

A realistic look at social media and the contact centre

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Twitter and Facebook are rapidly becoming the new kids on the block as a way for customers to complain, get information, and provide feedback to companies. For enterprises that want to provide top-level customer support and service, integrating social media with the contact centre is one way to serve customer service needs and help customers get solutions to their problems.

In the past couple years it's become possible for companies to route tweets and Facebook posts to contact centre agents, and handle these interactions just as they handle phone calls, email, and web chat sessions. The questions on the minds of many CIO's, contact centre managers, as well as marketing managers, are focused on whether they should be supporting their customers via social media, and if so, what's the best way to move forward?

Marketing - the new contact centre for social media?

Traditionally, the contact centre has owned the channels customers use to communicate with an organisation - calls, emails, chats. But when it comes to social media, one of the biggest issues facing companies who are trying to determine whether or not they want to support their customers through it, is the concept of "who owns" it. To find out, Interactive Intelligence and COMMFusion LLC conducted some informal research of about a dozen different global organisations. Based on that research, we found that in the vast majority of companies, social media is the responsibility of the organisation's marketing department, often in conjunction with the online marketing team. Marketing is responsible for the company's brand and image, as well as maintaining consistency in their messaging, and is therefore in charge of how the company presents itself via social media.

The marketing team generally handles customer inquiries and complaints that come in via social media in order to ensure that the company is presenting itself the way that marketing believes is best.

There are several reasons why marketing has taken the lead role in social media activities, including customer care:

1. Social media is a one-to-many form of communication, which typically falls under the jurisdiction of the Marketing department because the messages contained within the social communications directly impact the image of the organisation publicly. A wrong message sent out through the social networks can have huge repercussions.
2. Within the contact centre, traditional channels like phone calls, email and chat are one-to-one and are relatively private in nature and therefore do not expose the organisation publicly.
3. Because of the public nature of social media, responses need to be crafted in a way that puts the organisation in the best possible light - something marketing does best.

4. Concise, articulate and well-crafted written responses are needed when responding to customers via social media. This is handled best by marketing.
5. Research shows that most conversations that organisations have with customers surround sales- and marketing-related items (coupons/discount requests, new sales opportunities, attracting customers away from competitors, etc.) and not customer service-related conversations. In fact, research indicates that customers still prefer traditional channels far more than social media when needing customer service.

While there is good reason for the customer care team to be involved or even responsible for social media customer service, this is generally not the case today.

Social media adoption

We are still in the very early stages of seeing companies providing customer support via social media and for obvious reasons. In a recent study conducted by the Society of New Communications Research (SNR) 1, they found that customers are using social media for reasons other than customer support:

- 59% use social sites to vent about customer care frustrations
- 72% said they research companies through social channels before making purchases
- 74% choose to do business based on online feedback

Additionally, a study by the IBM Institute for Business Value² found that only a small percentage of consumers, 23% of their respondents, indicated that they used social media to interact with a company's brand. Even more indicative was the activity those individuals had with the company - 61% were looking for discounts/coupons, 55% for purchases, while only 37% of them used social media for customer service purposes. What conclusions can be drawn from this? Customers are clearly interacting with the companies that they want to do business with, but it is the marketing department that is handling the majority of social media interactions.

What does this mean for your company?

Be realistic and don't let the hype scare you into action prematurely. Social media is here to stay, and you need to be ready to service your customers through the social sites that they're using. After all, you don't want to be a #failwhale!

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