

The New Frontier, Your Call Center as a Social Media Outpost

If you are like me, and so many other people today, you've connected through LinkedIn, set up your profile on Facebook, Twitted your Tweets and MySpace'd your favorite music performers to view road schedules. But what business opportunities are there around Social Media, and how do you integrate it into your contact center; to be a media, marketing or contact center channel for interaction?

Social Media offers consumer and business-to-business companies the opportunity to connect and communicate every day and get involved in the lives of people that either use their products or services, or might one day. This is a body of people that want to be seen, heard and recognized that have needs, wants and desires, and are computer savvy, often with a high degree of disposable money, and time to chat, video, blog, or write articles (like this one). They are willing to spend the time to speak out, or shout out, to be heard Social media levels the playing field, as anyone can create bad press, say nasty things, but in social media everyone can jump in and create a consumer affairs disasters.

Social media can play a leading role as a direct channel to listen in, have a conversation and guide the discussion; good, bad or ugly. But having the right team, tools and timing is essential, as you have to be involved every day to listen, be present and "be in" the conversation. I believe that the contact center environment is an ideal place for this to happen. Agents can outreach and act as a "social media outpost" casting their net to capture conversations, hear, and deal with hearts, minds, problems and people that impact your business products or services. Problems are inherent, in any business and it is essential that you are diligent in addressing and resolving them. Using a contact center as a "Social Media Outpost" is a good strategy to address concerns, bad press or consumer affairs issues that can plague the best brand management strategy.

To create or bring on a Social Media Outpost, with the right people, process and technology, it is essential to establish a set of rules, to help guide this new conversation and interaction channel. Internet Protocol (IP) and Voice Over IP (VoIP) have enabled multimedia channel support synergies that connect many people over the web. Some systems are proprietary, and others are open source. There are many websites featuring vendors like Skype, Broadsoft, which have incorporated click-to-call buttons for making calls to contact centers. A visit to companies like Dell, Continental Airlines, Sears, will reveal that this technology is mainstream now. On the open source side there are things like RSS feeds, tags, and rich media functionality that fuels the technology that underlies the whole gamut of social media. The most fortunate aspect of setting up a Social Media Outpost, whichever way you go, is that much of the set up cost are open source and free.

Facebook has over 200 million subscribers and in 2009 introduced its storefront to every one of the Fortune 500. To further enable the conversation, pioneering works was recently completed by the IT giant Avaya, when it integrated itself with Facebook. Using the Facebook application Facephone, consumers can now interact with a contact center, while in Facebook, and start a phone, video session or IM. The video calls rely on the Avaya Aura Thin Call client, another experimental technology developed by Avaya. When the caller wants to communicate to an agent, they are positioned in a queue to receive a customized hold video. These possibilities are decidedly long term and still experimental in nature. And, then again, if they were available today would customers really use them? While one part of customer service is very personal, it still remains a service that has a degree of anonymity. Social media on the other hand is all about personality and authenticity. So, as a result, service is evolving along with the nature of customer service. There is no doubt that it will undergo a sea change. Communicating and connecting through a social networking site with a live and individual customer service representative who is only a single mouse click away.

Any contact center has a team of agents to handle calls. For a contact center to work effectively, in tandem with social media, the first thing to be done is to maintain a dedicated team of agents

and create a social media outpost. But this in itself will not produce any tangible results. What you really need is to build a framework along with a suitable strategy, with a set of rules and exceptions to help guide the conversation. For this you will have to learn every aspect of the social media sites, tools, relevant sites to be on then move to the next stage, listen to the conversations, guide the responses and lead with insightful perspectives.

Listening has always been the essence of effective communication. Just by listening, you serve half the purpose of your Social Media Outpost strategy. But in the realm of social media, the process of listening is done somewhat differently. Based on the various facets of your contact center, you need to sweep, scrub and filter the information that is conveyed through your channels of communication. While monitoring such communications, you should trace who is saying what and where. By analyzing the information you will be able to address, refine and guide the conversation. By being present on a social media channel, you listen to your customer and they can be satisfied from every angle.

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