Editorial

I was sitting the other day in a post-luncheon seminar session — maybe you were there too, but if not you have surely been to one like it. The speaker's theme (fashionable in marketing circles to the point of cliché) was 'Today the Customer is in Control'. I listened for a while in a post-prandial fashion. Then I thought: hang on a minute, do I buy this premise? After all, I'm a customer (so are you). Am I (are you) in control? Control of what?

When I was younger (much, much younger) I lived in a country town full of small shops. If I bought a duff product, or could not find what I wanted, or received poor service, I could have it out instantly with the owner. If I did not like his answer, I could take my custom to his competitor — and tell my neighbours. Which, of course, never happened.

Today I buy more and more of my goods and services from faceless multiples, and often at a distance. Nothing I can say will persuade Tesco to stock my favourite biscuits, and if I remove my custom to Sainsbury's (which does not carry my brand of tea), no one at Tesco will know or care. I have no influence over what the shops I patronise stock, and no way of expressing my pleasure or displeasure to anyone who gives a damn. Control, *moi*? You must be joking.

Have you ever tried to have a dialogue with the managing director of one of our major companies? I have — tried, that is. He does not answer (or I imagine read) letters addressed to him personally on issues of his company's policy. And do not try ringing him: after an aeon spent listening to witless automated menus you will, if you persevere, get through to... an outsourced call centre, which certainly is not in the business of entering into a critical discussion of its client's policies.

There is, of course, a business case for outsourcing one's call centre — as Penny Bousfield skilfully makes clear in this issue. The customer's case against it is that almost invariably it makes it impossible to voice a significant complaint to anyone with either the incentive or the authority to do anything (certainly anything systemic) about it. And if I cannot even register a complaint, leave alone have it attended to, then I am not in control, am I?

But it is too simplistic to lay the whole blame at the door of outsourcing, or of inadequately resourced call centres. The internet has given us all, as consumers, easier access to a huge range of information and alternative outlets. Moreover, if customers in the aggregate are dissatisfied and move their custom, they exercise power (though hardly control) over suppliers. But the immense growth in supplier size inevitably means that the power of any one consumer to influence (leave alone control) a supplier has been minimised to vanishing point. The truth is, an individual can only exercise any degree of control over an organisation which is quite small, and/or where he or she has access to a policy-making level in that organisation. And since most customers make most of their purchases from large organisations with whose senior management they have no means of contact at all, to talk of them being in control is misconceived.

As a business person you may not think this is all bad: not too many of us would relish being 'controlled' by our customers. What surely is bad is the false trail of customer-centric rhetoric by business leaders, consultants and assorted gurus whose real agenda is something very different. (For another angle on the same theme, try the article on customer management which we have abstracted (ref: 5220) in this issue.)

Richard Courtheoux is also interested in issues of customer response — but in his case in modelling it in a multichannel environment — and Christine Ennew writes on service delivery through both direct and indirect channels. Malcolm McDonald, on the eve of his retirement, has reprised for us his challenging IDM annual lecture for 2003 on the recent death of marketing, and the responsibility of sundry groups of players for its demise.

This quarter we have both a Best Practice paper by Beth Rogers (on the long-running saga of privacy issues) and a Case Study — this of a campaign designed by Saatchi & Saatchi for P&G's Pampers, which won an IDM Bronze Award, and written up for us by Kate Boothby. Our New

Technology Briefing, by Peter Muffett and Fiona Stark, deals with direct television as a marketing medium — from traditional DRTV to iTV with much in between. Peter Sleight's Legal and Regulatory Update throws a factual spotlight on the most recent Census statistics, on whose use we will be publishing a paper by Richard Webber next quarter.

Robin Fairlie