



Inbound Email Response: Digital Marketing's Last Mile

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Executive Summary

Digital Marketing is a technique that uses internet channels (web, email, kiosk, voice-over-IP, etc.) towards direct response and ultimately the acquisition and/or retention of clients. Email marketing in particular is an extremely popular digital marketing tool due to its cost effectiveness and accessibility by consumers.

In recent years, email has evolved into the preferred way for companies to enable their customers to interact with the business in a self-service fashion. This approach allows customers to get the help they need when they need it.

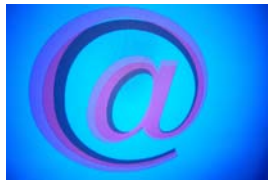
But there is complexity and lackluster response standards. For example, most companies' direct response investment is sunk into contact centers (also known as call centers). These are operations where agents or employees initiate outbound or field inbound communications to/from customers. Communications are customer service or support related. So, marketers are out of the loop.

The "last mile" is where things slow down. This is when an email from a buyer waits for a contact center person to open and reply. Organizations can do better. Attaining the standard of 100% response within 12 hours is possible and in fact should become the new standard towards which all organizations must adhere.

Bamboo Cricket illustrates its hybrid solution of combining technology with human approaches with a real world example of a client engaged as business to business publisher.

Bamboo Cricket sets the customer satisfaction bar higher, increases marketing effectiveness and enables high ROI. Bamboo Cricket provides its clients with the final push needed to make its digital marketing strategy a complete success.

Digital Marketing History



The end game of direct marketing is to generate “direct response” from a consumer or business, as a result of a targeted, personalized communication. It is used to address commercial messages towards individual consumers. This direct response takes the form of a phone call, letter, email or face-to-face visit.

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In recent years, email has evolved into the preferred way for companies to enable their customers to interact with the business in a self-service fashion. This approach allows customers to get the help they need when they need it.

The leading digital marketing advisory firm states that the volume of outbound emails by marketers to customers that opt-in to receive them increased by 90% since 2004. Over the same period, there has been a congruent increase in inbound email response back to marketers by their customers.

Marketing Out of the Loop

Most companies' direct response investment is sunk into contact centers (also known as call centers). These are operations where agents or employees initiate outbound or field inbound communications to/from customers. Communications are customer service or support related. So, marketers are out of the loop.

Company executives work hard to sustain value from these investments. Therefore, it is no surprise that most commercially available inbound response solutions are engineered for contact centric companies, without consideration for digital response or marketing endeavors.

CRM Integration

Well respected analysts recommend the integration of inbound response programs into fully automated multi-channel customer relationship management systems (CRM) instead of stand-alone or hybrid human-based approaches. Yet, the experience is that CRM has a 50% failure rate, delivering poor ROI and low customer satisfaction results.

In the real world, digital marketers are disconnected from the operation and management of customer service/support teams in the contact centers. The irony is that digital marketing programs can increase customer satisfaction.

The Decline in Customer Satisfaction

Money is invested and outbound email programs are launched, with the resulting connection with a desired audience. But before commercial transactions are initiated, the consumer initiates a response. Increasingly, this takes the form of an email.

What marketers receive is not just the messages from clients ready to buy. They receive SPAM, out of office messages, unsubscribe requests, and challenge response.

"Lackluster e-mail response times continue to plague the online customer service landscape. A broad failure of organizations to implement e-mail automation applications has decreased consumers' satisfaction with e-mail support. With dedicated resources and appropriate technology, companies can improve response effectiveness and efficiency, and lower the cost per contact of e-mail." (Jupiter Research Vision Report, July 8, 2005).

In the midst of this are the legitimate customer service requests that lead to customer acquisition and satisfaction. It is no wonder that most marketers fail when it comes to responding inbound customer service emails.

Many companies utilize auto-responders. This is a set message that is emailed to someone immediately after they initiate an inbound email. When an auto-reply message is received by a customer, that individual is required to take additional steps. Many will simply give up and not take those steps, generating even more dissatisfaction.

Increased Complexity

As stated previously, the practice is to integrate inbound email response into CRM systems. With this tight integration came complexity. As a result, the timely sorting, routing, and response to high value inbound customer emails received low priority against traditional inbound voice calls.

In the real world, email marketers receive 6 – 8% of outbound volume as inbound response. For some organizations, this can be in excess of 100,000 messages to process every month. To illustrate the impact this is having, let us use an example. A leading publisher receives approximately 17% of all inbound emails as high value communications. In this case, these are unsubscribe requests. The challenge is identifying them and responding quickly to ensure customer satisfaction and compliance.

Effectively, compliance is addressed by the CAN-SPAM Act of 2003 (Controlling the Assault of Non-Solicited Pornography and Marketing Act). This act establishes requirements for those who send commercial email, spells out penalties for spammers and companies whose products are advertised in spam if they violate the law, and gives consumers the right to ask e-mailers to stop spamming them (<http://business.ftc.gov/documents/bus61-can-spam-act-compliance-guide-business>).

By the very nature of its business and presence in its domain, the publisher must be completed quickly in order to ensure that the subscriber continues to receive the publisher's value added, time sensitive information.

The Case for Inbound Email Response

“For most people and applications, the biggest issue will not be search but filtering: so much will be knowable, but what do you want to know.” (Esther Dyson, Wall Street Journal, May 2006)

This statement sets the stage for shifting resources into email response within the business world for both marketers and buyers. The marketers’ mission is to manage, or to use Dyson’s term – “filter” the flow of its marketing messages to ensure that they reach the right buyer at the right time. The buyers’ mission is to ensure that they only receive the ones they perceive to be the highest value.

The “win-win” is being able to ensure that the inbound response from buyers is engineered in such a way that not a single inbound email is lost. The buyer gets closer on the first try, the marketers gets to secure new clients and retain existing ones in an efficient manner.

Conditioned to Email

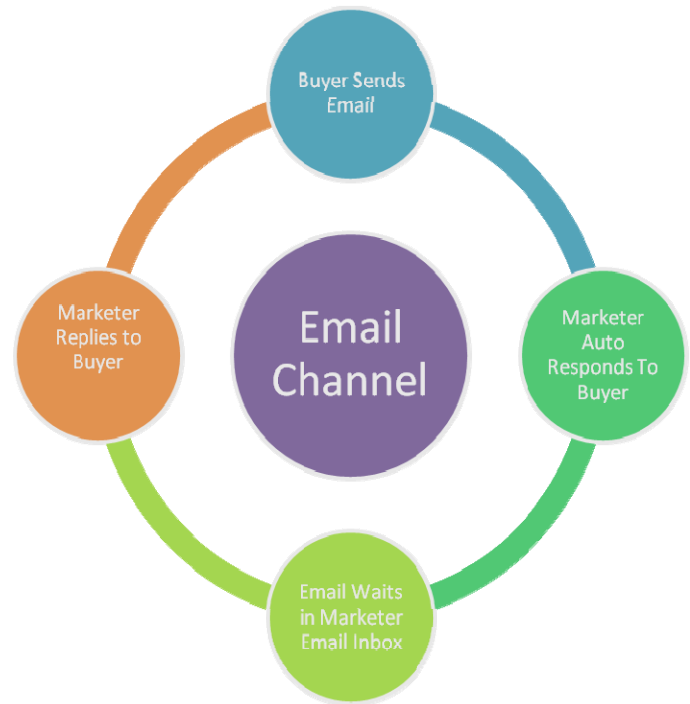
Consumers have become conditioned to utilizing search engines to initiate product/service research. Marketers recognize this and build sophisticated search engine programs to get their fair share of buyers. The Web-Life-Style and Web-Work-Style we operate in integrates not just personal computers and laptops, but newer web enabled devices. Significantly these tools are email enabled. Even our vehicles transmit messages as to its location or need for service. As consumers we take it for granted that we can initiate emails from whatever device we are on, whether it is a Blackberry, or Xbox.

Mapping the Email Channel

What happens when a consumer or business person initiates an email to a company offering a product or service?

1. Buyer sends Email: The message, addressed to a corporate email address such as info@ or sales@ is received into a general delivery email box.

2. Auto-Response: An auto-responder sometimes sends an acknowledgement back giving the opportunity to find the answer to the query by going to a website or FAQ.
3. Email Waits: The email then resides waiting patiently for a human to read it and respond.
4. Reply: Typically a contact centre agent assigned to this task on a part time basis processes the general delivery email box and responds.



Step 4 – the “Last Mile” is where things slow down. In some cases the response isn’t initiated for weeks. This may be due a lack of resources or poor technology or processes. The answer is probably a bit of each.

However, given the very nature of most general delivery corporate email boxes, are saturated with hundreds, if not thousands of SPAM messages. Thereby leaving legitimate emails to get stale or lost in the mass. Meanwhile the prospective customer loses patience and takes their business elsewhere.

100% Response Standard

To mitigate this risk, organizations incorporate customer relationship management strategies with limited success as stated by a leading research firm:

“Companies have succeeded in migrating consumers to the channel for both commerce and support. Approximately the same number of consumers used self-service as used the phone or email at least once in the last 6 months. However contact deflection initiatives have only had marginal success with poor self service resolution exacerbating rising cost-intensive inquiry volumes.” (Jupiter Research in Online Self Service 2005)

The very mission of deflection and the migration of channels is the reduction of costs at the expense of spiralling customer satisfaction.

Marketers can do better. Attaining the standard of 100% email response within 12 hours is possible and should in fact become the new standard towards which all organizations must adhere.

Solutions for Inbound Email Response

Workflow in the “Last Mile”

Companies use a variety of approaches to managing the workflow in the “last mile” of email marketing. But essentially they employ either a Manual (Desktop) or Automated (Server) based approach.

Neither approach delivers the required 100% sub 12 hour response necessary to maintain high levels of customer satisfaction and effective closure of customer service inquiries.

Here’s what each looks like:

Automated Response

The vast majority of organizations that discover the break in the “last mile” employ fully automated Means to bridge the gap. There are commercially available solutions that can be employed at the network or desktop level to manage the email flow. There are two types of automated solutions: Email Deflection Tools and Email Routing.

- *Email Deflection* is defined as –” The tool works by suggesting appropriate knowledge-base (KB) entries before e-mail inquiries go to agents for review.” (Self-Service Best Practices – Beyond Contact Deflection, SSPA News, May 2006, Zachary McGeary, Associate Analyst, Jupiter Research) This approach requires the creation of an archive of information and use of sophisticated systems.
- *Email Routing* is straight forward forwarding of emails to contact centre agents without any level of intelligent filtering. There are obvious shortcomings here – increased labour and cost come to mind.

Manual Response

Other organizations will utilize simple desktop email applications to track and reply to email one by one. In this case a single email inbox is created within a desktop email client tool such as Microsoft Outlook, Eudora or Mazola Thunderbird. Assigned employees then process this inbox, read and respond to email.

There are downsides to operating a manual email response process – reduced accuracy, increased cost, poor resource allocation and unwieldy management reporting.

The Key Differentiator

Bamboo Cricket's hybrid solution of combining technology with human approach is the most feasible most economic inbound processing solution. Using a jointly created Inbound Email Processing Matrix, a client is assured each inbound email is processed accurately, according to specification.

Proper inbound email processing positively contributes to a client's bottom line, providing the client with the final push needed to make its digital marketing strategy a complete success. A 100% email response standard can be achieved within a rapid time frame. At Bamboo Cricket Services, 100% response is delivered to a sub-12 hour standard.

To demonstrate how let's use a real world example.

A Real World Example

Bamboo Cricket Client Background

A business to business publisher serving a wide range of industries, while maintaining an online subscriber base of 1.5 million was employing internal resource to manage their inbound email.

This client fielded over 150 electronic newsletters to its base. It was therefore critical for this publisher to attain 100% email response in order to maintain CAN-SPAM compliance and increase levels of customer satisfaction.

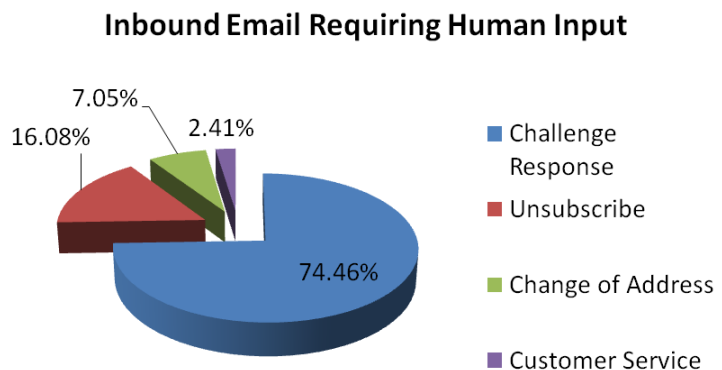
The organization was utilizing non-automated means to manage their inbound response from their clients.

The Problem

The client received 6 to 8% of their outbound volume as inbound response.

This represented more than 100,000 emails processed every month by internal resources.

9.46% of their inbound emails were high value communications requiring human intervention.



The challenge was sorting, routing and response to these high value inbound customer emails in an environment lacking in automation.

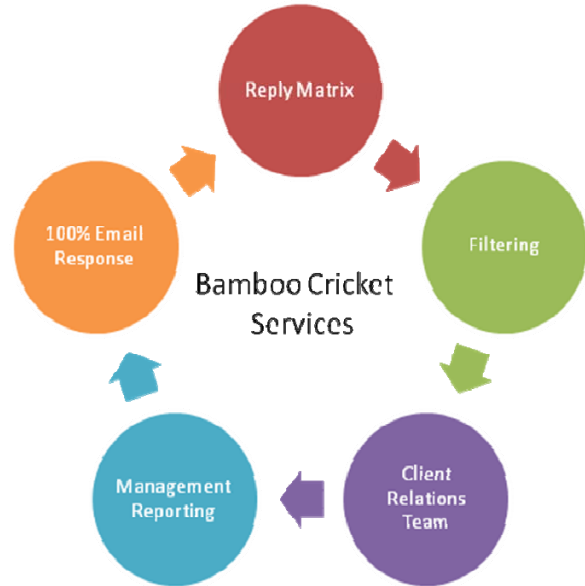
Bamboo Cricket Solution Overview

Bamboo Cricket proposed an effective, permanent inbound email response program to manage this base and enable subscriber growth and retention.

This cost effective solution combined technology and human approaches to attain 100% response.

Results Attained

- 30 Day Rollout
- 24/7/365 Email Response
- 3% per Month Increase in Subscriber List Accuracy
- 12 Hour Customer Service Response
- 9.7% Increase in Delivered Emails
- Daily and monthly reports outlining the inbound processing statistics, as well as cumulative statistics for the month.



Conclusion

Set the Customer Satisfaction Bar Higher

Compliance with CAN-SPAM is not enough. Sub-12 Hour 100% email response can be rapidly and cost effectively delivered.

Increase Digital Marketing Effectiveness

Bamboo Cricket Services will dramatically improve the effectiveness of ongoing marketing programs by bridging the gap in the “Last Mile”.

Enable Higher Marketing ROI

Bamboo Cricket Services enables higher revenues and lower cost of client acquisition, retention and loyalty.

Glossary of Terms

Autoresponder - a set message that is emailed to someone immediately after they request it

Blacklists - Lists of domains and IP addresses that have been reported or accused of sending spam. Check at www.openrbl.org

Bounce back handling - The process of dealing with email messages that bounce. Caused by a 'bad' email address or an address that is temporarily over its size quota or on a server that is temporarily down.

Bounces – Emails that have been sent back to sender as the recipient email address was invalid or presently not working.

CAN-SPAM - The CAN-SPAM Act of 2003 (Controlling the Assault of Non-Solicited Pornography and Marketing Act) establishes requirements for those who send commercial email, spells out penalties for spammers and companies whose products are advertised in spam if they violate the law, and gives consumers the right to ask emailers to stop spamming them. The law, which became effective January 1, 2004, covers email whose primary purpose is advertising or promoting a commercial product or service, including content on a Web site. A "transactional or relationship message" – email that facilitates an agreed-upon transaction or updates a customer in an existing business relationship – may not contain false or misleading routing information, but otherwise is exempt from most provisions of the CAN-SPAM Act. The Federal Trade Commission (FTC), the nation's consumer protection agency, is authorized to enforce the CAN-SPAM Act. CAN-SPAM also gives the Department of Justice (DOJ) the authority to enforce its criminal sanctions. Other federal and state agencies can enforce the law against organizations under their jurisdiction, and companies that provide Internet access may sue violators, as well.

Click through tracking – the ability to track the number of persons who click a specific link in an email

CRM – customer relationship management. The ability to keep track of every interaction with every prospect and customer and keeps tracks of trends and tabulates results of such notes on an aggregate scale. Essentially, an intelligent interface that allows keeping notes of every action, sale, phone call, email, fax, etc. Allows businesses to better know their customers and target messages to portions of their customers and prospects.

Domain - what one types in to go to your web site. Yahoo.com is an example of a domain. The “.com” is a TLD, which is called a third level domain.

Email client – what a person uses to view their email. Popular email clients include Microsoft Outlook, AOL mail reader, and Eudora. There are also popular web-based email clients including Hotmail and Yahoo. Often, HTML messages will display differently in different email clients. If a customer reports a

message that has displayed improperly, one of the first questions to ask is what email client they were viewing the message in.

Email marketing software – Allows users to send out newsletters to their lists and track results. Standard features include mail-merge personalization, message scheduling, and bounceback handling. Generally, email marketing software is also email list management software.

Ezine – An ‘electronic magazine.’ Essentially the same as an email newsletter. Usually sent on a regular schedule. Contains content. Not an announcement or promotion list.

FAQ – a list of frequently asked questions.

HTML – Hypertext mark-up language, the basic programming language of the Internet.

HTML templates – An arrangement of graphics within which an email newsletter can be pasted. We offer a service of custom HTML newsletter creation. Many customers have their own template already, or customize one of our templates for their use.

IP address – The Internet Protocol Address. eg. 209.51.151.158. Before DNS, domain name service, one would have to type in numbers (the IP address) to go to a web site. The DNS system allows one instead to simply type in the domain name. The DNS translates the domain name into the IP address and then directs the visitor to the server (or part of the server) that the requested domain name is hosted on.

ISP – Internet Service Provider. The provider of dial-up or broadband internet service that a consumer or business uses.

Metrics – Term used to refer to message statistics such as open and click through tracking, number of bounces, number of unsubscribes, etc.

OpenRBL.org - Web site through which one can view what blacklists a site is on.

Opt-in – A term that refers to any subscriber that has specifically requested an email newsletter. If they have signed up through your web site, they are opt-in. If you used a spider to harvest emails from the Internet and then added these persons as subscribers to your site, they are not opt-in. This latter tactic is often used by those who send out spam.

Permission-based – (see opt-in). Essentially, any list that contains only opt-in subscribers and does not contain any purchased lists or lists of persons who have asked to receive one type of newsletter and will be sent what they have not requested, such as additional promotions or newsletters on a different topic.

ROI – Return on investment. The amount of money one makes from an investment divided by initial investment.

Spam – Unwanted email that was sent without the permission of the recipient. Also known as unsolicited commercial email

UCE – Unsolicited Commercial Email. Another name for spam.

URL – Uniform resource locator. Another name for a web site address.

Unsubscribes – Email generated by a buyer by clicking the link at the bottom of each email which allows visitors to unsubscribe or modify/update their information.

Whitelisting – Opposite of blacklisting. Many ISPs have lists of sites with which they have built good relationships with and trust. If your sending fits their standards, it may be possible to add yourself to a whitelist. If you are on a whitelist, your mail has a much better chance of being delivered.

About BambooCricket

Bamboo Cricket is an innovative service provider that helps you complete the communication circle with your customers. We want to help you improve the online customer experience each of your customer has with your company. The Bamboo Cricket team is here to make your life easier. We consider ourselves an extension to your team.

We want you to get the most out of our technology, and succeed.

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