Making The Shift To Social Customer Service

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As a long term supporter of social customer service, I've mixed feelings after almost a decade of brand involvement.

It never scaled as we initially thought. After an initial tranche of brands who led the way and did a great job, there was silence. Too many brands remained scared of getting involved with their customers on social.

They hoped that ignoring them would somehow reduce demand. Facebook admins refused to let customers comment. Trouble is they went somewhere else and still made their point known. Obviously, that conflicted with what branding wanted to establish in the customers' mind, so maybe the answer was to try and influence outcomes by getting involved.

Even when brands reluctantly turned up, their initial instinct was to shunt customers off social into private channels as soon as possible. Thus losing the self-service opportunity that publically answered questions provided.

Finally, too many Marketing and Customer Service teams remained territorial around ownership and what 'good' looked like. This resulted in maybe the greatest missed opportunity of them all. Social is no respecter of organisational silos. Social customers talk about stuff that is of interest to marketing, sales, customer service, product development and continuous improvement for starters. But unless you can transcend those internal blinkers, you are only going to harvest a fraction of the value that social offers.

Frustratingly, much of the downside I've just painted can be easily resolved. It starts with a strategic recognition that social customer service works for the brand when clarity of purpose and scope of opportunity is clearly defined. Here are some of the more common reasons why you would want to be active and excellent in social customer service:

- We need to take our existing social customer service capability to the next level as customers and competitors evolve
- We need to align the approach to social customer service between Marketing, Corporate Communications and Customer Service teams
- We need to satisfy executive concern that the organisation can reduce the inherent risk from social engagement
- We need greater internal responsiveness to fixing customer issues that appear on social
- We need to capture greater value from social engagement in terms of word of mouth and customer insight

On the upside, I've always loved the catalytic impact that public discourse with customers has on a brand's willingness to up their game. Even the most lethargic can understand that it makes no sense to keep promoting your failures to a socially tuned-in marketplace.

As a result, the best social customer service teams I've been associated with have shown a keen sense of why managing your social footprint matters. They recognise it is the dividing line between social engagement and more traditional forms of 1:1 customer service. That's why brands need to act differently when delivering customer service over social.

It's foolish to launch into social customer service without a plumbed in improvement capability It starts by recognising that it's foolish to launch into social customer service without a plumbed in improvement capability. This means once individual customer issues are fixed, you have to invest the time and resources for root cause analysis and improvement. Otherwise, nothing changes – and customers notice deaf brands.

Sometimes this requires cross-functional collaboration. Sometimes it is encouraging expedited decisions from PR and corporate comms. Maybe it's a well-rehearsed escalation workflow, able to distinguish an increasingly vocal, irate customer from the gathering clouds of a full-blown social media crisis. Other times when things are really broken, the service design team might need to be called in. Whatever it is, the intent is to get smarter next time by removing the problem or minimising its impact.

Acting differently also applies to the customer facing team. Advisors must communicate differently. As I'm fond of saying when evangelising social customer service to an audience, *'no-one can hear you scream in the IVR'*. However on social, others notice well before the screaming stage and will often add comment to whatever footprint is left for others to be influenced by.

Everyone wants this to have a positive impact on other customers. *"They cared, they listened, I can trust them to do the right thing"*. The kind of word of mouth that content marketing would die for! It's why the catchphrase 'service is the new marketing' is so popular.

But getting this right is no fluke.

It demands a much more disciplined form of communication skills from advisors. Communicating one:many is amplified. The consequences of getting it right or wrong are therefore greater. Brand reputation is enhanced or diminished through the skill of an individual's communication and whatever behind the scenes support they rely on to expedite issues.

So an extra focus on getting your recruitment, induction and ongoing development right is important. Staffed by the best of the best, social teams need to be positioned as an aspirational role within the greater customer service team.

Team management also needs to move up a few notches. A coaching orientated style of team leading is required to support what needs to be an empowered team culture. If a command and control management style remains strong within the rest of customer services, it is important to shelter the social customer service team from that and allow

them to evolve their own style and standards. Even though trusting the team to do the right thing is a challenge to any legacy conformance based culture.

Besides getting talent and culture right, there is more to be done. Choose your technology platform carefully. It needs to deliver everything from listening, to routing, to real-time dashboards. Knowledge management and CRM need plugging in as well. And in a world of omnichannel communication, social needs to fit into a much broader service strategy.

As previously hinted, get your playbook sorted out so that it defines escalation and crisis management. Rehearse the plan often.

Keep auditing where your customers are on social. Each year it will look different, and you will need to decide whether new platforms warrant your involvement. Keep up to date with the major ones. Both Facebook and Twitter are competing to become the most customer service friendly solution.

If and when Facebook Messenger takes off, social will revert to a 1:1 exchange. By my definition, that means it's no longer social. But it may cause social to go mainstream once it looks safer for brands to participate privately.

Making a shift to social customer service can seem a daunting task unless you plan to succeed. Hopefully, some of the suggestions here will help you on that journey to becoming excellent.

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