

Empower Your Customer Service Team to be Brand Advocates

A Frost & Sullivan Article



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Introduction

Frost & Sullivan recently invited select companies to participate in a new and unique thought leadership forum - our Virtual Think Tank. The executives who contributed their opinions and insights hail from a variety of name-brand companies.

- **Doreen Berard**
Senior U.S. Customer Service Manager
 Moo.com
- **Rachelle Chin**
Senior Manager of Training & Quality
 Jet.com
- **Jerry Fletcher**
Vice President, Customer Success
 Sparkcentral
- **Roy Sundstrum**
Vice President, Customer Service
 Shopify
- **Tessa Mueller**
Senior Director of Customer Care
 David Yurman
- **Linette Myland**
Marketing Manager, Voice of the Customer
 Siemens Building Technology

Empower Your Customer Service Team to be Brand Advocates

Frost & Sullivan, a leader in growth, innovation and leadership for over 50 years, recently assembled a select group of Customer Experience executives from diverse organizations to participate in a Virtual Think Tank on the topic of customer service team empowerment to improve brand experience. The panelists shared their thoughts on existing in a business climate where social customer service is no longer a luxury, but a necessity, and discussed how harnessing the power of social media can positively affect brand strategies.

Today's changing consumer landscape has seen the increasing use of digital channels over more traditional voice. In particular, consumer adoption of all forms of social media is at an all-time high. Throughout their informed discussion, the panelists shared the strategies they are implementing to meet this changing landscape, what moved their organizations to using social to go beyond inquiries and customer support to proactively engaging with customers, and the challenges and opportunities presented in crafting social strategies.

Leveraging Social to Create Business Value

To start the discussion, participants were asked, "What is the business value of social customer service?" Answers varied depending upon the degree to which each company had invested in using social as a service channel. Panelists shared their viewpoints and some details about how they are using social to create value for their businesses.

Doreen Berard, Senior U.S. Customer Service Manager at Moo.com, observed that "The value for us from a Moo perspective is that it just carries on our brand. Our company is new in the U.S. and we can really get our name out there and showcase what we do, and quickly, in 140 characters or less on Twitter. So, for us it's just an extension of our brand." She added, "When the company was launched in 2006 we weren't doing social, and we were just starting to dabble with it when Moo came to the States in 2009, and that was really when we hit the stage that social media took on a different form for us as a company."

Roy Sundstrum, Vice President of Customer Service at Shopify, was quick to point out that the dynamics of communicating with consumers has changed, particularly when it comes to social. He stated, “I think it’s the dynamic way that people communicate, especially millennials, and I think that we as businesses think that we will modify people’s behaviors to fit us, but we won’t have the engagement that we need unless we engage with people the way they want to engage.”

Linette Myland, Marketing Manager, Voice of the Customer at Siemens Building Technology, added, “Social is becoming the touch point of choice, and is actually replacing interactions with call centers and emails. There’s that instant gratification for customers. As long as we’re on the other end providing that instant response, it’s a way for customers to get the answer they want when they expect it -- immediately. I think it’s just one more way, or the next way, to try to exceed our customers’ expectations.”



Jerry Fletcher, Vice President, Customer Success at Sparkcentral, added to this sentiment by saying, “Your customers are already tweeting at you and sending you messages on your Facebook page. So, ignoring them is a real costly proposition, as your competitors are reaching out to these people. Instead, it can be a real competitive advantage to engage with them there. If you’re out there responding to and helping your customers, they’re going to do business with you versus if you ignore them. It’s at your own cost.” Embellishing on this thought, he added, “If the customer engages with you on social, that’s their preferred channel of choice, so you want to keep them there. Asking them to call or email instead would be like, calling your call center and having the agent say, “Hey, can you take a piece of paper and a pen and write me a letter and send it to me?” You’d be livid. Keeping conversations on the same channel is a best practice.”



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— Tessa Mueller,
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Customer Care,
David Yurman

What makes customer service the new marketing?

While the theme of our discussion was initially about how to empower agents to be brand advocates, the panelist’s thoughts on the value of social media led to a discussion about using social to turn customers into brand advocates as well. Once a company repeatedly engages with customers over social to answer questions and resolve issues, the opportunity arises to have ongoing conversations or moments of engagement that can increase brand awareness and further cement brand loyalty.



Rachelle Chin, Senior Manager of Training and Quality at Jet.com, gave a concrete example of the value of using social media as marketing. She explained, “I think the best thing that comes to mind for me is when a lot of companies are putting forth hundreds of thousands, or millions of dollars, for example, on a Super Bowl commercial. Jet definitely has a presence on the TV, but decided not to make a presence during the Super Bowl just for the sheer, high cost. So what we did, literally within about a 24-hour turnaround time, was to create our own kind of little internal commercial, if you will, and then put it out on social media, and it just kept spinning and spinning. So it was a much, much cheaper cost to still get some type of visibility out there, which was fun.”

In a similar vein, Tessa Mueller, Senior Director of Customer Care at David Yurman, chimed in with, “My big plug for social is engagement -- customer engagement -- I want to keep them engaged. And when I think of social, I’m kind of a proponent of having the discussion online, getting other customers involved with each other, and as a company only really getting involved in social when there is a call to action for the company or when there’s a complaint of some kind. But what I love about social is that you can have this conversation with the customer, other clients can see it and engage in the conversation, and the best kind of outcome is having current customers sell new customers on the product, on the service, or on the organization in general.”



Our panel brought up some creative ways of further cementing that brand awareness. Tessa talked of tying together different marketing components with social and community. Her company, Jet.com, ships products in distinctive purple boxes. She explained, “When I think social, I think visual as well. Instead of just appearing as a name brand on our social sites, we see a lot of digitals, because when you order something from Jet, then it comes in a purple box. And so even just the box alone is something that people have as a brand reminder, and they sent us pictures, and put different pictures on social of things that they’re doing with these purple boxes, such as their kids making dollhouses out of them. That would be the first thing that I’d say, again, it’s just linking and labeling that brand recognition so that people are kind of saying, ‘Hey, I’m recognizing Jet and I’m understanding what that’s all about.’”

However, the key to brand awareness is providing a superior customer service experience as well, and that typically falls to the contact center, not marketing. In fact, Doreen described this situation in her own organization when the responsibility for social as a channel moved from marketing to customer service. Moo.com is an online design company where customers can create business cards, so inquiries usually involve artwork issues, with questions and answers that are too lengthy for social. She said, “The reason why previously social was handled in the marketing department and why it’s come over to the customer service side is because as much as we love our marketing department, they didn’t know the product like we did, and not everyone in the marketing department knew how quickly we could turn around a print product. So, for us, it was about maintaining that excellent service that we pride ourselves on.”

Jerry added, “Your customer service people know your product the best, so they should be out there talking to customers. Also, customers know the difference and can tell when they are speaking to someone who isn’t knowledgeable about the product or service and it’s a big source of frustration. So, when they work with someone who can address their needs and resolve their issues, they become promoters for your product. It’s like free promotion. It’s incredible to watch.”



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Technology and People can be a Make or Break

Finally, we moved on to talking about just how important having the right technology and hiring the right people is when handling social as a channel, particularly as the content has so many stakeholders within an organization.

In regards to the importance of hiring the skill set to suit the channel, Linette said, “I think one thing you have to think about with staffing, is that customers are going to associate your brand with the service or that level of service they get from your customer care team or your customer service reps, because in most cases they're going to be, especially on social, the first point of contact.” She added, “They have to have the right training. They have to always know what the latest product features are or have new information or updates on products, services or delivery. But, they also have to be proactive, right? They have to be able to go out and find the answer or know how to get the answer.”

In making those hiring decisions, the panel talked a bit about hiring from within to support social as a channel. Doreen said, “From a Moo.com perspective, for us they need to be exceeding the departmental expectations from a customer service standpoint to be considered part of the social team.”

Jerry added, “I agree with Linette that staffing social channels with people who are knowledgeable about your product is foundational to making social care happen. But I cannot stress the importance of also hiring people who are empathetic, can think outside the box, and who are able to connect to customers in writing. Strong written skills are a must. One also needs to consider software that is intuitive and easy to use. You want your customer service folks to focus their energy on connecting and resolving customer service issues and not focused on onerous workflow. The software shouldn't get in the way of the conversation; it should enable the conversation. Ideally, you want to have the employee focused on the customer and the channel itself should be secondary; the software can handle those differences. This means choosing software built for social customer service, not social marketing tools.”



In Conclusion

In a rapidly changing consumer landscape, how do you design strategies to fully engage with the socially aware consumer? That was the fundamental question posed to our panelists and the essence of meeting customers where they live – on social media was endorsed overall. The panelist’s replies rang very strong, and they were in agreement about using social media to do more than serve customers, and also advocated using it to build a community and build brand advocacy as well.

The opportunity is there, not just in empowering agents when they deal with customers on social, but to get customers to help each other and to sell to each other on a topic, product or brand. The enthusiasm behind this can best be summed up by Tessa Mueller, who said, “When I go into marketing meetings, I’m always saying that the best advertising you can get is a customer advocate out there selling the brand for you. And I say that a lot. We don’t need to spend any marketing money, just put customer service out there. I believe that. I believe that if customers are selling the product for you, that’s the most powerful form of advertising. It’s that, “I love this brand. You should love it too. This is why I love it.”

Social shouldn’t be viewed as a different animal, but as a valuable interaction channel that can be the make or break in solving issues and creating good and lasting impressions with customers. But to do this demands diligence in finding the right tools to easily train and empower agents to handle this exciting new interaction channel.