Tips for providing great customer service on Twitter

Much like the great Wizard of Oz, it's not always clear to consumers who sits behind the curtain of a company's Twitter profile. For years, businesses have been pouring money into marketing and advertising on Twitter and have taught customers to turn to the great and all powerful Tweet to be heard.

Usage of Twitter to get a brand's attention is growing, perhaps more rapidly than any other social channel, forcing companies to react. According to Twitter, there has been a 2.5x increase in tweets to brands and their customer service handles. In February 2015, Simply Measured reported that 98 percent of the Interbrand Top 100 brands had an active Twitter handle and 95 percent of those tweeted at least once a day. Of those brands, 91 percent replied to users at least once, and year-over-year there was an 85 percent increase in per-post engagement.

These interactions aren't just happening through replies and retweets. Twitter recently expanded its direct messaging feature to optimize it for effective customer support. By introducing welcome messages and quick replies, Twitter is acknowledging its evolving role as an interface for company-customer relations. In their own words, these features are intended to "directly advance the work of customer service teams" as well as "open up new possibilities for how people engage with businesses on Twitter."

One key finding continues to present itself: the customers who tweet at a brand want the answer returned via Twitter. Ignore them at your peril or, better yet, use these tips to optimize your use of Twitter for customer service.

Promote other service channels in the Profile Summary

You can use the Profile Summary space to:

Post active support hours

Set expectations for response time

Suggest an alternate way to contact customer service

KLM Royal Dutch Airlines (@KLM) has long been on the cutting edge of Twitter customer service. They invite customers to ask questions on their primary handle and provide expected wait times, which are updated every five minutes.

Keep in mind that consumers often expect the same response time over nights and weekends as they do during business hours, particularly if you're a global brand.

Set up a dedicated support handle

Ultimately, requesting support via Twitter should be simple. Dedicated support handles are most beneficial to larger companies who generate a lot of social traffic. In such cases, creating a dedicated handle for customer support (e.g., @modcloth_cares) makes support easy for the customer to find while keeping complaints and issues off the company's primary feed.

ModCloth's dedicated support includes alternate ways to reach the team. They also regularly tweet updates to help set customer expectations:

Dedicate agents to social support

Whether you answer customer questions on your company's primary handle, or a dedicated support handle, you don't want people who aren't well-versed in the Twitterverse responding to complaints. Large companies, especially, might consider designating a "Social Squad" to respond to tickets that come in via social media.

What to avoid:

Replying to tweets like they're emails will take too much valuable character count real estate and risk cutting short the meat of the issue resolution. For example, replying with: "Hi, Sarah, my name is Sam and I'm happy to assist here" is polite but unnecessary.

Linking to tickets instead of trying to answer the question in Twitter adds an extra step and click to the customer's experience.

Master the art of brevity

Any social media marketer worth their salt has mastered the art of brevity on Twitter. But we're not just talking about limiting yourself to 140 characters.

Sites like bitly, Ow.ly, TinyURL, or Google URL Shortener allow you to compress long links to additional information.

Hashtags should be short, obvious, unique, and easy to remember. In general, less is more. Over-tagging is known as hashtag spam. It devalues the tags and clutters a response. It's a good idea to select just one or two hashtags for your support organization to use in relation to your brand.

Choose your words carefully, and know that it's okay to shorten "with" to "w/" and to make other common abbreviations. Twitter-specific abbreviations include: DM for Direct Message, RT for Retweet, and MT for a Modified Tweet (to show that an original tweet written by someone else has been changed or shortened). Check out the official Twitter glossary or Mashable's Guide to Twitter Lingo for more.

That being said, splitting replies into multiple tweets is okay, but try to keep it to two or three. Beyond that, you're better off moving the interaction to email. If you are going to split a long response into multiple tweets, number them (e.g. (1/3), (2/3), etc.) so that the customer knows when you're done.

Search for direct and indirect mentions of your brand

Search Twitter for three things:

- Direct tweets at (@) your Twitter handle

- Mentions of your company using a hashtag (#)

- Mentions of your company without the @ or # symbols

Twitter alerts you to any direct tweets at your brand's Twitter handle, but hashtags have to be clicked on or searched for, and sometimes consumers forget, or don't think to, tweet at you or use hashtags. Perhaps, even, they don't know your brand's handle but are still confident you're on Twitter. To find these indirect mentions, configure an advanced search for your company name and save the search so that it can be regularly accessed. Social media monitoring tools can also pick up these mentions.

Opt-in to direct messaging

Direct messaging used to require both a brand and its followers to follow each other in order to send private messages (still limited to 140 characters), but Twitter now allows customers to DM a business without the brand needing to follow the customer in return. Check the "Receive direct messages from any follower" option in your account settings to allow this. If you do opt-in, be aware that you may see an increase in spam, and may also need to adjust your Twitter settings to block spam bots or abusive users.

The great autoresponder debate

If you're particularly tech-savvy, it's possible to set up a Twitter autoresponder (or even a Twitter bot that can automatically answer questions), but the better question is whether you should. Autoresponders may be construed as spam or, more dangerously, may respond to @tweets or brand mentions without taking into consideration the context of the mention. Autoresponders can make it painfully obvious that a tweet has not been read by a human.

Set your resolution threshold

Every time you reply to a customer, your @reply appears on your feed (and includes a public link to view the entire conversation). While it may be tempting to take a complaint offline, resolving an issue publicly can go a long way in satisfying that customer and positively influencing others. That said, you don't want to clog up your feed with too many tweets at a single person, so it may be helpful to set a resolution threshold, where you attempt to resolve the issue in, say, three tweets or less. Figure out what the right number is for your brand and, if an issue exceeds this limit (or you expect that it might), offer to move the conversation to another channel or into a DM. If you do need to move the conversation into a ticket, let the customer know why. This is not only for the customer's benefit, but for others who may search for keywords in the tweets later, or who are watching the conversation as it happens.

Use lists to segment customers

Consider organizing the people you're following into lists. If you have particularly active customers (or a few "squeaky wheels") you'd like to keep an eye on, collect them into a private list. (Note that Twitter users have the ability to see which public lists they've been added to.) Keep in mind that giving too much social media attention to customers who fall into the "squeaky wheel" category can send a public message of validation. You may also consider inviting these customers to have a more personal conversation with you.

Host a Tweet Chat

A Tweet Chat is a public conversation or live Q&A session that occurs on Twitter around a unique hashtag. These chats can occur spontaneously or within a scheduled timeframe.

For example, consider hosting a recurring #supportopenbar, where customers can tweet questions or feedback and receive responses in real-time. If the volume or technical-level of the questions can't be handled during the chat, create a parking lot of issues and be sure to follow up as soon as possible.

Tips for hosting a Tweet Chat:

Moderate the conversation. While you don't need any special service or software to host a Tweet Chat, there are products available to help facilitate the conversation such as Sprout Social, TweetChat, HootSuite, and TweetDeck.

Research and select a unique hashtag to associate with your chat. Every tweet that's part of the chat, by everyone participating, should be tagged with this hashtag.

Advertise your Tweet Chat in advance. You might want to make sure that your chat time isn't competing with an established, industry-wide Tweet Chat. If you get feedback about the timeframe, consider whether you want to assign a static recurring date and time, or try a rotating schedule that will accommodate more of your customers. There's no right answer here.

Assign a moderator (or several). Which agent will be responsible for welcoming new members to the chat, for getting started on time and introducing a topic or asking a question? Who will retweet the best questions and feedback from participants?

Say thanks. Don't forget to conclude a chat by thanking all participants and setting their expectations for when another chat might occur.

To tune in to Tweet Chats focused on customer service, check out:

#CXO — Mondays, 12:00–1:00 p.m. ET
Weekly discussion on Customer Experience optimization for #custexp professionals and enthusiasts. Moderators: @vivisimo_inc, @clearaction, @natasha_d_g

#CustServ — Tuesdays, 9:00–10:00 p.m. ET
This original Customer Service chat on Twitter, since 2009. It's a weekly discussion on Customer Service and Customer Experience for #custserv professionals and enthusiasts. Moderated by @MarshaCollier

General tips for great support

Refrain from responding to customers when... Sometimes the best response is no response. Trolling, for example, should be ignored. Don't respond to baiting, or obvious attempts to pull you into a pointless altercation in a public space. Nobody gains from this kind of interaction.

Forward "love" tweets to your Marketing team. Many tweets may be best handled by a different part of your company. For example, you may just want to assign marketing-related tweet tickets (compliments, etc.) to your Marketing team in case they want to retweet or reach out to the customer.

If you found these tips useful, check out our tips for providing great customer service on Facebook.