

Perspective on Current Trends: May, 2008

To Save Money with Self-Service, Consider Design

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I recently found myself buying party supplies at my neighborhood Fred Meyer. When it came time to check out I stood in front of the registers with my cart overflowing, groaning at the thought of waiting in one of those mega-lines. Then I noticed that no one was standing in the self-checkout area, so I turned my cart in that direction...

Self-checkout may be the most visible example, but it's certainly not the only type of self-service out there. According to an article lauding self-service programs in the February issue of Inc. Magazine, over 40% of organizations now display web FAQs. And software like RightNow, used by nearly 2,000 business clients worldwide, even automates the email process. As customers draft their questions to service reps, these programs analyze keywords in the emails-in-progress and display links to possible answers already on the website.

It all makes perfect sense, because if self service can help customers BEFORE they engage customer service, companies save a lot of money. Whereas that automated response costs less than 60 cents, employing a rep to do it costs an average of \$2 to \$4 per email and \$3 to \$10 per call. Furthermore, in addition to shaving costs for companies, self-service helps customers who are tired of waiting in call queues or receiving gibberish replies to their email questions.

But here's what I'm wondering: When it comes to self-service, are companies saving as much as they could? If self-service were beautifully designed, in the way that Apple designs computers, would the self-service market grow by leaps and bounds?

Companies seem so eager to get their self-service going that they don't plan for it in the way they do for their website, advertising and other

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customer communication. For instance, before implementing a new website companies often conduct usability studies and customer experience mapping. Would self-service be used more (and used more effectively) if it were based on a well considered plan that also included quality control?

... Back to my trip to Fred Meyer. What happened in that self-checkout line? Well, I made it through, but I didn't leave with a smile. After I failed to properly place my bag on the scale, the screen-robot began loudly barking at me: "Please place your item in the bag. Please place your item in the bag." I felt goofy and embarrassed. Meanwhile, a Fred Meyer employee stood rigidly behind the counter five feet away, never once offering to help. Randomly, I fiddled with the bag until the robot eventually shut up, but I was annoyed, and next time I'm not sure which line I'll choose.

Thinking my particular situation through, **here's how the experience could have benefited by a planned design:**

1. The employee could have been empowered to help me.
2. Or, at the very least, she could have acknowledged me with a departing note of appreciation, as in, "thanks for using self service today; sorry our machine was a little cranky."
3. Next to the checkout machine or on the screen itself there could have been a hint about how to make the process go more smoothly. (Whether the trick is put heavy items in the bag first, or wave items over the scanner at an angle, clueing the customer in or involving them in the process is always a smart strategy.)

Strategy to Consider

Add design to self-service. Remember Steve Jobs and the iPod. We are living in a time when good design and easy interfaces rule.