



WE HAVE PUT THE INDUSTRY TO THE TEST WITH A MYSTERY SHOPPER STYLE INVESTIGATION TO RATE THE GREAT AND THE GOOD IN OFFICE SUPPLIES. **MATT JANE** WENT OFF THE RADAR TO SEPARATE THE WHEAT FROM THE CHAFF

SERVICE BASKET



Roll over Donal MacIntyre, there is a new undercover operation in town. Posing as an office assistant for a marketing and communications firm based in north London, *Dealer Support* put seven leading companies to the test in a real-life survey of their efficiency, helpfulness and the quality of their catalogue. As the catalogues began to fill the post bag at AB Communications head office and its inbox filled with price lists and offers of visits, there were some interesting results on their performance.

OUR MAKE BELIEVE COMPANY

Company name: AB Communications

Size: 10 employees

What we do: Lead the way in marketing and PR.

Office supplies needs: All the regular office supplies goodies, with plenty of tea and coffee to quench our thirst and big emphasis on eco-products to appease our consciences.

Company's favourite biscuit: Biscuit or cake debate aside, it's the Jaffa Cake.

Favourite water cooler topic of late: The late Michael Jackson, as heard on loop on AB Communications radio.

Annual spend on office supplies: £1,500

WHO IS BEING JUDGED?

Internet: Amazon

Mail order: Viking

Contract stationers: Lyreco, Accord (part of O2O), Corporate Express

Independent dealers: UOE, Bright Media

WHAT IS BEING JUDGED?

Number of rings: How long does it take for them to pick up the phone on the first call?

Mood: How happy are they to get a call from a potential client, or is it just a robot at the other end?

First impression: What was the feeling at the start of this potentially long relationship?

Website: A key area for that first impression and getting those valuable contact details.


Catalogue: Judged on style, range of products and speed of delivery.

Eco-friendliness: An important area for companies to be working on, so we look out for any products to tick these boxes.

RESULT

Just like those school exams, a grade from A – F, with dealers hoping to avoid those Fs. **DS**

Please turn page for the results →

COMPANY	NUMBER OF RINGS	FIRST IMPRESSIONS	MOOD	WEBSITE		CATALOGUE	ECO-FRIENDLY	OVERALL COMMENTS	SERVICE MARK
AMAZON <i>Internet superstore</i>	0 - but recorded answer	Answering machine put me through. Finally spoke to someone after being on hold for two minutes, but he didn't really understand what I wanted.	The robot seemed to have more personality than the human I spoke with.	Includes a designated office products section. Layout is clear but the product ordering is in no recognisable order — a Super Mario game next to toner is just confusing.		Nothing available as this is a purely online service.	There was no information on products. My confused phone operator told me to speak to the manufacturers to find out about green credentials, which could be a fairly mammoth task.	Whatever the concerns about Amazon entering the office supplies market, they are not ready to compete yet. Would work for bits and pieces but they are not on the same service level as dealers yet.	F
VIKING <i>Mail order</i>	1	Friendly manner, though it was a quiet phone line. Took details and offered a range of catalogues. Asked me to email a list for prices. A response came after a day.	Sounded really happy to be talking with me, but also sounded like she was calling from a mobile in the middle of the Amazon due to the poor connection.	One of the more thorough websites with easy-to-use online ordering and a plain, clear layout.		The paper is lacking slightly on quality. If feeling charitable, this could be called an environmental consideration. Less so, could be described as a cheap offering. On the plus, it was delivered promptly.	No designated green option. While some products are highlighted as recycled, the evidence could easily be missed. The website is more easy to spot the green products.	While the initial service was helpful and promising, there was little in the way of follow-up service. Got a quote through very quickly, then it all went quiet on the Viking front.	C
LYRECO <i>Contract stationer</i>	0	Very helpful. Arranged for rep to deliver catalogues. He called the same day and arrived at my door that afternoon with catalogues and bespoke price lists. Followed up later.	Friendly and informal.	A simple to use website with a designated online ordering page. Simple and effective, pretty much does what it says on the tin.		A clear catalogue, well presented and certainly there's no missing the Lyreco mustard yellow cover.	There is a blurb at the start of the catalogue outlining their green credentials, with designated eco products labelled with a tree. Quite comprehensive.	The service offered by my representative was faultless. The sort of service you would expect from a smaller, independent dealer. Pleasantly surprised.	A
ACCORD <i>Contract stationer</i>	0	Had to be transferred from one department to another before getting through to the person I needed. Offered the catalogue but weren't forthcoming; I had to lead the discussion.	All the people I spoke to were happy enough, but ideally wouldn't have wanted to talk to three different departments.	Clearly laid out but fairly uninspiring. Plenty of information on the company but visually a bit tedious.		Where the website flounders, the catalogues excel. With an individual green guide which oozed eco-ness, a guide to the company and a full product catalogue, all bases were ticked.	With a designated catalogue for green products, the environment certainly seems high on the Accord agenda. Though the environmental merits of printing a separate catalogue may negate these efforts.	The initial bouncing between departments may have put some customers off. The catalogues were impressive, but there was little in the way of follow-up service.	D
CORPORATE EXPRESS <i>(AKA STAPLES ADVANTAGE UK)</i> <i>Contract stationer</i>	1	Friendly tone, took all my details and told me she would get the most appropriate person to call me back. Got a return call two days later and emailed a bespoke pricelist.	Friendly and interested in hearing about my company.	The website boasts all the trimmings, with a wide range of products listed. No actual online catalogue, but e-ordering is an option.		Despite asking a couple of times for a catalogue, nothing arrived. Unfortunately the representative seemed more interested in registering us for an account. We only wanted to see a catalogue!	There is evidence of environmental consideration, with emails reminding me to save not print, and green credentials boasted on the website.	Despite stressing that I was merely after information, there were several attempts to get me to register with an account. Lost patience in the end — it no longer seemed worth the effort.	D
UOE <i>Independent dealer</i>	2	Friendly, taking all relevant details and offering info throughout. Called a week later and they instantly recognised me, making it feel like we'd been in business for years.	Incredibly friendly and relaxed, like phoning a friend to arrange a drink in the pub.	A clear layout, no missing the contact number on every page. Even techno-phobes could order from this service, easy to navigate and simple language.		Sleek and simple design, with an emphasis that they will give you a discount on any prices shown. We like that.	Green products are clearly marked. UOE have started a carbon reduction programme	An efficient and friendly service, after two phone calls I was already feeling like one of the family.	A+ 
BRIGHT MEDIA <i>Independent dealer</i>	2	A very chatty and friendly answer. Knew the information she needed and gave good introduction of the company and how they operate. Not pushy, just the right information offered.	Bright by name and bright in personality. I felt slightly uplifted after speaking with them they were that cheerful.	There is no missing this website with its bright pink theme. No products listed which could hamper an order, but give them a call and they will get it sourced for you.		This company is too green for a catalogue. May put off some customers who like the tactile feel and ease of use of a printed magazine.	As green as can be. This company has ticked the eco-box with a big marker and then gilt edged it. They even have a fleet of LPG vehicles to deliver your order.	This company seems like the <i>Cheers</i> bar of office supplies, where everybody knows your name. A friendly local service, so green they could have flowers growing on their stationery.	B+