The Blind Side: Is Your A/R Program Saving Customers' Time and Effort?
By Scott Simpson, president and CEO, BlueTarp

I loved the book *The Blind Side* about the discovery of future NFL left tackle, Michael Oher, written by Michael Lewis and later adapted into a blockbuster movie starring Sandra Bullock. The story opens by explaining how the left tackle position, someone who never touches the football, has become one of the most highly paid positions in the NFL. It's confusing to the casual fan, but Lewis reveals the hidden-in-plain-sight logic: the most important player on the NFL roster is the quarterback, typically a right-handed passer. The second most important position is the left tackle, who prevents the defense from hitting the quarterback's blind side, where chance of injury is more likely.

B2B businesses have a blind side too: it's their customer experience with their A/R program. The largest customers typically represent a significant portion of a B2B business' revenue. Sure, your customers may have been won by product or pricing considerations (i.e. an outstanding play by the QB), but that revenue will be protected or lost based on how you've helped them save the scarcest resource of all: time.

Simply put – customers don't want to spend any more time getting what they need than they have to. They're busy with their own customers and concerns about service.   This is especially true when it comes to billing, A/R, and other payment or credit needs.   Here lies a hidden front in the competition—and B2B businesses who exploit it have a new strategy to lock in customers and win new ones, too.

Success is no longer just the absence of problems.   Sure, customers expect you to have the product they need, have it delivered promptly, have the order be accurately fulfilled, and be billed without error. However, in the world where Amazon has revolutionized the consumer buying experience – and has eyes on doing the same for business – saving customers' time will earn you sticky, hard-to-leave relationship.   Bonus surprise: you'll also discover significant cost savings in the process.

Here's how to make it happen.

#1   Make it easy for customers to serve themselves.   Everything we need as a consumer is online – purchases with your credit card company, ability to pay your phone bill, etc.   In B2B, however, that's still considered cutting edge.   B2B businesses should invest in online customer account management capabilities.   Rather than customers having to call your business and you paying staff to service these needs, make it simple for your customers to get what they need, whenever they need it.   They should be able to download a statement, view past purchases, make a payment online, request more credit, dispute a charge, and any other common use case.   They'll get addicted to the ease and routine of serving their own needs.

Want proof?   BlueTarp regularly conducts satisfaction surveys and discovered something seemingly counter-intuitive at first, but proves the blind side point. Removing the human touch from the service experience doesn't decrease satisfaction. In fact, BlueTarp's most satisfied customers are the highest users of our online tools.

#2 Notifications, their way.   No one likes to get a phone call asking them to pay their bill.   It's a confrontation that is absolutely necessary for a few, but actually avoidable for most.   Invest in automated email due date reminders and past due notices that provide a reminder of what's due and when.   Better yet, include a link in the email that connects to the online account so they can pay right away.   Even better yet, make these type of notifications configurable so your customer can determine how they want to be communicated with and when . . . email, phone, or even text.

BlueTarp has found that email notifications are **just as effective** as a phone call in helping drive payment of unpaid bills that are slightly to moderately delinquent.   To state the obvious, they are massively less expensive, can be executed en masse, and are preferred by most as the preferred communication method.

#3 Make it easy to get a credit account with you. The more effort needed to do something, the less likely it is going to happen. Establishing a credit account is no different. Filling out a paper application is still the dominant process for most B2B businesses. Often times the application may be incomplete (requiring follow-up), missing a signature (sneaky, but requires follow-up), or takes a long time to be collected and decisioned. For those trying to build an online process, this is a non-starter, but even for those who are completely brick-and-mortar, this can quickly become an excessive burden on your business. After all, the credit account was designed to protect you. You have to decide how important it is to get these properly completed and decisioned.

B2B businesses using BlueTarp get the benefit of an online application portal for their customers. Getting an account is just a few minutes of online entry followed by an instant credit decision with an immediately available credit line for use in that online session or that store visit. The application has required entry fields that eliminate incomplete apps and provide digital sign capability where the customer can agree to the terms without needing to print, sign, and mail in the application.

Not every B2B business is going to accept where the tide is going. Few in 1995 thought retail giants like Macy's, JC Penney, and Sears would be struggling for survival or that the very concept of the mall would be under threat of extinction. The internet channel, including companies like Amazon, has taken an increased share of sales every year as customers decide that convenience trumps trekking to the nearest mega-plex. That trend became notable a while ago and has now reached its obvious conclusion. This trend leaves us questioning, what logic suggests that only consumers value convenience when making purchases, and business customers would not?

Consider yourself advantaged if you see where you need to get with your A/R program while others don't. Their exposed blind side will be your gain. There are multiple paths to making this play. You can build it up yourself with your own team, consult with software providers who can build out modules for you, or consider a customized B2B credit program from BlueTarp and tailor your existing infrastructure. Whatever your choice, make sure you are taking action to protect *your* blind side. You'll reap the rewards sooner than you think.