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Social media: Enabling touchpoints beyond advertising

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An effective customer service platform and a strategic communication channel.

by Kapil Tuli and Sheetal Mittal Bhardwaj

One of the most successful global social media campaigns is by the cosmetic brand e.l.f. #eyeslipsface on TikTok in 2019. It generated seven billion views and five million user-generated videos, spreading organically through Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter, with many celebrities like Lizzo, Ellen DeGeneres, and Reese Witherspoon joining in too.¹ This is just one example of how social media in the last decade has fundamentally and irrevocably altered advertising.

With more and more people spending time on social media platforms, business managers are excited about its pervasiveness and dynamism, as well as its ability to create an incessant buzz. This has led to the incredible success of many promotional campaigns. A case in point is Nike's 'Play for the World' commercial, a communal display of athletic feats that people were accomplishing indoors. Within an hour of its release on Twitter, it was shared by high-profile Nike-sponsored athletes like Cristiano Ronaldo, Tiger Woods, Michael Jordan, and Carli Lloyd on their social media channels, making it go viral in no time.² Similarly, another Nike commercial titled 'You Can't Stop Us', which tells the powerful story of athletes undeterred by any kind of adversity, clocked 23 million views on Twitter and 16 million views on YouTube within just 48 hours of being posted on social media.³ Or take the example of the athletic apparel retailer lululemon, whose marketing strategy includes putting considerable social media content on many platforms, attracting three million monthly unique viewers on its website, 3.8 million followers on Instagram, 2.7 million on Meta, and 990,000 followers on Twitter.⁴ Or consider Sephora's launch of its green eyeshadow on Instagram, and the huge response it garnered in a short time.

Clearly, with the advertising journey evolving from print, radio, and billboards to television, cable TV, and Internet display advertisements, social media is not only the next logical step but also the most rewarding for brands today. It is able to hyper-target its audiences, deliver personalised content based on demographics and user behaviour, and drive customer engagement through live conversations around the content. No wonder, the revenue streams of some of the leading social media companies such as Meta and TikTok are predominantly from advertising.

A CUSTOMER SERVICE PLATFORM

Social media's prowess is not limited to advertising alone. A fundamental difference between social media and traditional broadcast media is that the former is not only about broadcasting but also interactions. Social media platforms have evolved over time on two key parameters: richness of content, and degree of interaction with consumers. The richness of content refers to the amount of information that is provided to consumers through the medium in a given time frame. Degree of interaction refers to the scope of a two-way communication process with consumers, whereby they can react, as well as generate and disseminate content.

Until the advent of social media, while there had been a progressive improvement in the ability of traditional channels to provide richer content in terms of both information and visuals, it was only a linear improvement with negligible scope for any interaction with consumers. The communication had been essentially one-way, where the companies talk, and consumers listen. However, with social media comes the ability to interact and have a dialogue with consumers, enabling companies to use it as a dynamic customer service platform.

If you scratch beneath the surface, you will find many organisations are leveraging social media not only for advertising and promotions, but also for understanding and interactions, as well as providing customers with a platform to establish and maintain customer relationships. One such entity is Jun, the Spanish town that reportedly runs on Twitter, with more than half of its 3,500 residents having Twitter accounts.⁵ The mayor and his team trained them on how to use Twitter for verifying identification documents (IDs), reporting matters to the police, or making complaints about utilities. To foster greater accountability and transparency, town workers such as street sweepers also post messages about their daily activities on Twitter.

Another example is KLM Royal Dutch Airlines, which ventured into social media in 2009 with a basic Facebook

page and a blog. Over the years, it has sharpened its strategy by analysing and understanding consumer expectations and behaviour across social media platforms. KLM believes that it is important to provide different formats of customer service through a wide range of social media channels. Thus, besides enabling bookings to be made on platforms such as Twitter and Meta, it offers 24/7 customer service on messaging applications like WhatsApp, Facebook, Messenger, WeChat, and Kakao Talk in 14 languages. The airline asserts, "At KLM we are where our customers are".⁶ As of end-2022, KLM had more than 25 million fans and followers on social media channels. It receives over 200,000 mentions every week, including 35,000 queries or feedback.⁷

Recent market surveys by social media management companies Hootsuite and Sprout Social point out that most customers expect a real-time response from businesses on social media platforms. Of the more than 150 million people who message companies on Instagram Direct every month, 76 percent do so to request for customer service or support, 83 percent of them expect a response within a day, while 50 percent expect one within an hour.⁸ However, 49 percent said they never get a response to their social media complaint. Most companies are far behind in understanding the importance of responding to a customer's direct message, tweet, or query posted on the company's Facebook page in a timely manner. Responsiveness to customer queries on social media is critical not only because customers expect it, but it also makes good business sense. For example, a study showed that when a tweet to an airline is answered within five minutes, the customer is willing to pay almost US\$20 more for a ticket in the future.⁹ KLM targets a customer response time of less than 30 minutes to any query, and promises to resolve the issue within 24 hours.¹⁰

A decade earlier, most companies handled customer service primarily over the phone. That naturally meant that an employee could only serve one customer at a given point of time. But on social media, an employee can receive and send

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Bots are used to answer, regulate, and filter social media queries. If a query is not standard, it is handed over to the human interface, saving precious manhours in the process while engaging customers without any delay.

messages to multiple customers at the same time. Moreover, it is an asynchronous channel; this is unlike phone calls where an employee does not have to respond immediately and can take some time to find an appropriate solution for the query before replying to the customer. This enables a high level of efficiency and provides greater customer satisfaction. Going back to Jun's example, the Spanish town accrues more than US\$380,000 in savings, as estimates suggest that it costs only US\$1 to answer a customer query on Twitter, versus US\$6 per service call.^{11,12} This is in addition to building greater empathy between the government and citizens.

The use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) has further enhanced the efficiencies enabled by social media. AI-based algorithms can be trained as per a company's customer service protocol to produce preliminary responses to a customer. Digital bots, the next advancement in the domain, have improved the productivity of customer service personnel manifold. In fact, this silent transition in customer service has been unfolding over the last eight to 10 years—from 'one customer per employee at a time' service rendered on phone at a call centre, to an employee responding to multiple messages at the same time on social media, to a shorter response time using AI and machine learning (ML) tools, to using bots that can answer, regulate, and filter social media queries. If a query is not standard, it is handed over to the human interface, saving precious manhours in the process while engaging customers without any delay. Consider the example of KLM once again. Having consistently adopted the newest social media technologies, the airline has mastered how different levels of customer service efficiencies can be achieved on chat windows, be it a quick flight status update on WhatsApp/Messenger, or the use of AI to reply, or having its bot BB to provide solutions to passengers' problems.

A STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION CHANNEL

Some brands and organisations like KLM and Jun have figured out that the real advantage of social media is its value as a strategic communication channel, not simply because of the

tremendous efficiency it brings to delivering customer service, but also in how it enables public relations (PR) management, market research, and most importantly, social listening. Social media platforms are incredible in that they enable brands to actually listen to what their customers think, feel, and talk about in real-time. This is something that would have been unthinkable merely a few years ago, and a marketer would have paid an arm and a leg to access such data. Consider McDonald's, the fast food giant, which has more than 260 million followers. How can it afford to ignore them and not listen to what they are talking about, especially if a customer posts some concerns?

The real-time insights that social media provides enable fast turnarounds that are not possible through traditional consumer surveys. KLM and South Western Railway conduct sentiment analysis of online chatter to keep track of their customers' perspective and develop their communication strategy in line with the consumer insights drawn from it. A company can also drive effective PR through social media by showcasing its work environment, culture and ethical values, or corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives. Its employees or partners may also post about their positive experiences with the organisation online.

Additionally, social media can be leveraged to support functions such as operations. South Western Railway has located its social media team next to where its rail operations and emergency services are tracked and coordinated. Moreover, a monitor for social media is right next to the monitors that display comprehensive data on rail status, as well as train movements and conditions. The social media team runs keyword searches on various platforms to find any matters related to South Western Railway operations, and they often discover customer problems before the staff on the ground. This enables the operations team to quickly rectify the issue even before it is officially notified. Another example is National Australian Bank (NAB), one of the largest banks in Australia. To deal with the COVID-triggered rush of a 200-fold increase in social connections, the bank rolled out Apple Business

chat (iMessage) along with WhatsApp, allowing its customers to connect with its bankers by calling them via their iPhones or directly clicking to call when automatically prompted.¹³

The key reason behind the success of these companies in leveraging social media is that they have embraced it organisation-wide, thus investing in it as a strategic cross-functional resource. It is not done perfunctorily as a mere subset of their advertising budget, an operational style that was prevalent in the days of traditional media.

HOW TO BUILD AN EFFECTIVE SOCIAL MEDIA STRATEGY

Social media is an imperative in today's world for companies to be able to reach out to their customers, have a meaningful dialogue, and achieve higher levels of efficiency in customer service and operationally. But a business must adopt a social media strategy that is coherent, consistent, well-thought-out, and in alignment with its corporate vision. This will not happen without purposive effort and planning. Here are some key steps that a firm can adopt to build an effective social media strategy.

Audit the current strategy

As a first step, a company should perform an audit to evaluate its current social media strategy and identify the gaps in resource allocation by asking the following three critical questions:

1. How much time do your current and potential customers, employees, and other stakeholders spend on social media?
2. What percentage of your communications budget, i.e., advertising, market research, customer service, and PR, is allocated to social media?
3. Is the answer to (2) in sync with (1)? If not, why?

Say, a company finds that 75 percent of its customers spend two hours a day on WhatsApp, while its own presence on the platform is limited. This is a big red flag. Why would you not be where your customers are? In Asia and Europe,

most small and medium enterprises (SMEs) are setting up their WhatsApp business accounts because they know most of their customers are on it, and it would become seamless and effortless for them to communicate with the company and vice versa. Hence, if a business is not active on the social media platform frequented most by its customers, it needs to ask itself—why not?

Budget this strategic resource right

The biggest challenge in the implementation of social media is not that the domain is a quagmire that is too complex to navigate, or the technology is too difficult to understand—it is in breaking down the organisational silos and liberating the budget allocations. Because under typical budget planning, there is a tendency to subsume social media under the marketing budget and forget about it. But companies have to go beyond these silos. It is important to view social media as not only a marketing, advertising, PR, customer service, market research, or human resource expense. It has to be treated as the organisational strategic resource that it can be and then budgeted for accordingly.

Put in place people and protocol

At the same time, a piecemeal approach to opening a social media account and assigning a few people to it won't cut the ice. It is important to understand the size of the customer base on the identified social media platform. What would be the protocol if a customer sends a message to the business on the platform? Who will decide the response, and who will execute it? What would be their authority levels? This would help the company determine the resources that it must allocate to social media to begin with. The budget would expand later with the natural progression of social media from advertising to customer service and social listening as well. Moreover, the larger a brand with a significant social media following, the higher would be the scale of investments required. With 350 service agents who personally address

each customer concern, KLM has one of the largest social media teams among airlines worldwide.

Train, train, and train

A business manager must guard against the company treating social media as a plug-and-play platform by designating people to manage it without training them. It is paramount to develop and invest in a dedicated social media team. For example, KLM's social media team has expertise in communications, e-commerce, customer care, ticketing, marketing, operations, and cabin crew. It also includes press managers, social media and campaign managers, online reputation managers, and an editorial board comprising technology and metrics specialists. The airline has a comprehensive training programme which staff must complete before being allowed to manage its social media.


Inadequate manpower and poor training can cause massive bad publicity like what British Airways faced in 2013. A passenger's tweet about his lost baggage was not responded to for more than seven hours, as the airline's social media team worked only from 9 am to 5 pm.¹⁴ Disgruntled, the passenger paid US\$1,000 to promote the tweet "Don't fly @BritishAirways. Their customer service is horrendous" that went viral.¹⁵ A social media opinion against a company can adversely impact its brand equity in the long term besides the immediate sales.

Mind the language

Along the same vein, a company needs to understand that social media management is not only about learning how to use the technology and chat windows, but also understanding the nuances of representation and linguistics. First and foremost, it is important for social media personnel to understand that they represent the company and hence cannot post their personal points of view. Anything they write would be seen as a formal statement of the company, which becomes a matter of record and can be reproduced endlessly.

Second, the language or visuals have to be carefully chosen, as they can be perceived differently from the intended message by customers. For example, the tweet by Burger King on International Women's Day 2021, "Women belong in the kitchen", which was meant to promote scholarships for culinary education, was widely misinterpreted and the company had to issue a public apology.¹⁶ Similarly, in 2020, when Netflix tweeted a poster designed by its team depicting young girls in revealing dance outfits to promote the French language film *Cuties*, an examination of the sexualisation of young girls, it triggered a huge backlash with #CancelNetflix trending.¹⁷

CONCLUSION

Social media needs to be embraced by the whole organisation as a strategic resource. It is vital to have an organisation-wide unified approach with different functions aligned to sending consistent messaging, and also tapping into the efficiencies that social media has the potential to unlock. Business managers need to understand that learning to manage social media is a journey of evolution that comprises one step at a time, trial and error, figuring out what works and what does not, fine-tuning it, and then scaling it up. 

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