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Community eBook

From Company-Centric to Customer-Centric:
Returning to a Customer-
Focused Service Model

MAY 2010 ISSUE



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CHAPTER 1:

Introduction

As people turn to the Internet more and more for information on everything from hair products to lawn mowers, companies are faced with the challenge of producing brand messaging, content, and support that provides the same level of value and trust that peer-to-peer recommendations and advice now afford. Business never planned to include trusted friends and networks as a source of competition, and they're having a hard time adjusting to this new playing field and set of rules.

The changing consumer landscape has flipped business on its head – what was once a company-controlled marketplace has become an uncontrolled, honest place where a very small portion of buying decisions are impacted by company marketing and communications initiatives.

How do businesses get back in good standing with their customers? With exceptional customer service that anticipates buyer needs and focuses on providing exceptional customer experiences. Maybe this sounds slightly fluffy, but the reality is that good customer service deepens interest in your products, cuts down support costs, and increases retention rates to directly impact your bottom line.

In this ebook, we're talking about getting back to basics with customer service, and detailing what it takes to create (or return to) a customer-centric customer service model, from profiling the modern-day customer to discussing what good customer service can mean for your organization. All this, of course, is framed in the context of a social business model, so we'll be reviewing the implications of including online social channels and strategies in your overall customer service initiatives, and we'll break down how social customer service and relationship building and management differ from traditional customer service and customer relationship management methods.





CHAPTER 2:

The Current Customer Landscape



Today's customer profile is unlike any the business world has seen before, not because people are all that different, but because the means of communication between companies and their customers have changed drastically. In the past, companies were able to control mass messaging, and while they couldn't guarantee how people talked about their brands and products with one another, there were never the same opportunities to spread opinions on a mass scale like there are now.

As individuals, we've capitalized on the ability we now have to publish content of our own, and use those publishing channels to share our opinions about everything, including how your brand or product made our lives easier and better, and how your company has treated us along the way. The previously one-way broadcast has become a two-way dialogue that's guided by both the company and the customer.

So, what characteristics are buyers exhibiting these days?

1. Today's customer turns to friends and online networks for advice and help making buying decisions both big and small. He or she trusts the advice of those people more than she trusts marketing messages.
2. He or she is open and vocal about online and offline buying experiences.
3. The modern customer is savvy and has done research outside typical marketing channels before going to brands to initiate a possible purchase. Once the customer has begun talking to a company, he or she expects to be treated respectfully, not sold to or pushed upon.



4. Today's customer wants a relationship with a brand. Even if the interactions involve little person-to-person contact, he or she expects a level of honesty and attention that companies haven't been expected to provide before.
5. The modern customer is no longer part of a demographic or market segment. He or she might fit into a specific group you've identified, but will never be satisfied if treated that way, and will change loyalties if a beloved brand starts treating him or her as anything less than an individual.
6. The Internet has turned into a research hub. In light of that fact, today's customer expects organizations to have some sort of online presence, and expects to be able to at least make contact with brands through online channels such as email or a contact form.
7. The modern customer doesn't necessarily want brands to make every suggested change or fix every perceived problem; he or she wants confirmation that a complaint or comment was heard, acknowledged, and taken into consideration. The modern customer wants to know he or she is being listened to.
8. Today's customer doesn't want to have to call customer service to get basic questions answered or support issues solved. If an answer can be found online, they'll track it down. If they can reach out to support via an online channel or support forum in a way that doesn't demand full attention or take away from the task they're focused on, even better.
9. The modern customer considers customer service in the larger context of a brand, not as a separate and disconnected entity. Good and bad customer service directly ties to future purchasing decisions and recommendations to friends and family.
10. The modern customer isn't just someone who buys your product(s) or service(s) – your vendors and employees are also customers, and the larger community of folks interested in your brand or vertical fall into that category as well. This fact has always been the case, but it deserves emphasis and recognition in the context of this ebook.

Online social communications have changed the way people seek out services and products and choose to shop, and although the foundations of customer service were built to appeal to our social nature, many businesses will have to reshape their corporate cultures and customer service initiatives to take these new forms of communication, opinion sharing, and shopping into account.

Before we talk about that, though, let's look at some of the details of a traditional customer service model and figure out where the gaps lie.



CHAPTER 3:

Gaps in Traditional Customer Service

In traditional customer service models, the connection between customer and company is pushed down the list of priorities to accommodate the push for cost effective complaint resolution, customer data collection, and perceived improved internal efficiency. These are all key factors of a customer service strategy, but without consideration for the customer-company relationship, they close off and marginalize customer service efforts.

There are some very specific pieces of the traditional customer service model that could use a boost from social elements to put them back on the board as effective and valuable elements of customer service.



- **The Contact Center.** To be clear, the contact center will always be an important part of your customer service department. There will be more than a fair number of instances in which a customer will want to speak directly with a representative to get a question answered or problem solved, not just over tweet or email, but over the phone, voice to voice. Where the traditional contact center falls short is in its extended call times, scripted responses, and incomplete resolutions that result in additional calls.
- **The Customer Service Rep.** Traditionally, customer service reps focus on resolving customer complaints or issues and answering basic questions about products and services. They live in a very narrow hallway of work and responsibilities, and aren't asked or encouraged to reach outside the bounds of a basic support function.
- **The CRM System.** Data collection is what keeps customer service ticking, but our lives and behaviors online aren't tracked into most CRM systems. While many of the software providers are taking this into consideration, the strategy supporting these systems still isn't accounting for or capitalizing on this.
- **Inbound Contact.** In earlier days, the only way a person could reach a customer service department was by initiating contact themselves through a phone call, email, or contact form on a website. Because of the nature of communication before the Web, customer service has remained an inbound function of a business, with people having to reach out first to get questions answered or problems resolved.



Why the gap?

- The speed of communication has quickened to a break-neck pace, and we expect our questions and comments to be answered and acknowledged quickly. Spending 5-10 minutes waiting in a call center queue takes away from our days and fosters a level of frustration that might prevent us from calling back to resolve future problems or, in a worst case scenario, jump ship to a more customer-friendly brand.
- We seek out one-to-one communication from companies, and the customer service representative is generally the only place we can find that kind of focused conversation opportunity. In light of that fact, customer service representatives are in a position to build relationships with us when we're on the phone, and offer us solutions to our problems that could very well make us loyal customers for life. Those reps are also in a position to receive candid feedback about their brand, products, and services.
- Our online behaviors are now an integral piece of your larger customer picture, because much of what we do and say on the Internet can be tracked back to our likes, dislikes, and spending habits. Unlike the framed opinions that come from a market research survey or focus group, online commentary is ongoing and unprompted, and it offers a much richer picture of who we are, what we're interested in, and how we want to be communicated with.
- Because the common customer service model has become heavily automated, people have in turn become more self-sufficient when it comes to seeking out answers to product inquiries or support issues. Forums and message boards have made it possible for groups to aggregate their experiences with a particular product or brand in one place for safe keeping, and people have begun to rely on those gold mines of information instead of reaching out to a company directly. In more instances than companies would like to admit, the group of people managing the forum or community is more helpful than the company support team itself.

There's a good chance your business' customer service model has some deficiencies that are incredibly specific to your industry, organization, and corporate culture. Before making changes to that model, review what your goals are for customer service, keeping in mind how you go about researching brands and products and making purchasing decisions. Do you look at previous customer reviews of a product online before deciding? Do you talk to you friends? Do you go to the brand website? What does a stellar customer experience look like to you?

Audit your customer service department maintaining the frame of mind that you would take as a customer. Where else should customer service live within your organization?

**CHAPTER 4:**

Adding Social Back Into to the Customer Service Mix

Business, by default, is a social endeavor, but over the last few decades all sorts of processes have been put in place to remove companies from the frontlines of direct contact with their customers. While those processes provide a certain amount of protection and perceived efficiency to businesses, they've ultimately led to a deep mistrust from the one thing that keeps them afloat: people.

Adding social tenets, strategies, and tactics back into your

customer service model will give you a chance to reconnect with customers on a level that gets them coming to you – in addition to their friends – for information about your products and services, and trusting you enough to recommend you to others, on a one-to-one basis and, hopefully, on a one-to-many basis. Now, note here that adding social elements into customer service doesn't mean add a bunch of online tools – the point here is to adopt the beliefs and use the tools to facilitate a more social interaction between your company and customers.



Getting Started

Shifting Mindset and Culture

One of the biggest shifts that must take place to successfully overhaul any customer service initiative is a shift in corporate mindset. This truth can be difficult to accept, but valuable customer service has to move outside departmental walls and into the roles of anyone who has the potential to impact a customer's decision-making process. Customer service is no longer about doing triage, it's about anticipating the needs of customers before they're even aware of them.

How do you get started making that shift in mindset?

- 1. Open internal lines of communication.** The more siloed an organization, the less your people will understand how their role impacts the company *and* customer. On the other hand, the more open you can be about departmental interconnection and company goals, the more your teams will value their place within the organization and understand what problems you, as an organization, are trying to solve for people. Keep your teams informed of what's happening outside their scope of work, and conduct interdepartmental meetings to introduce departments and get them working with, or at least talking to, one another.
- 2. Foster employee value and trust.** Fostering a customer-centric mindset within your organization requires trusting your employees to properly represent the brand and deliver the best customer service possible. The executive suite has to demonstrate that trust consistently by letting employees speak on behalf of the brand, removing "Big Brother"-type processes that closely watch employee engagement, and giving them the means (and freedom) to provide an outstanding customer experience.
- 3. Share customer feedback.** One of the most impactful ways to get people understanding where customers are coming from is to share customer feedback. Have your current customer service department compile those complaints, compliments, and suggestions for change into a document or presentation, share it with your teams, and ask them for ideas on how to fix the most glaring issues that have been brought up. Perception is reality, and letting employees see how your company, brand(s), and product(s) are perceived in the real world rounds out their pictures of both the people your company caters to and the company itself.
- 4. Review your mission.** Does your company mission take into account the customer's perspective? Does it cater to the customer, or does it show off what you think you're doing right in the market? Do you make it easy for people to learn about your brand(s) and product(s) and buy them?
- 5. Make Your Customer Service Team Teachers.** Just because you're weaving customer service throughout your organization doesn't mean that you shouldn't have a core set of people stewarding your customer service initiatives. Let your team use their expertise to help you overhaul customer support initiatives inside and outside their department.



Assessing Commitment and Bandwidth

Creating an organization-wide change like this is no easy feat; you'll need to audit your teams' workloads and processes to ensure they're capable of taking on customer outreach and response in addition to their current responsibilities. You'll also need to assess team member skills and harness the power of those people in your organization who already have a customer-centric mindset while you build up the customer focus across your company.

How?

1. **Streamline workflows.** Have each team conduct an audit of their work processes. Are they spending time performing unimportant tasks because priorities are unclear? Are they doubling up on work because there's a lack of communication? Ask them to identify what they believe their most time-consuming processes are, and have them work together to decide on priorities, update workflows to match those priorities, and eliminate unnecessary processes.
2. **Conduct culture-focused performance reviews.** Tony Hsieh, CEO of Zappos, advocates focusing your performance reviews not on sales goals or projects completed but on how closely employees' actions match up with your company culture. If you're still working on wrapping customer centricity into your culture, conduct reviews to find out who already demonstrates a customer-focused mindset (enthusiasm, desire to help, shows interest in discussions about customer centricity, poses questions and comments that take into consideration buying community, etc.).

Arming Your Teams

All the changes you're making to your customer service initiatives will leave much to be desired if you don't properly train and educate your employees. They'll need to be caught up to speed on the various tools and technologies you choose to implement to accommodate the changes to your customer service model, given a thorough lesson on your updated corporate culture and customer service mission, and taught about your products, procedures, and organizational flow, at the very least.





Where do you start?

1. **Create a knowledge base.** In too many instances, employees are unequipped to answer customer questions because there's no store of information readily available for them to tap into. Provide an internal community of some sort that houses product and brand information, as well as organizational charts, contact information for all departments, and basic training materials. Create a team to oversee and own the internal community to keep it updated and valuable for employees.
2. **Train beyond roles.** Why should your employees be trained only in their area of expertise when much of what they do requires a larger skill set? While capitalizing on people's strengths and experience is key, good training moves beyond those expert areas to give your people well-rounded business backgrounds that make them self-motivated and adaptable. Insert a customer service training module into your on-boarding procedures and regular employee training to make sure that your people feel equipped to handle the responsibilities that a customer-centric business hefts on them without having to go to a supervisor for help or permission.
3. **Create customer engagement policies.** Sometimes, this sort of freedom to speak on behalf of a brand isn't received well by employees because it's intimidating. Employees might retreat into their shells or shun customer outreach because they have no parameters for interaction and don't know what can and can't be said. To combat that fear of interaction, create loose policies for engagement based on company ethics codes, legal processes, and brand promises. Be careful that these policies don't stifle response, though, as you'll want your people feeling like they can be themselves.

These suggestions are the very tip of the social customer service iceberg; they should get the gears in your brain turning and help you home in on what you need to do for your organization, specifically, to foster a customer-centric approach to business. As we mentioned in [April's ebook](#), making change happen requires patience and consistency, and this integration of social philosophies into your customer outreach is no different than any other philosophical overhaul. Start here and see what other ideas come to mind, assess if they're feasible, and, if they are, map the processes that will get your company back on the radar of today's customer.

**CHAPTER 5:**

What Does This Change Mean For Your Customer Service Department?

Now that you're making customer service less of a function and more of a company philosophy, how will that change impact your actual customer service department? Are they going to become a more decentralized entity? Will they spearhead your efforts? What will their new list of responsibilities look like? How will your team react?



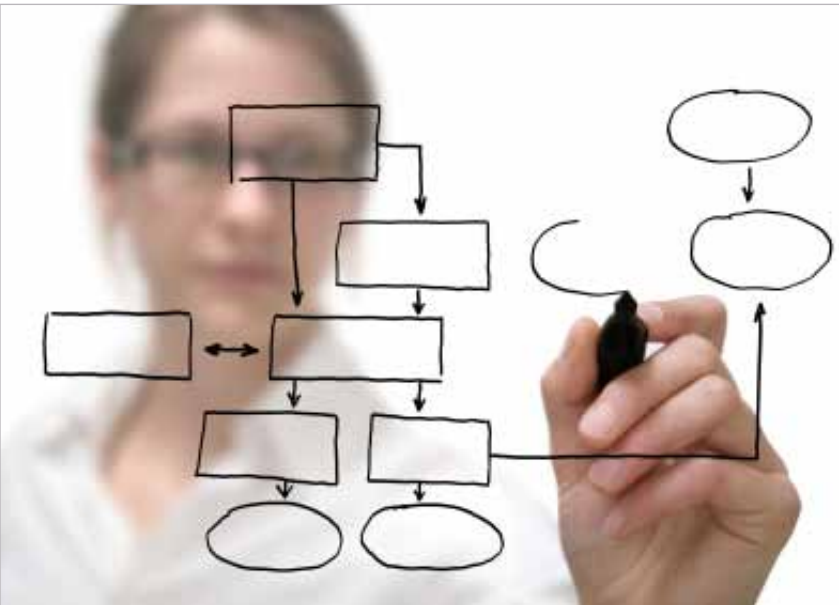
Change in Organizational Role

Consultancy

To ensure that all the touch points your customers are coming in contact with are inviting and easy for them to use, the customer service department should probably have a hand in reviewing the effectiveness of things like marketing messaging and sales channels. Having the most regular and varied contact with customers, your customer service representatives and managers can speak to what types of marketing will ignite interest and provide feedback on which sales channels are most often utilized and why (and how they can be improved).

Internal Customer Hub

Your employees outside the customer service department will need to be able to look to some sort of internal authoritative body for guidance – especially at first – and to share findings, voice concerns, and ask basic questions about the new customer service initiatives. Whether it's your entire customer service department that acts as this authoritative body, or a select group of people from the team, a group of people who are already in the customer service trenches can (and probably should) act as the intermediary between other departments and the executive committee for relaying company-wide customer service efforts.



Change in Processes

Technology

Implementing a customer information database that keeps track of more than just the basics will be an important step in providing a better and more social customer experience. Ideally, you'll find a CRM system that tracks the online social interactions your representatives have with customers and prospects, as well as the basic information, and offers some additional benefits that remove some of the manual elements of customer service and help employees

collaborate on engagement and response. No matter what type of system you choose, your reps will need training of the tools and will need to understand how this additional information should be used.

Refocused Engagement

As customers respond more and more to your brand online, you probably want your customer service team to begin answering questions and helping customers on those same channels. That will take an adjustment in time management as your reps start dividing their time among these various forms of communication.

Unscripted Interaction

One of the essential components of a good customer service experience is feeling as if we're talking to a person who's speaking organically, not from a script. Scripts shut extraneous conversation down, which is good for call times, but bad for relationship building and identifying other opportunities to offer solutions to caller pain points. If your current customer service reps work with scripts, they will probably need, at the very least, minimal training to get them out of script mode and into "How can I help you?" mode.

Think about how your customer service department in particular will be affected by this corporate globalization of their philosophies and, to some extent, their responsibilities. Compile these responsibilities into a list to be shared beforehand, so your customer service team is aware of the big process-oriented changes that will directly impact them.

CHAPTER 6:

Wrap-Up

The growing focus on customer centricity, and the desire to make it a more prominent and engrained part of business, is a sign that we're moving in the right direction, away from antiquated and customer-blind service and support strategies to those that are more personalized, friendly, and customer-aware.

The bottom-line benefits of moving into customer-centric territory include customer support center cost savings, increased customer retention, increased brand loyalty that results in word-of-mouth marketing and new sales, competitive advantage, increased employee satisfaction, and a more consistently pure representation of the brand.

Ready to get started?

Hopefully this ebook has got you thinking about what customer centricity means for your organization, where changes need to be made to refocus your attention and goals on your customers, and how you can get started making those changes. We're happy to talk with you more about getting involved and scaling your online engagement efforts across your organization. Have questions or comments? Let us know.

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