Your customers are already talking about you on social media...

by Martin Ellingham

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The internet is big business. Of course, you knew that already. Most companies in 2017 choose to have an internet presence and to use appropriate keywords to attract footfall to their websites where they can hook customers with special online deals. That's good news. But do you really know the extent of the internet's reach and have you fully appreciated what that could mean in terms of customer service?

In 2016, internetlivestats.com published a report showing the number of internet users across the Globe. In the UK, 92.6% are engaging with online apps and services; over 60 million people. In the US, Canada and Ireland the percentages are in the 80s, with South Africa coming in around 50% (in terms of population that's still 28+ million users).

Also in 2016, smartinsights.com published a report on the use of social media. An incredible 1.59 billion people were engaging with Facebook, 320 million with Twitter and over 100 million people were on LinkedIn.

Thousands of millions of people are using social media to keep in touch with friends and family, to grow their social network, sell products, influence others or be influenced by recommendations, and of course, complain about poor service. Everywhere you go, from buses and trains to (annoyingly) restaurants, it's increasingly common to see people connected to Facebook or Twitter via mobile devices. Before the rise of social media, if your train was delayed, your bus driver was rude or the service was terrible in a restaurant, you had a few different options: you could complain there and then, face to face; you could ring the company later and attempt to select the right options to join a queue; or you could write a letter and wait patiently for a response. All these pathways to customer service are still valid but they all come with their own problems. Face to face conversations can be confrontational and in a society where we increasingly communicate via screens and keyboards, confrontation is something many people shy away from. All other methods require waiting – and the longer you wait, the more time your anger has to build up.

For many people, it's not even a conscious decision. A browse through Facebook or Twitter reveals a world where even the smallest everyday occurrences are shared publicly. Much of it is largely unimportant but we're now living in a society where it's normal to let your social network know what you're up to and therefore any interaction with a business (good or bad) is likely to be seen by hundreds of people at a time.

The good news is, whilst some will share immediately on their own social media accounts, many will still choose to contact the company direct – via social media – to share their impressions, concerns and anger (and of course to solicit an appropriate outcome). There is ample opportunity, with effective social media management, to turn those opinions around and to visibly do the right thing in a very public setting.

In May 2015, the Guardian published an article by Jo Causon, Chief Executive of the Institute of Customer Service, revealing the alarming statistic that from January 2014 to May 2015 the use of social media for complaints had increased eight-fold. Additionally, their research showed that 1 in 4 social media users had used this avenue to make a complaint between March and May 2015. When you consider how many people are connected to social media that's a *lot* of complaint traffic. Now we're a year on from the publication of that data - imagine how much further those statistics will have developed. Can you really afford to ignore the trend?

The internet has, without doubt, made the world a smaller place and it has provided amazing opportunities to communicate widely and share thoughts with millions of people. As an enterprise with 'key stakeholders' and 'margins', you really need to know what those people, *your* customers, are saying about *you.*

Let's be clear: Social media offers a great opportunity for customers to vent their anger in real time, but it also presents an equally attractive opportunity for businesses to promote outstanding customer service. You have the perfect opportunity, with a little virtual elbow grease, to turn your critics into your advocates.

Where does good online complaint management start?

That's a tricky question. To succeed – to have an online presence that is proactive, customer centric and appropriate – you need to target several aspects of your business. You need to make sure you have adequate software to capture complaints and analyse data. You need to make sure you have policies and procedures in place for colleagues to exemplify good practice. You need to make sure that all levels of the business, from the boardroom to the grass roots, are engaged and positive about what you need to achieve. Reward colleagues who demonstrate the best you have to offer.

One thing to remember; there's no need to panic. Complaints aren't new. You already know how to provide great customer service and there's no reason why that can't translate into great social media engagement.

Let's start by looking at employee engagement. It's all very well to tell your customer service team that they need to start responding to customers on social media, but remember this is a very public format and they need to be equipped with the right skills to do so. A badly written social media response or a

negative tone may do as much damage, if not more, as not responding in the first place. Fortunately, more and more social savvy candidates are entering the workforce every day.

One Team

You need to make sure that your Customer Service department and your Marketing department are communicating effectively and that all employees are aware of your company's vision, mission statement and objectives. Most importantly, you need to empower your employees to make good decisions with confidence, so that they can respond in real time, using their own judgement and you know that the risk in them doing so is minimal. You could even use technology to proof and add layers of authorisation (protection) to how they reply.

Apart from the risks associated with public real time responses, great customer service on social media looks the same as great customer service on any other channel. 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.

Train your staff so that they know the difference between auto-pilot and *genuine* engagement. You won't succeed if you trot out placatory comments without substance. Remember, thousands of people may see the response so it must be worth reading. Try to avoid using cut and paste templates where possible; no matter how well they're written they are still *very* obvious – especially after they've been seen several times on the same platform by the same customers. Enabling your employees to use their own natural tone of voice and their own words (and encouraging them to use their name to ensure that personal touch) can be scary – but it's worth doing. One positive, engaging, conversational response that addresses the customer's concerns directly and offers an appropriate solution will always surpass badly written apologies that don't sound genuine.

Take It Offline & Be Genuine

Another important consideration is taking conversations offline. A public apology and a transparent ownership of any mistakes are great tools for showing customers that you care. However, consider the implications of offering a solution publicly: you could set a precedent for every customer to want the same outcome; you could even encourage unscrupulous people to make false complaints if you've offered public compensation before. There might be occasions where you need to have a conversation about sensitive data like account numbers or contact details, and a Facebook wall just isn't the place to do it. Have a process in place for apologising publicly but then letting the customer know that you will contact them privately with the outcome or to take more information – don't push the initiative back on to the complainant to complain again elsewhere, especially via a channel they did not approach you from.

Embrace Technology with Technology

Invest in software that will analyse your social media presence and the feedback you're getting from customers on the main channels like Facebook and Twitter. Remember that whilst we're focusing here on complaints, many people will share positive experiences on social media too or even seek the answers to basic service questions and these need to be identified and addressed. Every customer who comments about you on social media *must* be addressed; the one you overlook is the one that will escalate and damage your reputation.

You also need to be able to identify trolls – some people don't want a genuine outcome, they just want to cause trouble. Being able to identify them and deal with them effectively is a key part of your effective strategy. Again, look to your processes – do your employees know what to do if they suspect they are being trolled? Knowledge is power so make sure you teach them how to handle this potentially sensitive public situation.

Technology can help you to catch negative feedback before it escalates. Rather than leave it to chance, have a system that alerts you to a problem and get your team to resolve it within a set time – you could even route the problem to the most capable team member to resolve it.

Your Next Steps

Communication at all levels of your company is vital. It's no good making social media management decisions in the boardroom and simply handing off responsibility to the Marketing team – you need everyone on board. Customer Service need to work with Marketing to make sure they have aligned skills and knowledge about best customer service practice.

The cleanest approach is to have a clear vision that is shared throughout the business, to ensure Marketing provides great feedback and reports on social media analysis and that Customer Service craft great responses that align with the company's aims and objectives. For those with a separate complaints team, you need to bridge the divide and allow for one team or a connected team.

Effective social media management will help you to develop and maintain a healthy brand and will improve your relationship with your customers. Your customers are talking *about* you anyway, so you have nothing to lose – and much to gain – by giving them a platform to talk *to* you via their favourite sites, with you in control.

Remember that mission statement so lovingly crafted that's lost in the weeds on your website? Use it. Reinforce it daily and show it working publicly through social channels.

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