

Soothing customers online, in person

In a digital age where dissatisfied consumers vent their concerns through biting viral videos, nasty blog posts or negative online comments, managers need to develop strategies to soothe angry customers in person as well as online. According to new research, combating anger on social media can be simple for companies, as long as they get in front of a problem to prevent it from growing.

The study, by researchers from Monash University and Rutgers University, suggests that problems grow based on the amount of time it takes for companies to respond to negative comments, videos or blog posts.

Monash University researcher associate professor, Yelena Tsarenko from the Department of Marketing, says while social media can be a positive experience for a majority of the time for companies, it can quickly be turned against them when angry customers use it to vent their frustrations toward a company.

Failed Frenzy drives Oz users into a frenzy

"This was definitely the case with Australia's inaugural Click Frenzy event recently that did not go to plan when the online site went into meltdown and was inaccessible for several hours and angry consumers hit the social media channels to show their frustration," she said.

"When customers can vent their frustrations directly to employees of the firm, the channel of communication between the service provider and consumer becomes much stronger, allowing for a more open conversation where both parties can create and mutually agree upon possible solutions.

"This direct relationship also allows service personnel to provide the empathy and emotional support that customers are looking for," she said.

Aside from quickly responding to negativity on social media, the researchers suggest managers should offer complementary services in order to soothe the customers' anger.

Be pro-active

"Managers are the best line of defence to help prevent problems from spreading, which is a big concern when dealing with social media. Social media such as Twitter and Facebook are extremely powerful outlets for viral word-of-mouth and can pose a serious threat to managers who do not control service failures quickly."

To avoid becoming the focus of a top-ranked trend on the micro blogging site Twitter or to prevent an erosion of customer loyalty, managers must actively promote a private environment where consumers can vent emotionally.

Early intervention and emotional intelligence training are essential to avoid customers' obsessive ruminations over the event and the subsequent spread of negative word-of-mouth commentary.

"Managers represent the first, best option to take customer complaints directly, a challenging task but one

that can blunt the long-term consequences of upset clients who allow their feelings to simmer internally or immediately begin relaying their discontent to friends and family," she concludes.

The research was published in the current edition of the *Journal of Service Research*.

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