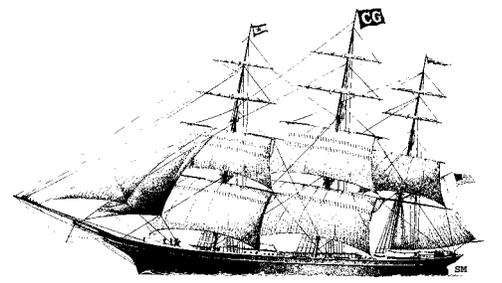


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The Unfriendly FAQs — Improving Customer Service Starts Here

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Let's begin with a confession. Like many of you, I am an Internet junky. I am dependent on the Internet at work (research, communication with clients and advisors, purchase orders, electronic invoices, electronic payments, Web procurement, and technical support). I am equally dependent in my personal life (communication with family and friends, account management, Web buying, and technical support); I just bought my second car via the Web. **I would rather search the Web, including Usenet groups, than call someone on the phone, fumble my way through painful automatic routing questions, and then wait for someone to help me with a problem, whether technical or account related.** And, of course, this human contact may or may not be able to help me. Usually, I find that I am at least as knowledgeable as they are. Unlike my father-in-law, and many of his generation, I prefer good automated support to the long, painful journey through mediocre human encounters, especially for mundane matters.

So here's my problem. **Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) and online information should be a business or government agency's first, and best, way to please me as a customer.** For me, it's the first, because I prefer it that way, but it is not the best. For many enterprises, it seems to be an afterthought, after spending heavily on call management systems, call routing to the other side of the globe, and customer resource management (CRM) systems. It's odd that enterprises don't see this as the first line of defense in cost reduction. **We all know that it is far cheaper for me to self-serve myself to what I need, than it would be to interact with a human to accomplish the same goal.**

So what's wrong with FAQs and online knowledge bases? Most force me to scrounge through either lists of questions and/or many possible support documents that answer a question that may be, somehow, related to my problem or what I am seeking. OK, I admit it, I would rather scrounge, search, and read to get my result, but that doesn't mean I like to do it, especially when I have to discard much to find my nugget of gold. And most folks are not as perseverant as me. They give up, call a friend, or enter that expensive queue to answers that are often too little, too late, or too painful to reach and become another disgruntled customer - probably deemed to have been satisfactorily served in a CRM database because s/he made it to the end of the line, and in spite of the much higher cost to the enterprise.

So while you online enterprises are spending your CRM dollars to figure out how to get me to spend more, realize that helping me find the support or information that I need is likely to do more to bond me to you than another targeted email, catalog, or phone call, or even a more "personal" Web experience. **Do yourself a favor, spend more up front on automation to get me to the information that I need, and you will make me happy. As a bonus, you will spend less on your staffed support, which will make your CFO happy.** If all problems could only be this simple.



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About the Author

Mike Kahn is Managing Director and a cofounder of The Clipper Group. Mr. Kahn is a veteran of the computer industry, having spent more than three decades working on information technology, spending the last third at Clipper. For the vendor community, Mr. Kahn specializes on strategic marketing issues, especially for new and costly technologies and services, competitive analysis, and sales support. For the end-user community, he focuses on mission-critical information management decisions. Prior positions held by Mr. Kahn include: at International Data Corporation - Director of the Competitive Resource Center, Director of Consulting for the Software Research Group, and Director of the Systems Integration Program; President of Power Factor Corporation, a Boston-based electronics firm; at Honeywell Bull - Director of International Marketing and Support; at Honeywell Information Systems - Director of Marketing and Director of Strategy, Technology and Research; with Arthur D. Little, Inc. - a consultant specializing in database management systems and information resource management; and, for Intel Corporation, Mr. Kahn served in a variety of field and home office marketing management positions. Earlier, he founded and managed PRISM Associates of Ann Arbor, Michigan, a systems consulting firm specializing in data management products and applications. Mr. Kahn also managed a relational DBMS development group at The University of Michigan where he earned B.S.E. and M.S.E. degrees in industrial engineering.

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