

SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media and your business

Your biggest risk is not getting started

By Susanne Simic

Social media is the 'buzz word' these days. It seems almost impossible not to read an ad, watch TV or go online without being inundated with news and invites to join Twitter, Facebook or YouTube. Does this mean that it's important that today's businesses jump on the bandwagon and release their coveted brand on social media? The straight answer is YES. Furthermore, industry experts believe that your biggest risk is not getting started today!

Taking that leap into social media was the hot topic on April 25, 2012 at a roundtable Discussion that was hosted by the Canadian Marketing Association's Contact Centre Council. Sponsored by LoyaltyOne and moderated by John Bardawill of TMG International Inc., the roundtable included senior executives and social media experts from TD Bank, ING Direct Canada, Sears Canada, JWT, Kobo and Sysomos. The event was attended by approximately 100 call centre, marketing and social media professionals. There are a number of companies who have jumped in and are learning how to best harness the power of social media to build the brand, identify new sources of revenue, and enhance the customer service experience, but there are many companies who have been reluctant to participate. According to John Bardawill, "this is a bus that has already left the station, and regardless of who is driving it, all companies need to find a way to jump on."

How to develop a social media strategy

If used properly, social media can provide significant added value to a brand, provide insight on new trends and topics and allow companies to share information and perspectives. Yet many companies don't know how to leverage social media to enhance their business. Before getting started,

it is imperative that businesses LISTEN to what their customers are saying on Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, blogs and industry forums to find out what they are interested in and where they are 'hanging out'. It will also help businesses to get a better feel for the content and tone of the conversations that reflect what really matters. According to Laurie Dillion-Schalk, digital strategy director at JWT, it's important to understand that social media is a dialogue between a company and its existing and potential customer base. "The goal is to gain a deeper engagement with your customers," she says. "Be prepared to change the nature of the conversation based on what your community wants to talk about."

Your social media strategy should be developed around the steps in the customer buying behaviour model which includes developing awareness, education, preference and purchase. This will ensure that your social media strategy is customer focused. By aligning your operations to your customer needs you can better establish a framework for success with social media and more importantly, strengthen the relationship with your customers and prospects.

So who is driving the social media bus – marketing or the contact centre?

Both marketing and the contact centre play a role in establishing a social media strategy, however many of the experts from the roundtable felt that marketing has to step up to the plate and fund these social media opportunities to get them off the ground. It's a brand engagement initiative so it typically begins in marketing and gets executed across the organization. This may require a piece of the media budget (or other marketing funds) to establish, but the entire company needs to embrace social media as it will affect all aspects of the business.

You'll need to pull together a team that not only understands and lives in the social media world, but is knowledgeable and passionate about your brand. "Coaching this team of associates is the most important role," says Wendy Arnott, vice-president, social media and digital communications, TD Bank. "Establish the guidelines and determine the voice of your brand on social media."

Existing contact centre representatives provide the ideal skill set and knowledge of a company's brand and should be considered for the social media roles the organization is looking to fill. Assign a senior staff member to be in charge of the social media strategy and ensure that there is execu-

tive buy-in in all departments for a more cohesive and fluid brand and a positive internal morale. Without cross department collaboration, any new program will fade quickly.

Lessons learned, best practices

Traditional metrics still apply. Customers continue to expect the same level of customer support from the contact centre, so businesses need to determine how to translate the social media metrics back into their existing traditional ones. Establish a CRM platform that can connect all of your company's channels. This will provide a much clearer picture of who the customers are and what they care about.

Be honest, open and transparent. Remember that you are broadcasting to the world and that the consequences to your brand can be significant. David Bradshaw, vice-president (head) of sales and service at ING Direct Canada and Chair of the CMA Contact Centre Council suggests that sometimes it is best to "respond publicly but resolve privately." You may make mistakes, but use those as learning experiences and move on. Customers will appreciate your honesty.

Respond in a timely manner. Not only does a company need to be organized in the public eye, but also behind the scenes. "Provide lots of online support resources to allow you to respond in a timely manner," states Jeff Cann of Sysomos. "And ensure that you respond to all social media platforms you are supporting, not just one handle." Remember that social media is just that, SOCIAL. Be accessible, connected, entertaining, and BE YOUR BRAND!

Leverage your brand advocates. It's important to remember that not everyone is going to 'like' a company or positively promote its brand. However, if businesses can help their customers resolve issues, provide insight or just appreciate their patronage, they can leverage these brand advocates as part of their strategy to positively influence potential new customers and enlarge their following on social media.

Don't wait any longer to get started. "The biggest risk is not getting started," advises Arnott. "Otherwise, you will miss an opportunity to service your customers because they are already on social media."

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