Resolving customer complaints across social media traditional channels

An overview
Background

This document is based on and inspired by presentations, debate and discussion that originally took place during an interactive workshop held on 8 June 2011 during the European Complaint Handling Strategies conference.

The workshop was developed by Michael Hill of complaintsrgreat.com and utilised the Complaints Made Easy training game (produced by AKD Training). The workshop was facilitated by Akin Thomas of AKD Training and included presentations by Michael Hill. Participants included representatives from Microsoft, Toyota, Nokia, Fiat, Suuntu, Independent Police Complaints Commission, Raiffeisen Bank, RWE Zákaznické služby, s.r.o., Banca Comercială Română and Česká spořitelna a.s.

This document has been compiled and written by Michael Hill.

We would also like to thank Guy Stephens, Social CRM consultant at Cap Gemini, for conducting a final sanity check of this document.

“Complaints Made Easy” is the trade mark for a training game that is available from AKD Training Solutions.
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Introduction

Social media is increasingly taking over a significant portion of people’s daily lives. In the US, social networking accounts for 1 of every 6 minutes spent online. Many of us now check Twitter or Facebook for status updates on a smart phone before we even get out of bed and use our devices to listen in on or actively engage in conversations online just as much as we do during our daily face-to-face and phone interactions.

Global map of social media usage statistics:

http://www.marketing-online.co.uk/wiki/Social_Media_Usage_Statistics

We are also choosing to share our conversations publicly - especially when we have a story to tell and want this to be shared with others beyond our immediate network of friends and family.

Of course, the age and social status of a consumer is still a significant factor - 60 per cent of social media users, aged 25 to 34, said they are influenced by both positive and negative comments about a brand or company compared to 64 per cent aged 55 or over stating that they are not influenced by the comments they view on a social media site.

You can discover more about the behaviours of different consumers based on age, gender and country by accessing Forrester’s technographic profile tool at:


Your customers are going to become increasingly engaged with social media and they are going to be talking online more and more about the things that affect your business.

Of course, you will always have customers who want to phone and talk to someone or send an email to complain directly to your company - but growing numbers of customers are willing to express their opinions openly on social media sites and you now need to adapt your customer service strategy and start listening to the conversations that are already taking place.

Your marketing, public relations or HR teams may already be developing a social media strategy but you
need to make sure that customer service is fully integrated. Indeed, you may already be successfully
driving marketing campaigns on social media sites and your employees might already be receiving advice
on what they can and can’t do in the company name. However, your customers will be more and more
likely to be giving their opinions and views, across a variety of social networks, on both your successes
and failures - and they are waiting for you to reach out and be there for them.

View the UK Social Media Census 2011 at:
http://www.lansonsconversations.com/financial-services/infographic-the-uk-social-mediacensus-
2011/

Here are a few key questions for you to consider when adapting your customer service strategy to
incorporate the handling of customer service issues on social media:

• What are your customers ready for?
• How and where will your customers engage with you?
• How do you want the existing relationships with your customers to change?
• Do you want to create customer advocates?
• Do you need to increase your engagement with your customers?
• Do you have internal buy-in?
• How will social media channels interact with traditional channels?

“Please don’t create social #custserv strategy. Create a business strategy instead. We
need to break down the brick walls not build them”

@Guy1067 on Twitter

Listen - identifying complaints and feedback

In the past, we used to speak about the complaints received by a business being the ‘tip of the iceberg’ -
many customers choosing not to tell the business concerned about a product fault or service failure but
deciding instead to share the negative experience within their network of friends, family and colleagues.
Now, the water is falling and increasing our visibility of the iceberg.

The incidence of problems does not increase simply because we can see more clearly - but our
expanding view of existing problems give us a greater opportunity to put them right and build loyalty
and trust in our brands. Importantly, you can only resolve those problems that you know about - you
cannot resolve problems that you cannot see.

Your customers are therefore exposing their previously hidden word of mouth stories about brands,
whether positive or negative, to those companies that are actively listening and recognising the opportunities that can be found when delving into this public and open data stored in social networks. The data can immediately inform us whether a mention is ‘noise’ – a casual mention about product usage – or emotive comments that are potentially negatively or positively impacting on your reputation.

“If you make customers unhappy in the physical world, they might each tell 6 friends. If you make customers unhappy on the Internet, they can each tell 6,000 friends.”

Jeff Bezos of Amazon.com

You need to be aware of the places where your customers may be talking about you and may need your help. Your customers are likely to be found tweeting on Twitter, commenting on your Facebook page, posting videos on YouTube or blogging on Tumblr and – depending on your organisation – posting content on more dedicated communities and forums such as mumsnet.com and moneysavingexpert.com (but remember the characteristics of the platform as responses in a forum by an organisation may be frowned upon or not allowed by the hosts).
The challenge for your business is to make sure that you are the first to hear about your customer’s dissatisfaction. Social networks should not be treated as an escalation point for your customers. Therefore, make sure you are doing all you can to reduce the customer effort required to contact you on any of the channels you promote. Remember, if you fail to make it easy for your customers to complain directly to you, your customers will find somewhere else very quickly where they can simply share their concerns with the rest of the world - and your competitors.

View the Groubal Customer Satisfaction Index:

http://www.groubalcsi.com/

Also, when delivering customer service across different channels, be aware of the different characteristics of each social platform and how the different platforms are likely to be used by your customers. Delivering customer service using 140 characters on Twitter - and the use of language that this channel requires - can be very different from delivering customer service on Facebook where your customer must ‘like’ you before engaging with you and a different use of language will be expected.

Assess - evaluate the issue

You need to be looking for actionable conversations and mentions but you will find a great deal of variety - some requiring intervention and others may be low value information. So, what types of conversations will be heard when you listen in across social networks? Some of the most common types of conversation that can be found across our social networks are:

- **The complaint** - the consumer expresses dissatisfaction about a brand
- **The compliment** - the consumer praises a product or the service received
- **The problem** - the consumer expresses a desire for assistance in overcoming a problem
- **The question** - the consumer asks a question about a brand
- **The campaign impact** - the consumer reacts in response to a marketing campaign
- **The warning** - consumers are discussing an issue that might impact on a future activity such as mentions of issues with pre-ordering before a product launch
- **The crisis** - the consumer mentions or delivers information that suggests an imminent or happening crisis
- **The competitor** - a competitor is discussing or sharing information about your brand
- **The crowd** - a community is engaging in discussion about or related to your brand
- **The influencer** - a consumer is engaging in a discussion or producing content to influence others
- **The point of need** - the consumer expresses a desire or need for a solution that could be delivered by a product or service

Therefore, you need to assess and evaluate the conversation or mention of your brand. Of course, we often do this on traditional channels too - a phone call may be from a journalist asking searching questions about our business or a letter directed to your CEO is identified as being from a well-known personality. However, the immediacy of social media, potential impact of influence (based on the number of followers and fans) and often higher expectations of the consumer may require us to do so more
quickly and more effectively.

However, you should consider replicating the approach you take on traditional channels – if your CEO says that she or he trusts the effectiveness of complaint handling process and redirects all complaints received in his or her office through the appropriate process then a similar approach should be implemented when handling complaints across social networks.

The public characteristics of social media sites will also require you to think about any potential risk to your brand before you act. Some companies will choose to develop a risk-based tool to assess their decision-making - maybe, using a “triage” approach to consider the severity of the problem whilst assessing factors such as legal and regulatory risks, reputational risks and physical risks (such as where the consumer or employee may be at risk of physical harm if the issue is not addressed). The results may suggest a more collaborative response - possibly involving a PR specialist, company lawyer or even getting the opinions of a customer focus group or known detractor (hopefully the opportunity can be used to turn them into an advocate).

Listening is more important than talking - if you are going to talk, have something relevant to say. If you decide that a customer is dissatisfied and ready to be engaged then you need to start work on resolving the complaint.

**Engage - resolve the complaint**

Complaints need to be acknowledged promptly - whatever the channel they are received on. If a complaint is not acknowledged promptly, you not only risk eroding customer loyalty in your brand but also dealing with costly, repeat contacts across multiple channels as the customer seeks alternative ways of resolving their concern.

However, a YouGov survey (http://econsultancy.com/uk/blog/7300-poor-customer-service-leads-to-more-complaints-on-social-media-survey) indicated that many companies are slow to react even to those negative comments that are directly posted by customers on to social media sites. Almost half of the respondents who had complained directly to a company using social media had either never received a response from the company or had to wait more than 48 hours for a reply.

Your speed in acknowledging the problem is imperative. Remember, the issues that go viral often do so because the issue both makes a great story – and generates the interest of others - and the organisation failed to acknowledge the problem promptly and react effectively (usually on a traditional channel). If you are able to acknowledge the problem quickly and reassure the customer that you understand their concerns, the customer will be more likely to give you the time you need to investigate and respond.

Different social media sites may require different approaches. If you discover someone complaining about an issue on Twitter, you need to @reply them. The @reply is better than a direct message (DM) because the @reply is public and open means of demonstrating that you care and sharing what you are doing with the community. DMs are also often ineffective because the customer cannot reply unless they follow you and, if upset, they are unlikely to want to do that.
On Facebook you might want to post a daily update to let your customers know that you are open for business and ready to start dealing with any issues. This has the benefit of allowing your customers to clearly identify where they can go to add comments but also clusters customer comments using a simple timeline.

If the complaint is about sensitive or personal details or the customer is very upset or you need to contact the customer quickly, try to direct message them or give them a quicker method of contacting you - such as an email address or phone number. Do make sure that they know that you are ready to help and assist them in getting the problem resolved.

Be careful with your words and do not use language that could make you appear to be behaving in an arrogant manner or blaming the customer for the problem. Make sure you have their permission to intervene and provide them with the information they need.

If you want to work towards resolving the complaint, you might want to start a conversation by acknowledging the problem and demonstrating that you really do care and are serious about getting the problem resolved:

- “I’m sorry...”
- “Thank you”
- “Here’s some information...”
- “Thanks for letting us know...”
- “Hi, I’ve just noticed your tweet - can I help?”
- “That must have been frustrating, how can I help?”

If your customer may not be expecting your intervention - maybe they have simply mentioned your brand - make sure that both you and your organisation are made known straight away. Also, make sure that you really understand what the customer wants - confirm your understanding at the start of the conversation if required.

Hopefully, you will engage in a natural and productive conversation with the customer. But you also need to protect your customer’s personal details - don’t allow yourself to get into a situation where the customer mistakenly shares in public details such as a bank account number. Of course, the best option may be to acknowledge the problem within the social media site and then transfer to another channel. If you change channel, don’t stop listening - the customer may still provide you with important information on the originating social media site. They might update their blog to express gratitude with your resolution attempts or despair at a delay. They might also provide a more immediate update to
resolution than your service partners - tweeting that a field service engineer has visited and corrected a fault before you have been informed - don’t get into a situation where you are asking the customer about something that your company has already told them about!

If you do decide to respond to a complaint on a social media site, make sure that your response demonstrates that you are fair, honest and also consistent - companies that act inconsistently on social media sites are quickly found out.

Often, conversations and mentions are associated with how the customer is feeling - providing an opportunity for you to connect with their emotions and show empathy. Those companies that are able to make an emotional connection with the customer are those that use complaint handling and problem resolution to maximise customer loyalty and advocacy.

**Analyse - find the causes and learn**

Complaint management on any channel is not only about addressing the individual concerns of your customers - effective complaint management also provides your company with opportunities to analyse the trends and patterns that will enable you to identify emerging issues, systemic failures and recurring problems and take action to put them right.

You will need to fully understand the customer journey when engaging with your products and services to identify the key touch points that cause pain and leave customers feeling dissatisfied with the experience and disappointed with your brand. If you improve the quality of the data that is being collected, the validity of customer insights increases and managers are able to make well-informed decisions to adapt products and services based on the feedback collected and sentiments expressed

![Twitter Sentiment Analysis](image)

Social media will present you with an opportunity to incorporate wider sentiment about your products and services within your traditional analysis. Therefore, you can gain a better understanding of any negative (or positive) sentiment that is expressed but not directed to your business. This is important because some experiences may dissatisfy your consumers but not impact them sufficiently to stimulate a complaint. Your customers may be unhappy about the content of your latest advertising campaign and mention this within a social network but direct a complaint to your company. Or, your customers may be frustrated about the time spent in a queue in a store - and tweet or update their Facebook status about the negative experience but not complain to anyone about it.
However, your analysis activities should not only focus on what customers are saying about you. Your analysis should also focus on the profile of those customers who are talking about you, where are they located (social media is presenting us with more and more location specific data to consider and analyse), how quickly are you responding across different channels, what outcomes are you delivering to your customers, escalation rates and channel switching rates, the impact on consumer behaviour (retention and repurchase activities) and so on.

**Share - explain the fixes and learning**

You can only reassure your customers that you do listen if you actually act on their feedback - and tell them what you have done to make things better. Social media is a great platform for keeping your customers informed on your awareness of a problem and also to let them know what you are doing to put things right.

You can also use social media to explain the tough decisions you may have to make from time to time. If you can’t do something for your customers, explain why but also give customers an alternative where possible.

Social media gives business a great opportunity to be human - and helpful. You can engage more personally with your customers and explain and educate people in your business, what you can offer to them and also how you can add value.

The immediacy of social media also allows you to keep customers updated on progress in correcting a systemic problem or handling of a crisis. KLM airlines have even utilised social media to identify exactly where a passenger is located within an airport when a flight is severely delayed so that a personalised and appropriate resolution can be delivered. Another airline, JetBlue, had to deal with a crisis when an ice storm hit the north east states in America. The airline did not initially handle the crisis well and customer dissatisfaction grew and spread across social networks. However, JetBlue’s CEO acknowledged and apologised for their failures and – across all channels and social networks – gave details on how JetBlue would learn their lessons from the experience.
The JetBlue airline apology letter is a good example of how a company used both the web and social media to say sorry and communicate the lessons learnt. However, the company also used the opportunity to invite customers to learn more about the company and its commitment to customer service.

If learning is openly shared with customers, trust in the brand will be positively impacted upon. Of course, your customers do not want to witness your company making mistake after mistake but they will be willing to be more forgiving if you are able to demonstrate that you are trustworthy and giving reassurance when things do go wrong.
Get the FreshNetworks Social Media Monitoring Report:

Social media is not just a public relations tool. Social media also provides a great opportunity to learn, reduce the number of surprises and be alerted to emerging issues before they escalate out of control. Social media gives visibility of those conversations that traditional channels often fail to expose. Your monitoring of social media can give you the potential to track consumer sentiment and discover an issue before a complaint is even directed to your company. Trust in your brand can also be protected by broadcasting to your customers the steps you have taken to prevent problems from recurring, improve your products and enhance your service offerings.
Finally...

Social media has given business a new channel to evaluate and assess what strategy is required for delivering customer service (even if the assessment decides that the strategy should simply be to not make customer service available on that channel). Traditionally, companies designed and implemented formal and official processes for capturing and managing customer complaints and feedback. These processes often attempted to define a complaint and the required organisational responses when a contact met the defined criteria. These processes often focused on the tip of the iceberg and some were more successful than others in stimulating feedback.

Social media challenges these traditional processes - on social media channels customers rarely state that they would like to make a formal complaint, they express how their emotions have been affected by a failure or their expectations have been left unmet. Social media is another customer contact channel but with the important characteristic that places engagement within a public arena – and often in real-time. Therefore, poorly skilled and unempowered customer service agents will struggle and expose their business to greater risk but those businesses that do allow skilled and empowered agents to engage with customers will be able to publicly demonstrate their excellence at resolving customer issues.

The challenge is to prevent social media channels being used as an escalation point for customers who cannot get satisfaction using traditional channels. Social media needs to be an integrated channel but business must make sure that it consistently gets the basics right across all channels.
Useful resources

This document was inspired by a rich variety of digital content and online discussion – much of which was publicly shared by influential customer service experts.

A selection of #custserv experts that you should consider following on Twitter:

- @KateNasser
- @JoeEspana
- @FrankEliason
- @crg_ltd
- @SOCAPiE
- @AKD_Training
- @artduservice
- @Forrester
- @YourCustomers
- @custexpmagazine
- @DonPeppers
- @Greg_Levin
- @GuyWinch
- @guy1067
- @instituteofcs
- @CustThermometer
- @Hyken
- @stevieboy6
- @adrianswinscoe
- @martinhw
- @rbacal
- @report_it

Some LinkedIn groups to join:

- Complaint Management
- Customer Complaints Consortium
- where social media meets customer service
- Social Media for Customer Service and Call Centres
- Society of Consumer Affairs Professionals in Europe
- Financial Services Complaint Management Group
- Telecomms Sector Complaint Management Group
- Utilities Sector Complaint Management Group
- Retail Sector Complaint Management Group
- Healthcare Sector Complaint Management Group
- Travel & Transport Sector Complaint Management Group
- Public Sector Complaints Network
- Charities Complaint Management Group
- Complainable
- Social Media Governance Forum
Infographics

- Customer relations fiascos
- Customer service in a tight economy
- Fastest ways to lose customers
- Price of bad customer service
- Brands that do customer service the right way
- Customer service: an investigative approach
- Why online customer service is important

YouTube sites

- O2 Guru TV
- Complaints Choir of Birmingham
- The GASP Store story
- Virgin Media Complaint Call
- United Break Guitars by Dave Carroll

Useful social media resources:

- **Klout** - measures your influence across social networks
- **PeerIndex** - calculates your social capital
- **Gist** - provides a single 'social' view of your contacts
- **Twitter Sentiment** - measures sentiment for a keyword
- **Twitrratr** - distinguish negative from positive tweets
- **Tweetfeel** - distinguish between negative and positive tweets
- **HootSuite** – manage multiple social media accounts, monitor streams and collaborate across teams
- **Seesmic** – cross platform application that allows you to break up your Twitter stream into multiple columns and manage multiple accounts
- **UsefulFeedback** – multi-channel case management solution that integrates social media with traditional channels such as correspondence (letter and email) and phone
It doesn’t matter what training need we work on. Brilliance in complaints handling means an organisation listening and learning from its customers. In team building, it could mean staff coming to work with a new enthusiasm and desire to make a difference. In risk, it can mean saving a life.

What drives AKD training is stimulating brilliance. Our reward is seeing people and organisations evolve, develop, breakthrough and realise their brilliance.

Our products and services will help you implement internal processes and systems that maximise the potential of your people to deliver great customer service and resolve customer problems quickly and fairly - turning detractors into advocates.

Our products and services include consultancy, system usage reviews, cloud-based software solution implementation (UsefulFeedback, Feefo and CustomerSure), research and also training products.