors undertake a data roadshow, visiting all our dealerships every year to underline the importance of data."

Swansway operates a 'live' database – any customer who has been active in the past three years. The group has set a target of 80% accuracy for its data capture and is currently running at 92%. A sophisticated

reporting and tracking procedure ensures basic information such as name, email, mobile, service date and MOT due date are all recorded.

Ling said: "Data is everyone's responsibility, that's the key to getting this right."

As a result of Marketing Delivery's focus on collating accurate data to boost results, Jakes is also confident sales teams are working from a much more robust prospect database.

He said: "We have seen a massive benefit in terms of email capture and ensuring we have the correct information for service and MOT reminders. If there's information missing from an enquiry on the system, we have a robust way of checking and chasing up. If I see something, I ping it back to the sales executive to check. It's that level of detail, but we are a retailing environment and we have to be that methodical and fastidious."

Adams said: "Marketing Delivery provides us with wide-ranging data quality insights, highlighting key information, such as next service dates. Our top-performing sites achieve around 80% data accuracy, but it's been quite a journey to reach this level and there's still work to do. On average, our data accuracy is at 70%, which has risen from 55%. We want to get to 80% across the board."

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