

Business Process Services

White Paper

Providing Customer Service the Social Way

About the Author

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Abstract

Industries across the board are redefining traditional methods of customer interaction to adapt to the digital wave sweeping through the business world. The image of a call center with headphone-clad agents staring at desktop monitors has given way to new age contact centers with giant LED displays and live streaming of social content. This change comes with an array of benefits and perils.

For example, a single positive customer interaction on a channel like Twitter could become the default brand message for millions of customers and prospects visiting the page. At the same time, an irate customer has the power to seriously damage the brand image using the very same online channels. For enterprises, this burgeoning digital world means navigating a slew of new technologies and processes to stay connected with their customers across channels. Every industry has a few enterprises that have got on the digital bandwagon early on and have set a precedent for others to follow.

In this paper, we have put together a list of must-dos that an enterprise embarking on the social customer service journey must consider.

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The impact of social media on customer service

Social media has changed the way individuals seek information and connect with each other. Even as the depth and variety of information available on social channels empowers companies with deep customer insights, the accessibility of social media has unleashed a new brigade of empowered customers. This trend has a two-fold impact on customer service—there is a heightened need for ensuring that negativity on social channels is handled appropriately, while also providing superior and consistent service on these channels. Instead of just enabling fast response on a channel of the organization's choice, providing fast response on a channel of the customer's choice is the new service differentiator.

It's important for an organization to adopt the right set of technologies and processes in order to transition from a reactive organization to an 'actively listening', proactive one. It is also important to identify the right metrics for assessing the success of individual customer engagement initiatives. All of this requires focused commitment, investment, and even reprioritization of resources.

The implications for an enterprise: servicing the digital customer effectively

What does the evolving role of customer service mean for an enterprise? For one, it means maintaining the balance between optimal investment and effective service. But investment is only one part of the puzzle that brings about service effectiveness. A strong process network is really the lynchpin of successful service delivery, with technology acting as an enabler. That said, technology should play a much wider and more far-reaching role in a social-media-enabled contact center that facilitates interactions with customers over social channels to address their queries and complaints. This is because it involves monitoring a large number of channels and humungous data volumes.

There is a whole host of factors that come into play in ensuring effective customer service on digital platforms, leading to an enhanced customer experience. Figure 1 depicts the four significant aspects that need to be considered.

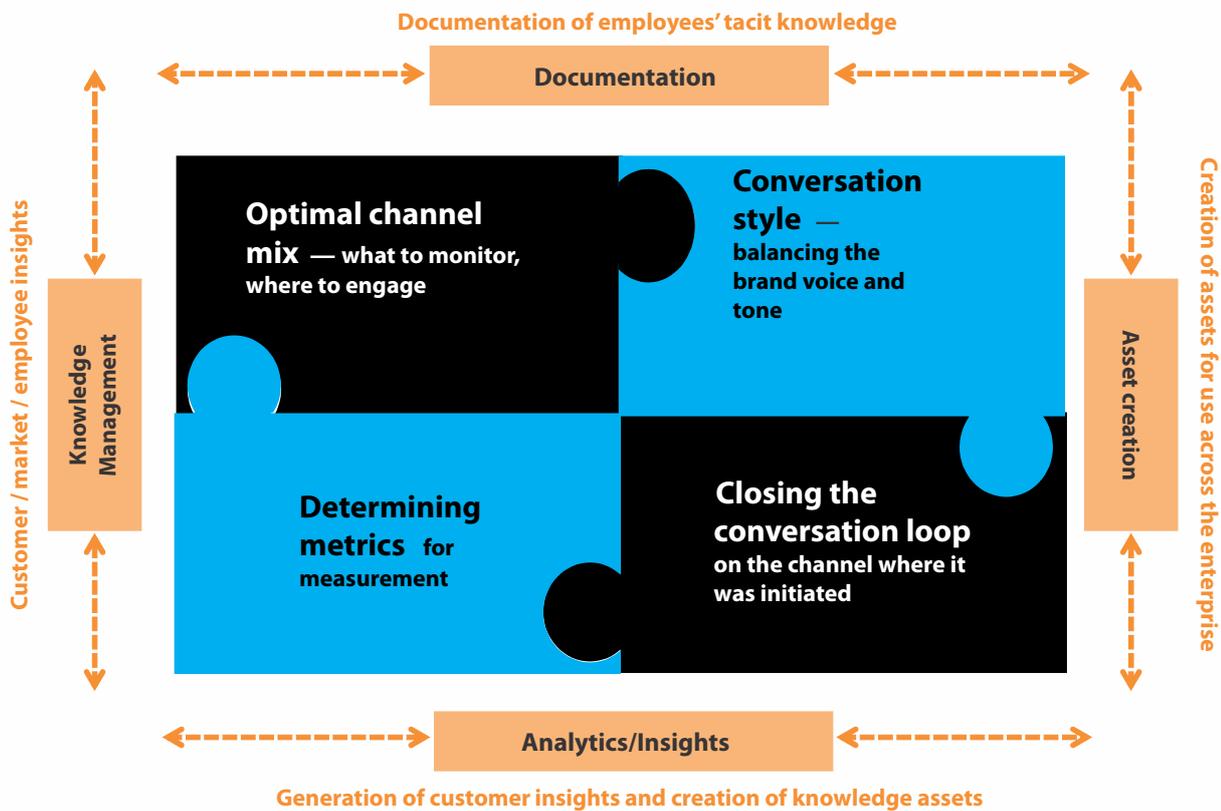


Figure 1. Four key factors that drive effective customer service in the digital age

Monitoring relevant channels

Companies need to identify one particular channel for dedicated customer service, and clearly communicate this strategy on the company website and other communication pages. It is equally important for other social channels to be monitored to detect any customer queries or complaints, and to glean insights.

For instance, in industries such as pharmaceuticals and insurance, customers may not post queries on a brand's website, but are very active in third-party forums. This holds good for the hospitality industry as well. Some BFSI companies have been known to respond to customer queries on blogs, and share company and industry updates through podcasts. Leading telecom companies run crowdsourced forums, where customers are encouraged to respond to queries. Companies need to ensure that these forums are effectively moderated to steer discussions in the desired direction.

While companies may choose not to engage directly on many of these platforms, they can use these as important hubs for market insight generation. Before starting their social media journey, companies need to determine the channels they will use for customer engagement and for insight generation.

Ensuring the right brand voice and tone

Customer service through social media is a fine balancing act between the tenets of external communication, marketing, and customer service. Social media posts and responses should be able to convey the right brand perception, while building a personal connect with the customer, and adhering to the brand voice and tone guidelines. Over a period of time, effective communication helps create a base of more engaged and loyal customers. The norms applicable to interpersonal communication need to be applied to social media interactions too. The company's responses should be empathetic while allaying customer concerns, and the tone should encourage further communication.

Closing the loop

Enterprises tend to close queries, requests, and complaints received on social media channels through other offline means, while the social media posts receive no response. This leaves the social media property with an inconsistent response pattern. To a new customer visiting the page, it may convey the message that the company is not monitoring that particular channel.

Companies must also refrain from the practice of posting standard responses to all queries on social channels. Such a practice might help meet defined SLAs, but not the larger objectives of social media engagement. It also runs the risk of annoying the customer. Many customers turn to social media channels either because of ineffective service on other channels, or the long waiting time on other channels. In such a scenario, providing a standard response on social media is likely to aggravate matters.

In general, responses to social media posts should follow three steps, as indicated in Figure 2.

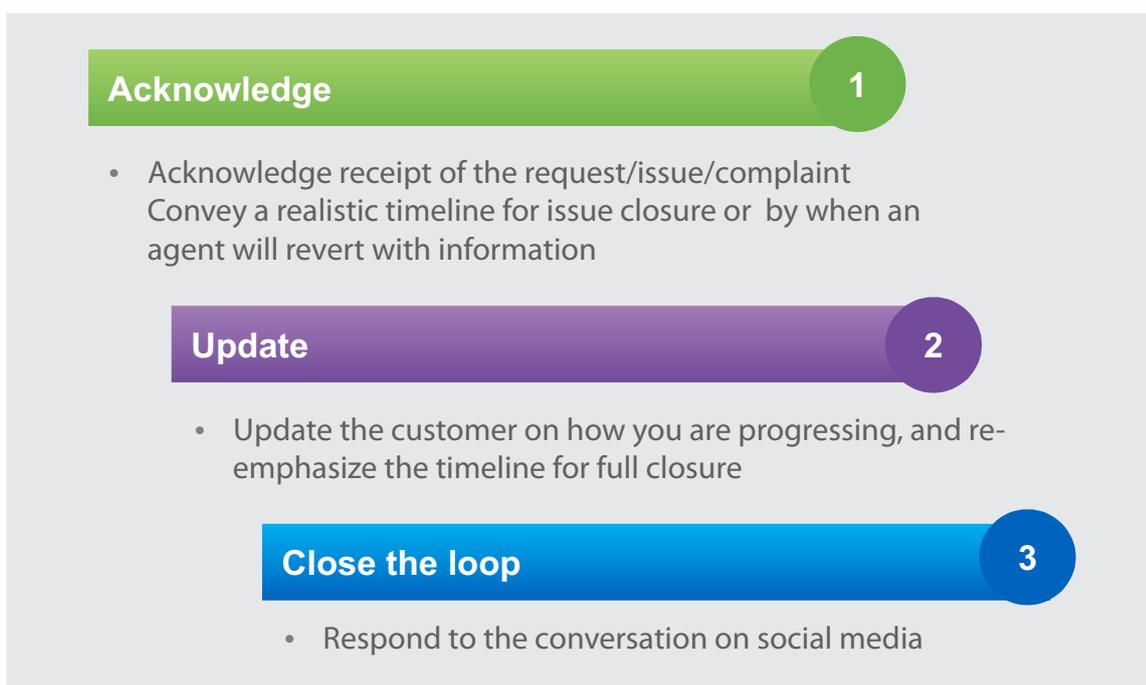


Figure 2. Streamlining responses to social media posts: three key steps

Tracking results

The success of social media customer service hinges on how effectively companies track the health of the engagement. Important measures include the average response time, the number of leads, the percentage of complaints converted to compliments, and the percentage of customers who return to the same social media channel with queries and requests.

All metrics need to be determined at the beginning, and should be closely tied to the business objectives the company is trying to achieve. An important initial step is to identify all relevant business objectives and the KPIs that need to be tracked. It is also essential to constantly reassess the metrics in line with changing business needs and objectives, and redirect focus accordingly.

Determining the right service level for optimized investment

For an enterprise transitioning to a social customer service set-up, a key driving force is the cost savings likely to be generated in the process. The cost of an interaction on social media is significantly lower than an interaction on a voice channel. By deflecting even a fraction of customer interactions from voice to social media channels, enterprises can achieve substantial savings along with enhanced customer experience. However, for optimized investment, companies need to clearly set service levels for each channel—such as the optimal speed of response or the number of posts that will be answered within a defined time frame. Some ways to determine the right service level include:

- **Adopting a workforce management model:** This requires in-depth analysis and understanding of traffic trends such as peak hours, peak days of the week, seasonal impact (festivals and holiday seasons), and so on. In the hospitality industry for instance, social media traffic trends are highly seasonal. Companies need to consider the expected volume spikes around festivals, holiday seasons, and so on while creating and implementing a workforce solution. Analytical models based on historical volume trends help companies structure their social media investments efficiently.
- **Determining the response timeline for a specific customer base:** To determine the acceptable speed of response, companies need to consider the types of queries, complaints, and requests received on their social media channels, and the time sensitivity of these interactions. For instance, an airline company, for which the majority of queries are related to flight schedules and cancellations, needs to post responses in near real time.
- **Understanding customers:** Apart from the right technology and processes, companies need a thorough understanding of customers' needs and sensibilities. They need to build processes based on a holistic understanding of their customer base. For instance, an instant call in response to a post made late in the night may be appreciated by some customers, but some others may find it inappropriate or annoying.

Providing the right service level requires the support of the right technology. Companies therefore need a tool that can attach criticality metrics to the posts, and ensure it is mobile optimized to help agents deliver faster and effective service. On their websites, companies should clearly indicate their preferred service channel and the expected response time for each of their social media properties; this helps manage customer expectations.

Making the most of data

- **Capture the tacit knowledge** residing in the customer service, product, sales, and other relevant teams, and share this learning with the social media service team. This learning should become a part of the company's training modules, online knowledge repositories, and Social Media Playbook.
- **Utilize the social media interactions to generate relevant business insights**, and channel them to the relevant teams. This will enable the company to go beyond just a short-term solution for a specific issue, and put in place a plan and process to address its larger ramifications.

Across industries, cumulative insights from social media interactions over a period of time help in understanding latent market and customer needs. Companies can also drive innovation, understand customer pain points, and identify leading influencers who can support marketing activities.

Resolving the efficiency dilemma

How can companies harmonize technology investments and process efficiencies? It is worthwhile to look back at traditional contact center settings and draw from their accrued learning. The success of customer service in these settings has for a long time hinged on the level of empowerment of customer service agents, and their willingness to help the customer. Technology undoubtedly empowers them, but customer satisfaction and delight can only be driven by personalized support and commitment to honor timelines.

Companies need to carry over this learning in the new digital contact center set-up, and invest more in quality, training, and development support. Continuous learning, layers of supervisory control, quality checks, and the strong service orientation of contact center agents can be key differentiators. Technology facilitates mining and screening data, managing workflows, and tracking KPIs, but strong process support is the catalyst that makes all of this work seamlessly.

Conclusion

Businesses and customer support organizations are yet to fully avail of the opportunities provided by the social media revolution. It is time to move beyond using social channels as listening platforms, and leverage them for effective customer engagement. To make this possible, organizations need to ensure that the right frameworks, processes, and technologies are in place. They can utilize business process management (BPM) tools to streamline the activities of a socially enabled contact center and enhance service delivery. Holistic measurement strategies and improved data quality and governance can also help businesses realize greater ROI on social media investments.

In conclusion, customer service on social media should, in spirit and practice, be similar to traditional customer service and draw from the depth of learning in this industry. The empathy and personalized service delivered by customer service agents on traditional channels need to be replicated in every social media interaction.

About TCS Business Process Services Unit

Enterprises seek to drive business growth and agility through innovation in an increasingly regulated, competitive, and global market. TCS helps clients achieve these goals by managing and executing their business operations effectively and efficiently.

TCS' Business Process Services (BPS) include core industry-specific processes, analytics and insights, and enterprise services such as finance and accounting, HR, and supply chain management. TCS creates value through its FORE™ simplification and transformation methodology, backed by its deep domain expertise, extensive technology experience, and TRAPEZE™ governance enablers and solutions. TCS complements its experience and expertise with innovative delivery models such as using robotic automation and providing Business Processes as a Service (BPaaS).

TCS' BPS unit has been positioned in the leaders' quadrant for various service lines by many leading analyst firms. With over four decades of global experience and a delivery footprint spanning six continents, TCS is one of the largest BPS providers today.

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