SkillSharpener Web Extra

Strategies for monitoring and managing customer experiences via social media

A recent Standards and Benchmarking Survey shows that as many as 40 percent of companies have put the customer service department in charge of monitoring and responding to customer comments that come via social media channels.

But the truth is, many companies — smaller companies in particular — are at a loss in terms of what they need to do to establish a social media presence and to monitor and manage what gets said via social media by customers.

For advice, we turned to Marsha Collier, an online business authority, and author of *The Ultimate Online Customer Service Guide*. Following are her suggestions:

The first thing Collier suggests, particularly for a smaller consumer company, is to go to a site like Yelp.com or Angie's List to register your business and to monitor what people are saying about you. People go to these and other sites like them to rate and comment on local businesses ranging from house painters to retailers. Simply go to the site and claim your business, monitor what people say about you, and encourage customers by offering discounts, etc. There are also a number of industry-specific sites that solicit comments from customers.

To follow customer comments on a broader scale, and on social media platforms like Twitter, FaceBook, and others, Collier recommends signing up for Google Alerts. You can also use Twitter Search (search.twitter.com) to search for mentions of your company on Twitter.

"But for a more complete picture of what your customers are saying online, you'll have to go to a site or use a tool that aggregates searches from all over the Web," Collier says.

For instance, SocialMention.com searches various sites and presents graphics to indicate such things as customer sentiment, strength, passion, and reach. Other search tools are available from SocialSearch.com, Twiogle.com, and Whostalkin.com.

Responding to negative comments

If somebody does make a comment about you on a social media site, it's important to try to deal with the customer's issue, "But don't go all knee-jerk and slam them back on the site," Collier says. "Get the contact information of the customer from the site — you can get this if you have registered and claimed your business — and try to work it out with them offline."

She adds: "Never go negative in public. And remember, every word you say online will stay up there. So if you lose your temper and go nuts over a comment, people are going to find that in the future, and it will not reflect well, no matter how the issue was resolved."

But you need to respond, and "you need to publicly make it known that you are willing to make it right — because people will go back and read the reviews and see what you have done," Collier says.

Set up employee guidelines

While every company should be thinking about setting up some kind of social media guidelines for employees, this is especially important where you are asking customer service reps or other employ-

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ees to monitor customer comments and serve as brand ambassadors.

For instance, Collier offers a sample social media policy from Coca-Cola that provides a good model. It requires that employees:

- Adhere to the corporate code of conduct and other applicable policies related to business conduct, information protection, insider trading, and others.

- Be responsible for your actions by exercising sound judgment and common sense in what you say online.

- Be a "scout" for both compliments and criticism. (Coca-Cola, for instance, asks employees to "monitor the social media landscape," and provides an email address for an in-house Coca-Cola spokesperson for employees to forward any comments or concerns they observe online.)

- Let subject-matter experts respond to negative posts rather than trying to respond to negative comments directly.

- Be conscious of mixing your business and personal lives. (This is basically a reminder that everything that is posted online can be seen by anyone at anytime.)

"Even if you have only two or three employees," Collier says, "you need to set up some guidelines so they know exactly what they can and cannot say online."

Content is king

While social media is a unique way to build a community around a product or a company, Collier says, it's important not to make your outgoing message too promotional. "Content is king on the Internet," she says, and whether you are talking about Twitter, Facebook, blogs, or other online media, your messages should be more informational than marketing oriented. It's OK to publicize the occasional discount or sale, but the sales pitch should be secondary.

If you do create a Facebook page or an online blog, Collier says, you have to be prepared to update it regularly with new content. "If you put up a blog and you only post to it every couple of months, you are probably going to do yourself more harm than good."

And finally, while companies can't control what is said about them on various social media sites, they can control what is said about them on their own websites. "People are still going to be checking out your website, and you need to get your message across in the best way possible," Collier says. "And a very important part of that website should be a well-articulated frequently asked questions (FAQ) page to provide answers to questions that customers and would-be customers are most likely to ask."

Contact: Marsha Collier, www.marshacollier.com. Collier's book, The Ultimate Online Customer Service Guide, *is available from John Wiley & Sons at www.wiley.com/business.*