PROTECTING YOUR REP

Why Online Customer Interaction Matters

By Terence Rockles

Over the past decade, the advent of social media has changed the way businesses connect with their clients. Unlike traditional forms of interaction, social media is accessible 24/7 and allows businesses to quickly respond to customer inquiries. With a few clicks, customers can share their experiences, both positive and negative, with a wide audience. This has made customer interaction a critical part of any business's strategy.

Rob Howard, founder and chief technology officer of Telligent Systems, graduated from Baylor with a BBA in 1997. He founded Telligent, the first company to market integrated online community software, in 2004. The Dallas-based company has grown to become a leader in providing high-impact customer solutions to manage their online presence.

"What we provide is a set of technology that enables private companies to have their own private social networks on their own websites," he said. "We also have technology that can help companies manage their image on sites like Facebook and Twitter."

The reason it’s so important for companies to manage these online customer interactions, Howard said, is that things consumers learn through social media has become a driving force in their decision-making.

"The way we, as consumers, make decisions has changed radically, especially since the mid-90s," he said. "In the past 15 years, there has been such a huge increase of content on the Internet and the increased availability of search tools, that when it comes time to make a consumer decision, there is so much information that it becomes overwhelming."

It’s when consumers feel overwhelmed, Howard said, that they turn to their friends for advice.

"People have always wanted to know what their friends think, but now your friends are consumers across the globe," he said.

"We really encourage companies to start their own discussion. And that’s where we can help them to really create their own social network, on their own websites, that is branded to the personality of their business."
It’s easy for companies to get really excited about the technology that’s out there, but human capital investment is what makes it successful,” he said. “That’s the message we gave our clients: you have to support the content with human interaction.”

Human interaction is also the main concern of Spike Jones, a 1993 Baylor graduate living in Austin, Texas, who is now the senior vice president for digital experience/word-of-mouth at the international public relations firm Pleasants-Hillard.

“Word-of-mouth marketing has been around forever,” Jones said. “Ten years ago, it was rooted in branding, who we are. ‘Now, more than ever, it’s what people say about you. So, social media does play a part in that. But what we do is make that digital interaction less and feel more like face-to-face, word-of-mouth. What I do is help companies bridge the gap between digital and offline communication.”

People go to product websites mainly for sales or customer service, he said. It’s here, that the interaction needs to take on a human quality.

“It’s part of the human condition that, even if you use your own name, when you are online, people are quicker to get angry and people are quicker to complain,” Jones said. “And fewer and fewer people want to get an answer on Facebook or Twitter. But, Jones counsels clients to give those answers. “At least have the courtesy to be out there responding to people who have legitimate problems,” he said. “But we need to retain our customer service people to a higher touch. For some brands, that can be as simple as having those employees use photos of themselves as their profile picture rather than the company logo. It adds a human element.”

But beyond handling customer concerns, Jones believes companies need to focus on how to use emerging technologies to create more word-of-mouth opportunities.

“Think of how many times you ask your friends or coworkers, ‘what do you think?’ We trust that kind of recommendation for more than we trust anonymous voices on the internet,” he said. “So what we need to do is turn our customer, or potential customer, into brand ambassadors who can give us that word-of-mouth promotion.”

Jones said he concentrates on bringing online experience, offline and vice versa. One of his clients, Chevy, is doing that well.

“Chevy has a master program where they go to events all around the country and connect with people’s passions points,” he said. “They’re not sales events. They just want to help people love the stuff they love even more.”

For example, in Texas, Chevy sponsors Little League Baseball. The company sends representatives to games where they will hand out cards that simply say “Chevy Ignites” and lists a URL and password. When the consumer goes home and logs into the information, they get a free T-shirt. In this way, Chevy uses face-to-face meetings to drive people to their website.

Chevy may also send a camera crew to a game. They make a short video highlighting real kids playing baseball and give a private link to the parents. The video is just that: a child playing the sport they enjoy, with only a simple Chevy logo at the end. The video isn’t used for anything by Chevy. It’s simply a gift to that parent, who can choose to do whatever they would like with it.

“Now what we’ve created is a brand ambassador for Chevy,” Jones said. “In both instances, the consumer has been given something simply for the sake of spreading goodwill. And we know that those consumers will not only add Chevy to their consideration set the next time they’re purchasing a vehicle, but they are also connecting with their friends, whether that’s through social media like Facebook or in face-to-face interactions, in the name of Chevy.”

In the end, Jones said, interacting with customers whether digitally or in person, is a lot like your personal life.

“When people only brag about themselves when you talk to them, or fill their Twitter stream just for self-promotion, you know they’re not authentic,” he said. “Customers just want companies to be authentic. They may be using their computers but what they really want is personal interaction. That makes good customer service.”

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