Editorial

If there is a single theme running through the first four papers in this issue, it is that of how we treat our customers — on the Web, in decision making and segmentation, on the telephone. Our first paper this quarter, by Marty Carroll, is about Web usability. Those who feel that we devote too much space to new technology matters (and no doubt we should still consider the Web a ‘new’ technology) might care to ponder how similar some of the lessons derivable from inadequate websites are to those arising from other inadequate forms of communication.

Consider the case of a traveller wishing to book a Channel crossing from England to France. First, there are numerous different companies offering crossings. So we choose one company; this runs ferries from and to a number of different ports. The first thing its website asks us is to enter our chosen route and date of travel. Route, date? How do we know? We are trying to choose a crossing based upon a complicated equation comprising cost, time of departure/arrival and driving time at each end, with route and date as the solution of the equation, not the input to it. What we require is a menu that allows us to state our priorities: cross between dates a and b, and between times c and d; leaving by any route between ports e and f; to arrive anywhere in France between ports g and h. And the website should then return a list of available crossings in ascending order of cost, or of crossing time, or of any other computable criterion we wish to enter. That would actually be a usable website. What we get, both from individual ferry operators and from consolidated websites, could hardly be less helpful, and is actually very much less usable than a printed brochure.

So why do we get unusable sites? Simple: websites are designed to present the information that the site owner *thinks* the punter needs in a sequence and manner that cause minimum trouble to the site designer. And secondly, these websites have never been beta tested by real, live customers. Or indeed by anyone standing in for a real, live customer. But this is not unique to websites. What about the direct response coupon with not enough space for the responder’s name and address? Or the customer service number which puts customers through a maddening series of menus, only to hold them in an endless queue? Or the supermarket which alters its produce locations every few weeks, just as you were getting used to its geography?

We are all customers. As customers, we encounter these mindless problems every day, and are infuriated by them. But how many of us bother to check the performance of our own companies? Herschell Gordon Lewis, in his latest book *Marketing Mayhem* (which we review in our next issue), gives advice that should be mandatory for every manager: ‘Call your own company’s service or tech-support line as though you were a customer. If you get the same treatment I did, roll some heads. Not to worry: they’re probably empty anyway.’ And that goes too far for trying to use your own website, and respond to your own promotions.

We follow with two papers questioning different aspects of how we decide on the treatment of customers. Seán Kelly questions the traditional a priori method of customer segmentation, which starts with a matrix into which customers must be fitted, rather than starting with customer behaviours from which segments might be deduced. Richard Turner looks at current use of technology in decision making about the treatment of customers, and asks whether the vast growth in available data and automated systems has actually resulted in better decisions.

Guy Fielding’s paper on the role of the call centre takes us back, yet again, to the question of how we treat customers — this time at the very point where that treatment is most direct and personal: the only form of one-to-one communication that is available to all direct marketers. He foresees a change in the role and status of the call centre, leading to it being seen as at the heart of the organisation, and of the brand. (And, if he is right about this, surely companies can no longer continue to outsource, usually to the cheapest available supplier, this vital, central determinant of customer relationships and brand identity?)

If there is one subject on which almost all our readers are agreed, it is their wish to have more real-

life case studies. For obvious reasons of confidentiality, these are not always easy to get, particularly if they contain (as they must if they are to be of value) real figures quantifying successes (and failures). Our case study this quarter is written up by Kate Boothby. It is an example of outstanding success — and an outright winner of the IDM's business performance award Gold Medal for 2002 — in the field of charity fundraising, where successes have been harder and harder to come by with each passing year.

To follow that we have a fascinating Best Practice paper from Teletext, composed by Tanya Cheyne. It is particularly interesting to read this alongside Marty Carroll's paper on Web usability: what the latter advocates as sound theory, the former demonstrates in successful practice.

Our New Technology Briefing, by Justin Anderson, considers alternative ways of sending a video clip by e-mail, the marketing potential of this use of the medium, the hang-ups that arise at the moment and the likely future developments which should help in years ahead.

The Legal and Regulatory Update by Colin Lloyd provides an introduction to the latest of our industry's self-regulatory bodies — TrustUK, formed to promote consumer trust and confidence in online trading through an accreditation scheme.

Owing to lack of space, Marketspace and the diary of forthcoming events will be published online only. For details of how to view the online publication, please refer to page 220.

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