

## Creating Brand Advocates From Customer Complaints

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Millions of people are using social media to network, sell products, to extend influence and inevitably, complain about poor service. A recent report on social media use reveals 1.59 billion people engaging with Facebook, 320 million with Twitter and over 100 million people on LinkedIn. Beyond these impressive numbers, do you really know the extent to which this activity impacts on your customer service?

Before the rise of social media, if you had an issue with the service you received you could complain face-to-face. Another option was to ring the company later, or write a letter and wait patiently for your issue to be resolved. All these pathways to customer service are still valid, though each have their own problems. Face-to-face conversations can be confrontational. With communication increasing via screens, confrontation is something many people shy away from.

A browse through Facebook or Twitter reveals a world where even the smallest everyday occurrences are shared publicly. For many people, it's not even a conscious decision anymore to let your social network know what you're up to. Any interaction with a business - good or bad - is likely to be highly visible. Can you really afford to ignore this trend? As an enterprise with 'key stakeholders' and 'margins', you really need to know what these people, your customers, are saying about *you*.

### **Doing the right thing**

While some share complaints immediately, many customers still choose to contact the company directly – via social media – to share their concerns and look for an appropriate resolution. An article by the Chief Executive of the Institute of Customer Service, reveals the alarming statistic that from January 2014 to May 2015 the use of social media for complaints had increased eight-fold.

That represents a lot of complaint traffic. However, there's no reason for panic. Complaints aren't new. As you already know how to provide great customer service – why shouldn't you be able to translate it into excellent social media engagement? This is your opportunity to visibly do the right thing in a very public setting, to promote outstanding customer service and turn your critics into advocates.

### **Terms of engagement**

To achieve an online presence that is proactive and customer-centric, requires precise targeting. Adequate software to capture complaints and analyse data is a must; as well as policies and procedures in place for colleagues to exemplify good practice.

Equip your customer service team with the right skills to respond. A badly-written response or negative tone may do as much damage in a public forum – if not more – as not responding in the first place. All employees should be aware of your company’s mission statement and objectives. All levels of the business, from the boardroom down, should be engaged and positive.

Ensure your customer service and Marketing departments are communicating effectively. Empower your employees to make good decisions. Once they’re confident with their own judgement, you minimise risk. Technology is available to add layers of protection, if required.

Great customer service looks the same on all channels. Customers want the same things: they want a swift response; they want you to be honest and acknowledge your mistakes; and they want a satisfactory outcome.

### **Are you genuine?**

Train your staff to recognise genuine engagement: let them use their own natural tone of voice; their own words; and their name to ensure that personal touch. Placatory comments without substance, or using obvious cut and paste templates should be avoided. One engaging, conversational response addressing the customer’s concerns directly, offering an appropriate solution, is much better than going through the motions. Reward colleagues who demonstrate the best you have to offer.

A public apology and transparent ownership of mistakes show customers you care. However, you could set a precedent for every customer to demand the same outcome. You might even encourage unscrupulous people to make false complaints if you offer public compensation. If you need to have a conversation about sensitive data, let the customer know that you will contact them privately. Avoid pushing the initiative back on to them to complain again elsewhere, especially via a different channel.

### **Technology answers back**

Invest in software to analyse your presence and feedback on the main social media channels. It’s not just complaints - many people will share positive experiences too, or even seek the answers to basic service questions. Every customer who comments about you must be addressed; the one you overlook is the one that will escalate and damage your reputation. Technology can help you to catch negative feedback before it escalates. Have a system that alerts you to a problem and aim to resolve it within a set time.

Some people just want to cause trouble. Identifying trolls and dealing with them effectively is a key part of your strategy. Again, look to your processes – do your employees know what to do? Make sure you teach them how to handle potentially sensitive public situations.

### **A clear brand vision**

Communication at all levels is vital. Align skills and knowledge about best customer service practice. Possess a clear vision that is shared throughout the business. Ensure marketing provides feedback and reports on social media analysis and that customer service craft responses that reflect this vision. If you have a separate complaints team bridge the divide by creating one team, or by improving connections.

Effective social media management helps to develop and maintain a healthy brand and improves relationships with your customers. Reinforce your vision daily and show it working publicly through social channels. As your customers are talking about you – you have nothing to lose, and much to gain – by giving them a platform to talk to you. Most importantly – you remain in control.

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