

Using social media as a customer service channel

 By [Diane Charton](#)

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Many companies run Twitter, Facebook or YouTube accounts to supplement their other offline and online marketing activities, yet few have understood that social media is quickly becoming as important a customer service channel, as it is a marketing opportunity.

Social media is a channel that few organisations feel they can completely ignore, with stats from Nielsen revealing that nearly four in five active internet users visit social media sites or blogs. However, few companies have grasped just how fundamentally social media will transform their relationships with their clients over the next few years.

Today's more empowered customer wants conversation with brands and personal service from brands in the channel of his or her choice, which is often Facebook or Twitter. This trend is quietly obliterating the line between marketing and customer service.

Lip-service isn't enough

No longer can an organisation claim to have good customer service, it must also prove that it does through the way that it interacts with customers under the public scrutiny of social media users. Lip-service isn't enough since anyone can follow a conversation between a company and a customer and make up their own mind.

Social media is quickly emerging as a communications channel that feels as natural to users as the telephone or email. They want to reach out to organisations they deal with by means of social media because they see it as a channel that is convenient, easy and transparent to use.

What's more, social media is going to become an even more important part of their lives as internet usage on tablet computers and smartphones grows.

Smartphones increase access

According to recent research presented by Google and conducted by Ipsos GmbH, TNS Infratest and the Mobile Marketing Association, 63% of South African smartphone users access social networks daily.

The most popular social network is Facebook, which has about 4.2 million users, followed closely by LinkedIn and Twitter with around 1.1 million South African users each. This is close to mainstream penetration among the mid and high LSMs in South Africa - and growth remains exponential.

This all adds up to a new reality for organisations. Customers have integrated social media into their daily lives and expect the organisations they deal with to be available in social channels. They expect transparency and conversation when they use these channels, marking a change in their relationships with companies.

The old broadcast model does not cut it anymore. Now, it is about being willing to engage in dialogue with customers and interact with them in a personalised manner. Impersonal, scripted replies are not good enough. The question is how to provide personal service on a massive scale.

Customers also expect immediacy. They want answers in minutes or hours, not days or weeks, as businesses may have got away with in the past.

Strategic thinking required

Organisations need to start thinking about what this all means for customer service and start developing strategies, processes and best practices for social media engagement.

Getting this right is complex. Organisations need to look at ways of aligning social media - today seen as the marketer's domain - with customer service contact centres. Companies will need to understand which touch points customers are using for service, how and why.

There are many nuances to consider - from the workflow between social media and customer service through to the subtle differences between social media channels. How does one get service interactions right in Twitter's 140-character limit, for example? Moreover, how do you efficiently resolve a Facebook complaint by funnelling the customer to someone who can help?

Today, social media is often the last resort for customers who are frustrated with traditional support channels. It can provide a window into how the service infrastructure is performing, so it is definitely worth tracking from that perspective. However, customers often vent on social media before they contact customer service, so there is an opportunity to be proactive, too.

In an ideal world, social media can be a great way of enticing customers away from expensive channels like brick and mortar or the phone to electronic interaction. It can enable organisations to quickly address customer complaints, build relationships with customers and demonstrate their service in action.

ABOUT DIANE CHARTON

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