



Doing social customer service right



by Pamala Proverbs

The Pew Research Center reckons that two thirds of American adults are social media users. At first, the social media platforms were used to form communities. Companies, however, quickly started to infiltrate these communities with advertising and triggered a change in the nature of social interaction.

Social media is now used not just for connecting with family and “friends”, but also to connect with companies. Customers are quick to let them know positively or negatively how they feel about particular products and services.

It has placed the customer in a position of power to air grievances publicly to a global audience where in the past the only remedy they had was to call or write to the company or to traditional news media, which, incidentally, also performed a gatekeeper role. There are no gatekeepers on social media.

Furthermore, the once considered bastard, social media, previously scoffed at by companies as being for teenagers, is becoming the new norm. Just like the corporate website phenomenon, where today if you don't have a website the perception is that your company either does not exist in reality or like the dinosaur, is extinct, more and more companies are expected to have a social media platform, a go-to place for customers to interact online. The question is no longer if you should have a social media platform, but rather which platform is the best fit for your brand. That then leads to the question of how to manage it.

Responding to online comments

In my experience as a public relations consultant, the biggest concern that executives have about creating a social media page is that it may become a forum for complaints. Let's look at this rationally. A social media page presents another medium through which a company can manage and monitor its reputation. This seemingly onerous task should, however, be welcomed as it provides an excellent opportunity for companies to sniff out and tackle issues before they escalate into crises.

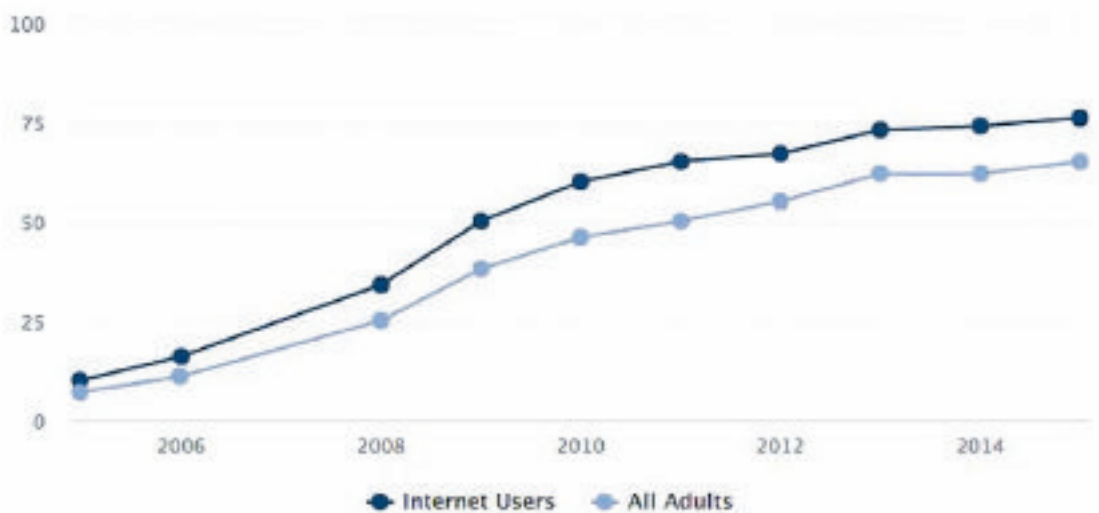
More and more statistics are showing that a large number of the news stories, on the traditional news networks whether positive or negative, started as social media posts. Hash tags have become popular for trending news, the implications of this make monitoring and engagement critical for businesses on social media.

The reality is that whether or not you have a social media page there will be customer complaints. The question you may want to ask, however, is would you rather that customers create their own complaints page? The Nestle Green Peace Saga on **Facebook** and **Twitter** is one of the highly publicised corporate messes that played out on social media. But wouldn't Nestle have had to deal with this issue anyway if it did not have a social media page? Yes it would have,

Social Networking Use Has Shot Up in Past Decade

Chart Data Embed

% of all American adults and internet-using adults who use at least one social networking site



Source: Pew Research Center surveys, 2005-2006, 2008-2015. No data are available for 2007.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

since there were some very clever ads and videos calling for them to stop using a particular ingredient.

How to respond to internet queries

Nestle's initial response might have been the reason the issue reached crisis proportion. It is important that you have a plan to respond to queries and that the response is delivered in a sympathetic manner no matter how irritating or absurd the comment may be. Quick sympathetic replies to every query, win other advocate for your company.

In Barbados, we have several social media pages for companies in telecommunications and retail, for example, littered with unanswered customer complaints. In the brick and mortar world, the customer is always right and among the online community, this sentiment is reinforced even more so. You never want to appear as if your company is more important than any customer.

A company should see every issue as a strategic opportunity to be flipped into a leadership position. Responding to comments, therefore, should not be seen merely as a customer service issue, but as a mandated company policy.

Even if you have responded to someone else on the same question keep answering every new question. It is also a good practice to let your social media queries inform your frequently asked questions page on your website.

Which is the best social media platform to answer customers queries?

My recommended choice of social media platforms is **Facebook**. I like it because it is appropriate for any industry. And because it is not digitally driven relying on pictures, video or audio yet able to integrate all digital technology, it is easy to update on a daily basis.

Unlike **Twitter** and **SnapChat**, for example, it does not have a word or time limit so you can flesh out a customer query thoroughly right where the query occurred and promote your own messages effectively.

In a crisis situation where information is needed quickly but briefly, I would give **Twitter** the nod. However, there are industries like fashion, sports, entertainment that are best fitted to video and picture platforms. I always encourage at least two platforms with one being **Facebook** because of its power to connect and satisfy customer expectations.

Social customer service matters because customers are spending a lot of time in these platforms and are demanding a high level of accountability from the companies they do business with. It is important for businesses to do social customer service right as the market has changed and customers have more power to air their views.

Pamala Proverbs is managing director of PRMR Communications Inc. The communications consultant is a past president of the International Association of Business Communicators' Barbados Chapter. Email: pamala@prmrinc.net