

The Impact of Social Media on Customer Service and the Customer Experience

WHITE PAPER



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Businesses invest scores of resources trying to get customers to talk about them. Naturally, they want to hear positive buzz, the kind of conversation that generates interest and sales, fortifies brands, and drives new innovation. And as all businesses do, they will sometimes generate negative feedback forcing them to take the bad with the good. Whatever they're hearing, however, they need to stay abreast of customer conversation — positive and negative — so they can use it to their advantage.

Thanks to social media — forums, blogs, and networks like Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter — customers in both B2B and B2C segments are sharing information with each other and their providers like never before: recommending brands, providing usage tips, sharing content, and praising or criticizing customer service. Prior to social networking and the applications that followed, customers were barely able to ripple the waters when happy or angry about their dealings with a provider, but today they have at their fingertips the tools to cause major impact and even drive change.

Every demographic has taken to the Web and the number of people using social media continues to grow exponentially. According to a new study from BIGresearch, users of social media tend to skew younger and have slightly higher incomes than the overall population. Businesses that fail to provide them with a place to gather and create a community stand to lose a voice in the discussion and, in the process, even their customers who might take to other sites to discuss products or their pleasure or dismay with a service experience. Further, they miss an unparalleled opportunity to improve their service delivery by leveraging these very platforms and monitoring the chatter taking place there.

SOCIAL MEDIA USERS VS. OVERALL POPULATION		
	Social Media Users	General Population, 18+
Male	42.5%	48.7%
Female	57.5%	51.3%
Average Age	38.2	45.1
Average Income	\$68,311	\$66,942
Source: BIGresearch, 2009		

Moreover, a recent study conducted by the Society for New Communications Research (SNCR) illustrates the impact of customer care on brand reputation in the age of social media. Well over half — 59% of respondents said they use social media to vent anger over their customer service experiences. Meanwhile: 72% of respondents sometimes research a provider's customer care reputation online prior to purchasing products and services, and 74% choose at least some providers based on other consumers' customer service experiences, shared in online forums. Further, 84% consider a provider's customer care quality at least sometimes when deciding whether to do business with a company.



“Social media isn’t a choice anymore — it’s a business transformation tool,” says Natalie Petouhoff, a senior analyst at Forrester Research. Petouhoff estimates that the ROI to be gained from deploying a customer service community to be 100% over a period of less than a year. This ROI, she says, comes from such benefits as: Reduced agent-assisted interactions, increased first-contact resolution, agent productivity, customer retention, and customer lifetime value.

The Go-to Guys

By incorporating social media into their multi-channel support strategies, businesses can leverage platforms that are providing unprecedented insight into customer emotion and behavior. Businesses can follow premier customers and super users on their own forums and other networks, deliver messaging over select media, search the Web and select social networks for language specific to their company and vertical market, and perform outreach for resolving services issues.

The benefits of leveraging social media differ depending on the company, says Ian Jacobs, an analyst with Datamonitor. Both B2C and B2B brands see gains, with broad B2C brands seeing particular benefits from monitoring social networks, according to Foster. Though marketing teams have largely leveraged social networks, determining what keywords are associated with their company’s brand so they can tune their messaging, customer service is getting in on the act, too.

“While you’re doing all that social network monitoring, there’s lots of information you could be gathering, even if you’re doing it for marketing and branding reasons. This opens up a whole new set of channels for service,” says Jacobs.

But to leverage what’s being said in social networks, “support organizations have to recognize a problem quickly enough to make a difference in their interaction with customers and control the perception of their brand,” he continues. “If they can do it in sufficient time to recognize issues with individual consumers they can reach out to them with a targeted response. That can be incredibly powerful, especially if they’re contacting them with a proposed fix.”

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More than just tracking what’s happening on popular social networks around the Web, support organizations are leveraging social community concepts to draw customers to their own portals and keep them there. With quality forum and other social media technologies, the right look and feel, and solid marketing and outreach, businesses build a place their customers want to visit to give the benefit of their product and service knowledge. By becoming the best source of knowledge for their own products and services, businesses have more opportunities to further impress customers. Through integrated multi-channel service offerings, they allow customers to help themselves to support and to choose assisted options should they need to escalate.



Synthesizing Sentiment

To fully exploit social media platforms, customer service organizations have to be able to find content that relates to them, determine the intent behind it, and take appropriate action. They also need to move toward integrating these newer channels with their CRM databases so they can extend the tracking capabilities — measuring agent performance, response time, time to resolution, satisfaction — they have across more mature channels. Their processes for managing these emerging channels need maturation as well.

“Search, listening and other technologies aren’t yet sophisticated enough to mine all the nuances of language and content,” says Jacobs. An even bigger issue: Customer support organizations haven’t yet figured out when it’s appropriate for them to respond to comments. When should support reach out and be proactive about a tweet or a comment on Facebook, and when should they just sit back? And can they allow themselves to develop a persona rather than retain the kind of anonymity that contact centers and service desks have traditionally promoted?

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“This is where social media and customer service are at loggerheads,” says Jacobs. “Customer service has traditionally been based on anonymity in the call center, but social media is all about personality. How do you inject personality into a world based on anonymity?” Some companies have done well adopting certain personas and allowing agents to behave like individuals rather than merely a cog in the greater unit, but it can be a difficult transition for some.

Petouhoff sees the fact that social media requires some persona-building as a step forward for customer service, particularly as it develops more best practices and ROI targets around social media.

“When customer service adopts social media as a way to bring customers together and to interact with them, they have to decide they want to have an honest conversation with people — it has to be authentic,” she says.

On-the-Job Persona

With social media, technology deployment represents just part of the change that must take place within the support organization. Numerous cultural and process issues must also be addressed, including revisiting what comprises the contact center workforce. According to Jacobs, traditional call center duties will not go away because in most verticals the phone still reigns supreme. “There’s a higher percentage of social media being used than previously but the majority of channels used are still traditional,” he says.

Still, the hiring equation will need to be altered if an organization decides to integrate social media as a service channel. “Call center agents as they are recruited and trained today may not be the right people — hiring for these kinds of social media applications may mean changing your whole hiring process,” says Jacobs.

You want call center agents with brand ambassadorship who understand the servitude/leadership concept.

Natalie Petouhoff, Forrester Research

“Social media does eventually change the makeup of the call center,” says Petouhoff. “You want some people with brand ambassadorship who understand the servitude/leadership concept. This pretty much changes how you’re hiring and why you’re hiring.”

Companies may need to reevaluate the mix of specialists on staff vs. their ratio of agents handling multiple channels. They’ll need to, for example, hire community managers, moderators and knowledge management experts, if they haven’t already.

Support centers can then take social media channel contacts and, via integration with front-office CRM systems, match them with customer support agent

skillsets and route them in an automated fashion. Agents can address a problem and alert customers to the fix via email, or customers can reference trouble tickets that were created via Twitter or Facebook integration. Reps can reach out and initiate a chat with a customer to address an issue. And increasingly, they can insert themselves into virtual reality environments, providing in-world support to customers encountering problems.

“In that case, you’re flipping the traditional service model on its head, injecting customer service opportunities into the social environment. When they’re in an immersive environment, they don’t want to leave the world for support,” says Jacobs.

The secret to hiring for the coming social media/customer service alignment? Start small, says Petouhoff, and concentrate on hiring people who want to support other people. Not every agent will handle social media interactions, and it doesn’t take a massive staff to handle these channels.

Gazillion Entertainment monitors Twitter and other social media to stay in touch with its users and their gaming issues

Players of massively multiplayer online games (MMOG) are by nature a social bunch, at least when they're in their virtual worlds or discussing them. Savvy gaming providers leverage that characteristic as they take advantage of an increasingly important component in multi-channel support strategies — social networking. Gamers gather in forums at their favorite sites and on gaming portals, they post their accomplishments on Facebook and other sites, and they turn to Twitter to tweet their happiness or displeasure with their game experience. With their technical and game savvy, and their comfort with sharing information, they're a gold mine for support executives.

The support executives at Gazillion Entertainment, a San Mateo, Calif.-based MMOG start-up, have seized on the potential that social media has for improved customer service. The company's currently developing a number of titles, and has also formed partnerships with other providers for game licensing and development. Though they haven't released any titles, they're already hosting forums and providing support for beta runs through their self-service knowledgebase, email and ticketing modules from Vienna, Va.-based Parature Inc.

Gazillion's forum technology is a critical component of their service management strategy. Their community manager monitors the company's forums daily for information that benefits both support and marketing.

You can leverage social media to create positive brand recognition and to solve problems faster

Gabriel Scott
Customer Support Lead,
Gazillion

When Support's Not a Game

"We're looking to determine effective ways to leverage user communications from our forums because the community is such a great source of information and they're always helping each other solve problems," says Gabriel Scott, customer service lead.

Forums not only represent an opportunity for users to air grievances, share tips, and hold general discussions about their gaming experiences, but they provide valuable information to the support group, says Scott. "Our community managers alert me to activity and I can respond to issues by opening tickets in Parature. We can link issues to content in the knowledgebase, documenting and addressing them."

Harnessing Social Media

In addition to monitoring their own forums and other social media platforms, Gazillion is taking advantage of Parature's new Twitter integration, which allows organizations to track and monitor relevant tweets and re-tweets so they can create support tickets, add new content to their knowledgebase, respond to users when appropriate, and measure the quality of their published support content. With the integration, Parature provides a Twitter Queue that allows reps to isolate and route tweets accordingly. With these tools, support teams can view customer 'sentiment' and treat it as actionable information that can translate directly to customer satisfaction improvements.

"Moving forward, we'll be working closely with the marketing team to generate reports so they can see all the [relevant] tweets we're tracking through support," says Scott. "Our community managers will track and post to Twitter, Facebook and the entire spectrum of media we use to disseminate information."

Because they're still in development on upcoming game releases — and because self-service is a lower-cost channel that's seeing increasing use — Gazillion wants to drive traffic to their knowledgebase and forums as often as possible, and to continue to do so once their games are out of beta and in release mode. Those customers who can't solve their own problems through self-service channels can escalate to create a ticket.

"As we ramp up new games we have plans for ramping up support through different channels," says Scott.

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Twitter Chatter

Scott has already leveraged Parature's Twitter integration to gather worldwide support content generated through the beta registration process for its upcoming release, Jumpgate Evolution. To date, Jumpgate Evolution has more than 250,000 registrations worldwide for its beta.

"The integration allows us to take [tweets] and create tickets, so we can run reports on keywords and issues that keep popping up and track trends," says Scott. Using business rules built into the Parature suite, Scott and his team segment different topics and user groups and decide which issues are actionable.

Gazillion has already gathered a significant amount of knowledgebase content based on tracking Twitter. "We're seeing feedback coming via the Twitter integration. Moving forward, we want to use it to track the good the bad and ugly," says Scott. He and his team intend to closely monitor Twitter and other popular networks, as well as any new platforms that will surely emerge.

"It's hard to argue against how important social media actually is at this point. You can leverage it to create positive brand recognition and to solve problems faster," says Scott. "As a gaming provider, it's very important to be involved in social media, because for our users, both inside and outside the game, it's all about community."

EHR provider leverages community forums, Twitter and other social networks to deliver best-in-class customer service

When your products ensure that your customers are positioned to deliver the best possible healthcare to their patients, you take their support seriously. At e-MDs, a provider of electronic health records (EHRs) and other clinical and administrative applications, the Hippocratic Oath isn't just the pledge upheld by the healthcare professionals who make up a large part of their staff. Protecting patient 'life and limb' applies to the mission for their product set as well.

"Our software helps doctors streamline service and deliver the best healthcare possible," says James Foster, client data operations manager for the Austin, Texas-based company. Buttressing their comprehensive healthcare suite is e-MDs' corporate makeup, which includes a CEO and president who is a board-certified neurologist and a senior management team comprising additional physicians, informaticists, pharmacists, nurses and other healthcare professionals.

"Our team and philosophy set us apart," says Foster. In addition to EMR software, the company's enterprise solution includes software for billing and collections, scheduling, document management, and e-prescribing, and an integrated patient portal to facilitate Web-based patient/provider communications. To date, they have signed more than 2,300 customer sites and 7,000 providers.

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James Foster
Client Data Operations Manager
e-MDs

e-MDs Thrives on Social Media

To get the most from e-MDs' products, these providers rely heavily on the vendor's cross-functional support teams — who handle everything from installation, to training, to early-stage deployment, to claims issues — as well as the communities e-MDs fosters through their forums and other social media. e-MDs has deployed the forum module from Vienna, Va.-based Parature Inc., as well as the vendor's knowledgebase and ticketing modules.

"Our customers have always used our forums and been very active," he adds. This usage not only encourages community among customers who want to discuss work-, industry- and technology-related issues, but gives e-MDs numerous opportunities to engage customers on their own turf.

A Tweet — or a Thousand — a Day

Among the social networks physicians are using is Twitter, which allows them to microblog, find key information for their practices, discuss relevant issues surrounding healthcare, and talk about their technology implementations, both clinical and IT-related. Though they don't actively publish through Twitter at this point, e-MDs is looking to take advantage of the new Twitter integration in their Parature suite, which will enable Foster and his team to monitor tweets and re-tweets so they can respond appropriately and review the quality of their knowledgebase content. Parature provides a Twitter Queue that allows Foster to isolate specific tweets so he can review them and determine if they should be used to create tickets, generate content for the knowledgebase, or result in action.

Given the ever-growing popularity of social media as a brand discussion platform, both B2B and B2C providers have realized the benefit of both hosting their own forums and monitoring what's going on in social channels across the Web. With new monitoring and tracking tools, support executives can determine customer sentiment and take action when appropriate, directly impacting customer satisfaction and future revenues. In healthcare circles today, even the CDC is twittering as it moves to keep people around the world updated on the H1N1 virus.

At e-MDs, relevant tweets are captured as a ticket, which Foster then reviews via the third-party application TweetDeck to

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James Foster
Client Data Operations Manager
e-MDs

determine if the twitter user is a current or potential customer with whom to follow-up. He searches for mentions of e-MDs, and keywords based on specific medical terms. When Foster finds a ticket that relates to an e-MDs customer, he ties it to the customer's account, as he would if they came in through any other channel.

"I see [social media] as an amazing marketing and customer service tool," says Foster. "We have to be in this realm to be really effective in our service strategy." Though he acknowledges it may not benefit every company as a support channel, at e-MDs he wants to "capture every relevant thing anyone says, positive or negative, to drive customer service."

Foster and his group have been working on guidelines for social media policies within e-MDs, including how employees should behave on social networks, how behavior affects their brand, and how they should treat competitors. He says they're following solid, long-standing principles set forth by IBM and other powerhouses who've leveraged social media for some time.

"The golden rule of Twittering is to behave positively. Engage where needed, use common sense, and treat everyone fairly, even your competitors," says Foster. "As we develop our guidelines for social media use, we're making it clear to our employees that any association with e-MDs that's promoted online is an extension of the company."

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ABOUT PARATURE

Parature, the leader in on-demand customer service software, makes it possible for any business to leverage the Internet to provide outstanding customer service. The company's software-as-a-service (SaaS) delivery and integrated, intuitive design enables organizations to better and more efficiently serve, support, engage with and retain customers in today's Web world. Founded in 2000, Parature received the 2007 and 2008 Product of the Year Award from *Customer Interaction Solutions* magazine and has been named to the *Inc. 5000* list of Fastest Growing Private Companies in America. Parature has been named to both the *Washington Business Journal's* list of Best Places to Work and *The Washingtonian* list of Great Places to Work. Headquartered in Vienna, Virginia, Parature is at work in organizations of all types and sizes, and helps support millions of end users worldwide. For more information, visit www.parature.com or follow [@parature](https://twitter.com/parature) on Twitter.