What Happened to HQ?

By Sue Rose-Padalino (a/k/a Sue Rose)

There was a time when the headquarters of an American corporation was a real, physical place. A building with a front door. You could walk in, speak to a receptionist or secretary, and at least in theory reach someone empowered to help. Even if access was limited, the company still felt present.

That model has largely disappeared.

Today, corporate headquarters are often abstract concepts. Buildings exist, but access does not. Phones go unanswered. Customer service loops endlessly through automated prompts, outsourced call centers, or chatbots that ultimately redirect customers back to a website.

When consumers turn to websites, the experience often deteriorates further.

Corporate websites are frequently fragmented, glitch-ridden, or internally contradictory. Customers searching for specific products are redirected between pages that do not connect properly. Categories send users in circles. Features appear and disappear depending on which link is clicked. In some cases, even paid services fail because of missing components or poor design.

Airlines offer a familiar example. Booking tools, schedules, payments, and customer-service portals often operate as if they were designed independently and never tested as a complete system. The result is confusion, lost time, missed purchases, and in some cases real financial loss.

At some point, responsibility for these experiences must rest with leadership.

If corporate leadership does not manage accessibility and customer experience, how can sustained growth realistically occur? Are major corporations now so financially strong that they believe they no longer need the customer? Or has convenience for the company quietly replaced service to the people who built the brand?

This distance persists not because it goes unnoticed, but because internal incentives reward efficiency metrics over human resolution. Automated systems, call deflection, and fragmented digital tools lower visible operating costs, even as they silently transfer time, frustration, and risk onto the customer. Over time, organizations begin optimizing for containment rather than service.

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What this costs is harder to measure and therefore easier to ignore. Trust erodes. Loyalty thins. Institutional memory fades as fewer employees understand the end-to-end customer experience.

The company may remain profitable in the short term, but the relationship it depends on weakens gradually, often without a single triggering failure.

Locked doors, eliminated human contact, and outsourced support may reduce immediate expense, but they also signal indifference. A company that cannot be reached cannot be relied upon. A system that avoids accountability, even unintentionally, teaches customers that their time and effort are expendable.

This is not an argument against technology or efficiency. It is an argument against abandonment.

Consumers do not expect perfection. They expect clarity, access, and a path to resolution. When systems make it impossible to reach a responsible human being, frustration becomes the defining customer experience. Over time, that frustration becomes brand damage.

Respect for customers is not outdated. It is foundational.

Companies that remain accessible—through functional websites, responsive support, and accountable leadership—do more than resolve individual problems. They reinforce confidence. Confidence builds loyalty. Loyalty sustains long-term growth.

The irony is simple: treating people well is still good business.

In the end, companies don’t lose relevance because customers disappear; they lose it because they made themselves unreachable.

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