

PROTECTING YOUR REP

WHY Online Customer Interaction Matters

By FRANCES ROGERS

NOTHING IN RECENT DECADES HAS CHANGED THE way BUSINESSES CONNECT WITH THEIR CLIENTS LIKE THE advent of social media. Internet access and 24-hour availability bring a range of customer service opportunities and challenges that can be difficult to navigate on your own. But two Baylor graduates are creating their own opportunities with companies designed specifically to help businesses not only manage their online customer service presence, but also develop strategies to create brand loyalty and credibility and turn their customers into brand ambassadors.

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-profile corporations with 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 to manage their image on sites like Facebook and Twitter."

The reason it's so important for companies to manage those 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 all 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 website, that is branded to the personality of their business."

Companies, too, can become overwhelmed at the vast amount of information available to their customers and potential customers. And that's where Howard and Telligent come to the rescue.

"The first thing we do is tell a company to get a handle on how their brands and products are being discussed: go to Twitter and Facebook and interact with your customers," Howard said. "But don't stop there. That's a mistake too many businesses make. 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 website, that is branded to the personality of their business."

Dell, for example, is one of Telligent's clients.

"Dell is a well-known, successful Texas company that has used online communities both on the support and sales sides," Howard said.

Dell's own personal social network has created a community that is loyal to each other, and more importantly, to the brand.

"When a Dell customer comes to the site and becomes a member of the community, they not only get recommendations and support from other customers, they're also interacting with Dell in a whole new way," Howard said. "Dell is available to them 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year. They even have the ability to generate new ideas for Dell, to give and receive even more feedback."

Howard said Dell's willingness to create its own community helps them to take customer service via social media to a whole new level.

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UMAN INTERACTION IS ALSO THE MAIN CONCERN OF SPIKE JONES, A 1995 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 FLEISHMAN-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 look and feel more like face-to-face, word-of-mouth. What I do is help companies bridge the gap between digital and off-line 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 expect to get an answer on Facebook or Twitter."

But, Jones counsels clients to give those answers.

"We do need to be out there responding to people who have legitimate problems," he said. "But we need to retrain our customer service people to be 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 co-workers, 'what do you think?' We trust that kind of recommendation far more than we trust anonymous voices on the Internet," he said. "So what we need to do is turn our customer, or potential customers, into brand ambassadors who can give us that word-of-mouth promotion."

Jones said he concentrates on bringing online experiences off-line 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 passion 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 types in 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 highlight reel of kids playing baseball and give a private link to the parent. The video is just their 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 chose 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 streams 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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