



There are many ways to automate customer service that save a company time and money while increasing client satisfaction. Two examples include a website where order status can be checked 24/7 and a way to easily submit reorders. Image courtesy of InkSoft, Albuquerque, N.M.

Save Time: Make More Money With Automation

If you are interested in cutting costs and becoming more efficient, there is no better way than by employing automation. Many production aspects have been automated in the graphic industries, including automatic screen printing and graphic presses, automatic screen cleaning machines, direct-to-screen imaging equipment, folding, bagging, packaging and more.

Big companies have been forced to automate in order to survive. With shareholders and investors demanding maximum return on their investment, management is always looking for new ways to slash costs, reduce labor and be more efficient.

Small independent shops do not have the same pressure and therefore most do not take advantage of all the software products available that could help them reduce labor, save time and streamline their operations.

Just a few of the tasks that can be automated include artwork creation, artwork approvals, price quotes, social media marketing, customer service and

collecting money. In these tasks, you not only save money with automation, but also cut down on human error, which increases customer satisfaction and helps meet deadlines.

Accountability and communication also improve with automation. Software that tracks every step of an order throughout the process makes it easy to identify bottlenecks or other issues that slowed or stopped an order's production. Using a network or cloud, supervisors can see at what stage an order is at any time.

Automation also holds every employee accountable, because what they did and how long it took them is recorded. With this kind of data, management can identify areas that need improvement and who needs better training.

If you are one of those companies that has not fully employed automation, your time is running out. The software and technology are available and at affordable prices. Late adopters run the risk of waiting too long and going out of business while the aggressive companies take advantage of the many benefits mentioned above.



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One of the biggest bottlenecks in any decorated apparel or signage business is the creation of the art. Clients often don't know what they want and they don't know what format it needs to be in. With the use of an online design program, they can take as long as they like creating a design that meets their needs. Image courtesy of InkSoft, Albuquerque, N.M.

While the software is an investment, you'll find that the return is more than worth it. Talk to companies that have done it to find out to what degree. In the constant quest to have the lowest price and highest value, automation plays a key role. By automating redundant tasks, you reduce overhead, and this allows you to offer competitive pricing while maintaining your profit margin.

With companies like Amazon offering product delivery in an hour, the pressure continues to build to offer quicker turnaround. This is another area where automation can speed up the order/production/delivery cycle and allow you to keep pace with consumer expectations.

Here are a few key areas where business automation software is available. There are many more, which you will discover as you research products that fit your business and niche.

Customer Service

One of the greatest advantages of business automation software is its ability to

offer self-service to clients. Using a web portal, an account name and a password, buyers can check on the status of their orders, submit questions, review artwork anytime they like.

Reorder speed is also increased as clients can easily and quickly submit reorders online. If a buyer has misplaced a printed receipt, he can go online and simply reprint it.

Price Quotes

One of the most frustrating tasks every print shop must endure is preparing price quotes. Oftentimes, people are shopping for the lowest deal, and the time spent collecting the information and calculating the cost is a mostly a waste of time.

With the use of software, the most common denominators can be identified and included in the program to allow visitors to get at least a ballpark idea of how much a specific job may cost. The potential client is prompted with a series of questions to determine specifics of the

job. Unlike humans who can forget to ask certain key questions, the software ensures that all the pertinent information is collected.

In some cases, the degree of customization may be greater than an automated program can handle, and in this case, the client can call to discuss the additional parameters and get an accurate quote.

The 80/20 rule applies here. If you can automate the bulk of a core process, it results in significant time savings. The software cannot automate every single type of order, but it can assist with the most common ones. For price shoppers, it can reduce the number of people who take up an employee's time and never order.

Artwork Creation

Whether you print signs, graphics or apparel, a big bottleneck for all shops is the artwork. The general public rarely understands the quality and type of art needed to do specific decorating jobs. And many times supplied artwork is not useable.

Uneducated customers also tend to resist paying for artwork to be created. This, combined with many of them not knowing what they want, results in a lot of time and frustration as the in-house artist or freelancer tries to create graphics that will please the customer at an affordable price. It is this exact situation where using software to automate the process can result in dramatic time and cost savings.

There are online designers available for the graphics markets that allow anyone to create an account, sign in and choose from a vast library of stock art and templates. These programs are easy to use and prompt the user through each step until a final draft is created and approved.

It doesn't matter how much time it takes because it's the client who is investing the time, not an employee. Additionally, there are studies that have shown that when someone creates his or her own design, there is a greater sense of satisfaction in the final product.

Some people may not want to use an online designer. For this group, software can be used to send a client a link showing a specific design category of stock art. The customer can review this art to see if there is something they like, and the process is speeded up by having a core piece of stock art and a template to start with.

Artwork Approval

For customers using an online designer, art approval is automatic, since they do

not stop designing until they have created a graphic they are satisfied with.

But the rest of the time, companies will either be presenting concepts for feedback, creating original art or taking a customers' provided art and formatting it for the job. In these cases, you always want the customer to view the graphic and get approval before the job begins.

The two most common ways to accomplish this is to either send an email with an attachment that can be opened and viewed, or send a link where the customer can click and review the design. In either case, the customer either approves the art as-is or responds with changes needed. The good news is that there are software programs that will automatically send out the art approval email and track its process until it's approved.

Production Scheduling

While there are still shops that use a white board or paper for scheduling jobs, there are several benefits to automating this part of the production process. One big advantage is the ability to instantly look at numerous jobs simultaneously produced. The bigger your shop is, the greater the advantage to using software to manage.

Another plus of automating is the ability to organize jobs by due date. The program also can assign each step of a job to a specific individual. Each employee must input in the computer when he is done with relevant data — a great way of holding individuals accountable.

Further, employees can log in each morning and have a handy to-do list to view, saving time trying to figure out what needs to be done.

Social Media Marketing

While not every print shop is convinced about the importance of social media marketing, this is a task where automation plays a significant role.

While many experts recommend posting once a day or more often, it is not practical or efficient to post every single day manually.

With automation, you can create content and schedule it for a future date. This allows you to automatically post once or more every day of the month, but you only need to devote one session a month to create and schedule it. Social media apps like Hootsuite and Buffer allow you to schedule across all social media accounts. This means that a single post can be scheduled to post simultaneously to Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Pinterest, etc.



While automating is a good thing with lots of benefits, make sure you always offer clients the option of personal communication for times when the automated options don't cover customers' needs. Always have a phone number, live chat and/or an email address for those who want to talk to someone. Image courtesy of InkSoft, Albuquerque, N.M.

staff and customers. Interview both and ask, what causes the most frustration? What are the most common mistakes? If you could change one thing about the company, what would it be?

You also will want to set future goals. For example, let's say your company spent \$23,000 in correcting orders last year. This year, you want to lower that amount to \$5,000 or less.

Once you have determined these factors, then you analyze your processes and procedures. Create a checklist of what needs to be changed or improved. For instance, to address the reject rate mentioned above, you may identify that your company needs a better art approval process to avoid printing merchandise due to a lack of understanding what the customer wanted. This is an area that can be greatly improved by allowing the customer to create their own artwork and approve it all online.

Keeping The Human Element

While automation has many advantages, you never want to completely eliminate personal contact. If a client has to go through 15 steps or cannot find what he is looking for, that is not going to be a good experience. Ideally, automation focuses on the parts of the production process that don't directly involve the customer.

There will always be a certain percentage of people who prefer to talk to a human being, and you do not want to lose their business. Always make sure that phone numbers and emails are prominently displayed for customers to contact you.

You also can create a monthly or yearly marketing calendar with local events, specific client happenings and other dates. The software will automatically remind you that these dates are approaching and it's time to start sending out reminders to clients or promotion. This type of software can be used to track when coupon codes expire.

Shipping

Many software programs today can be integrated with the most popular freight companies such as FedEx, USPS, UPS, Purolator and others.

Oftentimes, these carrier companies offer discounts for using their systems, and the software tracks usage data that is helpful in keeping shipping costs as low as possible and ensuring that packages are delivered with the greatest speed and highest accuracy.

Another perk is automatic generation of shipping labels. For e-commerce sites, customers can be told what shipping costs will be at the time of placing an order, and the money is collected right then.

Getting Started

The first step in automating your business is to start collecting data from your

Get Results

Even when automating saves less than a minute per task at a time, when these savings are spread out over a multitude of tasks and further multiplied by the number of business days in the year, you will find the time and costs savings can be dramatic.

It is easy to get overwhelmed when beginning to automate your business. Don't go overboard right away. Start with collecting the feedback and doing an audit within your company. Identify and prioritize and pick one department at a time. Start with an area that will provide the most immediate return.

As you implement automation into your business, be sure to track and review results. Over time, you'll be able to measure the results and see what is working as well as identify new areas to improve.