

Webb's web

Customer service

In the history of the internet, the concept of customer service has been developed in many ways – the one that interests me most is the way that a whole new category of service provider has arisen. And to illustrate this, all I have to do is look back to what I've been doing over the past few very busy months.

The main area of excitement has been moving house, including selling the old place. In Canberra, we have the benefit of a very good local operation called All Homes (<http://www.allhomes.com.au>), although there are similar operations elsewhere (and that's one of the big things to come out of the web: good ideas can be copied very quickly all over the place). Through services like this, you can get a good overall view of what's on the market, look at attractive photos of the houses, see how much interest there's been, and contact the agents. Now, advertising of real estate has been around for a long time, but what this type of service offers is ease: it's all there at the click of a mouse.

And when it's time to move and you need to dispose of all those unwanted goods and furniture, there's the online classified sites to look after that for you. (Although I must say that we had really good results from putting a "For sale" sign at the front of the house. Even in our quite little street, a surplus bed was snapped up in fifteen minutes.)

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Once you've moved, you need to tell a lot of people about your new address, and not surprisingly when you think about it, there's only so much you can do on the net. There are some possibilities, and if you go to eMove at <http://www.emove.com.au>, you'll see quite a few organisations

that let you do it online, including many government bodies; but the more serious ones (banks and some health funds) will require a signed letter.

After all that we needed to buy a car; and that's where I was most impressed with the help that was on offer. The car makers of course have their flashy sites with brochures, pictures, and videos – but the information aggregators are the real stars here. Redbook (<http://www.redbook.com.au>) and its associated site <http://www.carsales.com.au> for instance, offer plenty of data about new and used cars, including estimated price ranges, full specifications, pictures, and so on. They even have a form that you can fill out to send a new car query to a dealer in your area.

So, the secondary providers – like All Homes or eMove or Redbook – are the real stars now, all giving an extra level of service above that offered by the primary retailers.

Leaving the commercial world aside, there's quite a bit of discussion going on about how governments are providing online services. It's funny how things go in waves: first there were individual agency websites, then we moved to the idea of portals, and now they're falling into disfavour – if we're to believe Andrea di Maio, a Gartner analyst with impressive credentials. In a blog post at <http://tinyurl.com/ycxca73> he continues his argument that there is a better way to offer services, or at least for a large

proportion of them. It really depends on what he's arguing against: a portal or an all-encompassing processing site. I think of the portal as a way of finding an online service, which may be on a generalised payment site or its own site where specific processing needs to be carried out. And Andrea's point about the uptake of portals being lower than expected – or perhaps lower than the figures that have been provided to the decision makers: well, it was ever thus.

Which is not to argue against further development, but few of us would want to go back to the old ways. Ugh!

And finally, a look at alternatives to the customer service that you find in libraries. It's long been recognised that people are inclined to look to their friends first in seeking an answer to a question. Say you're grappling with a problem in Microsoft Word: do you check the online Help features, do you call your local help Desk, or do you turn to your workmate and say "Hey Tina ..."? And so it is with reference desks. For as long as we've had discussion groups, they're the place where the questions go (one of my groups has the unofficial acronym AKL, for All-Knowing List) and in many cases, the wisdom of that particular crowd can come up trumps.

Now, that's been regularised with Aardvark (<http://vark.com/>) where you register as someone with 'expertise' in one or more topics and you get to field questions submitted by users. Its business model wasn't clear for a while, but then they were acquired by Google – so I guess that particular question was answered.

The problem is that when you're using it you're really relying on the kindness of strangers (as you did with previous services, like Google Answers) and similarly the questioners may be innocent or not. In my chosen fields, I've provided answers to questions where I'm sure there was an agenda, as shown by the sorts of follow-up questions that came in.

Where this particular type of service is going, I'm not sure. On the web, we've become used to taking in (if not relying on) anonymous information and that's not going to change. I'd be interested to hear about trends in use of Reference Services in all sorts of libraries.

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