



Social Media – it's not just about hearing the crowd...

...it's about acting on it!

Tipping the social experiment from marketing into the contact centre and connecting through to your organisation and processes. What does a business really need to do to embrace social media: a beginners' guide.

For businesses to use social media effectively, it must become an integral part of customer service and the contact centre platform. It's not just about having a social presence; it's about how an organisation manages these interactions effectively and acts on them.

Summary

Almost half the UK population has a Facebook page and participating in online communities is fast becoming the nation's favourite past time. For businesses, this presents a compelling opportunity to reach out and promote products and services to a massive online audience. In some consumer sectors, companies which lack a social presence are fast becoming conspicuous by their absence. The hype around social media is spawning an industry of software specialists, consultants and agencies keen to persuade businesses to invest in social media trials and tools. It's not just about promotion; businesses are also seeing the potential of social media as a customer service tool, firstly to understand what customers are saying about their product and service and, secondly, to manage and influence these broadcast comments. This type of activity is currently managed by marketing departments who have the skills and experience to deal with awkward requests, but this will not scale. So, how does a business take social media from a marketing experiment to a customer service channel which will differentiate the company, scale and ultimately make the company money?

For businesses to use social media effectively, it must become an integral part of customer service and the contact centre platform. It's not just about having a social presence, it's about how an organisation manages these interactions effectively and acts on them. Companies must consider how the customer experience will be managed and scaled and what process management software is put in place to manage workflow and connect the socially enabled contact centre to the rest of the organisation.

This paper attempts to cut through the hype and provide a basic introduction to the different elements of a social media customer service strategy.

1. The social hype

There are 500M Facebook users; the UK is the second biggest community with 28M+ users, 45% of the population having their own Facebook page. And it's not just the young; most Facebook users are over 35 and 50+ is the fastest growing Facebook demographic. Twitter claimed 175M users worldwide in 2010 and blogging or participating in online communities is fast becoming the nation's favourite past time. Social media is now 50/50 with Google as the favourite web entry point. The ability to market to this audience represents a compelling opportunity for businesses. But how does a business channel this huge audience and use social media as a new form of business communication?

Many brands are reaching out to the online community to promote their products with online forums and Facebook pages. These pages advertise products, services, new features and promotions to active followers. Coca Cola has over 24M followers with Starbucks close behind with over 20M followers. Personalities actively promote their sponsors via their own Facebook pages; Lionel Messi and Roger Federer sport Nike clothing with 7.2M and 6.8M followers respectively and David Beckham who 'likes Diet Pepsi' has over 9M followers worldwide.

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As a broadcast channel, the promotion opportunity is massive, and the impact is rapid as the audience are followers, receiving instantaneous updates which, as the solution is transparent, appears to followers as more credible. Adversely, by the nature of these characteristics, social media represents a danger for business; one critical review can have a huge impact. In 2009, United Airlines is reported to have lost 10 per cent of their share value, \$180million, after being blamed for damaging a musician's guitar. His song has become a YouTube hit with nearly four million views in 10 days.

Read more: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/worldnews/article-1201671/Singer-Dave-Carroll-pens-YouTube-hit-United-Airlines-breaks-guitar--shares-plunge-10.html#ixzz1M2S2p4or>

2. How can a business make money from social media?

More and more social analytical tools, consultants and agencies are appearing in the market place and companies are 'jumping on the band wagon' and investing in social media trials. These trials are typically driven by marketing to understand the customer, their requirements and perceptions of the business and to promote products and services. But does this actually make the business money? A recent Gartner report estimated that around 70% of social media experiments will fail this year. But what does failure mean?

Businesses are making huge investments in social media software and struggling to show an ROI. For some, this is because there is a lack of understanding and clear strategy at start and so ROI cannot be proven. However, for many companies, the answer is that the strategy should not be about promoting to and acquisition of new customers. Instead, it should be about connecting to existing customers, understanding their gripes and using social media as a customer service tool in order to differentiate the business. Customer experience can be a business's critical tool for differentiation, more powerful than having the best products or the lowest price. Because social media is a broadcast communication, any exemplary customer experience is reflected out to 1000s of online followers, unlike email or voice channels.

Social word-of-mouth has tremendous consequences: 78% of consumers trust what peers say, whilst only 18% trust TV advertising, so when someone Tweets about good or bad customer service the impact is massive. 53% of people on Twitter recommend companies in their Tweets, with 48% of them delivering on their intention to buy the product. (ROI Research for Performance, June 2010)

Obviously, ambassadors for your customer service are important to maintain, but businesses also need to identify critics who have a wide sphere of influence then communicate with these critics to convert them to advocates. Take the example of a holiday company who have set up an online forum for questions and issues: from the people submitting queries, marketing identifies those who have a high sphere of influence, Tweet regularly and are due to travel; if these passengers are greeted with champagne on arrival at the airport, the company receives an instant positive Tweet. Currently, there are many similar projects managed by marketing - how do we turn this into a customer service tool which can scale to support volume as it grows?

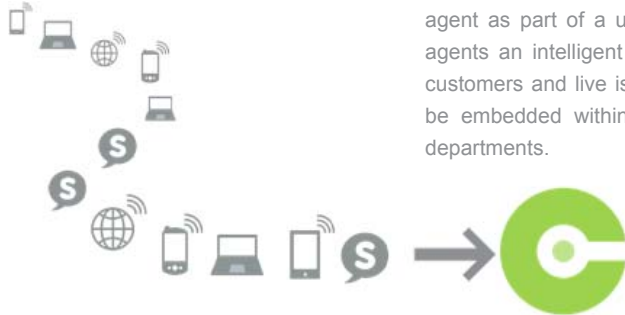
3. Tipping the social media experiment from marketing into customer service

With a minimal number of comments on online forums, marketing can manage each one and make decisions based on experience as how best to handle critics. But this is costly and, as more people realise that they can receive exemplary service simply by posting comments on forums, solutions will need to grow. The answer is not to simply throw lots more bodies at the problem as it rapidly grows, as this is costly and inefficient.

The only viable solution is to manage social media as another channel into the contact centre, alongside other channels.



An integrated contact platform could be used to manage social media comments and queries alongside other channels and to queue, prioritise and route these to the correctly skilled agent as part of a universal queue.



Call centres have a history of adopting and adapting to new channels; over the past few years multi-channel platforms have enabled the integration of email, SMS and web portals to support multi-channel contact centres.

An integrated contact platform could be used to manage social media comments and queries alongside other channels and to queue, prioritise and route these to the correctly skilled agent as part of a universal queue. Technology is used to automate processes and give agents an intelligent desktop which includes the script, knowledge and real time data on customers and live issues that they need in order to handle queries. Escalation routes can be embedded within this to hand-off difficult issues to marketing, engineering or other departments.

4. So what tools are out there?

Social media can be treated as another pipe into the contact centre but, as a form of communication, it is inherently different to existing channels: it is broadcast (one to many), transparent and users are accustomed to a rapid response to their comments. So, additional tools are required by the business, alongside existing systems to assess and manage interactions.

- a) **Monitoring tools:** The customer service system needs to monitor key discussion groups and match key words. When comments are made that match keywords, a service request should be sent to the contact centre and routed to appropriately skilled agents based on the key word. The comment, along with the public domain profile information for the user, should screen pop to the agent and automatically create a CRM contact or match to an existing contact and provide contact history.

Monitoring tools can be used to rate comments on negative and positive scales, where comments at either end of the scale can be identified. Positive comments enable businesses to identify ambassadors whose feedback can be utilised. Critics can be determined and prioritised in queues so their issues can be resolved quickly.

Users can also be rated in terms of their sphere of influence or advocacy over others: for example, a baby food manufacturer surveying online baby forums would be best placed to identify and prioritise a member who is a doctor or midwife and who might exert more influence over other members rather than a new mum who has few connections on Facebook. Although it is clear that consumers are influenced by peers online, a back lash is emerging after many reports of companies placing bogus reviews on sites such as Trip Advisor. Consumers tend to trust reports from people who are 2nd connections (i.e. indirectly connected) so, identifying a consumer's sphere of influence is a critical part of monitoring tools.

- b) **Facebook portals:** Many brands have set up Facebook pages and now have thousands, if not millions, of followers. More recently, companies have begun to use Facebook as a way of hosting an online customer service portal where users can communicate questions, complaints and comments directly to the company and expect to receive responses.

A ticketing company receives many calls to its contact centre leading up to an event enquiring as to when tickets will be released. A Facebook portal can be used to communicate this news and so reduce call volumes and avoid contact centre melt down. Virgin Holidays have been effectively using a Facebook page to manage queries about holidays, countries visited and flights; as this is a broadcast form of communication, if there has been a general issue, such as a strike or adverse weather at an airport, delays and advice can be communicated to a large online audience, effectively reducing inbound calls to the contact centre.

Connecting the agent desktop into the rest of the organisation and managing social media process requests, monitoring trouble tickets, linking to existing resource planning, inventory, ordering and CRM tools are essential parts of the socially enabled contact platform.

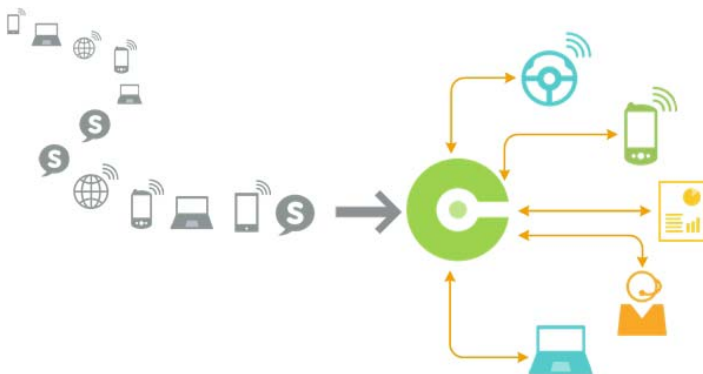
Adversely, because Facebook is a broadcast tool, queries must be dealt with rapidly. Consequently, comments should be delivered automatically to the appropriately skilled agent who must be given a knowledge base of standard answers or real time FAQs to respond.

c) **Empowering agents:** Automation can provide agents with standard answers, customer history, real time reports on their issues and an escalation route. However, agents also need to be skilled in responding to social media requests; responding rapidly to Tweets and social media comment demands a skill set that many contact centre agents do not yet have. One solution could be to use outsourced agents who specialise in social media. It should be possible to escalate issues to management or Marketing if they cannot be dealt with directly by the agent and agents should be provided with client-specific rules and procedures.

5. Customer Experience - not just hearing what the customer has to say but acting on it.

"The current generation of customer service software is too focussed on data aggregation rather than decision support and collaboration, the changes that have the most impact on customer service are the support of easy to change business rules and real time advice to guide the agent. Traditional providers of CRM software will scramble to remarket their products as containing business process rule capabilities: but for most the truth is that they have cumbersome workflow tools." Gartner

Managing the customer experience is not just about listening to customers, it's about managing and resolving their requests. If a resolution to their problem is not provided within 24 hours, then you can be sure that the online audience will hear about it. So, connecting the agent desktop into the rest of the organisation and managing social media process requests, monitoring trouble tickets, linking to existing resource planning, inventory, ordering and CRM tools are essential parts of the socially enabled contact platform. Escalation paths must be managed and issues routed to engineers or marketing in different departments. Integration of field staff with the contact centre provides agents with live status updates for customers.



Currently, the social media customer service process of hearing, dealing with request **and responding back** is managed by a marketing prime. This prime can manage a social media request from end to end and ensure that a response to the customer is provided. Followers must hear that their issue has been dealt with and write a recommendation.

But, for the process to scale as requests grow, workflow and business process rules must be automated, thus empowering agents to resolve customer issues quickly and respond to customers. It is their recommendations that really deliver the value to the business and, in turn, return revenue.

Summary of elements required

1. **Listen** - analytical tools to monitor customer interaction, find ambassadors and critics
2. **Customer service page** – Facebook is the dominant social media; create an area for customers to voice opinions and ask questions
3. **Queuing and routing** – route and queue alongside existing channels to correctly skilled agents
4. **Empower agents** with a knowledge base and real time data and skill them to deal with social media communication
5. **Manage workflow** throughout organisation to ensure issues are resolved quickly, integrate with CRM and resource planning systems
6. **Close the loop** – the contact centre responds via Facebook, turning critics into advocates and broadcasting information.

Social media will become a critical form of communication for businesses and they should start implementing now a strategy of managing the social media experience.

Conclusion

Businesses currently fall into three categories: those investing in tools and consultancy services; those piloting and testing the water with minimal experiments; and those watching and waiting who are often cynics. But ignore social media at your peril; what is clear is that it will have a huge impact and will, over time, change the way marketing operates. Customers are learning to find products based on what their peers say and not from advertising and promotions. In time, marketing will focus on influencing social media comment instead of promoting products to customers, be they business or consumer. The market may be hyped up but what is clear is that, like the growth of the internet, social media will become a critical form of communication for businesses and they should start implementing now a strategy of managing the social media experience.

This strategy needs careful consideration; for many it's not about promoting to new customers, it is about using social media as a customer service tool to ensure advocacy. To implement this in an efficient, cost effective way requires integration with the contact centre, careful management alongside other channels and consideration given to workflow and business process management to ensure requests are dealt with and always communicated back to customers.



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