

CUSTOMER SERVICE REPORT 2017

Customer Care: Emerging Trends and Future Strategies



Introduction

The face of customer care is changing. In many cases it's already entirely faceless. But does that mean technology is replacing the human connection, or is it just filling the gaps and facilitating an all round better consumer experience? And is this a brand or consumer-led phenomenon? Are companies proactively leading the charge, or are they simply reacting to changing customer expectations and fast moving market conditions?

This new report from Incite will dig deeper than ever before, examining in detail what's going on behind the scenes. As the topic of how best to deliver exemplary customer care becomes increasingly complex, we'll also look at what brands of different sizes can do to improve the overall customer experience, increase loyalty, and drive business growth in the coming year. We'll also be looking at what makes a unique visitor a customer for life, and will examine what more brands can do to nurture this vital transition.

In addition, we have interviews with leading experts in the area of social customer care (SCC), who talk candidly on topics ranging from: the need for rapid responses to improve customer uptake of SCC; to overcoming the challenge of effectively linking SCC outcomes to ROI; to how AI and bots are, if properly built and tested, capable of assisting the customer care process and breathing new life into the customer experience.

In two parts that form one overarching appraisal of this important space we operate in, we hope you enjoy this paper and find informative ideas that inspire action within your care teams...

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PART ONE

Leverage social listening and get buy in for the social customer care cause

So, why is the face of customer care changing?

For decades customer service has meant one thing—agents in call centers dealing with requests, enquiries and, above all, complaints. Which means that, in the past, customer care has been skewed somewhat toward the negative. But with SCC and open online posting, both the positive and negative experiences are shared, and are clearly visible to brands, then in a position to publicly or privately respond. And yet, a deep rooted fear of investing more in the arena of SCC still persists with many top level executives remaining unsure of the value it brings? But holding the purse strings too tightly when it comes to developing customer care departments is being revealed as a folly, as increasingly it's shown that those who do invest are the ones winning customers over, and gaining public praise.

In a recent interview conducted by Paolo Fabrizio with Jochem van Drimmelen, KLM Airline's online reputation manager and social media advisor, Van Drimmelen said:

'I am still surprised to see so many companies being anxious to deal with online feedback. They ignore it and simply focus on posting marketing messages. Rather than seeing negative feedback as a threat, we embrace it and see it as a great opportunity to get in touch personally and show our passengers, and the world, that we care, and get inspired to fix things. In fact, providing excellent customer service is the precondition to anything else we do on social media.'

80 percent of success is showing up

The key point being made here by is that if brands refuse or fail to acknowledge the fact of customers talking about them online, and ignore the conversations, they are missing out on real opportunities to show customers they care about what's being said. In a sense, it doesn't matter if the conversation has a positive or negative thread, brands will be noted by their absence, particularly when other brands in the same sector who respond to queries, address misgivings, apologies for wrongdoings, and thank people for the nice things they say are proactive around-the-clock. As Woody Allen famously said: 'Eighty percent of success is showing up.' Which means that brands engaging in social conversations are more than 80 percent of the way to success already. By being present they are showing (a) that they really do exist (b) that they care deeply about their reputation, and are committed to doing and fixing things on behalf of their customers. And when the online chatter is positive, as it often is when brands bend over backwards to be useful, and are innovative with their outreach, those same engaged brands should be ready to turn that valuable praise into added brand awareness.

Time to hit the tipping point

Of course, with technology changing so fast and control slipping from the hands of companies into the hands of consumers, such board level fears are still understandable. But delaying the inevitability of a customer care future, underpinned and driven by the explosive power of the internet and its myriad channels of communication, will only make the pain of change harder. Still, with established business

models and legacy systems in place it's difficult to confront the pain of change without having the metrics to justify it.

Frankie Saucier, who is an expert in helping large businesses streamline digital communications with their customers, said:

'I think a lot of brands have either artificially or inadvertently suppressed the general public's adoption of social customer care. Why? Because they're not proactively communicating that their agents are able to quickly and effectively handle complex issues through social media channels.'

'The reason those companies aren't encouraging their customers to address their queries to social teams, is they don't yet have the incentive of quantifiable data showing them social media customer care is cheaper, and that a growing number of people prefer it.'

'So it's something that's still waiting to be quantifiably proven. And then, once you have taught your customers that: "yes you can come here; yes we have enough people to answer your question; and no you don't have to wait very long," those same customers are more likely to preference things such as Twitter and Facebook over traditional methods of engagement, such as the phone. For brands now, I think that the pain of staying the same has got to somehow hit that tipping point and become greater than the pain of change.'

For companies that have already embraced change, however, it's a quite different picture. As vendors bring more sophisticated software to market, such as social monitoring tools, and offer improved SaaS solutions, the opportunity for brands to deal with increasing numbers of online customer interactions is on the increase.

According to Brandwatch Analytics, 96 percent of people that give mention to brands online don't actually follow their profiles. This highlights the importance of monitoring online conversations outside of the most obvious channels. Knowing what people are saying about your brand right across the web is one of the best ways to identify possible emerging trends and unearth unexpected opportunities.

Executive director of digital care at media giant Comcast, Calvin St Juste said:

'The key thing about social customer care is that now customers have a real choice. Historically, pre-internet, brands would provide the customer with a phone number and tell them the particular times they

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could call. That then evolved into providing a 24-hour service. Then, with the internet, customers were given the opportunity to chat, but even then they still had to proactively seek a brand page before they could engage.

'What social care has now done is to turn this traditional model upside down. Instead of calling a provided number they will now use Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, or any of a number of other communications vehicles readily open to them to tell their own story about the brand and its level of customer service, sharing their thoughts and their concerns with the rest of the world. Which means that now we as brands have to find the customers—where they're speaking about us, where they're having problems, the places they're actually telling other people they have a service issue—so it's a significant change in the model.'

Why social listening is vital to reassuring and retaining customers

Companies needing to have teams dedicated to around-the-clock social listening to find out what's being said about them is, indeed, a big shake up in the way customer care is resourced and delivered. But those companies are increasingly compelled to do it partly because, in a digitally connected world, the ever present specter of cyber attacks demands that brands are always on guard, ready to stamp out any small flames that have the potential to become raging fires.

There are many well-publicized and quite recent company data breaches that have left customers concerned about the safety and security of their personal and financial information. TalkTalk, Sony, Target and LinkedIn have all been victims of aggressive attacks. Exposed to negative media coverage and torrents of online chatter, such incidents will test the mettle of even the most robust brand's customer care capabilities. At such times social listening will undoubtedly be on hyperdrive, with brands communicating with their customers across channels, particularly social. And this is a real double-sided coin, because what it shows is that that protecting brand reputation is a vital part of delivering exemplary customer care, not least of all because customers are by association affected by what brands do or don't do.

Every smartphone, a blessing and a threat

Cyber attacks aside, identifying potential problems on the horizon by monitoring social activity, and meeting customer concerns head on is increasingly important. Knowing that any person with a smartphone can at any moment turn into a roving reporter, write about a particular brand experience, append a picture or video, and publish it to the world in seconds makes paying attention to the detail of what's happening in the online environment mission critical. The internet is full of brand incidents, some funny some serious, caught on camera, which went viral and started a hotbed of conversation in which everybody seemed to have an opinion. A quick Google search of social PR disasters quickly reveals how an apparently throwaway comment can turn into a firefighting exercise for social teams.

Which is why the savviest brands invest heavily in advanced social listening software to know what's being said, and when, before deciding on how to deal with it. Forewarned is forearmed as they say. Equally, those same brands assiduously monitoring what's being said are more likely to pick up

on any upbeat conversations, which can then be turned into positive PR.

Social search, rescue and triage

ST JUSTE: *'Today, anyone can simply go to Google and type in their brand name, and find out pretty quickly what sort of conversations are going on. But social monitoring and social listening vendors pull in much more detailed information, and by using more sophisticated tools its possible to get a much clearer understanding of what's happening within the global social environment. It's what I call the 'search and rescue' strategy—gaining an understanding as to what's being said before making a conservative decision on whether to engage, and deciding what to say.'*

And how does this relate to delivering great customer care?

'Firstly, there's the listening, and the tools give you the opportunity to find what's happening. Then, in our space, we use humans to do what we call the 'triage', which is to determine what the validity of the conversation is—is it truly a complaint, is it a question, a concern, or is it a compliment that gives you a positive lift? Human assessment of social conversations can help you to make quick determinations relating to those things.'

Customer conversations for marketing opportunities

Importantly it doesn't have to be an act of damage limitations. It could be something related to marketing, where a real opportunity to up-sell or tweak marketing tools, including content, to better reflect what's happening beyond company walls arises; all of which highlights how inextricably interwoven customer care has become with the agendas of other departments, such as PR and marketing. In an environment where consumers more readily go to brand websites to share their comments and feelings than pick up the phone, the public nature of their posts and the influential nature of the conversations they initiate mean that the gaps between customer service, sales, and marketing have narrowed.

Social selling and customer care

So what does this mean for sales, and how can SCC be linked to ROI to inspire buy-in at board level, securing better budgets for things such as investment in tech, and improved staffing levels?

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According to a recent LinkedIn commissioned survey, social has become vitally important to sales teams. Some of the survey's most relevant findings are that:

- Sales professionals spend the most time using social selling tools and CRM, and believe both deliver the highest value.
- More than 70 percent of sales professionals use social selling tools, including LinkedIn, Twitter and Facebook.
- Sales professionals see relationship-building tools as having the highest impact on revenue.
- 90 percent of top salespeople use social selling tools, compared with 71 percent of overall sales professionals.

Bolstering these findings, research from Feedback systems suggests that 61 percent of organizations engaged in social selling report a positive impact on revenue growth.

This points to the power of social, not so much as a driver of increased sales performance and revenue, but as a series of channels through which sales teams can more seamlessly interact with customers, carefully tracking their progress as they move along the sales funnel.

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PART TWO

From ROI and AI, what does the future hold for SCC?

THE SCC-ROI equation

Yet while great sales outcomes shine brightly in profit and loss spreadsheets, customer care fails to get the same level of recognition. But it stands to reason that great SCC is as important to the ROI equation as hard sales. So how is it possible to somehow correlate it with the bottom line—to prove the connection between care and value in terms of dollars and cents? It's a question burning hot in the minds of customer care managers, and also in the minds of the executives wanting to hand over more budget, if only they were given good enough reason.

SAUCIER: *'Executives want the harder proof of metrics to justify budget allocation on social media customer care. But that's difficult right now because many of the tools being used are not fully integrated. Naturally, there are cost and practical implications behind tying it all together, and capturing the data and really looking at it, which is why more organizations haven't gone through this exercise yet. But I think the barriers to entry are decreasing, and that there's going to be a far greater drive to deliver more insightful metrics to show and explain precisely what impact social media customer care is having on the company figures.'*

ST JUSTE: *'ROI has almost become the silver bullet everyone has been looking to quantify. I think ROI has been a data driven thing, what's the cost per contact and how do you reduce it, and that has always been a primary measure. In social customer care, it moves beyond that. For example, where online social communities are using do it yourself methods, social customer care helps with call deflection. Customers will move away focusing on the brand and look to see what other customers in a specific community are saying, and that way solve their own issues. And that has a quantifiable deflection cost associated with it.'*

Customer care DIY: Now is the time to prove its value

So the challenge now is to present things such as call deflection—which takes the pressure off of contact centers and reduces costs—in metrics terms, so that executives can make decisions based on analyzed statistics rather than hunches. And this is where the real impetus for developing better measurement tools lies. Showing the inherent power of customer care in business operations, and its contribution to saving (and making) money is a number one priority for heads of SCC departments. And convincing board level executives that customers' DIY problem solving is materially and positively impacting the bottom line will require a concerted push to better integrate tech tools, and deliver analytics that prove the business case. In the meantime, SCC agents must continue working to build better customer relationships by solving problems, and doing this as quickly and effectively as possible. Because when it comes to customer satisfaction time, as in speed of resolution, is of the essence.

The need for *real* speed in customer care

Group manager of social and community care at financial software company Intuit, Mark Obee, knows all about the importance of increasing response times to drive customer engagement. He said:

'When I joined Intuit one of the biggest challenges we had was reducing the response times in social. If you want to deliver on social, you need to meet the expected standards, and we weren't—our average response was 120 minutes. But now, with a team of ten dealing with high volumes, typically 3000 to 5000 enquiries a month, through direct messages on Facebook, and quite a bit more through our online community. Our ability to reach this scale has been pretty powerful. Importantly, the type of questions and enquiries can be quite complex, and they require research, so a big part of the drive was to enable the team to respond quickly, but really engage in a clear way.'

'Wow, are you human?'

In terms of the material impact on business outcomes, Intuit's massive reduction in response times on social yielded impressive results.

OBE: *'We actually saw a large uptick in the number of individuals using the service, so connecting with us through direct messaging. Year-on-year we saw a 20-to-30 percent increase here in the United States, and we saw some pretty heavy global adoption, too.'*

Within its Facebook pages, Obee's team also secured the prestigious very responsive to messages badge, something that only brands who deliver a 90 percent response rate in a 15 minute time frame within the last seven days' are given.

'It's great that within Facebook customers can see that, by communicating with us via social, they'll get the answers they're looking for quickly. And that comes through in the sentiment. From our customers, we get a lot of: 'wow, like are you human!' because they weren't expecting to get a meaningful response so quickly. Because although the response time is typically less than seven minutes, depending on the time of day and the throughput of queries, often people are getting their questions answered almost instantaneously. It's important stuff because it shows how committed we are to the customers.'

And it's this rising tide of commitment by brands like Intuit that is making social channels more attractive places for customers to find resolutions. So, as the steady migration away from traditional channels continues in

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earnest, are we likely to see exponential growth in the number of brand bots being used to handle the increase in volume? Is AI's writing already on the wall?

Rise of bots aka: AI

With Facebook driving the market to close on a billion people using its messenger service, and 100,000 bots already developed by businesses keen to provide their customers with new types of meaningful interaction, that also yield good data, the bot market is ripening fast. The near perfect storm of data price reductions, smartphone saturation, a maturing digital native demographic, and improved messaging app interfaces are driving uptake to the point that, according to a recent BI intelligence report, the four big messaging apps have surpassed the four big social networking apps in the number of active monthly users they're acquiring. Perhaps the biggest takeaway here is that, much in the way they connect with their own friends and family to chat and share various media, users are turning increasingly to messaging apps to do the same with brands. Which means that brands are finally crossing the resistance point of acceptance into the world of true personalization. There's no denying that younger generations are buying into connecting with businesses via messaging apps—on their terms—and brands just can't wait to get in on the action.

The importance of AI authenticity

However bots aren't just born, they need to be designed. Above all they need to be designed with the customer in mind, and feel as natural and conversational as they are with that family member, or friend. Which is why jumping headfirst into the world of bots isn't necessarily the best idea for businesses wanting to maintain that level of authenticity and seamless experience. To ensure bots maintain a conversational tone, and that any interactions have a seamless flow, plenty of iterations are needed. Companies such as Facebook with Messenger, and Apple with iMessage, provide the platforms, but businesses must create bots that are relevant and contextual for their customers.

Apple's Business Chat will be it's first foray into an arena currently dominated by the likes of Facebook Messenger and Twitter. Dedicated to achieving similar goals, though embedded more deeply within its iOS, it aims to make iMessage a place for customers and businesses to interact. Powered by voice to text or typed questions, bots built for the platform will (if properly designed) enable fast, automated customer care—at scale.

The biggest thing since push notifications

Bots opening up new channels through which businesses can inform, entertain, and engage their customers in a two way natural language conversation looks set to be as big a development in the tech space as when apps first started to deliver push notifications. From a customer perspective, the speed of being able to access information, ask questions and place orders—and from a business perspective being able to gather clean, honest, reliable and relevant data—mean that continuing sector growth is inevitable. Frictionless, scalable, customer oriented, what's not to like? Still, the industry isn't quite there—yet. And caution needs to be taken, because the last thing businesses want to do is take the brand equity they've worked so hard to build and throw it away. The danger of introducing bots too quickly into the customer care paradigm is that, instead of strengthening relationships, they plant the seeds of discontent—and disconnects. Ironically, should that happen, it will be human customer care that comes to the rescue.

Human or bot?

Which begs the question: will chatbots replace humans? Certainly not in the near future. After all, there's a big difference between pre-programmed chatbots communicating with customers and assisting them on their path to purchase, and machine learning AI. For now, though, brands have at their fingertips a potentially powerful tool that could do much of the heavy lifting, freeing up humans to take on more complex and nuanced tasks.

The hot 'bot' topic

ST JUSTE: *'I think it's going to be down to the way we use AI technology, and now there's an opportunity for brands to think about how they're going to use it in customer care. For now, it's best to think low hanging fruits, such as issues that customers repeatedly call in about—those can be handled by an automated system so that it allows your team to handle more complex issues. Above all, I think it's important not to lose the Care in the equation.'*

'Because of the significant shift of customers from traditional channels toward social channels, the volume of social enquiries we have to deal with will grow exponentially, so we have to be involved in what's happening. Beyond Facebook and Twitter, there's also Instagram, WhatsApp, Snapchat, Apple Store, YouTube and so on. If you consider that customers are going to use these channels, we'll obviously need some level of automated supplement to handle the volume.'

'At the same time, many of us working the SCC space are being very cautious. I think if we are strategic in the use of AI, it will help with the speed of response, but it also needs to be smart enough to know that if a query needs to be escalated, it can direct you to a human.'

OBEE: *'Building a bot doesn't take much effort. It's straightforward technology and is pretty simple to start up, but really fine tuning that bot and understanding and refining those more subtle human elements is the real challenge.'*

'We're in bot development phases right now, but as I mentioned, we've been able to reach scalability and really quick customer responses purely through human effort. What I've seen through connecting with other individuals is that there's been a big shift toward investing (in chatbot tech) and companies are very bullish on it. So this year is very much going to be a 'test and learn' and then over the next couple of years we'll start seeing heavier adoption, and better use cases of customer service implementing the technology effectively. But overall, I think it's more of a longer, three-to-five year plan before we see that full adoption and usage, similar in many ways to the uptake in online banking.'

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'When you think of all the different personas you have as a brand, how do you go about making sure their eyeballs are on the bot? And I think that's the sweet spot really, the holy grail; it's where a lot of brands have their focus—how do you really drive that adoption rate. There are a lot of ways you can do it, so it's mostly about understanding your customers, and listening to them to know how they would want to engage with that sort of experience.'

Care about the experience

Whether bot, human, or bot-human hybrid, the most important thing to remember is that the end goal is about creating an unbreakable bond with the customer. If the answer a bot gives to a customer only approximates an accurate response, it's going to lead to frustration. IVRs are a prime example of programmed robotic responses led by customer phone dial number choices that often end in failure. Anyone who's ever encountered an IVR and either been hung up on, pushed into an annoying feedback loop, or simply ended up being directed to the wrong department or person will know how easy it is to get things wrong.

While on a low level, a bot rattling off an irrelevant responses to basic requests is annoying, on a more serious level it leads to an immediate psychological disconnect that can ultimately send customers looking for business elsewhere. All of that investment in tech, when poorly used, serves only to diminish the customer base. In short, no bot is better than a bad bot. And no bot is better than a bot that looks good, but fails to deliver. A prime example of this in retail is when bot configurations aren't linked to inventory and fail to recognize 'out of stock' issues until the customer reaches the checkout. These are the things brands need to test and iterate for so that they can avoid them.

Look out for Gen Z

Because, ultimately, good service that leads to a good experience means customers getting what they want, and customers are changing, expecting more and more from tech, knowing the potential of its capabilities, frustrated when it doesn't deliver. Generation Z, snapping at the heels of Millennials, and, according to a recent IBM study, outnumbering them in the US by three million with extra buying power to the tune of \$44billion are the ones to watch out for. Their lives are pretty much hardwired to the tech. They're creating it and using it. The same report found that three quarters of this newer generation carry out a large proportion of their recreational activities on tablets and smartphones. In short, considered to be the first true digital natives who cannot remember a time pre-internet, they are more au fait with the roots and the branches of the entire digital ecosystem. With a truly tech savvy new generation coming through, when it comes to delivering great customer care, attention to touch point detail across channels and devices with be paramount.

Omnichannel is the byword of a customer care future

Because these are the guys (Gen Z) that are going to flip channels and devices without giving it a second thought, brands are going to have to

redouble their efforts to be in the right place at the right time. Delivering a seamless flow of unbroken customer experience, picking up on activity in one channel at precisely the point the customer dropped off at another. Being the ultimate, super high-speed concierge service is going to be one of the biggest future challenges for social customer care.

ST JUSTE: *'It's true; the real shift is going to be omnichannel. It's the big piece and we have to embrace it. We have to be prepared to give customers every option. If they want to chat with us, if they want to tweet with us, if they want to make a phone call. Whatever it is, we need to be able to pick up the journey from the place they enter the loop. I think that omnichannel excellence is going to be a kind of communications superhero, with artificial intelligence acting as its sidekick. These things together are what I think will truly help to solve this enormous paradigm shift we're seeing in customer care right now.'*

Conclusion

Customer care, as a sector within many sectors, is an area where real gains can be made by forward-thinking brands. But even though most companies are cognizant of this, many remain behind the curve with regards as to where customer care is headed. Fear of its lack of genuine impact on the bottom line due to a current lack of available metrics is hampering any advancement, which is a problem. A NewVoiceMedia survey suggests that a staggering \$62billion each year is wasted as a result of poor customer experiences. No wonder other data from Forrester reveals that almost three quarters of US businesses have 'improving customer experience' at the top of their agenda. But having it at the top of the agenda isn't the same as taking action. Sentiment talks, but cold hard cash and investment from the top walks. Investment in tech, investment in headcount, investment in belief that beyond the quality of a product or service, customer care is the powerhouse of every brand, maintaining and nurturing key relationships by solving problems, and being contextual, useful, and meaningful at all times. Or, as Werner Vogels, Amazon's VP and CTO perfectly sums up:

'When new technologies are combined with a passion for putting the interests of the customer at the heart of everything you do, they can give agile companies that decisive push to the front of the pack.'

'The winners will be those that view their business from the eyes of their customers and understand that fast-paced innovation is the key to long-term growth. With this mindset they can take on even the largest enterprises who are slow to adapt to the fast moving digital reality.'

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