

Social Media and the Customer Experience

WHITE PAPER



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Social media is making its mark on just about everything these days. The number of people taking to social networks is staggering, impacting everything from news reporting to political campaigns to Tupperware parties. As usage explodes, the focus has rapidly shifted from adoption to the way businesses can leverage all the activity to their benefit. They're not only using it internally to become a part of the discussion with their own social outreach, but attempting to harness the information flowing from constituents to improve processes across departments.

One functional area that's been particularly impacted is customer service. Like it or not, businesses have to contend with a customer base that's readily willing and able to voice their every thought concerning brand whether good or bad. While support organizations traditionally understood customer sentiment primarily through direct interaction, now they're challenged to wade through a steady stream of information from customers and potential customers, some of whom, through their adept use of social media, are extremely influential. In increasing numbers, providers are feeling the impact of customers using:

- Facebook: >500M users
- Twitter: >75M users
- YouTube: serves up 1B videos daily
- LinkedIn: >48M users
- Provider-developed forums/communities
- User-developed forums/communities

Whether they're using social networks to talk about product problems that will eventually result in service issues, or speaking directly about their service experience — both stellar and abysmal — customer conversations increasingly take place where they can be "heard" by anyone. What's more, they know it.

Savvy companies know it, too, and it's rapidly changing the way they deliver customer service. They, too, are taking to the popular social networks, as well as hosting their own dedicated communities via forum technologies, to create a presence that ensures they're part of the conversation. It's a matter of corporate survival. According to research, Facebook now has 500 million users, with 50% logging in every day. Twitter has 75 million, with 20% of the 50 million tweets per day referencing products and brands. LinkedIn, meanwhile, has 48 million users from more than 200 countries, and YouTube serves up to 1 billion videos per day.

"The theory is you go where the customers are; if the customers are living their lives on a particular social media channel you offer them the same tools you would offer in traditional customer service settings," says Ian Jacobs, an analyst with Ovum.

Engaging Customers Where They Live

For those support organizations that are finding the means to monitor all the activity affecting them, social media provides a way to more broadly connect with their entire customer base. Not only are they able to foster a self-service community that lets customers collectively address their own issues — reducing support costs and enabling agents to concentrate on difficult transactions — but they're able to be proactive in a way that's only previously been hinted at. For others, the social media noise is deafening, setting them back on their heels trying to figure out how to harness the discussion and stay abreast of customer sentiment about their brand.

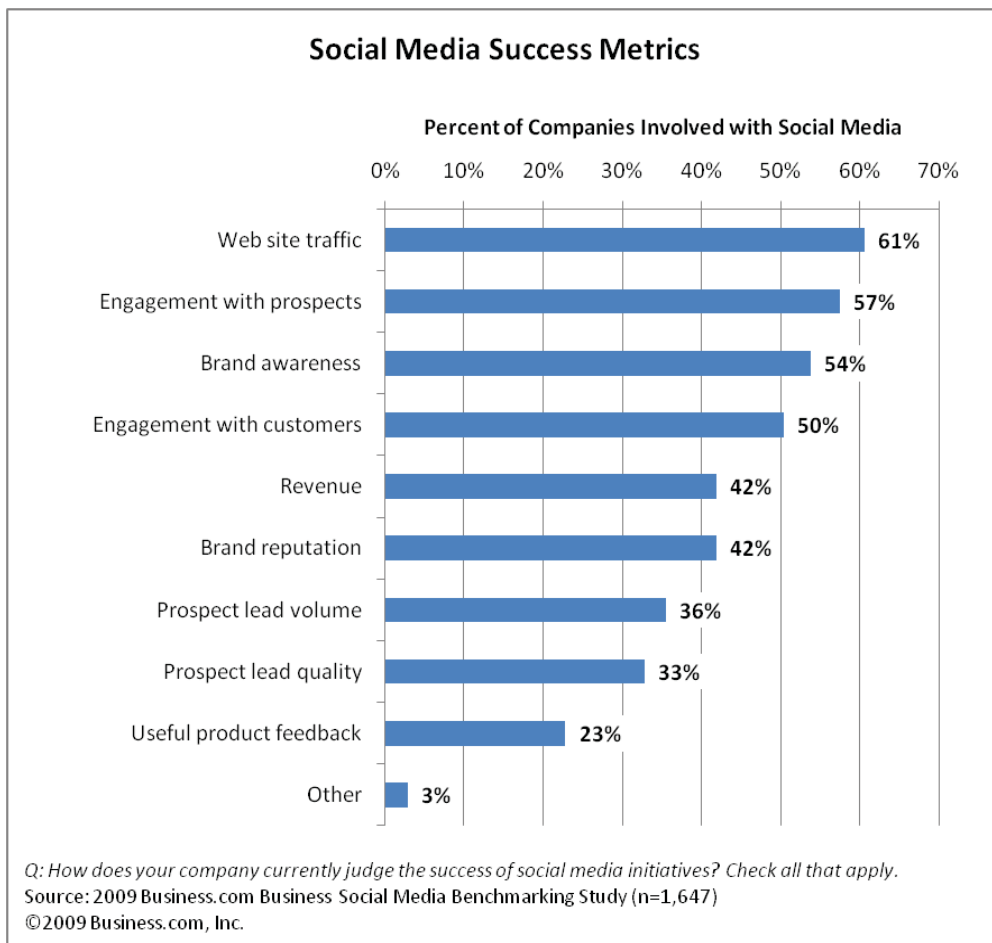


Those leading the way in using social media to improve service delivery understand the prominent role dynamic service technologies play in enabling information capture and analysis. They're using technology that consolidates data streams from prominent social networks and monitoring tools so they can address burgeoning issues before they're too big to manage easily.

They're likewise adopting customer service and support platforms that provide integration points with social networks so the data generated can be centralized, reviewed and tracked for ticketing and knowledgebase updates. With such integration, support organizations are able to make communities another channel in their multi-channel strategy.

According to a new report from Business.com surveying more than 1,600 businesses, customer support is the second leading department driving social media initiatives, with 23% of respondents saying that functional area is pushing their involvement with social media. Only marketing is ahead, with 66% of respondents saying their initiatives are driven from that function.

Moreover, businesses leveraging social media have keyed in on the advantages these networks bring to customer service and overall engagement. They're measuring success across a range of metrics, with 50% citing customer engagement as a key metric for judging their social media initiatives, and 57% citing prospect engagement.



Service on the Fly

At e-MDs, a provider of electronic health records software and other applications, social networks are becoming a key channel in their service delivery strategy, according to James Foster, client data operations manager for the Austin, Texas-based company. Because so many physicians are adopting Twitter to follow peers and discuss healthcare issues with a broad community, the software provider is beginning to take advantage of Twitter integration in their customer service management platform.

The e-MDs support team is using their customer service application's Twitter queue to monitor tweets and re-tweets about their products and service. They're able to reach out to customers having problems rather than wait until customers contact them, fix product problems early in the cycle, and ensure the quality of their knowledgebase content. The Twitter queue allows the support team to capture specific tweets for review so they can take necessary steps, such as contacting a customer with a solution, capturing the tweet as a ticket, or updating knowledgebase content. Relevant tweets are linked to the customer's account in the same way that any contact with the organization is, regardless of the channel.

"I see [social media] as an amazing marketing and customer service tool," says Foster. "We want to capture every relevant thing anyone says, positive or negative, to drive customer service."

This ability to capture information from popular social networks in a centralized manner is critical if service organizations are going to effectively serve customers going forward. Via integration, a customer service platform should provide the ability to monitor streams from all relevant social media. These solutions should also provide the ability for organizations to provide access to support resources through customers' favorite channels.

With Facebook integration, for example, customers can go to a provider's Facebook page and conduct any of the support functions they can through a dedicated self-service portal: searching knowledgebases, or escalating their case by opening up a chat session with agents or creating their own tickets. Further, customers can use their provider's Facebook page, with a look and feel they're comfortable with, to share experiences and solutions with other users there.

This integration greatly streamlines the hefty task of managing customers' relevant social network activity. With Facebook integration, support teams can monitor all Facebook Wall posts, comments and other activity in real time so they can automatically create tickets when necessary and route assignments. When they drive traffic to their own Facebook page, they increase engagement with customers, improve response times, and greatly enhance satisfaction and loyalty. They also create synergy with other corporate departments, including marketing and sales, who can benefit from data captured and become part of the conversation to their own business benefit.

Like e-MDs, Gazillion Entertainment, a San Mateo, Calif.-based online game provider, sees the vast potential social media plays in their customer service strategy going forward. A strong social media presence is particularly key in Gazillion's industry, as their customers are

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James Foster
e-MDs





experienced users of social networks. They're a vast resource for support organizations that can effectively harness all their online activity for service analysis and improvements.

"We're looking to determine effective ways to leverage user communications from forums and other social media 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.

Gazillion is using their customer service portal's Twitter integration to track and monitor tweets and re-tweets and take appropriate action. They're also monitoring Facebook activity.

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

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Gazillion Entertainment

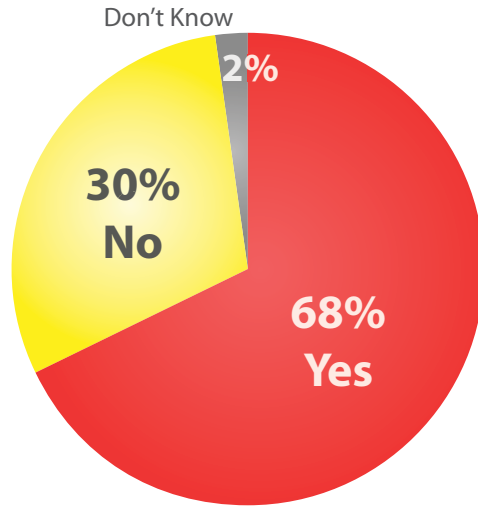
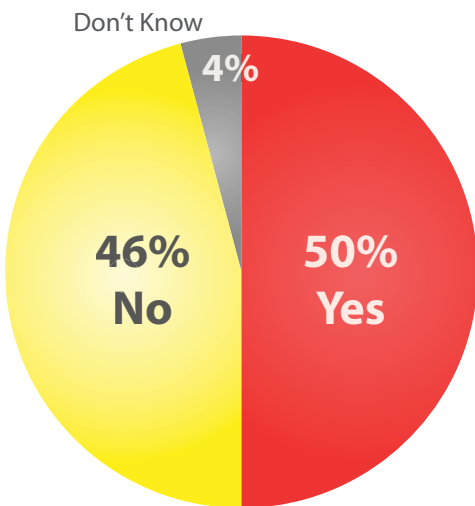
Presence of Mind

Measurement is the foundation of service and support, but too many service organizations measure everything possible and then do nothing with the data. Within these metrics often lie the keys to problem areas, avenues to improvement, and better overall customer

COMPANIES MONITORING THEIR BRANDS ON SOCIAL MEDIA

2007

2009



Source: UMass Dartmouth Survey, 2009, of Fortune 500 companies



satisfaction. As long as they're out measuring everything from first-contact resolution to abandonment rate, across every channel, they should use what they capture to unlock the information that can translate to critical business improvements.

Different social media require different service delivery models as part of a larger multi-channel strategy. Twitter, for example, with its character limitations, is a good way for service teams to identify existing and potential issues, but isn't necessarily a good way to address them. Except for cases where an agent can send a link to knowledgebase content via a tweet and customers can then help themselves, it's likely the case will switch to another channel, such as the phone, says Jacobs. Still, because it's an increasingly popular place for sharing information, Twitter will play an important role in service strategies for the foreseeable future.

With Facebook, companies can take a more intensive approach to service by creating their own presence on the network. There, they can enable both a peer-to-peer forum experience and the ability to tap self-service knowledgebases and click-to-chat mechanisms. If customers can go to a corporate Facebook page to share information with other users to solve problems or use the support knowledgebase to solve their own issues, a business has the opportunity to strengthen relationships with them.

"By going to a corporate Facebook page with their support problems, consumers are stating that they have some affinity and relationship with the company," says Jacobs.

Support groups can leverage that enhanced relationship to drive peer-to-peer activity, which they can then use to enrich their knowledgebase content. Support centers, says Jacob, have done the work of capturing the content for the kinds of redundant issues that generate the bulk of customer contacts so they can concentrate on "edge" problems, but by their very nature, edge problems often don't have answers yet. In the best of cases, the community solves problems that the support organization may not even know exist. If there's sufficient reason to generate knowledgebase content for a new problem, then a support agent can take the answer generated by customer interactions and pull it back into the knowledgebase, and then push that new content out to all agents, says Jacobs.

"This not only allows the company to draw feedback on marketing and push marketing content out, but also allows people to communicate service needs with the company and with each other," Jacob says. "This model is still leading edge, but it's where smart companies are headed."

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Ian Jacobs
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