



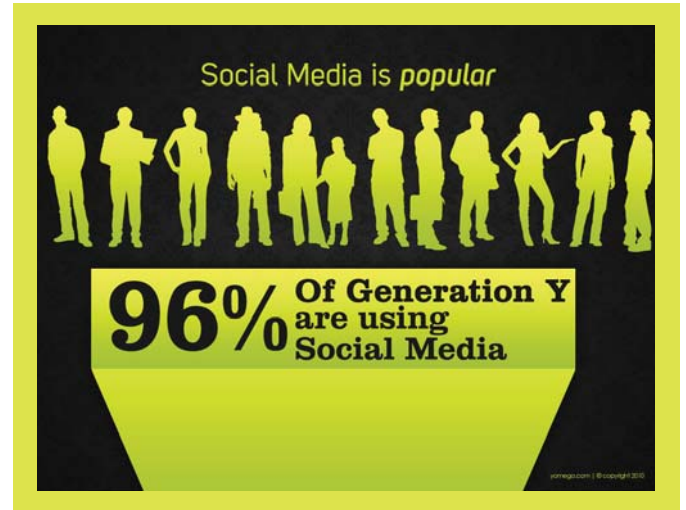
How To Use
SOCIAL MEDIA
to
REVOLUTIONISE
your
CUSTOMER
SERVICE

Social media has led to brands having more direct contact with their customers than ever before. **Steve Richards, MD, Yomego** tells us more.



Social media has led to brands having more direct contact with their customers than ever before. In the past, if a consumer wanted to comment on, complain about or praise a brand, they'd (mostly) tell their friends, or, if they were really riled, they'd go to the website, find the customer service email address and fire off a carefully worded missive. The good stuff mostly went unheard by a brand – how many of us ever get round to writing to a company to thank it for great service, or emailing to say we loved its new product?

But social media is changing all that. Brands can listen into sentiment - good and bad - on their websites, online communities, forums, Facebook pages, app store or on Twitter. It turns out that consumers are much more likely to tell a brand what they love and hate about them if it's easy to do. And the rise of social media means it's never been simpler.



Conversations in social spaces are completely transparent. Customers are effectively becoming extensions of marketing departments, influencing millions of purchasing decisions every day. But these feelings don't come with a filter; Social media shows off customer feedback at its most raw, with no carefully controlled advertising message or edited case study between the brand and its audience.

The result is more and more brands are embracing social media environments not just to promote positive messages, but to play a pivotal role in the provision of customer services.

Many brands now use social media to listen (and respond) to feedback from their customers. Some are following this through by using the feedback to help define product development and service provision - but the really smart brands are taking their social media strategies a step further, and setting up social communities to drive their entire customer service remit.

eircom, the Irish telecoms company, built eircom connect as part of its overall strategy to improve customer engagement across all platforms (and early feedback from customers is extremely positive).

The Social Customer

Personal recommendation has long been the marketer's manna. It costs nothing and carries more persuasive weight than a message 'pushed' from the ad pages of a magazine or an online banner. More recently, social media tools and platforms have made it easier to ask extended 'friends' networks for help, advice and tips via Twitter, blogs and social networks.

According to research from Forrester, more of us share good experiences than bad ones. But if we've had a bad experience with a company, we talk about it. A lot.

So if customers are using social media to talk about your brand, it makes sense to create a social media strategy to address customer service issues.



Empowering Your Customer

Creating a customer community is a brave move, but it can be a great (and efficient) way of customers helping each other with common problems, or for the brand to see what's proving popular (and, of course, what's not). It's also an opportunity for customers to 'self-serve': instead of having a one-to-one conversation or email exchange with a customer service rep, customers can come to the community and find their own answers to common questions.

A customer community is a way of communicating a single message to multiple customers (a service announcement, for example), and if any questions can't be answered straight away, a live chat function accessible from the site, or a 'direct message' function means the customer gets their problem resolved straight away.

But the real benefit is the visibility it gives brands into what their customers think. The brand can watch discussions about products and services unfold, or even involve customers in product development. Asda's 'Your Asda' community has a number of initiatives that are designed to 'empower' customers: its 'Chosen by You' initiative gets customers involved in product decisions; and its 'Bright Ideas' campaign – set to launch this year - encourages customers to submit their ideas to the store, and share in the resulting profits.



My Starbucks Idea encourages Starbucks customers to submit and vote for ideas to improve the chain's products. The website says:

"You know better than anyone else what you want from Starbucks. So tell us. What's your Starbucks Idea? Revolutionary or simple – we want to hear it. Share your ideas, tell us what you think of other people's ideas and join the discussion. We're here, and we're ready to make ideas happen. Let's get started."

It's a great way to engage with customers, listen to feedback, tap into a wealth of ideas, and create a culture of openness that customers will reward with loyalty. It also demonstrates a brand's commitment to new and innovative technology, raising its esteem with customers, especially those in the 18-34 age group.

Don't be afraid to embrace criticism

But if you're to create a culture of openness, you have to be ready for what your customers are going to say if their invited 'inside' the brand's metaphorical four walls (and let's face it they would otherwise be promoting the same negative sentiments anyway).

Consider whether you're ready to take on the challenge:

Create an easy-to-use and well designed site.

If your site is badly designed, it will frustrate customers (you don't want to end up with the online equivalent of the 'for customer service, press one... you call is important to us' automated voice message). Creating a customer service site is an expression of commitment to customers.

Do you have the resource to manage a customer service community?

It takes time and effort (although not as much as you might think). You need to be committed to the community if they're to commit to you. Answer queries, moderate responses to keep the site clean and spam-free, and feedback regularly to the community. Also, have a crisis plan. If an issue hits (such as a product recall, for example), you'll need to increase the number of people hosting the community.

Are you ready to hear what your customers are going to say?

Sometimes, your customers will say lovely things about you. But sometimes they won't. Are you ready to hear the negative as well as the positive? Don't censor negative comments: it will cancel out any warm feeling of trust you've gone to so much effort to create.

Listen and respond, quickly.

Brands using social media as a customer service tool must be prepared to listen and respond as quickly as if they were on the telephone (and much quicker than email). Make sure that the people running the customer service on the community have the authority to make decisions. Don't give this role to the intern.

Reward valuable contributors.

One of the major benefits of social customer communities is that there will always be some consumers who get more involved than the rest – helping the community and contributing regularly. Consider how you will identify them, and reward them (for example, granting them VIP status, or giving them vouchers or reward points).

If you get it wrong, admit it, apologise and move on.

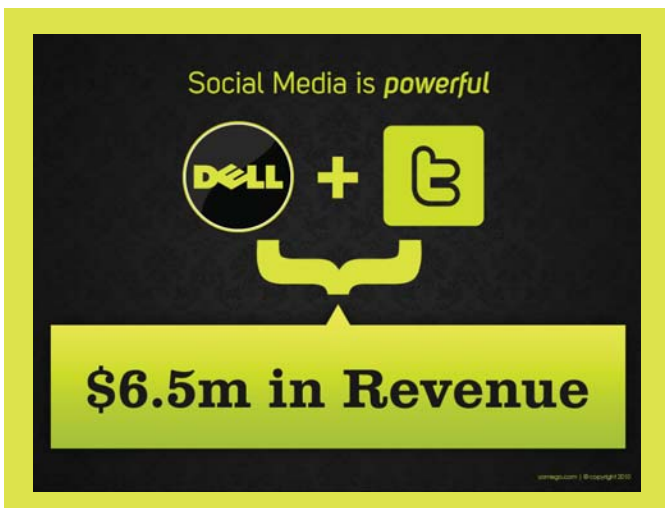
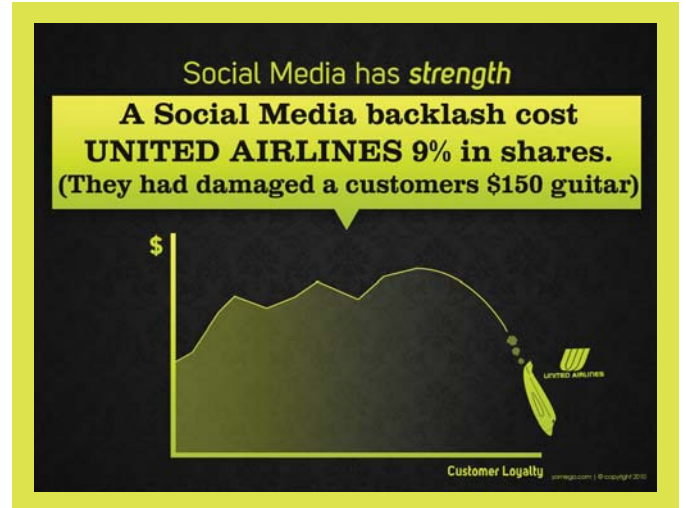
Vodafone learnt this lesson recently when a rogue tweet found its way onto the company's official customer Twitter stream when a computer was left unattended. Vodafone apologised and took swift action to repair the damage. We all make mistakes – it's how we deal with them that sticks.

Be prepared for the long haul.

Making a pledge to your customers within a community is a long term commitment. This is not a marketing gimmick, nor a straightforward promotional activity.

Don't expect the community to replace all other customer service functions.

It is, however, likely to significantly reduce the burden on them, and become more used over time. Give customers a choice about how they communicate with you.



Integrate your community with other social media tools.

Monitor conversations about your brand across other channels, and let your customers choose over which channel they want to communicate with you. Twitter, for example, allows you to direct message (DM) privately, which some customers might prefer. Integrate that option to the main community.

Track the impact your community has had on your brand's reputation online.

Our experience shows that creating a social media customer community will improve a brand's reputation, which in turn leads to an commensurate increase in sales. You can measure the impact of the community on your reputation by using a Social Media Reputation Audit, which tracks trends in positive and negative reputation conversations about a brand across social media, and analyses what is driving that sentiment.

Personalise your responses.

Communities engender conversations, rather than formal responses; and conversations are personal. Personalising suggestions, recommendations and responses to customers within that community can go a long way to driving loyalty.

Tools to consider

Some tools you should consider when building a customer service community include:

An open customer forum, where customers can exchange ideas, discuss issues and help each other with common problems. This should be moderated, but uncensored.

A chat function, to provide instant one-to-one support for specific issues. Be clear on the site about when this is available (9-5, for example).

FAQs. Most common issues can be resolved from the FAQ section of a site. Check the customer forum for common issues, and update the FAQs regularly. This will take significant burden away from other customer service functions.

The option to connect with a customer service rep over another platform, direct from the site, such as DM on Twitter, email and 'call me' options.

Incentive schemes to stimulate the community and reward positive contributors, such as voucher schemes, loyalty cards or product / service upgrades.

What do you think? I'd be interested to hear from you, steve@yomego.com Twitter: [@Chips11](https://twitter.com/Chips11)

About Yomego

Yomego is a specialist social media agency. It offers brands a mixture of strategic insight, creative design and expert implementation to help them create (and monetise) entertaining and engaging digital communities across web, TV and mobile platforms. It has created successful social media campaigns for brands including: GMTV, Five, ITV, MTV, eircom, Ladbrokes, Durex, Tayto, BetFred, Dennis Publishing and Fremantle (among others).

Find out more by following Yomego on:

Twitter: twitter.com/yomegosocial

Yomego Blog: yomego.com/joe-blog.html

Brand Republic: community.brandrepublic.com/blogs/joehughes/default.aspx

LinkedIn: [linkedin.com/companies/357586/Yomego](https://www.linkedin.com/companies/357586/Yomego)

Facebook: [facebook.com/pages/Glasgow-United-Kingdom/Yomego/92890257258](https://www.facebook.com/pages/Glasgow-United-Kingdom/Yomego/92890257258)

Flickr: [flickr.com/photos/yomego](https://www.flickr.com/photos/yomego)

Youtube: [youtube.com/user/yomegosocial](https://www.youtube.com/user/yomegosocial)

Website: yomego.com