

Email Customer Service in West Michigan

A Study of Responses from the 25 Largest Area Companies



407 First Ave, Holland, MI

mike@boyink.com p.616.204.1435

Copyright 2002, Boyink Interactive

This report may be freely quoted, referenced, printed, duplicated, and distributed as long as credit is given to Boyink Interactive. Trademarks, trade names, product names or logos included in this report may be the trademarks of their respective owners. Please visit their web sites for more information.

Email Customer Service in West Michigan A Study of Responses from the 25 Largest Area Companies

Boyink Interactive is an Internet Consulting and Development company located in Holland, MI.

It's the business name of yours truly, Michael Boyink. I've been developing and implementing technology for companies in the West Michigan area for over 9 years.

A good share of that technology has been related to connecting companies and customers via web sites and email.

I wanted to do two things in this study; take an email pulse of the largest employers in the West Michigan area, and based upon their responses put together a set of guidelines - both for the people who design and develop corporate web sites and the people who answer the email from them.

I'm making this report freely available in hopes of improving people's experience using email to contact corporations.



Email Customer Service in West Michigan
A Study of Responses from the 25 Largest Area Companies

Companies Studied ^[1]

Company Name	url
Spectrum Health	www.spectrum-health.com
Meijer Inc.	www.meijer.com
Steelcase Inc.	www.steelcase.com
Herman Miller Inc.	www.hermanmiller.com
Johnson Controls Interiors	www.johnsoncontrols.com
Gordon Food Service Inc.	www.gfs.com
Alticor Inc.	www.alticor.com
Haworth Inc.	www.haworth.com
Spartan Stores, Inc.	www.spartanstores.com
Perrigo Company	www.perrigo.com
D & W Food Centers Inc.	www.dwfoods.com
General Motors Corp.	www.gm.com
Howmet Castings	www.howmet.com
Saint Mary's Health Services	www.smmmc.org
Siemens Dematic	www.rapistan.com
Fifth Third Bank	www.53.com
Metropolitan Hospital	www.metrohealth.net
Wolverine World Wide Inc.	www.wolverineworldwide.com
The Hope Network	www.hopenetwork.org
Mercy General Health Partners	www.mghp.com
Delphi Automotive Systems	www.delphiauto.com
Lacks Enterprises, Inc.	www.lacksenterprises.com
Lear Corp.	www.lear.com
Bosch Kentwood	www.dieseltechnology.com
Metron Integrated Systems	www.metronhealth.com

Email Customer Service in West Michigan

A Study of Responses from the 25 Largest Area Companies

So You Have A Website

Why?

That may sound like a silly question, but it's a good one to ask yourself.

Often.

If you are like the respondents in a recent study^[2], providing customer service via the web is the second biggest reason for having a site. Yet, a recent study by Jupiter Research found that for many consumers, emailing a company made for "customer non-service."^[3]

Wondering what the local take on this issue would be, I visited the sites for the 25 largest employers in West Michigan. What I found was that 24 of the 25 offered ways to contact the company via email. Howmet Castings was the only company who didn't provide email addresses or a contact form to fill out.

So the question became: If they took the time to put the functionality on their site, how well would they respond to people using it?

I decided to find out.

The results brought out a number of guidelines for use by web site developers and people responsible for answering customer email.

Methodology

I put together a simple Microsoft Access database to use during the study - each contact would get recorded, along with notes about the site, and flags for other items (more below). Once the data was entered, simple queries provided summary data across all companies.

To send and receive messages I set up a web-based POP3 email account that I could check using Microsoft Outlook. I set up this account with an alias name to avoid any potential name recognition (I have been employed by and have done work for several of the companies on this list).

Knowing that Monday is often spent catching up from email sent over the weekend, I choose to wait until after business hours and visited all 24 sites within 2 hours late on a Monday night. I explored their site until I found

Email Customer Service in West Michigan

A Study of Responses from the 25 Largest Area Companies

some specific content to use, I then used the contact forms or email provided and submitted a question, acting as though I hadn't seen that content. This allowed me to not only time their response, but also see if the person answering the email knew what was on the site. It also allowed them to respond with varying degrees of helpfulness.

So how'd they do? These statistics were calculated over two and a half weeks (12 business days) after the original email was sent out. I hope you agree that giving a company over two weeks to respond is reasonable, if not generous.

Note that besides the one "un-ailable" company already mentioned, Lacks Enterprises' site malfunctioned and didn't allow my contact to go through.

The following results are based on the 23 remaining companies where, for all I could tell, the contact/email made it successfully to them. Definitions follow the table.

Overall Results

Summary Table:

	Number	Percent
Overall Return	19	82%
Responses on Day One	14	61%
Responses on Day Two	2	9%
Responses on Day Three	1	4%
Responses on Day Four	2	9%
Answered Directly (1)	8	35%
Answered with a link (2)	3	13%
Unhelpful Answers (3)	12	52%
Privacy Policy (4)	10	43%
Current Copyright Dates (5)	13	57%
"Did It Right" (6)	4	17%

Email Customer Service in West Michigan

A Study of Responses from the 25 Largest Area Companies

(1) Answered Directly

To be considered answered directly, the answer had to be in the response email – not linked, or offered to be sent via postal mail. I consider these responses the cream of the crop – directly answering the question posed, even though the answers were on their website.

(2) Answered with a link

This group responded with a link back to the content on their site. I consider this group as having provided adequate service.

(3) Unhelpful Answers

For the purposes of this study, if the response didn't provide the direct answer, or a direct link, or answered the question wrong altogether, it was deemed unhelpful. Remember the answer was on their site—so offers to mail the information via postal mail were deemed unhelpful for not taking advantage of the web.

(4) Privacy Policy

By contacting these companies, I was giving personal information. How many had links to privacy policies where I would be told how that data would be handled? Note that I didn't actually read the policies, I just looked to see if they existed.

(5) Copyright Dates

Copyright dates are often the only way to tell how current the site's content is. How many sites had current copyright dates?

(6) Did It Right

These companies answered within one business day, put the answer right in the email, were courteous, signed the email personally, etc — all in all they did it right.

Email Customer Service in West Michigan

A Study of Responses from the 25 Largest Area Companies

Guidelines

This section provides guidelines for web site developers who design Contact Us pages, and guidelines for the people who answer the email generated by them.

While actual responses are included, I've replaced all the company or person-specific text with asterisks (***) . It's not my intent to point fingers at particular companies, but rather use examples - good and bad - to help improve Contact Us pages and responses overall. So, in no particular order:

For Developers

On the Site

- 1. Do make Contact Us a top-level link on your site, visible on every page.**

One site located the contact info in a section labeled "Communications", which proved difficult to find.

- 2. Do set my expectations.**

Tell me how long to expect to wait for an answer. This can be done either on your thank you page or in a confirmation email. One company used this auto-response:

```
Thank you for visiting *****. We
have received your e-mail. If
requested, we will respond by e-mail
within 2 business days. If you
require a more immediate response,
please contact our Marketing
Department at (616) ***-*****.
```

- 3. Do tell me how you will use the personal information I'm giving you.**

Do this by providing a privacy policy. The policy should explicitly

Email Customer Service in West Michigan

A Study of Responses from the 25 Largest Area Companies

state how you will use the information I've entered into your web form. Link to it from the Contact Us form. I will feel better knowing how highly you value my privacy.

4. Do copyright your site, and keep the copyright date up to date.

Legal concerns aside, copyrights are often the only indicator of the age of the site. Having a current copyright helps me to know that you are still paying attention to the site.

Conversely, don't allow your copyright to grow outdated, as it will decrease my confidence in your company or organization. Copyrights found in this study went as far back as 1996.

5. Do test your contact process periodically.

Don't let your other site visitors get messages like this one; especially when it's the address posted for where to send comments or complaints about the web site:

```
"The original message was received
at Mon Sep 09 23:33:30 2002 Likely
reason for failure: 550 No such
recipient"
```

I was persistent and tried a different posted address - with success. Most site visitors won't be so persistent.

Another site produced this page when submitting the form:

```
Can not find the extension file:
d:\webroot\****\****\****\****.ini
```

Email Customer Service in West Michigan

A Study of Responses from the 25 Largest Area Companies

Forms and Thank You Pages

6. Do use buttons labeled Send or Submit on your web forms.

One site had a submit button labeled as "Register", which, coupled with no privacy policy could raise some concerns about what the form is actually doing.

7. Do make sure your live pages don't have development text on them.

Don't let your other site visitors see thank you pages like this one :

Some text goes here.

8. Do use a Thank You page.

If you use a web form, use a Thank You page, but make sure it's noticeably different from the form page that I just filled in. One site simply reloaded the web page containing the form (which cleared the data I had entered), and added a small text message to the top of the page that said that my data had been sent. My first impression was that I had hit a "refresh" button, rather than a "submit".

9. Do only ask for information that you truly need for the purpose at hand.

Many of the web-based forms I filled out asked for phone number and mailing address. Find out if your company ever uses this data, and if you don't, don't ask for it. If I'm contacting you via email, I don't want to tell you my phone number and address unless it's obvious to me that there's a good reason for it.

If you do make me enter it without a good reason, I will put false data there to protect my privacy. You do the same on other web sites — I know you do.

Email Customer Service in West Michigan
A Study of Responses from the 25 Largest Area Companies

10. Do let me "CC" myself on form submissions.

One of the complaints with web-based forms is that they leave no record of the contact in my email program's sent mail folder. Allow me to check a box on the form that will "CC" me on the data being submitted.

Email Technical Guidelines

11. Do use a mail account that has a recognizable user name when responding.

If your response email is going to come out of a generic email account, give that account a descriptive name that includes your business name. This will help me recognize it amidst the mountains of spam in my inbox. The Bad examples are ones I received during this study.

Good: info@yourcompany.com, feedback@yourcompany.com

Bad: Feedback, webmaster WEBMASTER, The info, Info

12. Do make the response email come from the site that I used.

For example, if I were to send an email to someone@1234.net (or from the www.1234.net site), but the response came from someone@5678.org I will be confused because I never visited 5678.org.

You may be intimate with the different domains your company or organization uses, but I am not. To ensure that your response gets read, make sure your outgoing email uses the same domain name as your web site does.

13. Do make sure your email system accepts email from web-based domains.

Many people use web-based mail for contacting companies. Make sure your system isn't throwing away mail from these domains. One site returned this response when I submitted mail using my web-based pop3 account:

Email Customer Service in West Michigan
A Study of Responses from the 25 Largest Area Companies

This is an automatically generated
Delivery Status Notification.

Delivery to the following recipients
failed.

****mail@****.com

Unsolicited email not welcome

For Email-answerers

14. Do respond within one business day.

The day by day breakdown of responses in the summary table shows that my chances of getting a response from you drop drastically after a day. If you wait that long I will have likely moved on to alternate means of getting an answer, or have gone to a competitor. You wouldn't leave a phone call on hold for a day—don't leave my email hang that long either.

15. Do put the answer right in the email.

A big charge, I know. But, if your company is truly dedicated to world-class customer service (you are, aren't you?) then this is your charge. Answer the question *right in the email*, not by referencing your site or other materials.

This response included the direct answer (with a screenshot not seen here) to the question and as backup, included a direct link to the source .PDF file on the company's web site.

Thank you for your interest in *****.
In response to your question, I have cut
and pasted from our on-line proxy copy
to this e-mail the summary compensation
table. If you are unable to read it,
I'd be happy to send you a hard copy.
Please let me know if I can help you
further.

* (Screenshot inserted here) *

Email Customer Service in West Michigan
A Study of Responses from the 25 Largest Area Companies

**** ****

Treasury Analyst

616-***-**** phone

616-***-**** fax

http://www.***.com....PROXY.pdf

16. Do provide completely formatted direct links to content.

If you can't directly include answers in the email, and have to refer to your web site, give me a completely formatted link in the response. Most email programs will make the link active, giving me a one-click access to the answer.

This reply talks about site content, but leaves me to find it:

Dear Mitch,

Thank you for your interest in ****.

The salaries of our five most highly compensated executives are published in our 2002 Proxy which is either accessible on our website as a downloadable PDF file, or we can send you a printed copy. Please let us know how you prefer to receive the information.

Regards,

*** ****

Manager, Investor Relations

This reply tried somewhat harder to help, but gives step by step "where to click" directions rather than a direct link. Leaving out the http:// prefix on the root site address makes it worse - Outlook

Email Customer Service in West Michigan
A Study of Responses from the 25 Largest Area Companies

couldn't interpret the incompletely formatted URL as a clickable link:

Dear Mitch,

You can find out more information about
***** by going to our web site
<www.****.***> Go to "Our Services" and
the information will be under *****.
There is contact information listed, if
you wish to call and speak to the
coordinator.

If the web site does not answer your
questions, please let me know and I will
look into it for you.

Thank you,

*** **

Marketing and Public Relations

17. Do take the responsibility to answer the question yourself.

Telling me that I have to ask someone else in the company the same question I just asked *you* is frustrating. You represent the company to me, and I've already asked "the company". If you don't know the answer, make the effort to find out and get back to me. At the very least forward my email to the right person in your company. Eliminate the need to apologize for inconveniencing me by *not* inconveniencing me.

Here is possibly one case where the web form should have asked my location, so the question could have been forwarded to the place with the answer. It's also obvious (by the ">" preface on each line) that the answer was cut and pasted from a previous response to another email, so I know that this is a standard reply:

September 09, 2002

Email Customer Service in West Michigan
A Study of Responses from the 25 Largest Area Companies

Dear Mr TenBrook:

> Thank you for using **** Online. In
> reference to your inquiry regarding
> the *****, we do not have information
> at our location. Please visit your
> local ***** for details on the ****.
> We apologize for the inconvenience
> that this may have caused.

>
> Again, thank you for using *****.
>
> ****.*
> ***** Online

18. Do provide email addresses, or at least phone numbers, for the subject matter experts in your company.

If for some reason you are unable to directly answer the question and need to pass me on to someone else, provide a quick means of contact for that internal expert. Don't force me to use postal mail, especially to talk to your so-called Public Relations Department (it's hard to relate to a public you can't email or call):

Dear Mr. TenBrook,

Thank you for contacting the **** Customer Assistance Center regarding your desire for information on the compensation given to ****'s top executives.

If you are unable to find the information at www.*****.***, we recommend that you write to our Public Relations Department at the address below. We apologize, but there is not

Email Customer Service in West Michigan
A Study of Responses from the 25 Largest Area Companies

direct e-mail address for that department.

(***Included address removed***)

If you should need to contact us in the future, please e-mail us again or call our ***** Customer Assistance Center at ***-***-*****. Customer Relationship Managers are available Monday through Friday from 8:00 a.m. to 11:00 p.m., Eastern Time.

Sincerely,

***** *****

Customer Relationship Manager

***** Customer Assistance Center

19. Do respond to me using the same method I used to contact you.

You wouldn't return my phone call with an email (would you?). Don't return an email with a phone call, like one company did. If I wanted to talk, I would have called. I want a response that I can print, save, or forward — this is why I chose email to begin with.

20. Do know what is posted on your own web site.

Here is a response I got after contacting one company, again, with a question that could be specifically answered with content on their site. The most disappointing part of this response is that this company had the fastest response time of any company in the study—getting back to me within the hour, even though it was late at night:

Hi Mitch,

Thanks for visting the site with your inquiry.

Email Customer Service in West Michigan A Study of Responses from the 25 Largest Area Companies

There is no ***** on our **** list, and
I have not heard of any ***** for ****.

You can check with your local ***** to
see if they know anything concering a
**** **.

Thanks again,

--Help **

help@****.***

21. Do be courteous in your response.

Omitting even the basic salutation and closing can drastically change
the sound of your email, as in this response:

Diluted earnings per share for the three
months ended June 30, 2002, were \$1.85,
14% over the \$1.62 earned last year.
Diluted earnings per share for the first
nine months of fiscal 2002 were \$4.33,
10% above the \$3.95 for 2001.

**** **

Manager, Shareholder Services

**** ****

--****

Fax: ***-***-****

22. Do sign the email personally.

Replies like this are just plain cold, and do nothing to make me think
you're actually going to take responsibility and follow through even if I
do want to get postal mail.

Yes, you can see our annual report online at
www.****.*** in the Investors section, or
send us your mailing address and we'll
snail-mail you a paper copy.

Email Customer Service in West Michigan

A Study of Responses from the 25 Largest Area Companies

23. Do send your response in plain text email.

Several responses came through as HTML, which isn't necessary for simple email (there is no gain to having your email text match your web site text, since when reading email I am not comparing it to your site).

If you have to use HTML, don't set your text size to an 8 point font as some responses did - many people struggle to read text this small. I can see you squinting now.

Summary

In the end you can boil this down to 3 rules:

1. Make contacting your company easy.
2. Answer right away.
3. Be helpful.

I know – it's not always that easy. Organizational complexities, legacy systems, distributed responsibility, corporate growth or shrinkage—all can affect the internal processes that you use to answer email from the web site. But, to me as your site visitor, these issues are moot. I have a question, you spent time and money setting up your site to allow me to ask it, and I expect an answer.

Maybe the four companies who never answered our email would do better to take the contact function off their site. That's a step backward in this wired world, but at least false expectations would not be set.

At any rate—if you've read this far you at least are interested in making your site and email responses better. I do hope this study has helped.

Please let me know – send any comments you have to me at mike@boyink.com. I look forward to your email.

Best Regards,
Michael Boyink
Boyink Interactive

Email Customer Service in West Michigan
A Study of Responses from the 25 Largest Area Companies

Acknowledgements

[1]

The Right Place Program

111 Pearl St. NW

Grand Rapids, MI

616.771.0325

www.rightplace.org

Largest Area Employers:

<http://www.rightplace.org/Business/WestMichEmployers.pdf>

[2]

Web-business Evolves

By Jon Surmacz

August 21, 2002

http://64.28.79.73/learn/numbers/number_detail.cfm?ID=all&METRIC=421

[3]

E-mail makes for customer non-service

By Margaret Kane

August 29, 2002

<http://rss.com.com/2100-1017-955947.html>