

THE CUSTOMER LIFEGUARD



Helping you save your customers at risk and protecting your revenues

Calm Down Dear – It’s just another channel!

How to fix a problem like social media

With apologies to Michal Winner – and possibly David Cameron, it’s time keep calm, but not just carry on, and to take a measured view of what happening with social media and customer service.

We’re going through a customer service revolution and social media is dramatically changing the landscape. Increasing numbers of customers –and not just generation Y – are using social media as their first point of contact for customer service, bypassing more traditional methods such as call centres and on-line help centres.

They’re doing it on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn, and there’s a new story every day, and classic YouTube videos such as Fenton, the Richmond Park deerstalker, ensure that millions of people get to hear about both good, and bad news, instantly.

Dave Carroll, whose “United Breaks Guitars” YouTube video went viral in 2009 with more than 11 million YouTube hits, has rightfully become the poster child for the power of social media in outing companies that institutionally disregard customer service in an ever increasing connected world .

Social Media continues to be a major battleground for all kinds of issues and especially for people complaining about poor customer service. And it’s not just the actual comments that are attracting attention. Hardly a day goes by without customer experience and customer service “gurus” voicing their opinions about whether or not Social Media, as a customer interaction medium, is here to stay or just a passing fad. Whatever side of the divide you find yourself on, it seems to me that ignoring it, and hoping that it will go away, is just not a sustainable strategy.

Many of these experts point to the fact that” it’s just another channel” and should be treated like all the rest. What they don’t always tell you is that the customer service landscape isn’t changing just because of social media. It’s changing because customer expectations are also reaching new heights. And it’s the combined adoption of social networks, and” I want it now”, that sets expectations for this new, connected customer.

There’s also a lot of debate about who “owns” social media and whether it should be marketing, customer service, sales etc. The question should be – Why does anyone own it? No one department owns telecoms, email or other channels. All of these may be utilized in different ways by each group, but clearly defined and guided by the customer experience strategy governing the organization and the impact on the customer.

However companies continue to do the craziest things and the problem seems to boil down to three key issues.

- 1. Many organizations lack a coherent, consistent social media strategy**
- 2. Business are genuinely afraid of engaging with customers via social media because of the potential damage a “rogue employee” might inflict**
- 3. They lack the technology infrastructure to effectively monitor SM or hide behind older legacy system “excused” for not being able to track negative sentiment.**

While all of these are legitimate reasons, they are far from insurmountable, and frankly don't differ dramatically from challenges in other channels, and importance of managing those effectively.

However, as was graphically shown on Canadian TV recently, even the biggest retailers don't seem to get it and there's still some way to go. The companies highlighted in the show, Canadian Tire, Zellers and Wal-Mart showed an alarming lack of awareness of the existence of social media and the potential brand damage that just one of these customers could inflict. Upset customers had posted unfavourable comments about an experience they had each had with the companies. After 24 hours, only one company, Wal-Mart, had responded and asked the customer to send an email – but the email address didn't work! The others not only didn't respond, but wouldn't even provide any meaningful comments on the findings from the show, resulting in an embarrassing, visual montage of belligerent security guards and low level PR hacks defending the indefensible.

I believe that businesses simply can't afford to ignore Social Media and while there's not really a “let's dip our toe in the water” approach, I also believe that it can be addressed in an evolutionary or staged fashion, that allows a company to take an approach that is responsive to customers and can be adopted both culturally and technologically by the business. There are, not surprising, three key elements to doing this.

- 1. Agree a social media strategy and in particular how, and by whom, Social Media interactions will be handled.**
- 2. Deploy a cloud based Social Media monitoring and listening solution that can be tested , implemented and integrated relatively quickly, to gauge the level and content of social “noise” and directed to the best people in the business for resolution.**
- 3. Use this to identify those people, especially existing customer who have been truly disenfranchised, from the trolls who are just ranting, and engage quickly and positively through a direct channel, but ensure the resolution is publicized appropriately.**

While starting down the Social path can release an avalanche of negativity, the simple fact of responding and engaging early, puts you an elite group that still see customers as important, and actually puts you in a better position to stem the tide, by understanding quickly what's upsetting them. Ignoring people is the worst of all possible outcomes and by not responding you risk alienating not just the customer who contacts you, but thousands, or even millions of their friends, with significant collateral damage to your company.

So before dismissing Social Media as just another channel, you should ask yourself - Do you really want to be the next United Airlines?