Social Customer Service:
Not Just Another Contact Channel

Gain competitive advantage by going where your customers are

Introduction

The advance of social media is the story of our time. In just a few short years it has transformed the way people interact with each other, with businesses, with their devices. It has enticed all ages with the twin promises of instant communication and just-as-instant response. Whether one sees this as a blessing or a blight, the fact is that social media is here to stay, and the longer it exists the more people see it as part of the basic background fabric of their personal communication infrastructures. Any forward-looking discussion of service delivery and B2C contact has to take social media interactions into account. Social opens the door for customers and businesses alike to leverage the wisdom of crowds and peers to save time and money.

Unfortunately, even though customers have embraced social media (and many service professionals have as well, publicly and privately), it is often a challenge for businesses. Many companies find themselves unsure of how best to manage its complexity. Contact centers are taking a stronger role in defining business' social strategy, but need help building strategies that balance mining the social sphere for useful intelligence with the need to shape dialogue with actual customers in real situations.

This is not to say that enterprises don't "get it" when it comes to social media. Most businesses see social as an amazingly rich resource. From a branding and messaging standpoint, social media has been an arena of genuine success and growth – hashtags and other signifiers of the social sphere are now fully part of the marketing landscape. Marketing departments stepped up as early adopters and owners of enterprise social strategies. Now as awareness and ownership spreads to the rest of the organization, there are still significant hurdles to overcome.

The tools and environments that make up the social space are improving daily. But businesses must be cognizant of the way that social media communications are different from the private, one-to-one interactions that customarily make up the bulk of service and support interactions. The logic of the voice contact center does not always apply. The tools for interaction management differ because the very communications themselves are different. And so businesses must avoid the trap of assuming that voice call infrastructure is sufficient and flexible enough to extend to new interaction types.

Businesses that recognize early on that social media is a progressive and disruptive way to communicate with customers are already gaining a competitive advantage by being where their customers are.

Social Customer Support Differs From Traditional Service

Many experienced service professionals find the idea of engaging with customers through social channels to be challenging, even scary. Social media does not neatly fit into the existing service framework built up over decades in contact centers. Compare the two modes: contact centers are built to replicate, at great scale, relatively simple interactions. Everything that's been learned about measuring success and optimizing performance is based on a very narrow set of interaction types. But social is a medium, not just a contact channel. It's hard to be both private and public; it's hard to identify who you are talking to (and

who is listening). And unlike voice calls into a contact center, you have to separate the signal in social communications that are relevant to a customer/product/issue from the noise.

And that's all before you get into the nitty gritty of actually managing the day-to-day inflow of interactions and their resolutions. Is it any wonder that when it comes time to select a technology platform for dealing with social customer interactions, many contact center buyers throw up their hands in dismay and default to solutions that mimic the voice paradigm?

Social service is markedly different from traditional service, and needs to be managed accordingly. It requires platforms that can synthesize data from more sources, because it is more likely that a given customer has hopped from one contact channel to another, landing on social because of a negative interaction somewhere else. The outcomes matter to both marketing and customer care professionals. But even though marketing has a larger stake in the outcome of social (than of voice), service is still service. In other words, it needs to be supported by tools that are strong in elements of issue resolution. Interactions need to be routed to the best available service rep, based on skills and talents and contextual clues that relate to the specific customer, not just to the overall marketing campaign. That is a delicate needle to thread, as it implies that the best toolset for social service will be rooted in customer care and interaction processing, rather than campaign management. It suggests that tools that purport to be "all-in-one" solutions to both marketing and customer care issues are not robust enough at the service end of the transaction to provide the same level of care that customers get from traditional voice contact centers.

The cultural dynamics are also shifting. Instead of focusing on the mundane details of customer accounts and inquiries, social interactions – so far – have represented outlying customers: those with outsized influence, disaffection or challenge. The fact that social interactions occur in public ratchets up the customers' expectations for quick and satisfactory resolution. It puts enormous pressure on the company to de-escalate outcries, or move interactions to private channels. Good social service has as much to do with effective brand management as it does with executing on proper customer interaction protocols. Social is also distinguished by the ease with which it can be made proactive by sharing information to many customers or prospects at once.

One important aspect of social interactions is that they move rapidly from the public sphere to the private, and back again. Companies need to understand how to respond to public entreaties without compromising private, personal information (which is needed to resolve many queries). And then as a best practice the business needs to re-respond back in the public forum to let onlookers know that the issue has been resolved.

At the same time, the business needs to be able to separate the meaningful queries from the noisy background of the social sphere. Each unit of social communication has to be parsed for relevant content, timeliness, urgency, customer identity and value, and potential influence.

These complicated dances require attention to the tools, the customer data, and the moment-by-moment status of the case.

As Figure 1 illustrates, social media has been rapidly adopted by contact centers – in a recent Ovum survey, 61% of centers currently handle social interactions, behind only voice and email.

Figure 1: Social media interactions are moving center stage

Q: What contact center channel capabilities do you currently deploy?
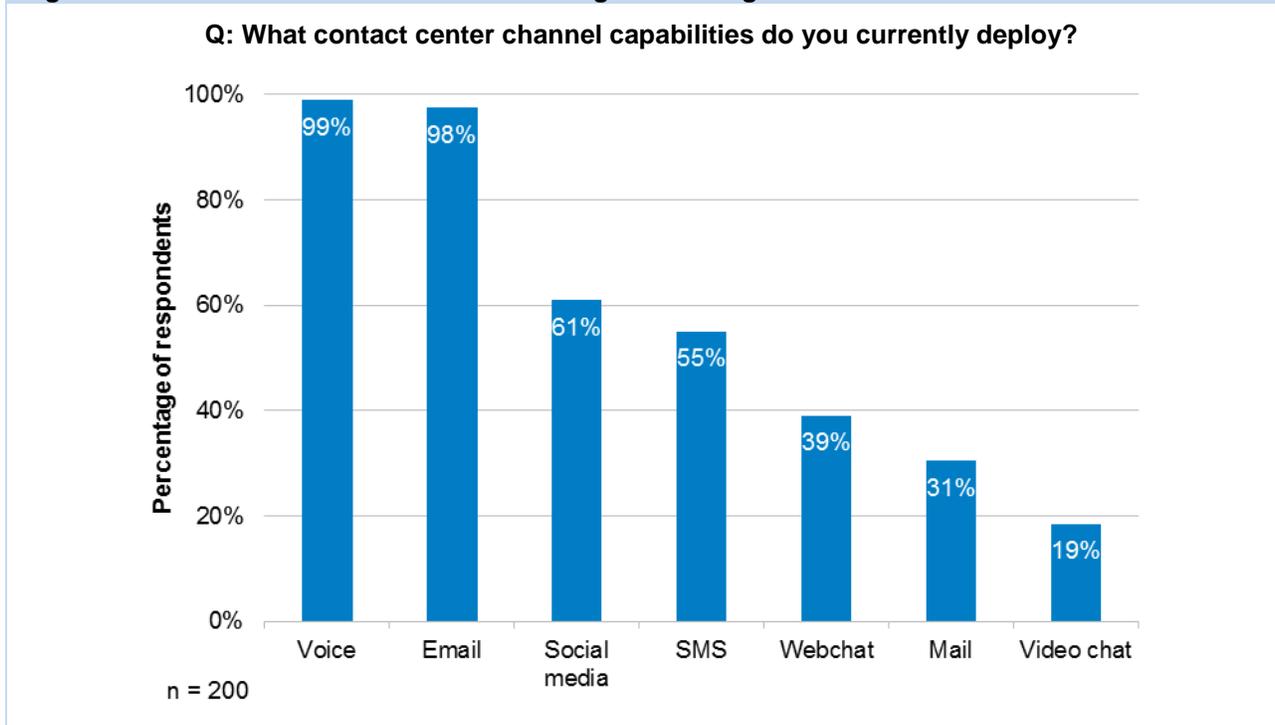
Source: Ovum survey

The consequences of getting social wrong

In the realm of social customer service, there are two forbidding traps that can engulf well-meaning businesses. One is not to engage with customers via social media at all – the strategy of burying your head in the sand. The other is to engage, but to do so thinking it is powered by the same drivers (and follows the same rules) as traditional one-to-one interactions. Arguably, getting social wrong can be more damaging to a brand and to its customer relationships than not pursuing social at all.

Why do we say this? Because implementing social customer service requires you to rethink some of basic elements that go into an interaction:

- When does the "interaction" start and end? Unlike a phone call, social interactions rarely begin as a simple, neutral request for information. They often occur as a consequence of information-gathering in other forms, or as a cry for help when service has gone awry.

- It is difficult to identify a social media user as a specific customer. Simple authentication via account numbers or other DTMF digits is a luxury that social doesn't provide (unless accomplished by CRM integration). And security must be taken to ensure that those details remain private in a public forum.

- There are potentially millions of people watching as a business reacts to a social inquiry. How agents react (and the secondary reactions of onlookers) are part of a much more complex, multi-threaded conversation.

- What does success look like? With a phone call you have your choice of success metrics: handle time, first contact resolution, cases closed, many more. In a social interaction these measures change their meaning, need redefining, and may not indicate the same kinds of success factors that they indicate in voice calls.

When you roll these elements together, it appears that handling social media interactions is perhaps the biggest leap away from traditional voice interaction handling in decades. Treating it as an extension of that process can be self-defeating and impose unnecessary operational costs on a business.

For example, social interactions often occur after the customer has exhausted his or her options in traditional channels and come away unsatisfied. At that point, both the individual customer and the reputation of the brand are at risk, raising the stakes for resolution of the social interaction. The agent who handles it has to be aware of more contextual elements (prior contacts, brand issues) and be prepared to act in a way that is less guided by scripts and templates and more on common sense.

Indeed, after learning that social media can become a vehicle for a fast response from businesses, many customers are turning to social *first*, as a way of self-optimizing their experience. Social is maturing from a channel of last resort to one that customers actively seek out.

When you see social as an extension of traditional voice contact, you fall into the trap of expecting interactions to be as cookie-cutter as they were in the past. This leads to a rigidity of approach (which can come off as impersonal and bad for the brand) or as clumsy. When a business gets social "wrong" by thinking it's "just one more contact channel," it takes a step backward in terms of its adaptability to changing circumstances. And nothing is changing as quickly these days as customers' expectations and preferences. Social, unlike other recently-added channels, is completely new. It is not a variation on what has come before. It cries out for best-of-breed expertise.

The Best Approach to Social Service

Given the realities of social media – its speed, intensity and public nature – businesses are justified in asking for specifics. What are the best practices? If we are not to treat these interactions as variations on voice calls, what exactly should we do with them? There are several key items to consider.

Managing marketing alongside service

Social media interactions have the potential to carry greater weight (positive and negative) than traditional interactions. There is extraordinary value in successfully caring for a customer in a public manner, just as there is risk to mishandling it. This value/risk conundrum cannot be quantified by traditional service metrics; it has to include the effect on the brand and overall company positioning. And for that you need the input and vision of multiple professionals within the organization. Collaboration in social customer service is essential because – unlike all the other permutations of service the industry has seen before – social acts as a force multiplier for good or bad. It has impact far beyond the confines of the specific customer relationship being addressed.

Social service is not an either/or proposition with regard to the influence of marketing versus customer care. Marketing teams are already set up to manage branding and messaging issues; they are also likely

already versed in the mechanics and language of the social space. In the early days of corporate-driven social media, marketing departments were often first into the space thanks to dedicated tools emphasizing campaign management and media mining. But now that we are pivoting towards social as an interaction processing channel, it is important for service technologies to play the lead role in ensuring a positive customer experience.

There is a best practice to follow, and that is to force service teams and marketing to collaborate internally. This does not just mean that they should come together in the aftermath of a mishandled or disgruntled social interaction. Rather, the two key stakeholders have to coordinate in advance to create a genuine social strategy that accounts for service quality and the delicate nature of public customer communications.

They are joined by others with a key stake in the outcome, including IT (as a technology mediator and brake on costs) and senior executives (who need metrics that reflect brand impacts, costs and ROI).

Metrics and Defining Success

Metrics like average speed of answer, first contact resolution or queue length have very different meanings (and consequences) in social. They tell stories about activity, but are less reliable in understanding the impact and outcome of good or bad interaction handling.

The business processes underlying social communications have to be re-engineered with new priorities and measurements in mind.

Also important to consider: the skills a social agent needs to complete an interaction lean more towards articulation and staying in persona than transaction processing. This affects the entire agent lifecycle, especially the training, coaching and quality evaluation processes. The choice of using dedicated social agents versus blended voice/social/multichannel agents should be informed by a good understanding of the skill differences required.

Encouraging peer to peer support

Contact centers, acutely sensitive to cost and scale issues, can look to peer-to-peer social interactions as a way of deflecting a portion of social inquiries away from expensive agented service. For example, this can be accomplished by creating focused customer communities, or through peer response teams using open tools like Twitter or Facebook (but still under the guidance of the company).

It is important for businesses to spend as much time understanding the reasons why customers ask for support in social contexts, so as to build workflows that minimize uncertainty and standardize the responses. One advantage of social media is that it allows businesses to leverage the expertise and brand advocacy already inherent in the customer base. The key is finding a way to identify highly engaged customers and encourage them to respond to questions from their peers on social media.

Solution choice

Because social interactions are not simple, you cannot necessarily just bolt a social application onto an existing contact center and expect it to follow the same success path.

At one pole, the market offers tools that bolt onto traditional contact center platforms, often from vendors that treat social as an afterthought or add-on channel. At the other extreme, buyers will find all-in-one social platforms that don't have as strong service integration capabilities as contact centers need. The ideal approach is to go with a best-of-breed provider that balances service best practices with robust social know-how.

Better social technology comes from sources that are experts in the nuances of brand management and analytics than from telephony or data networking. Best-of-breed systems are quicker to adapt to change. Again, social interactions take different pathways through the service sausage factory and emerge with odd but important outcomes.

When a service department forges ahead with a solution for social service that mimics the processes inherent in voice calling, it is taking a big risk. Does a voice vendor with a social add-on truly understand the complexity of the social environment? Can it foresee the shifts in customer behavior that are endemic in a non-voice social environment? Can it adapt its functionality to keep up with rapid technology advances, especially in how customers use mobile devices to hop from one service context to another?

At the same time, a successful solution needs to be built on the essential principles that guide service operations: speedy responses that are personalized to each customer; hyper-efficient handling at scale; containment of costs; rigorous tracking and analysis of outcomes; and most important, sensitivity to the entirety of the customer's experience. An attentive technology buyer may find that these service principles are not as highly prized in marketing-based all-in-one platforms (which understandably are built to serve other priorities).

In the advanced economies, most enterprises are already planning to deploy new or enhance existing social customer service technologies within the next 18 months (see Figure 2). With so much investment at stake, it behooves companies to select their technology carefully, with an eye to creating a differentiated experience through social media.

To date, most contact center technology vendors have focused on extending the capabilities of existing service methods to new channels via bolted-on modules. But these extensions left a gap, failing to foster new, better best-practices that leverage the unique capabilities of social media. It is increasingly clear that the practice of serving customers through social media requires a commitment to best-of-breed tools tailored specifically to the challenges and opportunities of this fast, public contact channel.

Figure 2: Social media interactions are moving center stage
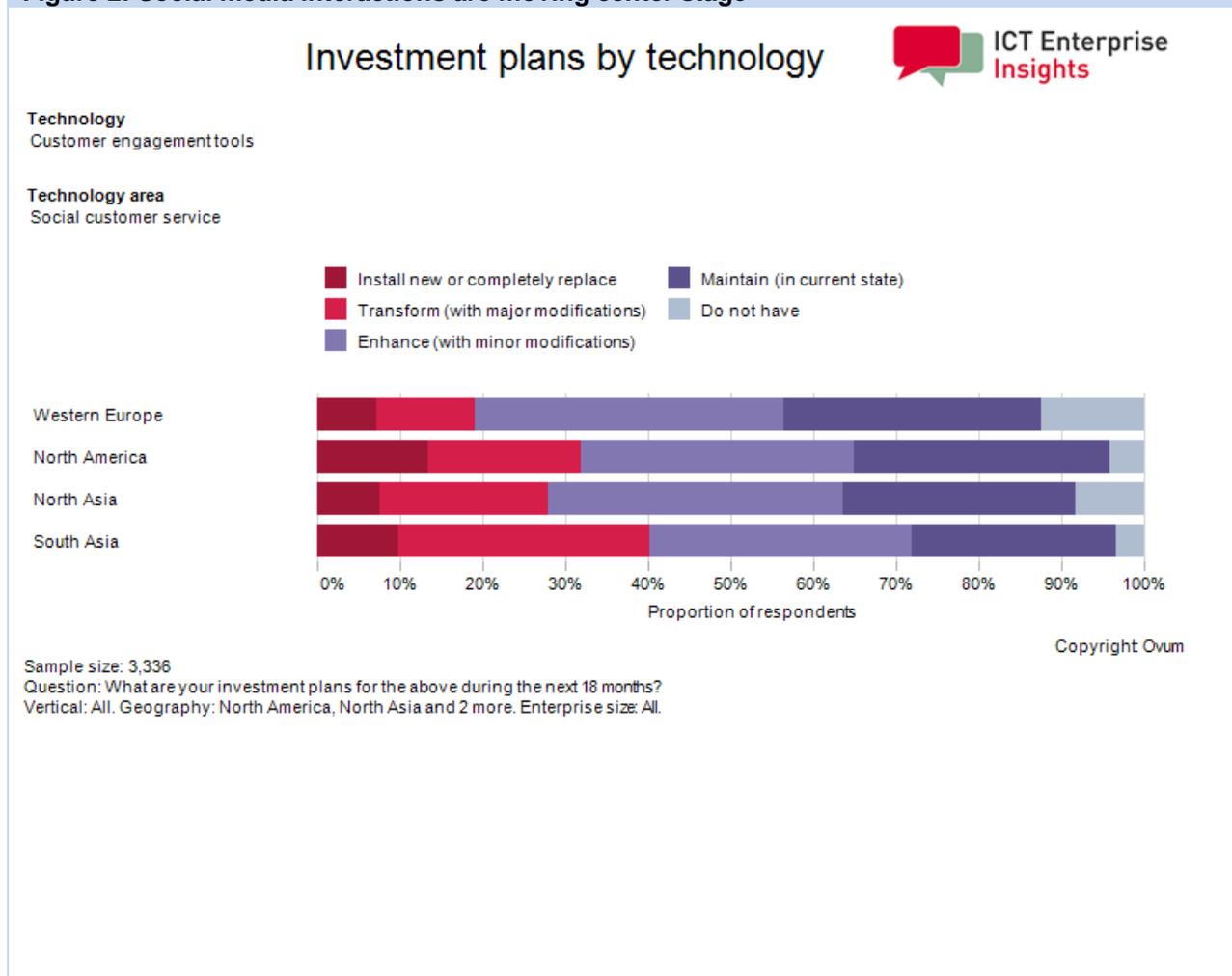
Source: Ovum ICT Enterprise Insights

Conclusion

For existing service departments, the challenge is twofold:

- to be flexible enough to allow those interactions to flourish without expecting them to play out exactly the way voice calls do

- and to wisely invest resources in tools that make the process cleaner and simpler, not more frustrating for customers.

That requires thinking somewhat differently about social than about other contact channels. It brings contact centers into much closer contact with their marketing colleagues, requiring a recalibration of the goals, metrics and processes that underlie customer communications. Companies that are serious about engaging with customers in the social space should take no shortcuts: this is a realm where missteps are public and reaction is instant. Social demands dedicated thinking, planning, and best-of-breed technology to achieve high service and customer satisfaction standards.

It is important to approach the deployment of technology for social customer service with an open mind. Mix the best of traditional practices with an appreciation for the differences inherent in this dynamic media. Tools that best approach this need don't look like traditional voice contact center systems, nor like all-in-one marketing management systems. Rather, they emphasize core service principles and adapt them to new situations via a best-of-breed approach.

Appendix

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Ovum Consulting

We hope that this analysis will help you make informed and imaginative business decisions. If you have further requirements, Ovum's consulting team may be able to help you. For more information about Ovum's consulting capabilities, please contact us directly at consulting@ovum.com.

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