

Reaching Out to Clients 24/7

By

Richard H. Roy

Chairman and CEO of idNET, Inc.

After a recent automobile purchase, I experienced something that my decades of experience in insurance automation did not prepare me for – the search for the elusive Auto ID card. It seemed like a simple task...at first.

Still excited from my purchase experience, I embarked on my proof of insurance adventure. My first call was to my insurance agent, but since the office was closed, I had to postpone my call until morning. My agency is a large, multi-state agency with a robust agency management system, but when I did get through to them in the morning, I was immediately advised to contact my insurance company directly. The agency's system was down indefinitely. Okay, I'm an understanding adult, and I can make another call. So, I contact my company, a nationally known company that boasts its technology leadership and innovation. The representative tells me that the card request will be submitted to their typist and should take 3 hours. Typist? Who has a typist any more? My car sale was done in the 11th hour of a great deal so I mentioned to my representative that I had to pick up the car at 3:00 that afternoon. Since I was calling at 9:00 in the morning, he said there should be no problem. Well, suffice it to say that my Auto ID card, even with follow-up phone inquiries, was not available when I picked up my new car.

Unfortunately (for the insurance industry), I'm a typical consumer, dissatisfied with the service from both my insurance agent and my company. And yes, I expected that it was possible to respond to my request within my timeframe. I can order a customized computer online and have it delivered in 48 hours. I can reserve movie tickets for tonight's showing this afternoon from my computer. I can plan an entire trip and receive my electronic ticket in one sitting at my PC. I can call my cell phone provider 24/7 and speak with a representative. Why would I expect any less from my insurance agent or company?

Having extensive knowledge of the industry and automation compounded my dissatisfaction. I absolutely know what is possible. There is no reason not to give a consumer access to his or her policy information, allow a vehicle change request and print an ID card. Likewise, there is no reason for an insurance agency or company to be unable to respond to that request within hours. The consumer demand is there and the insurance industry needs to realize that if it doesn't offer its customers flexible access to insurance information and services 24/7, then someone else will. In fact, they already are.

Innovative agencies across the country offer services via the Web and over the phone, raising the bar in customer care. Peel & Holland Financial Group in Benton, KY is one of those agencies. They selected idNET's CSR24 product because it enabled them to offer 24/7 services to all of their customers (those Internet-enabled and those not). The service has already paid off big in customer satisfaction. Peel's approach to the after hours telephone service includes a robust "escalation" process that ensures customers with emergency situations receive immediate service. The first weekend Peel implemented the after hours call center service, a policyholder experienced a tanker explosion at 9:30 on a Sunday morning and contacted the service number. The call center representative followed the established procedures and attempted to contact the agent at home. With no answer, the rep tried the agent's cell phone and was able to reach him on his way to church. The agent was on site with the policyholder by 10:00 am.

Peel and other agencies have also found that offering 24/7 services is a unique selling proposition in the acquisition of new accounts. Peel producers are able to capture new accounts away from the competition based upon their ability to deliver 24/7 service. One producer has recently gained two accounts totaling \$90k in new revenue. The Peter Bakker Agency in Avon, CT has experienced similar benefits. A recent customer was shopping around his account. The

Bakker agency presented its new 24/7 services to the customer and was able to retain the \$170K premium account.

Of course, there are some agencies that fear that implementing 24/7 services, especially Internet services, will result in a loss of contact with the customer. Not so! Consumers want the ability to service themselves with everyday inquiries and tasks. Satisfying the customer is a positive customer experience. And, by freeing up CSRs from telephone calls and inquiries that can be done online, the CSR is available to perform more proactive and complex service tasks such as contacting customers for feedback on their service experience and cross-selling products to expand the relationship. Success is in the approach. Agencies who build upon the ease and flexibility of online services to enhance their overall service capabilities will gain from the improved customer satisfaction and efficiency of their service organization.

Don't tell me that you still think consumers don't want or won't use the service. The studies already prove they do and will. The IIABA has built into their Trusted Choice pledge of performance that agencies have the capability to deliver service 24/7 to customers because that is what they want. An IIABA study confirms that 79% of independent agencies' customers want access to their insurance agent and information outside of normal business hours. Studies by carriers and research firms, like Gomez, all support the same findings. A Progressive Insurance survey shows that 99% of consumers want their agent responsive and available whenever needed, and 45% want online access to their policy information.

In reality, consumers are servicing themselves today. Bowen, Miclette & Britt in Houston, TX recently recorded a milestone of 3,500 online self-service transactions in a single month. Individuals and families value the ability to review policy information and coverages, as well as the flexibility to make change requests to the policy and print out, of all things, Auto ID cards. There are many businesses that need to print certificates of insurance including contractors, landscapers, employment agencies, businesses that exhibit at trade shows, and the list goes on.

The fact is that any of your customers could benefit from 24/7 service and many will embrace self-service options. It's time for the industry to join in and get on the broadening customer care train, or, get out of the way because it's gaining momentum and will roll right past you if you don't climb on.

Richard Roy, Chairman and CEO of idNET, Inc., co-founded the company to provide consumer outreach services to independent agencies, whether they be web site designs and transactions or 24 hour telephone services. Roy is a member of the Board of the Agents Council for Technology (ACT), has been involved in the property casualty business for two decades, and previously held senior positions at AMS Services before assuming his current role. Roy's e-mail address is: rroy@goidnet.com. The opinions expressed are those of the author and should not be construed as an official position of ACT.