

JCP PEOPLE

A PUBLICATION ABOUT US



She's Got Mail

And lots of it. Catalog Customer Service Supervisor Christine Thomas receives hundreds of customer e-mail messages each day, and makes sure each one gets to the right person for a prompt reply.

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E-commerce competition on the Internet is fierce. In many ways, the Internet, with its ease-of-use, has levelled the playing field. Customer service, delivered at the breakneck speed of the medium, is often the difference between success and failure online.

Supervisor Christine Thomas makes sure JCPenney's Internet customers are satisfied.

You've Got Mail



One December day in 1997, Christine Thomas was summoned from her job with JCPenney in Atlanta to the Home Office in Plano, Texas, where she was due to be introduced to a new software program the company was planning to put to use. Little did Thomas know she was about to embark on a journey – both figuratively and literally – that would put her on the cutting edge of increasing customer satisfaction via the Internet.

Thomas, a 15-year Company veteran, is a Catalog Customer Service Supervisor, but that hardly begins to describe what her duties entail. On a day-to-day basis, she supervises the customer adjustment area and order processing area for catalog orders. She also serves as software administrator for the Echo program, an interactive customer-care software system created by General Interactive of Cambridge, Mass., a firm whose other clients include the White House, the U.S. Senate and Disney.

Thomas describes Echo mail as a service that provides real-time, intelligent messaging while also serving as a relationship-marketing tool. The Echo program automatically reads incoming e-mail, stores information, routes it to the appropriate recipient, and logs it for statistical purposes.

"And that's as non-technical as I can make it sound," she says.

In practical terms, the Echo program ensures that the hundreds of e-mail messages that come to JCPenney from customers all over the world each day get to their desired target promptly and efficiently by a system of key-word recognition.

"I handle all of the incoming mail to JCPenney that is not sent to an individual," Thomas says. "It processes through [Echo mail] and is sent where it needs to go. We're continually evolving and upgrading it."

Though she sounds quite confident in what she's doing now, Thomas confesses to having very little idea of what was in store for her when she was called to Plano a year and a half ago and given her introduction to the system.

"I went very happily and unknowingly into the job," she says, laughing. "I had no idea how it was going to evolve. I've truly learned from the ground up. E-mail is growing exponentially."

Some critics have decried that proliferation as a step toward impersonalization, but Thomas doesn't share that assessment.

"I'm not too sure how anyone can think e-mail makes the world more impersonal," she says. "With the click of a mouse, anyone can ask an executive anything they want without having to worry about how they've addressed it. Their questions go exactly where they need to go. When

a customer has a merchandise problem, it goes to the merchandise department ... Everybody is just a click away now."

While Thomas' job may be hard to explain – and even more difficult to grasp – it's clear she's enjoying it immensely. The demanding nature of working on the front lines of a relatively new field and dealing with such a heavy amount of traffic certainly has proven a tall order. Nevertheless, Thomas not only has accepted the challenge, she has embraced it.

"It has been hard, but I've had such a great time doing it," she says. "It's really fun, and there's always something different. You're always forging off in new directions. I've never had this much fun in a job ... Sometimes I think I've spoken to nearly everyone in the Company



about e-mail. I'm not sure where it's going, but we'll keep growing with it."

And more growth is sure to come. Thomas speaks excitedly about what the future holds for e-commerce in general and e-mail specifically, citing one study that revealed that e-mail use is growing at the rate of 700% a year globally.

"It's nothing for me to receive e-mail from customers all over the world," she says. "It's an incredible tool, and it's not ever going away."

Even away from the office, Thomas seems passionate about her work. While she says she likes to read, garden, cook, travel, and exercise (she runs five days a week, in addition to taking aerobics), she's just as likely to spend her free time taking a technology class to keep up with the breakneck pace at which computer technology keeps moving.

If Thomas' capacity for shouldering such a heavy load is reaching its limit, it certainly is not immediately apparent. While she admits to putting in a lot of hours and juggling many tasks, her cheerful demeanor signals anything but someone on the edge of burnout. In fact, a conversation with her is punctuated by frequent chuckles and a lot of self-deprecating humor.

But don't let that fool you into thinking Thomas isn't sharply focused. Clearly, this is someone who relishes the opportunity to prove she can handle whatever comes her way.

"First of all, I really like what I'm doing," she says. "Second, I take a lot of vitamins. The truth is, I have a lot of terrific people who do their jobs so well, I don't have to worry about them. I've got people who have been with the Company for 30 years. They know their jobs better than I do. So I just let them do their job."

While administering the Echo program isn't the only thing Thomas oversees – her team consists of 65 people working 18 different jobs as they handle orders generated by mail, e-mail, fax and phone calls – that aspect of her job is the one she finds most fascinating as JCPenney strives to beef up its Internet sales.

"Everyone has become an equal on the Internet," she says. "Customer service is what will separate those who survive and those who don't ... If you don't keep your customers happy, they'll just find another website and go somewhere else."

With that thought in mind, Thomas emphasizes to her associates the importance of pulling together in the face of the considerable stress that often accompanies the customer service arena.

"We really work as a team, and we help one another when somebody is having a down day," she says. "We all have days that are tougher than others ... I have striven to get all my associates to work as a team while acknowledging the strengths and weaknesses every person has."

And it is Thomas who sets the tone.

"I attempt to impart my idea of superior customer service, then I empower my people to do their job," she says. "And I hold them accountable for it. And it seems to work."

Indeed, Thomas considers those relationships the best part of her job.

"The terrific associates, the fine people I'm able to work with," she says. "I'm truly enjoying my work and enjoying the customers. International customers in particular are so diverse, it's so fun to e-mail with them. And the average e-mail customer is just so grateful when you give them a personal answer." ●

Christine Thomas photos taken by associate Becky Zebe, who works with Thomas in Atlanta