



Bringing it all together

Serving the social customer

How to look good on the social dance floor

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A grayscale photograph of a woman with long dark hair, wearing a dark blazer over a white shirt. She is pointing her right index finger towards a large, purple, rounded rectangular button that says 'Like' in white text. The background is white with several other similar, semi-transparent purple buttons scattered around, some of which are slightly out of focus. The overall composition suggests a focus on social media interaction and customer engagement.

Like



First and foremost it's about listening, because when customers are on social media sites they are sharing feedback, and it's important to engage in a dialogue on sites (rather than engage in one-way communication)"

Frank Eliason, SVP Social Media, CitiBank.

Introduction: Dancing with customers

Have you ever been to a party where you don't know anybody? You scan the room and spot someone fascinating, so you move into the group of people surrounding them. The person finishes talking and you ask them a question – and they just walk away. This might be regarded as somewhat rude – and yet it is precisely what many organisations are doing to customers on a daily basis on social networking sites because they have forgotten that they are dealing with **social** rather than **broadcast** media. The clue is in the title!

Let's go back to the party. The dance floor is full and it would be arrogant to assume that you could jump on and take control of it, but you can go and dance. The first move is to stand at the side and look around to see who is dancing, what kind of music they like and who you fancy dancing with when you pluck up enough courage to boogie. This is the best approach to social media strategy – work out which dance floors your customers are on, listen to what they are saying and then look at ways to boogie with them that aren't going to result in a slapped face.

Many companies have decided to jump onto the dance floor with no real rationale apart from “everyone else is doing it” – this tends to result in uncoordinated ‘dad dancing’. The strategic struggle with social media is often about ownership. Marketing people see immediate opportunities to talk to customers over social media but they are often woefully ill-equipped to respond if people start to deviate from the messages that they want customers to hear. Worse still, some organisations create a “Twitter department” divorced from either marketing or service. All this can cause an already disgruntled customer to rampage around social media (and no doubt to all their friends and family as well) with a tsunami of negativity. Situations can rapidly spiral out of control on a very public channel unless some kind of co-ordinated action is taken.

There is a lot of hype and panic around social media and customer service in the market place at the moment. This research is looking to cut through the hype and examine how and why customers are actually using the social media dance floor to engage or comment on brands. It looks at the triggers for these interactions and at the implications for customer experience strategies. In other words, we are looking to understand what dancing is going on and look at the implications for corporate boogieing.

The approach we took to this research was to take a snapshot of social media interactions for 11 brands plus three UK government departments over key forums and social media sites (principally Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and YouTube) over a two-week period. Specific brand and customer names and content have been anonymised to protect the innocent, so the brands will be referred to under a code name.

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The sample encompassed retail (TradStore & DepartStore), banking (BrandBank & GlobeBank), travel (HiFlyer & LoFlyer), fast moving consumer goods (SuperCo, FoodCo & MumCo), logistics (LogistiCo), central government (GovCo) and telecoms (TelCo). The selection included a number of companies that have a substantial presence on social media, as well as some who have not, to see if interactions differed if company representatives were joining the dialogue. A local council and police authority also came under the spotlight but, because of the radically different nature of the interactions, they have been split out for separate consideration.

A search engine is overwhelmingly the first port of call for customers to take advice. So, a search engine was the primary tool used for this research because it mirrors the actions of a customer seeking advice on brands. A simple search on a publicly available search engine (i.e. Google) was done using "<BRAND NAME> customer service". The resulting first five pages of available content were used to unearth relevant social commentary on that brand from key forums and social sites. Since Twitter, LinkedIn and Facebook are less visible on conventional search tools a social aggregation tool was used to summarise interactions during the two-week period of the study.

In total 2,986 interactions were categorised in one of 13 categories:

» **Comment/Opinion** – Expressing a personal viewpoint about a brand. Not generally something a company would reply to, e.g. "SuperCo disposable barbecue – someone actually felt the need to have FOOD NOT INCLUDED written on it."

» **Complaint (product)** – Specific issue with a product, e.g. "Opened a packet of prawns and they were off, went to SuperCo Customer Service and was told they couldn't do anything because I had thrown away the receipt. Left a comment on the feedback site but nobody replied. Why ask for comments then not even reply?"

» **Complaint (service)** – Specific issue with service, e.g. "The flight was cancelled ... there were no LoFlyer personnel to be found to advise us. We then had to rebook at the cost of £50 per person. The return flight was 2 hrs late. Almost all interactions with LoFlyer staff were characterised by surliness and non-cooperation."

» **Criticism (product)** – General issue about a product, e.g. "TradStore – what's happened to your yummy sandwiches? They used to be the best!!! Now they are tasteless, especially the prawn and mayo."

» **Criticism (service)** – General issue about service, e.g. “Dear GovCo, if the ‘lots of information on [your] website’ answered my question, I wouldn’t subject myself to phoning you!!!”

» **Compliment** – Positive comment, e.g. “Had a brill time at DepartCo – thanks to the store manager and beauty ladies. Got lots of nice freebies so now to the wedding....!”

» **Recommendation/Fan** – Promoter rave, e.g. “Dear HiFlyer, you ROCK. Best. Holiday. EVER!!!”

» **Suggestion** – Constructive recommendation about how to improve a product or service, e.g. “Love the meal for two but it’s too much for one. How about doing a meal for one?”

» **Location Specific** – Customer identifying a specific location (including Foursquare data), e.g. “I’m at DepartStore in Basildon – Never get in the way of a middle-aged women and a final reduction on shoes!”

» **Comparison** – Comparing the relative virtues of rival brands, e.g. “I think TradStore is in terminal decline – food is still on the shelves past sell-by date, I was overcharged and got no apology. Think I’ll be crossing the road to RivalStore because they treat you better.”

» **Question** – customer question, e.g. “Anyone know if LogistiCo deliver on a Sunday?”

» **Link** – customer provided link to another site.

» **Answer** – customer provided answer to a question.

In addition, a sample of customers on Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn and Google+ were interviewed about when, where and why they might engage with organisations over social media – with 23 responding. Non-social media customers were not included in this survey because they are not currently using these tools for **any** interactions.

Social overview: Snapshot summary of customer activity

The first thing to note about the two-week snapshot of traffic is that there was not actually that much of it – just 2,986 customer interactions across 14 brands. This means that there was an average of just over 200 interactions per brand, per week. That would be an easy contact organisation to manage, if that was all that was coming in! In the local government category (local authority and police authority), no customer-initiated social content was found during the two-week snapshot period – content that was there was being broadcast by the authorities themselves.

You may conclude that social media is not worth worrying about because of the current low volumes. However, volume in numbers does not necessarily equate to volume in noise. If the first Google search result for your company is a viral YouTube video or a rant on a blog rather than the official site, this may be considered to be a brand issue.

There is also a small minority of socially connected consumers who have abnormally loud voices in the cacophony that is the social space. Forrester^[1] calls these 'Mass Influencers'. These people are responsible for 80% of the conversations about brands online but they are a minority of the online population (16% in Forrester's study of the US market). Twitter can be especially loud since it is the equivalent of having a loud hailer at the party – the more followers you have, the louder the voice. Social voices are magnified by the social spaces they inhabit – forum content, especially, can echo around for a long time.

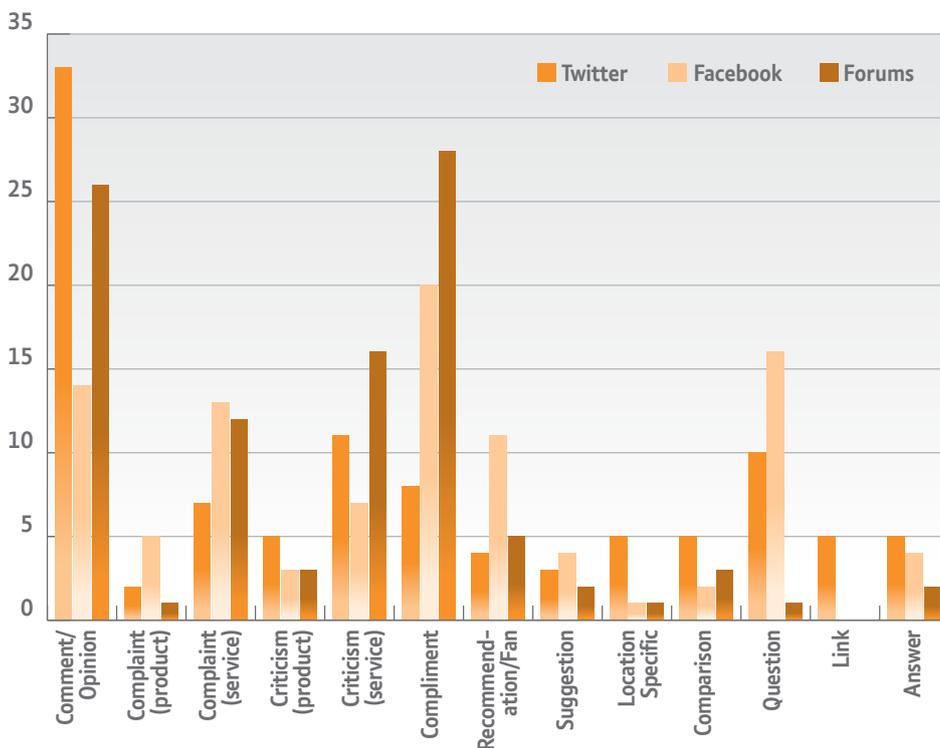
In fact, the vast majority of searchable content (83%) in this study was on forums – eminently visible and enduring (content that was up to three years old was still appearing high on the results pages of major search engines). 10% of traffic was on Twitter and 7% on Facebook with a small niche minority on YouTube (mainly short films about queues and, disturbingly, store elevators).

Much of the searchable content on LinkedIn was generally more business-focused than about service experiences but there were some cross-postings on Twitter that also appeared as updates on LinkedIn. Neither LinkedIn nor Facebook are entirely open social channels (if people have got their privacy settings correct) – what goes on in a closed community stays in a closed community. However, if a brand had a presence on Facebook, the contents of their wall and any other news content was visible and searchable to anyone. On LinkedIn, communities are generally invisible unless you are directly connected to them or invited to be in them. The contents of LinkedIn would be unavailable to customers searching for the brands under study in this research. This doesn't mean there was no content on LinkedIn but that content wasn't searchable through the search engine used in this study.

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Customer activity on social media

The top reasons that customers used social media across all brands and channels emerged as:



It is unsurprising that the bulk of the content is simply comment or opinion largely because of the nature of social channels. However, there was a lot of positive comment alongside the more negative stuff – largely complaints and criticisms about service (rather than products). There are also more questions than answers out there – reflecting life in general!

Of these complaints and criticisms about service (27% of the sample), 84% were about primary contact channels (i.e. the face-to-face, contact centre, email or web experience). These are fairly typical comments:

“ I emailed your company over a week ago about the awful service I received and still haven’t have an email back to even acknowledge I’d emailed. Once again proof that DepartCo don’t care about their customers or providing good customer service.”

“ It’s taken me four days to resolve my problem. Have made 23 phone calls...trying to get to talk to a manager is like getting a page 3 girl to wear a polo neck jumper.”

Average results

1. Comment/Opinion
27%
2. Compliment
22%
3. Criticism of service
15%
4. Complaint about service
12%
5. Questions
5%

There is an increasing amount of evidence that social media is a secondary rather than a primary contact channel for customers.

There is an increasing amount of evidence that social media is a secondary rather than a primary contact channel for customers. BT's Autonomous Customer research^[2] showed that only 10% of customers considered social media to be the first port of call for seeking advice from organisations. Even younger customers are only considering it as a preference 5% of the time. Our experience of social media use in BT has shown that approximately 60% of customers have attempted to make contact either by phone or email (which are generally the two primary contact channels at the moment, according to our Autonomous Customer research) and then turned to social media.

The message seems to be: get it right through your primary service channel and you won't suffer so much through social channels. However, it isn't that simple!

Some customers are now starting with social – with a BT Retail survey of social activity finding that 25% of customers picked up on social channels were intending to contact the organisation using a traditional channel but had not yet got around to doing so. The same study showed that, on average, satisfaction for those picked up proactively on social networks by organisations is 10 points higher than for customers on other channels. There can be some significant retention benefits to using social media in this way. Jonathan Denison from BT Retail summarised his experiences with pro-active contact: **“We've seen quite a bit of evidence of customers saying they're going to go to the competition or they're really unhappy with BT and then we've surveyed them after we've been in touch with them and helped resolve the problem, and a lot of customers are saying that they're less likely now to move away from BT, so we think we can prove a reduction in churn.”**^[3]

These stats show that it is at least worth observing activity on the various dance floors and shows the advantages that can be gained by dancing with customers. However, it is easy to paint all sectors and social channels with the same brush. In fact, the other thing that this study picked up was that Twitter, Facebook and Forums were being used for very different things and that certain sectors were dominant in terms of the volume of interactions going on.

Different dances for different dance floors: Not all social media are the same

“Reputation is what people say about you when you have left the room.”

Jeff Bezos, CEO, Amazon

Social media is the room where like-minded people congregate to rant, rave and recommend. It is something that often brings out both the best and the worst in people and it can trump corporate PR, marketing and sales machines in both immediacy and reach.

Businesses believe that engagement with social media will increase advocacy but, according to a survey by IBM ^[4], only 38% of consumers agree. This survey suggested that 60% of customers will only engage with a company on social media if they already have some enthusiasm for that particular brand and only 45% of customers would consider engaging with brands over social channels at all. This behaviour was reinforced by a recent global survey by TNS ^[5] which found that 57% of consumers do not want to engage with brands at all via social media. The highest amount of resistance was in the US (60%) and the UK (61%), with Asian markets showing slightly more appetite for engagement – 43% in Singapore, 42% in Hong Kong and 52% in China. The main reasons customers cite against engaging with brands are around privacy and spam. However, over a third said they were not interested enough in brands to engage with them directly.

Social media is not necessarily a place where customers expect to be able to talk with or be eavesdropped on by big business. On the slightly more paranoid end of the customer scale, some who think they might be overheard even disguise brand names by deliberately misspelling them or substituting random characters. For them, social media is about personal connections, not about engaging with ‘faceless’ big business.

An additional complication is that conversations on social media are not driven by businesses; they are driven by customers. Conversations need to be those relevant to customers rather than organisations – remember this is social not broadcast media.

Social media can provide the ultimate in transparency as they start to replace the old style media as the primary consumer watchdog – it is now difficult to hide if you do a bad job serving customers. In addition, we are seeing the rise of the serial complainer, very evident even in this two-week snapshot – these customers will go for a serial whinge on as many social channels as they can find. One customer interviewed in this research noted the tendency for complainers to gravitate towards social: **“You see a lot of bad reviews about a lot of companies and I suspect a lot of the time it’s because people are happy to moan and complain but rarely comment when they are happy about something.”**

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Deliver bad service and the carefully controlled brand messages that marketing and sales have created can be blown out of the water:

“ I posted two comments on your wall about delays this weekend and both comments were removed. The point of social media is real time feedback from customers, LoFlyer, or can’t you take the flak.”

“ I only liked your page so I could moan about being ripped off when I put my ski boots in as hand luggage and you screwed me for £30 even though there’s no mention of restrictions on the hand luggage section of the site. Don’t get too excited about the number of likes, there’s probably a lot more like me.”

Traceability and accountability of social media service interactions were factors that divided opinion with the customers we interviewed in this study. On one hand some customers used traceability and accountability as reasons to gravitate towards more traditional channels when they communicate with organisations – **“I prefer to use email over social media with companies because I can then track communications better”**. However, the visibility of social content was driving some customers to use it for the same traceability and accountability reasons: **“It makes dissatisfaction public; it makes companies’ engagement (or not) with customers more obvious; it’s a clear public record.”**

Customers are perfectly willing to punish bad service by making it very public: **“Twitter is my first port of call these days – it’s quick and easy and, because it’s done in public, you can more easily shame them if they don’t get back to you quickly or resolve your problem!”** The very public nature of this can fuel more customer comments – **“you realise it is seldom just you who has the issue, so it somehow makes it feel more acceptable to complain!”**

Ease of use of a social media channel was also a factor driving behaviour, especially if traditional channels were ineffective. Hold and queuing times came up on numerous occasions as one factor driving people to social media. The speed and personal touch of social media interaction is something that customers appreciate:

“ We don’t always get a better service, but it can be an easier way for us to contact businesses in our own time (no hold).”

“ It’s more convenient than calling and waiting in a queue... it’s fast ... and it’s a more personal service.”

“ Is it better or faster? Or is faster better? Or does it just feel more human – is it like interacting with a friend [rather] than a faceless organisation?”

The contact centre experience itself is another factor driving people to social media channels:

“ Inability to get through to a person in a call centre has prompted me to tweet my displeasure with the level of service and get a response with some alacrity on various occasions.”

“ I was having a real challenge getting past their script zombies on the service desk to actually buy something, so I tweeted them. Received a reply and phone call and my order was sorted there and then!”

“ I can’t stand hearing “your call is important to us... but we are experiencing a high level of demand” ... seems to be the norm... After overlong waits, you then get put through to someone who invariably can’t help. Social media is far more time efficient.”

“ We all know call centre staff are reading off screen prompts, and are low skilled. It drives us all nuts.”

This has led to much debate as to whether a two-tier service level is being created, with social media users being offered preferential, faster or more personalised service than through other channels. The dilemma is that this could drive more traffic to this very public channel and, as volumes grow, one interviewee speculated whether this level of service could be maintained: **“Twitter is training people that they get faster response in that mode. Thus everyone goes there, thus it breaks.”**

Some organisations, such as KLM, have been turning this speed into a service differentiator. KLM promise to answer every customer message personally within one hour, twenty-four hours a day, and seven days a week, in Dutch or English.

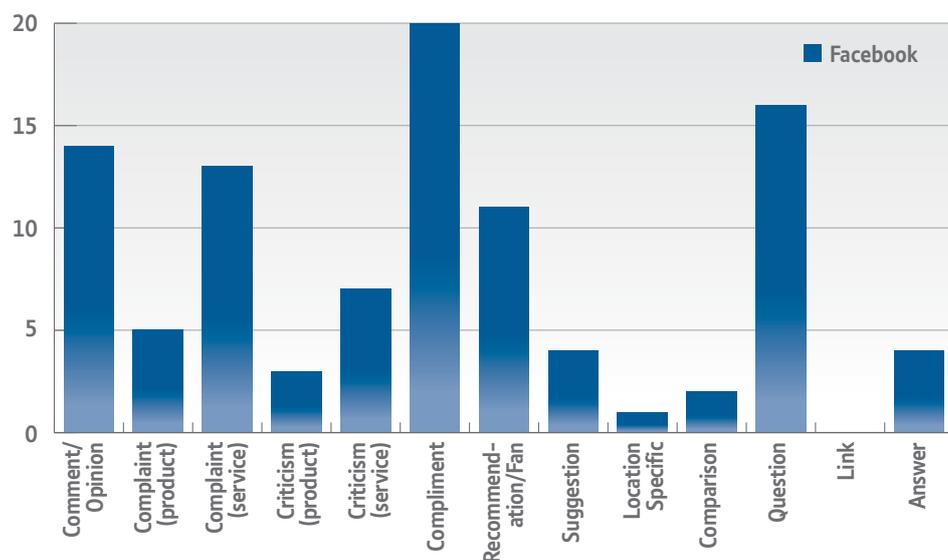
However, strategically, is it actually wise for brands to actively encourage all their dirty laundry to be aired in public? It wasn't uncommon to see people on Twitter encouraging other users to use the channel to complain, e.g. **“Do a Tweet to TelCo.com mentioning broadband. The response on here is good!”**; **“If only you responded to complaint letters as fast. Posted 8th Aug and still no reply.”**

The danger here is that social media could become the default mechanism for complaining – over and above simply telling the supplier through traditional (and less transparent) channels. The first you know about an unhappy customer may well be their review on a forum – and, although there is always a right to reply and resolve, the best way to do this might be to encourage the customer to give feedback at the time over a less visible channel. The wisdom and wit of comedian Benny Hill always comes to mind at this point as he once said that **“Just because no one complains doesn't mean all parachutes are perfect.”** Consider social media as your hotline from heaven or hell.

The other challenge is that, as many issues concern customers' personal details, the only way to solve them is to take them into a more traditional private channel. By solving the issue “offline”, the resolution then becomes invisible to the social customer – so it is important to close the loop with the customer in public once things have been resolved.

However, different social channels have very different purposes and customer motivations. The data showed that there were marked differences between the content on Facebook, Twitter, Forums and YouTube.

Friendly Facebook



“Just because no one complains doesn't mean all parachutes are perfect.”

...in the US and the UK, 56% of users expect extra promotions on social media, 55% wanted to be invited for events and 50% wanted to have more product information.

Facebook tends to be a much friendlier place than Twitter because a lot of Facebook activities are from people who literally 'like' the brand.

Research by InSites Consulting^[6] has shown that people (especially in the US, the UK and Benelux) are more likely to follow companies in the media, fashion, food and retail industries. The same study showed that 40% of US users followed at least one brand, 51% in Europe, 62% in China, 60% in Japan and 70% in India. These insights were largely supported by this study where there was little or no Facebook activity in the banking or government space but a lot in retail, logistics and travel.

Compliments and positive comments about the brand are very prevalent. It is also very typical for customers to step up and defend the brand on Facebook if negative comments are posted – this can get quite confrontational as customers fuel discussions between each other – e.g. after one customer left a long rant on Facebook, another responded – **“Wake up <name deleted> you have complained 3 TIMES about the same thing, this site is about service so I think you have missed the point this is not for whingers like you I buy everything in TradCo – always fab service and great quality.”**

Facebook users who did engage with brands by 'liking' them generally wanted something back in return – **“I sign up to some things so I can get things other people can't – you know, discounts, vouchers, special previews, exclusive stuff.”** The need to increase intimacy or create dialogue with a brand is not on the agenda – **“Why do I 'like' a brand on Facebook; easy, I want to get offers. I don't want them to be my friend.”**

This desire for offers and incentives has been echoed in other studies – with the InSites one showing that, in the US and the UK, 56% of users expect extra promotions on social media, 55% wanted to be invited for events and 50% wanted to have more product information.

Not only do customers not want an intimacy in the relationship, they also don't want to be sold to: **“One or two organisations I've liked I've ended up 'hiding' because their regular postings are annoying and seem like selling. I'm more likely to keep them visible when I want to read them and they are not selling me something.”** They also want a sense that companies are both genuine and honest – **“If I post something on their wall I expect them to reply not remove it – even if it's negative. If things look too good to be true, they usually are.”**

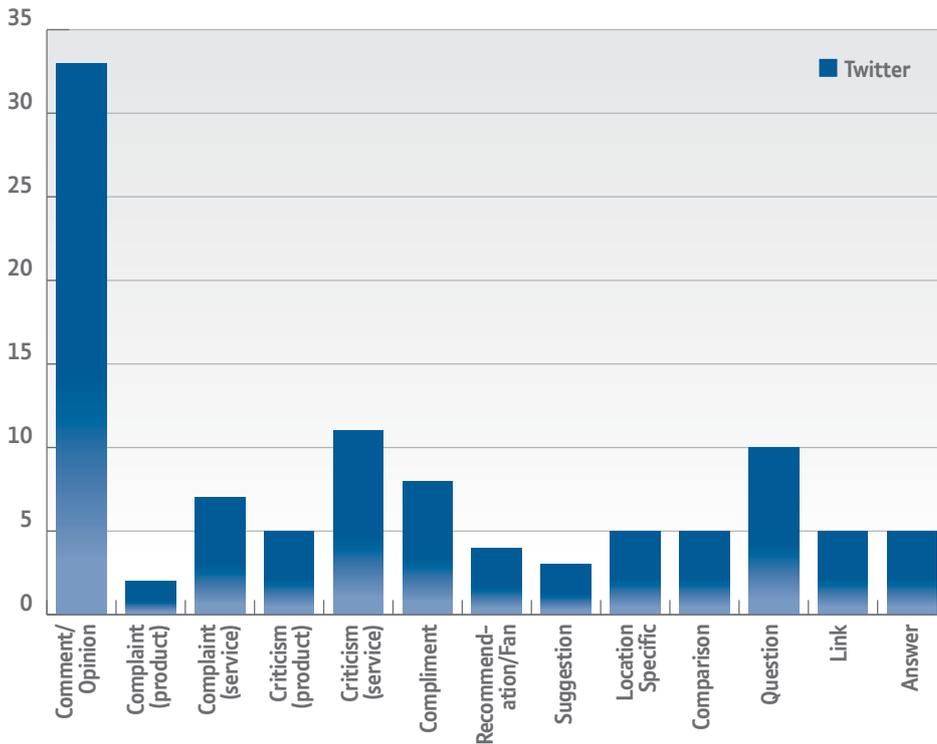
Facebook users, especially, seem to regard social media as something that is simply social: **“Facebook is a personal/social thing. I would use the email or phone, depending on the nature of the enquiry, to contact a company.”** This is echoed by the IBM study^[4] which showed that 70% of customers used social media to connect with friends and family, whilst only 23% considered it a tool for interacting with brands.

Exposing their identity outside their own personal circle on Facebook was a significant concern – **“I value my privacy and tend to prevent my profile from being especially visible on Facebook, so I wouldn't use it to contact anyone outside my network.”** It is for this reason that the majority would never consider contacting a company on Facebook – **“For service in the traditional sense I'd never use it, I prefer a walled garden.”**

The identity aspect was less of a concern on Twitter and even less on a forum, where people can choose to post more anonymously – **“For Primal Scream Therapy, yes, sometimes I will go on Twitter and get things off my chest but Facebook, no.”**

So customers are willing to interact with businesses on Facebook if they believe it is beneficial to them, trust the brand and decide that it is the right channel to use to get the value they want but the 'friendship' aspect is not on the agenda.

Primal Scream Twitter



Twitter is a real-time tool and lends itself to the ‘primal scream therapy’ that the last customer referred to. Twitter has been described as both a water cooler and a complaints department. Although most customers are there to engage with each other, many are using Twitter to talk about their experiences with brands – and, from time to time, get things off their chest. Selling on Twitter is generally frowned upon; as one customer put it: **“The power of Twitter is in sharing not selling!”**

For customers it is a great place for top-of-mind comment and opinion, often done in the heat of the moment. Because users are restricted to 140 characters, there isn’t a lot of detail here so there is a lot of whingeing about bad service generally, lots of questions and a fair number of positive comments as well.

There is always an element of showing off with Twitter and comments can be extremely witty – and are all the more dangerous for it because they are far more likely to be shared and go viral:

“ We put a man on the moon 42 yrs ago, but no broadband connection 10 mins from motorway junction and main line railway station. #middleages” (retweeted 18 times).

“ Dear GovCo, if the “lots of information on [your] website” answered my question, I wouldn’t subject myself to phoning you” (retweeted 22 times).

As more brands have joined Twitter, consumers’ expectation for interaction with brands has risen. According to US research by Maritz^[7], nearly half of customers who tweeted a complaint at a brand expected the company to respond—or at least to read their tweet. However, only a third of those consumers received a tweeted response from the mentioned brand. Consumers aged 55 and older seemed to expect companies to read their complaint on Twitter. Younger customers were less hopeful that a company would pay any attention to complaints.

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Despite this gap between expectations and delivery, people are overwhelmingly positive when brands take the time to actually respond to them on Twitter. The Maritz study indicates that 86% of Twitter complainers would have liked or loved to hear from the company regarding their complaints – and out of those who heard back, 75% were satisfied with the company’s response.

Twitter can, therefore, place significant challenges for corporate users in terms of response times but also offers some huge opportunities in terms of offering real-time updates to developing situations – such as faults, outages and problems.

Time and speed is often of the essence, especially since research has shown that around 60% of Tweets emanate from mobile devices. **“That’s so 20 minutes ago!”** was one response to a piece of ‘breaking news’ that someone posted after many others had got there first. One interviewee commented that **“it can take a VERY long time for a response to be posted that answers the issue, if it ever comes at all.”** Having service levels that reflect this need for speed is desirable. However, the debate as to whether this creates an expectation for quick turnaround that trumps other channels and drives volumes on a very public channel is also one that needs to be carefully considered.

This speed can be used as a virtue if it is harnessed during disaster recovery circumstances – from service outages to mobilising resources during natural disasters or public disorder incidents. The addition of searchable hash tags means that Twitter can be used very effectively to keep customers informed in real time when incidents are occurring. It can also be used by other customers to increase the wealth of information and breadth of knowledge about an incident.

For example, when a large exchange fire in London’s Chinatown took most of the circuits in the West End down, @BTCare tweeted an image of the general carnage (see picture on the left) as well as keeping customers updated as to the progress of the repairs that were going on. This was retweeted by both customers and various specialist forums and blogs, e.g. **“Now that is transparency!! RT: @BTCare: Service restoration now underway but may take some time.”**

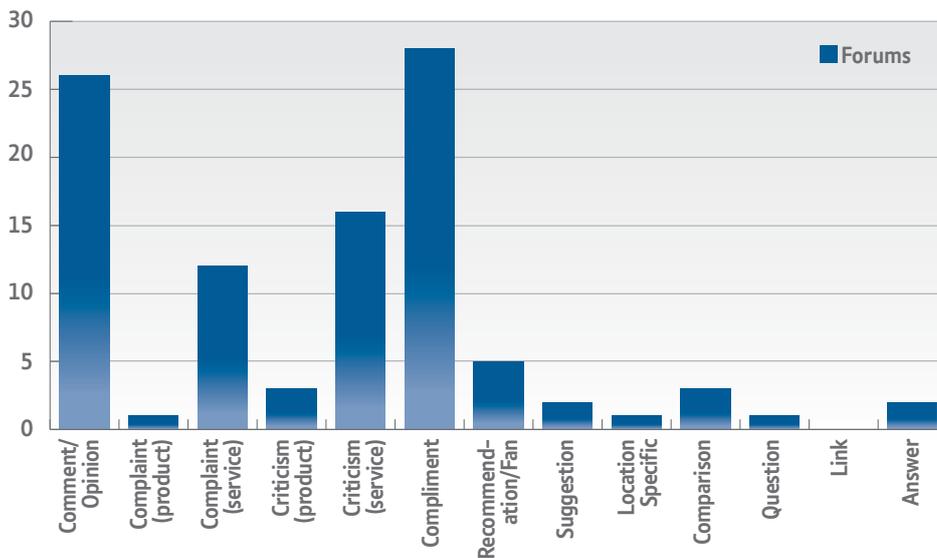
However, companies need to learn that they must be open and personal when tweeting. Qantas, crippled by strike action, was lambasted by customers for its wooden, unempathetic and scripted approach to tweeting. This prompted one of the celebrity Twitterati stuck in transit to respond: **“Come on #Qantas, get it together! How rude!!!!”** The airline blamed the sheer volume of customer Tweets for the lack of personalisation. However, one of their rivals seized the initiative by offering stranded passengers alternative travel arrangements over Twitter and Facebook.

There was one particularly interesting thing that emerged out of this snapshot study which was around the permeability of boundaries between social channels. One particular brand, namely DepartCo, had incentivised customers with an offer of vouchers for positive reviews on Twitter. This inevitably skewed the results found on Twitter to an unusually positive picture of the brand which was not reflected on any other social channels. This inconsistency was not invisible to customers who were searching across social channels – with neither forums nor Facebook reflecting the levels of positivity visible on Twitter. Customers can very easily spot when things are too good to be true and companies need to recognise that incentives can’t be restricted to a single social channel.



Chinatown exchange
fire damage

Community based forums



Forums tend to be a little more niche than Twitter or Facebook. Forums are a social channel that have been around much longer than channels such as Twitter and Facebook – with basic forums like Usenet being over 20 years old. They seem to get very little coverage in the social media press largely because they are neither new nor sexy. They are, however, very influential due to their visibility on search engines, so they are often the first port of call for customers seeking advice. The advantages of forums for brands like BT are considerable. As Jonathan Denison of BT Retail observed, **“The hope is that once you have answered a question in public, either we’ve answered it or somebody else answered it, then through Google someone searches for the problem and can find the answer.”**^[3]

Forums can be very niche. The inevitable consequence of a sprawling blogosphere is a splintering of interests – a natural human reaction when communities become too large in the physical space too. There are thousands of specialist forums out there – from the large communities that form TripAdvisor (travel and hotel reviews) to MumsNet (a community of parents) to more niche communities like SkyTrax (airline reviews), MoneySavingExpert (all things financial), ThinkBroadband (the name sums it up nicely), Ciao.com (a review site for just about all consumer goods) and MaryPortas.com (tackling the high street retail space). However, there is a forum about pretty much everything; from discussions about breakfast cereal to hints and tips to get gorgeous hair.

Forums have a number of advantages over other social channels like Facebook – in that many of them are anonymous. This means that people often express themselves more openly than they would in face-to-face and phone channels and channels where it is easier to identify them – this is often called the “online disinhibition effect” by psychologists. This is a double-edged sword. Sometimes people share very personal things about themselves (known as benign disinhibition) or show unusual acts of kindness and generosity (which we’ve termed “psychic income”, i.e. solving other people’s issues with no visible reward). However, the dark side of this is a tendency to be openly rude, overly harsh and abusive – this is a world of ‘flaming’ (online arguments that become nasty or derisive) and ‘trolling’ (someone who posts inflammatory, extraneous, or off-topic messages in an online community).

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Forums are often places where 90% of the content is provided by 10% of the users.

This online disinhibition effect also extends to staff who can also post messages anonymously. Interestingly enough this seemed to happen more in organisations which had a very limited social media presence and clearly no social media guidelines for staff. Some examples of internal dirty washing in public were very apparent on some of these sites, especially amongst retailers. Here are a few choice examples from the data sample:

“ Maybe if some customers were a little more polite to staff instead of thinking we work for them then and should be packing their shopping etc then there may be a few less complaints!”

“ I work for SuperCo. The training I have been given is useless, I have no idea what I’m supposed to be doing, and if I ask, I’m spoken to like I’m an inconvenience.”

“ SuperCo is a depressing place to work, an 11 hour day with only 30 mins break? No wonder the staff look disinterested. I don’t even know who our store manager is. Since I started I’ve never been introduced.”

“ With massive cut backs and bans on overtimes etc we are struggling to even have basic cover for the tills and fitting rooms. So, as much as we want to spend time helping customers, we get in trouble for leaving the areas unattended... can’t win! Ridiculous!”

“ I am a staff member and we have the life sucked out of us by management because of the unbearable amount of pressure put on us to open store cards. We must ask every customer and every 5mins the managers are on your back!! They really only care about the cards not the customers!!”

It is clear that these would probably be comments that brands would prefer to have internally rather than on public forums and, based on the evidence here, official proactive intervention on the part of the brand plus social media policies tends to prevent this type of content going social.

The other advantage/disadvantage of forums is that they are generally not limited to Twitter’s 140 characters. When customers want to get things off their chests, it is not uncommon for them to deliver extremely long, blow-by-blow accounts of their issue.

However, one of the other advantages of forums is that they can enable customers to help each other. This was a factor picked up by the Autonomous Customer research from BT ^[2] which found that 37% of customers contribute to reviews or forums and 51% say that they trust customer forums more than organisations’ official websites. As one customer put it: **“There are so many ‘experts’ out there, even if ordinary customers have had the same problem and found a solution the hard way. It’s like the ultimate in FAQs but from a customer database not what some corporate marketing focus group might think are the likely FAQs. If I have a network or PC problem I can find very targeted solutions off the internet far, far quicker than ringing up a helpdesk.”**

Forums are often places where 90% of the content is provided by 10% of the users. Some of that 10% can be very prolific indeed because they are often motivated by passion for the subject as well as engagement with the community – it isn’t uncommon for some people to spend most of their waking hours contributing to certain niche forums. This isn’t because they get paid for it but because they feel good about showing off their knowledge and expertise in whatever area they happen to be skilled in.

This behaviour can be exploited positively by brands by removing (or at least reducing) the need for a call centre or formal contact point entirely.

Probably the most extreme practitioner of this is giffgaff (a Scottish term for ‘mutual giving’), part of mobile network provider O2. giffgaff has no formal contact organisation but harnesses the power of its online community to run customer services and marketing operations. Since its launch in 2009, there have been 300,000 posts made on giffgaff’s combined online forums, where members help each other to answer questions and queries. So far there have been more than 20,000 questions asked, with an average of 9.6 responses to each question. All questions have reportedly been answered within an average of 3 minutes.

Some super users spend six hours a day helping others. In return, and as part of its mutuality ethos, giffgaff rewards people who help out on the forums or refer friends with a bi-annual payback scheme. giffgaff’s payback in December 2010 resulted in over £128,000 given back to the community in airtime, money or as a donation to a chosen charity, with its top earner receiving over £900. giffgaff believes that this model is scalable. If giffgaff accounted for 25% of O2’s total customer base, it is estimated that it would save £12.5 million from its annual customer service costs.

This model, however, is unlikely to suit all brands and industries – but it works as a consequence of a combination of rich social content and psychic income.

Engaging Generation Y(ouTube)

“There once was a time when it wasn’t possible to know what everyone else was thinking; that time was between the dawn of man and the launch of YouTube!”

John Lanchester, Journalist.

There is increasing evidence that Generation Y(ouTube) are using the video sharing site as a primary search engine for social content about products and services. This is understandable given the younger generation’s disinclination to read and preference for snappy and short visual content. A picture can be worth a thousand tweets – videos can be engaging, informative and eminently shareable/viral.

However, although brand YouTube channels do exist (e.g. BTCare, Apple, Best Buy), the only brands in this study who had YouTube channels were in the local government space and much of that content was broadcast from authority out rather than customer in (and were on things that might not actually engage customers, like car parking charges [38 views] and waste management processes [75 views]).

YouTube is not necessarily a place where customers go to talk about brands but it is a place where people can post incidents in near real time (e.g. sleeping engineers, queues in airports, parcels being thrown at customers’ front doors or into planes). In this particular analysis the content on YouTube ranged from the mundane – people filming themselves going through self scanning tills in supermarkets – to the plain bizarre – one customer being seemingly obsessed with lifts/elevators in stores.

“There once was a time when it wasn’t possible to know what everyone else was thinking; that time was between the dawn of man and the launch of YouTube!”

John Lanchester, Journalist



This one allegedly wiped 10% off United's share price as it achieved global notoriety.

It is the witty and viral videos tackling service issues that are of particular concern to brands – the infamous one being 'United Breaks Guitars', Canadian country and western singer Dave Carroll's attack on United Airlines after his prize guitar was broken by heavy handed bag handlers. This one allegedly wiped 10% off United's share price as it achieved global notoriety. However, its gestation shows the very typical pattern echoed by this study in that he turned to social media as a last resort after other more traditional channels failed him.

Carroll's full account of the experience shows that there was no one in the service chain willing to take responsibility for actions. After struggling with a whole series of uninterested and unhelpful people in United's service departments – with the exception of call centre advisors in India who were both pleasant and genuinely sorry but unable to help – he decided to waive his right for compensation but write and produce three songs about his experiences.

The resulting first song got 3.5 million hits in 10 days and that was before it got picked up by the BBC, NBC, Sky and other global media corporations (at the time of writing it is standing at over 11 million views). Interestingly, it also got 28,000 comments from customers often relating similar experiences – e.g. **"You are my hero! And guess what? They break more than guitars. Upon arriving in Chicago from Los Angeles, one of the black rubber strips on the back of my suitcase was completely ripped off leaving 3 holes along the area where the protective rubber used to be. When I spoke to the "help" desk, the woman was completely rude to me and said they don't cover "protruding objects". A rubber strip on luggage is not a "protruding object" – it's part of it. I'll never fly with them again. Horrible airline!"** Despite being two years old now, it is still getting comments!

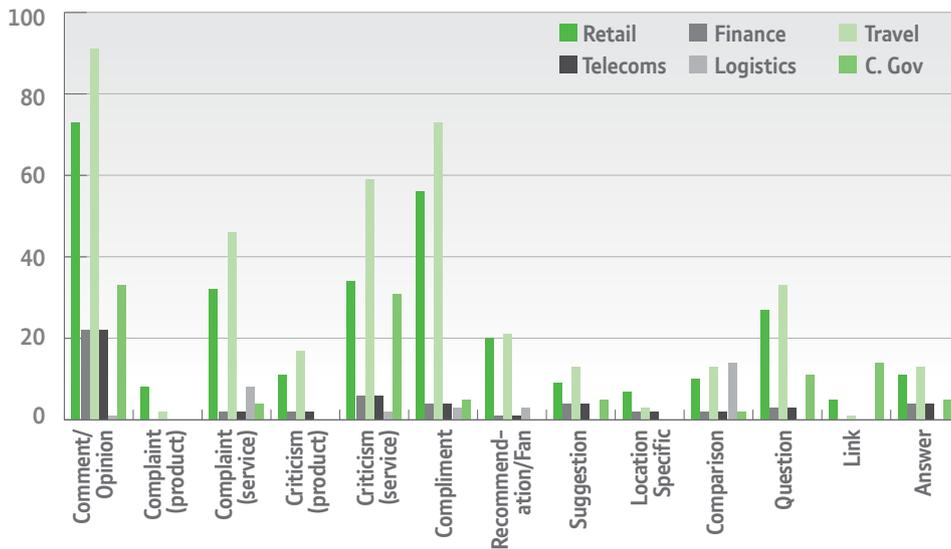
These type of viral campaigns are rare but being aware that they are happening is critical so that brands can start to limit the damage.

Sectors and social trends

There were significant differences between sectors in the analysis in terms of the type and extent of customer engagement over social media.

Retail/fast moving consumer goods (FMCG) and travel were the two top sectors in terms of social activity and finance and local government were the bottom two.

Where social is king: Retail and fast moving consumer goods



Retail and FMCG formed the highest proportion of social content in this study and is one of the most active areas in the social media space with fashion and clothing brands dominating the action. A substantial amount of the content in this study was on forums (83%) with 10% on Twitter and 7% on Facebook.

The key activities that customers did on social media for retail brands were:



The brands under study had very different approaches to social with one brand being very proactive on Facebook but not so much on other channels and one brand seemingly never responding to anything, even on their own Facebook wall.

It is that willingness to broadcast things on social media whilst ignoring customers who dare to engage that has been a particular criticism in numerous recent studies. Surveys in the UK and US have shown that between 25% ^[8] and 45% ^[9] of retailers are actively engaging with their customers on social networks. Of the brands under study here only one seemed to be proactively responding at all to customer feedback over both Twitter and Facebook. They were filtering feedback to the branch concerned and getting them to respond personally to the customer's comments – making the response extremely tailored and actionable by integrating the social channel into the retail operation.

The content of criticisms and complaints, as in other sectors gave a definite insight into the kind of issues that customers had with these brands and fuelling other customers to join the debate/sympathise/agree.

Typical comments ranged from:

“ **Criticism about online shopping:** “I will never use DepartCo for on-line shopping again! Broken items, lost items, premium rate phone line for customer services where you are repeatedly put on hold...totally frustrating experience. Finally found an email address to avoid yet another costly phone call, only to get a stock reply and then nothing. Do yourselves a favour – shop somewhere else!”; “They overbook grocery delivery slots – meaning a delivery 4 hours later than booked.”

“ **Inability to get a contact from traditional channels:** “Many calls to their premium rate number and still haven't received a refund. Most emails go unanswered; when they are replied I am asked over and over for information I provided before”; “The only telephone number I could find was an automated one and none of the topics matched what I wanted so I stayed online...without saying hello they put the phone down and cut me off, twice!”

“ **Ignoring feedback:** “Completed a “how are we doing?” survey. Gave constructive criticism. No response whatsoever”; “I posted a mostly positive review on their website but they've never published it. Why bother to ask for reviews if you never publish them?”

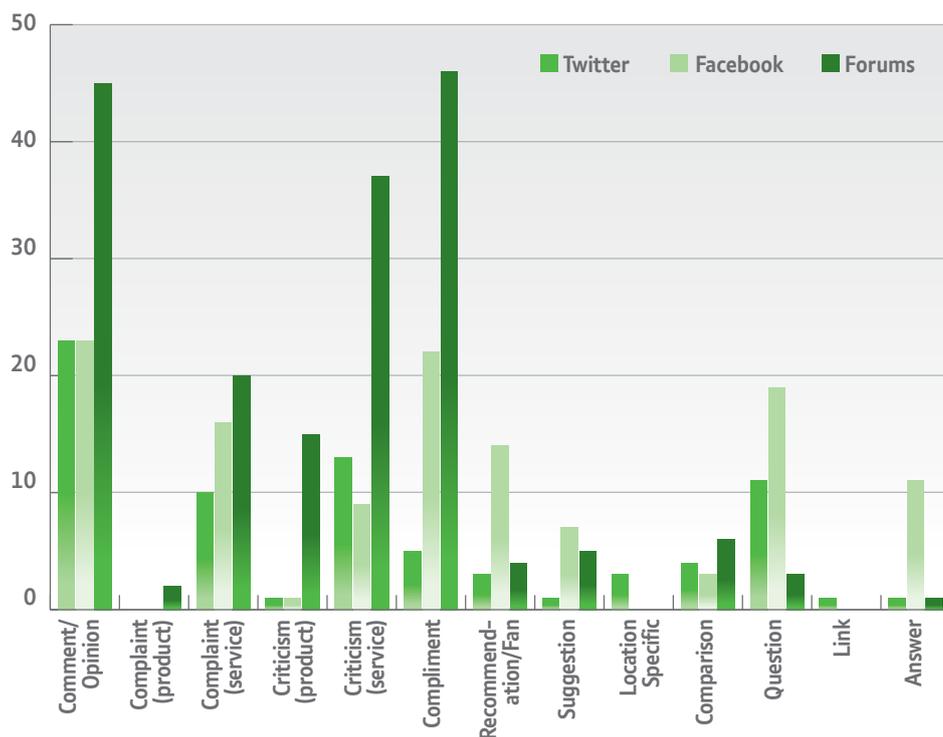
“ **Staff attitudes:** “Have just annoyed the cashier with my custom.”

“ But it wasn’t all bad, there was evidence of superb service as well: “After buying an outfit my mum got home and found the security tag still on. After phoning the store she spoke to the manager who explained she would get the matter sorted the next day. The same manager kept mum informed throughout the day and collected the outfit from mum’s house, took it to the shopping centre, got it detagged and bought it back to her. All in her own time!”; “My husband rang thinking it would be a lengthy process sending back to repair...we were pleasantly surprised by the result.”

Even if retailers decline to respond – and maybe the small proportion of questions from customers meant that they didn’t think that retailers would actually respond – these issues are good to know when building improvement strategies around customer experience. However, many of these issues are probably evident through other more conventional channels – if the right analytics are in place or suggestions from the front line are taken seriously and used to change the way that experience is delivered.

The veterans of social: Travel

The travel sector was also an area where a lot of social content was extremely evident.



Average results

1. Comment 23%
2. Compliment 19%
3. Criticism of service 15%
4. Complaint about service 12%
5. Questions 9%

The travel industry and social media have a long heritage from long standing review sites like TripAdvisor to travel blogs and now new location-based services like Foursquare and Gowalla. Travel is always a topic that can produce a fair amount of ranting, raving and recommending as there is nothing like travel delays, bad stays and lost baggage to make us very grumpy customers.



It is not surprising that the travel industry was one of the first industries to embrace the social web as a customer service tool, fielding complaints, enquiries and even the odd compliment. Certain travel brands are also responding very innovatively to the possibility of using personal social content to tailor customer experiences at the top end of the market (e.g. KLM's amusing experiment in mining social content to identify customers at Schiphol Airport and deliver them a small surprise [see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pqHWAE8GDEk>], Air New Zealand offering Foursquare mayors access to their business lounge and the Hard Rock Hotel San Diego tailoring guest experiences after searching past tweets to see what their interests are).

The study took a sample of two airlines – one budget carrier and another premium brand. A large amount of this content was on forums (50%) but the only surprise was that there wasn't more on Twitter (just 20% when compared with 30% on Facebook) since travel, the smart phone and Twitter seem to be natural bedfellows. This may well be that there were no renegade volcanic ash clouds, industrial strikes or bad weather during the two-week period of the snapshot!

The brands under scrutiny as part of this study had very different strategies where social media was concerned. Remarkably the perceived “low value” brand had the more proactive strategy where responding to customer contacts was concerned – tweeting apologies when flights were late, broadcasting updates on their Facebook page and offering vouchers for compensation when passengers were stranded. The higher value brand was far less visibly proactive.

The interesting result of the LoFlyer Facebook strategy was that it generated many customer interactions between brand loyalists and those who were using the site as a complaints channel. One rather prolific complainer (who posted eight times on Facebook, three times on forums and also five times on Twitter) got rather short shrift from a couple of the more loyal Facebook customers.

In response to a long rant about missing a connecting flight booked with the airline and the threat of a lawsuit, one loyalist responded – **“The contract clearly states that any connection you book constitutes a separate journey. If you book connections with low-cost carriers there's an inherent risk that something like this will happen. If you don't like it, pay for a ticket with a legacy airline”** and another backed that comment up: **“They're usually pretty accommodating if a schedule change or cancellation leads to missed connection and will often offer to change connecting flights free-of-charge, at least if you ask nicely. I have feeling you didn't bother asking them about this.”** An official representative of the company would be unlikely to get away with these levels of bluntness. This was illustrated when one LoFlyer employee who was reacting unofficially to a negative comment was sussed out by another complaining customer: **“And an employee is caught out???? You give traffic wardens a bad name.”**

As with other sectors there was a good deal of feedback about the experience through other channels:

- “ Your website has failed and no-one answers the phone.”
- “ I can't access your website from my phone.”
- “ I emailed HiFlyer customer services and still waiting for a response.”

“HiFlyer is better than most airlines, but if you have any customer service issues good luck! They do NOT have a call centre to handle customer issues – you must e-mail them. They don’t have any live person to take your call!! That’s the opposite of customer service.”

“I posted two comments to the LoFlyer wall about delays this weekend and both comments were removed. The point of social media is real time feedback from customers LoFlyer, or can’t you take the flak?”

There was an expectation of engagement on social sites and the brand strategy seemed to dictate the volume of these, with LoFlyer getting questions about flight delays and contact details but HiFlyer (who were not so proactive) getting very little engagement. There was an expectation of a slightly better service through social than through the traditional channels, however: “@LoFlyer. U have my contact details if u want 2 help. If ur limited by scripted response like ur colleagues, don’t bother!”

The other favourite topic of discussion about the premium brand was about staff attitudes:

“During takeoff and landing the crew were in a heavy and open discussion over their working hours and monthly income, as well as complaining about the ground staff and how inefficient the cabin service director was.”

“The worst part is the service provided by Flight Attendants, after pressing the button they switched off the signal without coming to your seat. Even for simple clarifications/request you would get a blank face and rude behaviour.”

“I will never fly this airline again. They must do something with their cabin crew. Rude and unhelpful staff. I will not recommend this airline to anyone.”

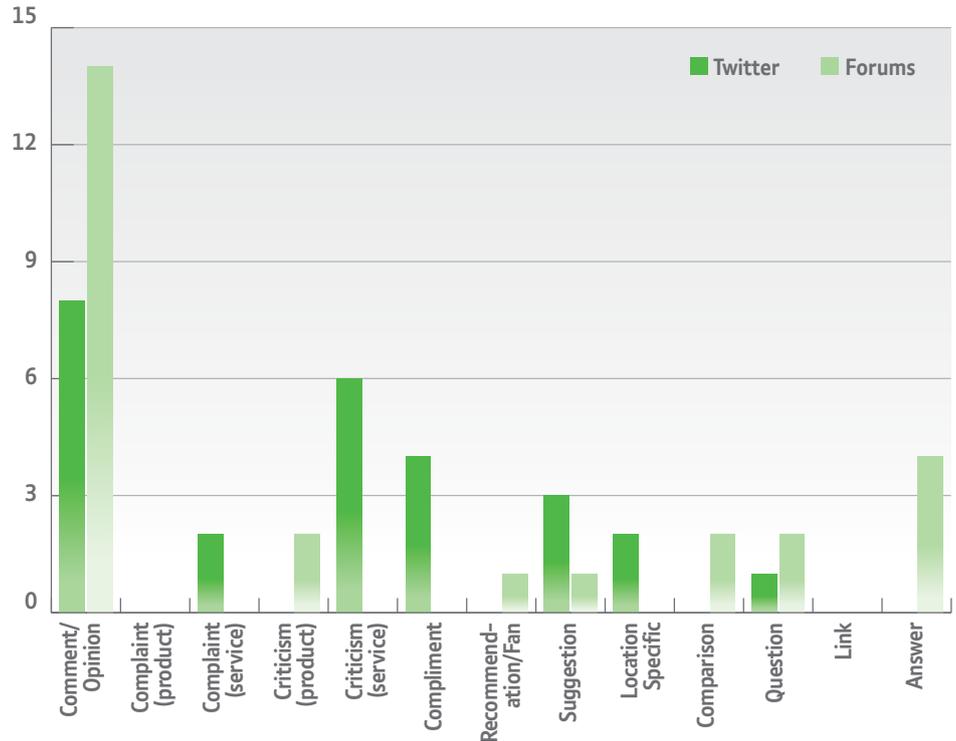
Social media and travel are seemingly a very comfortable fit with opportunities for real time updates and geography specific content especially appropriate. However, during massive disruption, social media can also be used by customers to mobilise each other in a time of high demand on traditional channels and high uncertainty as situations evolve.

During the extensive travel disruption caused by the Eyjafjallajökull volcanic ash cloud, many customers used Twitter and the #ash tag, #getmehome and #roadsharing hash tags to help put people up, offer them a lift home and offer advice where to stay, instead of relying on airlines and travel agencies. This was crowdsourcing in serious action!

Airlines were themselves keeping customers updated via Twitter, Alerts, Facebook, YouTube and their own home pages – for example, Lufthansa tweeted: “**We know phone lines still very busy. Extra staff added to call centre and airports. Doing our best, appreciate patience**” and were also attempting call deflection strategies: “**Cancelling your trip because of #ash? Put down the phone, you can do it online: <http://bit.ly/...>**” However, few were tapping into the hash tagging generated by the Twitter community themselves, which meant that their content was less visible.

Social media and travel are seemingly a very comfortable fit with opportunities for real time updates and geography specific content especially appropriate.

Banking on social media: Financial services



Social media and finance are not comfortable bedfellows – not least because compliance laws mean that financial services companies can't publicly identify an individual who has an account with them and can't provide unregulated financial advice – which makes responding to customer queries a legal minefield. This has understandably meant that banks have either steered clear of social media altogether or have taken only tentative steps into the space.

None of the financial brands in this sample had Facebook pages, so, of the content found, 42% was on Twitter and 58% on Forums but the volumes involved were significantly less than for any other sector, with the exception of local government.

The profile of social content was:



The bulk of the content (aside from that referring to major sporting events that these brands have sponsored) was not really about specific financial issues but the usual grumps and groans about contact centres, websites and channels:

“ Why have an international call centre that tells you to ring an English based centre to request statements!? Come on! @BrandBank! that's poor.”

“ Anybody else have a nightmare with @BrandBank! while abroad? It's cost me so much money for repeated calls! Indian call centres do not work!!!”

“ After being passed around from one call centre operator to the next (a total of 5 different ones) I managed to get hung-up on and still failed to get any sense out of the people I spoke to.”

“ I find 99.8% of your agents are uneducated, untrained, unhelpful save for the really well trained 3% who are helpful. Time and time again I keep complaining that you need to TRAIN YOUR PEOPLE, TELL THEM THE CUSTOMER IS THE LIFE OF ANY BUSINESS!!”

“ Wonder if @BrandBank! will reply to me on here before I have to spend another £10 calling them AGAIN!!! #customerservice???”

“ UX fail from @BrandBank! online banking. Don't mess about with common conventions and user expectations. #ux”

“ @BrandBank! Please fix your website. The forget username and password process is broken. Who's doing your QA?”

The customer expectation for any sort of response from banks through any channel, however, seems to be extremely low: **“undoubtedly you will be ignored by BrandBank. That has been my experience.”**

Research by Datamonitor^[10] found that only 6% of retail banks are using social media with customers and only another 1% suggested that it would be part of their strategy for the next year. Very few financial institutions have official Facebook pages – although some people have set up unofficial ones (generally hate pages unconnected with any of the banks).

First Direct, the UK online and phone bank, has ventured onto Facebook but tells customers on their front page: **“It's not a good idea to talk about your personal banking details in public, so if you have a question about your account or our products, we'd love you to give us a call so we can talk in private.”** They have succeeded in engaging customers in public discussions about the brand and their causes but they have also had success with a 'customer only' discussion board on their own website (beyond secure sign in) called the 'Little Black Book', talking about the essence of good customer experiences. This gives them significant insights into what their customers consider to be good service and gives them a benchmark against which they can compare themselves.

However, it's not just regulatory issues that are holding back social (media?) in a banking context; customers rarely talk about their intimate finance issues in public, so those conversations are unlikely to be had on social media either. The main customer issues are around trust, concerns about security and privacy of information, preferences around keeping their financial lives separate from their social lives and simply not seeing the point of accessing their financial accounts through a social networking site if the bank already has an online presence elsewhere.

Few banks have managed to convince people to engage in anything deeper – like accessing their accounts from Facebook or other social sites. According to a survey by Forrester in 2010^[11], 71% of US customers expressed little or no interest in accessing their bank accounts through social networking sites. However, 17% of online adults said that they were interested in doing this.

Social is a good listening tool for banks – as there are conversations going on about the effectiveness of their service delivery – but it may not be so good an engagement tool, unless it is behind the security of their own website.

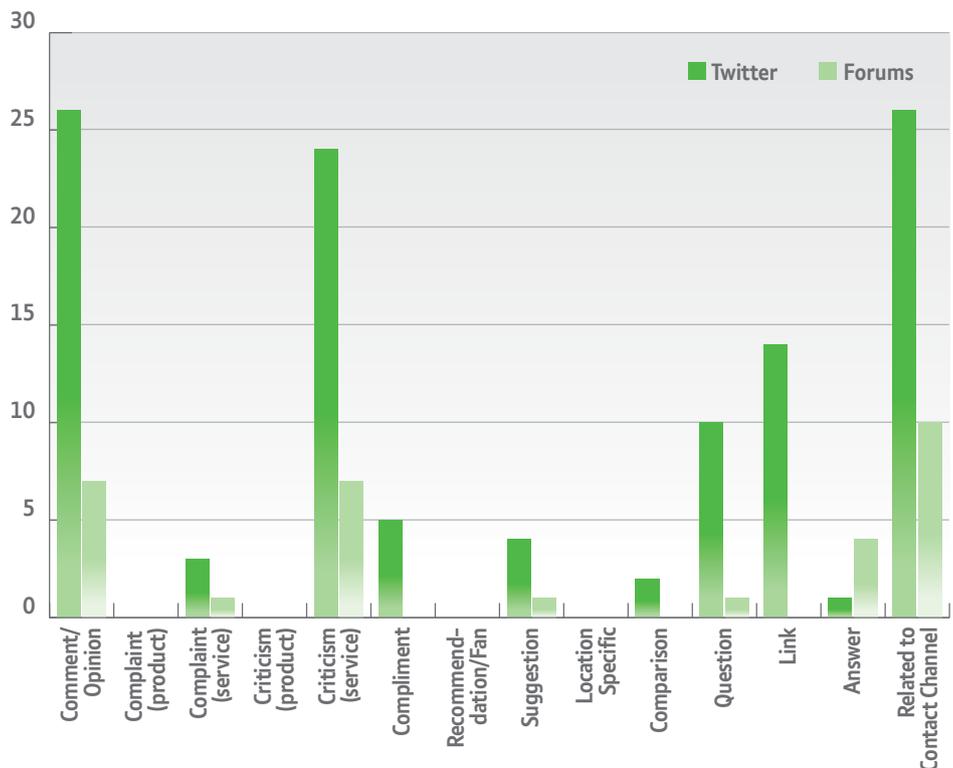
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Engaging the social citizen: Local and central government

Citizen engagement is something that is critical for government to achieve as the onus on communities helping themselves becomes an integral part of strategy in an age of austerity. Social channels seem to offer an ideal and relatively low cost solution to this process. The socially connected customer revels in two-way dialogue as citizens shift from customers to contributors. As a result, more and more government agencies are leaping onto channels such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter.

Both local and central government data was sampled in this study.

Central government



To put some context around the findings for this central government function, the research sample happened to fall in a week when a major mailing went out. This meant that there was a huge amount of activity hitting their contact channels and the failure of these channels to cope formed the bulk of the social data found in the study.

They may well have noticed that their contact centre was abnormally busy but, in case they were in any doubts, social media should have given them a clue as to the problems their customers were having getting in contact with them through any channel. Here's just a sample of their comments:

“ @GovCogovuk Your website is good, but please sort out the phone lines.”

“ Um, why in the world is #GovCo's hold music 70's porn music??? 12 minutes & holding. Someone please pick up the phone!!!!”

“ Dear GovCo please answer the phone!”

“ Anybody know if GovCo are on Twitter? ;-)
#onholdhell”

To compound things, once they did get through, they weren't necessarily getting the answers that they were looking for:

“ Classic customer support from @GovCogovuk. Reported an error. Advised to do exactly the same thing again. Unsurprisingly, got the same error.”

“ Almost exactly 50% of the time I will receive an exceptionally efficient and friendly response to my queries. The other 50% I will get an experience that makes my blood boil, be it through the sheer ineptitude of the patronising call centre drone I'm speaking to or their rudeness or usually a combination of both.”

Add to this, the website was also causing some problems:

“ Dear GovCo, if the “lots of information on [your] website” answered my question, I wouldn't subject myself to phoning you!”

“ Couldn't get into GovCo online today. Apparently if you paste in your ID it sneaks in extra spaces and you're rejected :- (#live&learn.”

“ Dear @GovCogovuk having this on webforms <link to photo> with no hint as to which is part of what makes dealing with you so hard work.”

As well as issues with more traditional contact channels:

“ Do you think I can tell GovCo that I will leave their letters and only deal with them 6 weeks after I received them? Worth a try.”

It seems that if organisations are having issues with their contact strategies then social media may well be a good place to gauge public opinion. Of course, the extent to which these issues are happening (and critically the true cost of failure for this) is likely to lie in the contact centre MIS (through abandon rates), CRM systems and in calls themselves (through call analytics). However, Twitter could be used to get a real time snapshot of significant issues in terms of things like website usability problems, contact centre volumes and response times.

Local government

The contrast between local and central government interactions was stark. The first thing to note was the complete LACK of customer conversations found about the local authority and police authority under scrutiny. Of course, the major difference is scale; central government has to deal with the entire population of the country whereas local is much smaller in terms of numbers. The other factor is the potentially diverse nature of the conversations which means that it can be hard to find relevant content in the noise. People could be talking about anything that the local authority does, ranging from pot holes to council tax payments.

Twitter could be used to get a real-time snapshot of significant issues in terms of things like website usability problems, contact centre volumes and response times.

“People don’t talk to local government, they talk to each other!”

Social media also defies geographical (and local authority) boundaries, so finding content specific to a location can also be difficult. The rise of geo-tagging (literally pinning social content to a location) may make this easier in the near future but it may still prove to be misleading as people may not be commenting on the location that they are in at the time of posting on a social media site.

However, there is another fundamental issue with citizen engagement in a local context which LGEO researcher Liz Azyan points out: **“People don’t talk to local government, they talk to each other!”** This would seem to go some way to explaining why there seemed to be next to no interactions going in the local government social space beyond messages which were broadcast out by the local authorities themselves. The promise for dialogue is there (and is attractive to local authorities interested to raise levels of public participation in local communities) but the public motivation seems not to be. This is also often reflected in the erosion of community spirit in the physical world (especially in urban areas where people rarely even know who their neighbours are).

The Local Government Information Unit (LGIU) ^[12] found that only 1% of local constituencies actually followed their local council on Twitter. However, that they also found that there can be compelling results in terms of cutting down cost and avoiding contact with initiatives like BwD Winter (from Blackburn and Darwen Borough councils) on Facebook reportedly saving 10,000 avoidable calls and nearly £8,000 during the heavy UK snowfalls in 2010.

This would imply that, for government, the social space may well be one largely to inform rather than interact. The simplicity of accessing social content might also help in an era where many local government websites remain confusing and complicated because they tend to be structured from an internal rather than a citizen perspective.

The other problematic factor around social media in local government is that access to it is frequently banned for council employees. This means that departments are often unable to either use or view content which is relevant to them – which makes it easy to ignore – or individuals take the initiative and access social sites using their own devices, which means that it is impossible to co-ordinate, measure and track on an enterprise level.

Another inhibiting factor is the public scrutiny that social media tends to attract – Twitter, especially, is like a large chocolate box for journalists. In an effort to minimise risk and limit damage, authorities often fall back on the traditional external communication approval process. However, with even an hour being a very long time in social media terms, these processes can be too slow and bureaucratic to be effective.

Conclusions: Reasons to be social

In the light of the evolution of the supercharged, superconnected so-called “autonomous customer”, power is often shifting from corporate to customer as they tap into the power of the social and smart technologies available to them. They are often cutting organisations out of the conversation entirely – talking about them behind their back and trusting customer reviews over official content. That in itself can be useful as customers help each other rather than relying on organisations to respond.

Brands are not always welcome on the social dance floor as customers are often not interested in deepening their relationship with corporates on social media. Issues with privacy and spam are rife and “liking” (especially on Facebook) may be more about getting special offers than engaging in meaningful dialogue.

The challenge on social media is to learn how (and if) it is appropriate to dance with customers. Engaging in social media with no intention to create dialogue is probably liable to get organisations a virtual slap in the face – they may just as well stick to broadcast channels. However, engaging in uncoordinated dialogue, especially if it isn’t linked in to overall channel strategies for customer experience is likely to get the same outcome. Not having adequate policies on staff intervening on social can also be a recipe for disaster.

Currently volumes are relatively low – or zero in some sectors (especially finance and local government) – but it is noise rather than numbers that counts here. The study shows that forums are often the noisiest with the influential Twitterati also creating a skew in terms of how viral things can get. Another thing to bear in mind is that social channels are often linked as tweets are fed into Facebook and LinkedIn, and customers complain across social channels about the same issue.

Clearly analytics can help companies to better understand the torrent of data being thrown at them from multiple channels and media. The good news is that analytics technologies are getting better at making sense of this unstructured space. However, knowing that the data is there is one thing – doing something about it in order to enhance customer experience is another. Using it to listen and improve or to listen and action is vital – and it is the degree to which this is embedded into customer experience business as usual that is likely to dictate the difference between a successful dance experience and a public vote for eviction. Established channels like the contact centre are critical for the success of social activities because they can act as a centralised repository for customer interactions across all channels. Treating social as part of a co-ordinated multichannel contact strategy and integrating it into a universal queue, along with appropriate service level measures, seems to be best practice in those companies that do social contact well.

Knowing that the data is there is one thing – doing something about it in order to enhance customer experience is another.

BT Retail's strategy with social media has harnessed intelligent systems technology developed within BT's Innovation organisation to help integrate social data into customer service business as usual. Called Debatescape^[3], it was designed to help facilitate a corporate voice on social conversations about the BT brand. It uses RSS feeds, open APIs and content scraping tools to obtain and pool user-generated content from online forums, blogs, and social networking sites such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube. Using a natural language analyser, Debatescape then sorts and classifies the content into various categories, and then accelerates this content to the appropriate expert customer service advisor who can deal with it. These advisors can then choose to take action on the customers' questions or problems and post their resolutions or responses to Debatescape, which then streams these replies back to the originating sites with the appropriate BT credentials. Debatescape has been running within BT Retail since February 2009 and helps BT to dance appropriately with its customers without the need for a "social service" department. By integrating social media as another channel into the overall customer experience strategy, co-ordinated and consistent responses across channels can be facilitated.

However, social is currently a secondary contact channel rather than a primary – places where customers rant, rave and recommend. Old channels like the phone, email, webchat and branch are still very trusted dance floors. If they fail, then social is often the place where customers go, often in frustration. The focus should, therefore, not drift away from these traditional channels. Get these channels right and a large proportion of negative social content will not be posted in the first place. Integrating social into the overall customer experience mix ensures that all bases are covered and the strengths and weaknesses of each of these channels can be fully exploited – especially in the event of emergencies.

So seek out your dance floors, figure out how to dance appropriately and in a co-ordinated way and then go and dance!

Integrating social into the overall customer experience mix ensures that all bases are covered and the strengths and weaknesses of each of these channels can be fully exploited – especially in the event of emergencies.

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