

The Rules of Engagement

Companies put themselves at risk in the marketplace if they don't address social media with effective monitoring and engagement.



By Andrew Brooman and Dave Ditmars

Ring ... ring. Ring ... ring. RING ... RING!

To John Cronce, director of consumer affairs at Jockey International, this is the familiar sound of consumers contacting him. Yet this ringing isn't coming from the phones in the call center, it's coming from the Internet: from consumers using social media to express their opinions and request assistance.

Whether or not you are leveraging social media, it's clear that it's here to stay: 80 percent of Americans who communicate online participate in social media. Twitter has about 75 million active users, of which over 6 million are new each month. And, on average, each Twitter user has 27 followers.¹ Facebook has 400 million users—half of whom log in daily! One hundred million users access Facebook from mobile devices.² And, 33 percent of the North America's 253 million Internet users read blogs.^{3,4} As companies participate more in social media, consumer affairs will, without a doubt, need to engage more in social-media dialogues.

Consumer products and services companies face risks in the marketplace if they don't address social media with effective monitoring and engagement. In 2009, informa-

tion management firm Convergys' research revealed that one negative comment on social media by a consumer can influence 30 customers to defect. One in three consumers affected by bad service share their problems on the Web, and each post on a social-media outlet reaches an average of 45 users. Sixty-two percent of study respondents reported they would stop buying products about which they read negative things.⁵

The Role for Consumer Affairs

Marketing and corporate communications departments of consumer products companies have been monitoring traditional media for decades, analyzing consumer sentiment and maintaining good public relations. With the meteoric rise of social media, recent attention has been focused on the flood of consumer-generated communications originating from blogs, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and the like. Social media is becoming a cornucopia of consumer praise, criticism and questions waiting to be leveraged by savvy corporations. However, corporations are faced with a wide variety of problems to solve, including analyzing consumer sentiment, deriving detailed insights, determining rules of engagement, what to say, etc. While there are no clear-cut guidelines, one

thing is apparent: There is definitely an important role for consumer affairs to play.

Keep in mind that marketing and corporate communications departments are traditionally focused on the big picture: Do consumers like a new product? Are they offended by an advertising campaign? Should we pull sponsorship for an athlete? The role they take with social media tends to be focused on this big picture as well. Their tools tend to aggregate data into simple statements like: 67 percent of recent tweets mention our new product in a favorable tone. Responses tend to be crafted by copywriters and vetted by expensive lawyers to be distributed to a wide audience.

But hidden beneath this big picture is a mosaic of details—consumers expressing frustration that a product was discontinued or service was slow at a particular location, or asking how to apply a product or where to purchase it, and yes—even praise. Sound familiar? These are the communications that consumer affairs has been handling effectively for decades, just through different channels. In the beginning, there was traditional mail, then the 800 number, then email, then chat and now social media. Do you remember how each time a new channel was incorporated there was a conversation about how this

issues. You will analyze trends and report back to quality assurance and product management as you always have. And finally, you will engage the consumer in conversations on their preferred channel, whether that be Facebook, Twitter or the-next-big-thing. Remember, consumer affairs already has many of the tools in place. Reps are already trained to handle mail, telephone, email and live-chat communications. Pre-approved answers to most inquiries are already available and knowledge bases are at-hand for quick reference. Social media can leverage these assets as well.

Susan Baranowsky, who is director of consumer affairs at Campbell Soup, explains that her company has embraced social media with consumer affairs “engaging and monitoring conversations to identify and help consumers at their point-of-need by providing information or assisting unsatisfied consumers.” In addition, the company recognizes that its own employees are using social media and often encounter information related to the company online. So last summer, Campbell disseminated “Guidelines for Personal Social Media Postings by Campbell Employees.” “We continue to find ways to educate employees in this area,” she says. “We also have created a Social Media Advisory Committee consisting of members from legal,

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time it’s different—a game changer? But it wasn’t. It was just another avenue for consumers to reach you. Social media is just another means of communication.

Consumer affairs needs to embrace social media the same way it has all the other channels, but it needs to handle it differently than marketing or corporate communications does. The social-media landscape will need to be divvied up so that the big picture goes to the “big picture” people and the day-to-day conversation goes to consumer affairs.

You will need to leverage social media the same way that you leverage emails and phone calls. You will derive detailed insights about specific brands, products and

public affairs, consumer affairs, IT and advertising representing our divisions and brands.”

Jeff Hagen, who is director of consumer services at General Mills, is heavily involved with social media. “While many brands are actively engaging consumers who choose to interact with them via Twitter and Facebook,” explains Hagen, “our consumer services team is called upon to become involved in conversations where consumers have problems or want to discuss controversial issues pertaining to our products.” In addition, he says that consumer services is “actively monitoring” brands that don’t yet have a social-media presence and is joining conversations or responding to problems about those products.

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Gaining Actionable Insights

Initially, some companies adopt a one-directional approach to addressing social media. They monitor consumer mentions of their offerings; collect, analyze and report the activity in a scorecard fashion ascribing sentiment characterizations of “positive,” “negative” or “neutral” to comments. This approach to social-media intelligence collection is analogous to a digital clipping service where clusters of words, such as “sodium, trans-fats, BPA and green” are supplied to Web search engines to find all relevant mentions in targeted social-media outlets. Ascribing sentiment characteristics to mentions enables companies to compile polls that support claims that, for example, 70 percent of consumers like the new product. While quantitative analysis provides value, it is not sufficient to explain why the consumers like the offerings. To companies’ greater benefit, social media enables them to take the next step to find that out.

To gain actionable insights, mentions in social media need to be coded in a fashion similar to traditional contacts; simply coding with sentiment will not be sufficient. First, mentions need to be filtered and reviewed, as not all mentions are created equal. For example, while mentions such as “Yum, enjoying a Kit Kat during my break!” are nice to know, they are not really actionable. However, mentions such as “I can’t find my favorite hair color anymore—was it discontinued?” are just as actionable as an email. Once actionable mentions are discovered, they need to be coded with the same level of detail as a contact, with a product and issue code, for example. Then you will be able to produce reports that derive actionable insights from social media just as you do for other channels. And you may be amazed at what you discover!

“Product reviews are the richest source for us,” observes Cronce. “Social-media consumer reviews provide specific, measurable feedback that guides us toward improving profitability. Read them. They are like those insight-laden phone calls that customer care contact centers have been receiving for decades. For product reviews, we focus on Amazon.com, Macys.com and Jockey.com.

“Companies like ours can benefit from monitoring social media to discover consumer reactions and insights

that can improve business results, our bottom lines. Consumer affairs contact centers already learn from the individual consumers who contact them directly what it is they want from their company’s offerings. But, now what about those millions of consumers who prefer to express themselves to each other only on the social Web?”

At Campbell Soup, social-media mentions are collected for specific brands and topics, says Baranowsky. For example, brand managers want information pertaining to brand image, price and cost perception, product usage, consumer usage and perception. These mentions are aggregated monthly and quarterly, and the brand teams then work with advertising agencies to develop consumer outreach programs and blogger events.

Engage the Consumer

Social media is an interactive form of communication, unlike print, radio or television, which are primarily one-directional. Consequently, simple monitoring—reviewing commentary—is giving way to proactive engagement, where companies participate with consumers in online conversations.

A key finding of a recent study from The Center for Client Retention is that the majority of social-media consumers react positively when companies respond to their comments. This finding underscores the importance of social media as a vehicle to learn what consumers think, as well as a way to enhance companies’ images, reputations and brands.⁶

“This is a significant finding and reinforces the value of monitoring social-media sites,” says Richard Shapiro, The Center’s CEO. “It’s critical for companies to be aware of the fine line between using social media to connect with customers and being in a constant selling mode.” Companies that adopt a bi-directional practice with social media can achieve that desirable “wow” factor of surprise and delight. As social media is still new, “customers are pleased when they receive our social-media responses to concerns they’ve expressed on social media” says Sarah Meenach, former consumer relations manager at Bob Evans Farms.

Of course, companies should be cautious when making public replies to individual consumer postings.

Therefore, companies that respond to social-media commentary can benefit from adopting rules of engagement and best practices that involve all internal stakeholders: communications, legal, quality assurance, product management, manufacturing and marketing.

Responding effectively to social-media commentary requires understanding the etiquette of the medium. For example, one company's early experience began badly. It replied to postings on various social Web forums. Forum members, however, considered the company's responses to be selling and banned it from posting ever again. In another instance, the consumer receiving the company's response felt it an intrusion into his personal conversation.

In contrast, Jockey's experience has been positive. Its customer care center is selectively importing consumer reviews into its contact handling system and responding privately when appropriate. The company is extracting actionable insights about its offerings just as it does with its direct consumer contacts. And its customer care representatives use the same approved outbound messages that it uses for other established communication channels.

Cronce elaborates: "We've begun responding to consumers who post product reviews online and leave an email address, inviting us to dialog with them. On our website, when we can say something useful to a wider audience, we post a response to the individual consumer's review." Due to the private nature of its products, much of their outreach does happen privately, although Cronce says that they do engage in public discussions "when appropriate and monitor social-media outlets where we are welcome to respond to comments and can add value."

At Campbell Soup, consumer affairs is leveraging long-established relationships with marketing, public affairs and interactive marketing to identify situations where consumers need assistance with quality issues or have products and services questions. In many cases, the marketing teams have individuals who are responsible for handling difficult conversations that occur on company-sponsored social-media sites, such as Facebook fan pages. Public affairs and consumer affairs

are part of these teams and provide input and counsel, according to Baranowsky.

Use the Right Tools

Specialty vendors are providing the tools now being used to monitor, analyze, report on and engage with social media, including Clarabridge (text mining), BuzzMetrics (market intelligence), Radian6 (monitoring dashboard), Techrigy (sentiment tracking), Cymfony (influence analytics), Visible (brand protection) and Wilke/Thornton (monitoring and responding). They also collect commentary with Google and Yahoo alerts, which are free services that scours the Web for mentions. And they establish accounts on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube to direct consumer commentary to company-controlled venues.

Many social-media monitoring tools simply determine which products are mentioned most and what percentage of people like or dislike a product or service. They can also provide ways to report how happy or unhappy customers are and who are the most influential commentators. But without engaging in a dialogue with these consumers, companies will not necessarily discover why consumers have specific reactions, feelings and opinions, and what the companies should do to make their brands better. Consider doing as Jockey's Cronce suggests: "Ask for a monthly trend report on a specific topic, and see how it looks. These days, we can't afford to spend on technology that we can't link clearly to an ROI. The value must be demonstrable."

With the right social-media monitoring and response tools, companies can go beyond reporting trends of sentiment to uncovering specifically what consumers like or don't like about particular offerings—the taste of a soda, the texture of a candy bar or the feel of a seam on an undergarment. By default, consumers using social media can be a "focus group" resource, ready to be tapped for advantage. And consumer affairs can report communication channel trends, comparing findings across channels—telephone calls, chat sessions, emails, letters, social Web mentions and texting. They can discover and report social-media commentary that contains content that needs priority handling.

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Therefore, consumer affairs will require tools that seamlessly integrate social media into their existing operations, and leverage existing assets such as trained reps, policies and procedures, prewritten responses, knowledge bases, reporting systems, etc. For social media to be useful, it must be treated with the same care and precision as direct contacts. If it is, then you can engage consumers and derive insights without worries.

For Campbell Soup, social-media monitoring is evolving. “At first, we relied on free tools such as Google and Yahoo alerts, Keotag [tag search multiple Web search engines], and general Internet searches,” explains Baranowsky. “Campbell’s marketing, public affairs and ad agencies are now using Visible’s tools, so consumer affairs is transitioning to them, short-term, as well.” She also says that they have established a corporate-wide email address so employees can “alert consumer and public affairs if they see a statement about Campbell in blogs, on websites or Twitter, or in other social media that may merit a response or correction.”

For General Mills, incorporation of social media into consumer affairs is well underway. “In the coming months, we will be acquiring text analytics software and engaging a provider for a data pipe to feed us records of conversations and postings taking place within social-media channels that mention our products, competitors and topics of interest to the company,” says Hagen. “We intend to create dashboards of information for each of our brands that join social-media topics with the information from our consumer services contact tracking system that will update automatically with each update of the data pipe. We will create alerts for specific issues and words, as well as for significant increases in the volume of discussion taking place on topics or for significant changes in sentiment by brand or topic.”

The Future Is Now

As social media evolves over the next few years, companies will continue to pursue actionable consumer insights and use new tools to support interactive dialogue. Social-media monitoring and response tools will evolve and become better integrated with existing consumer relationship systems, and consumer affairs will handle this indirect social channel just as they do direct contact through established channels such as mail, email and phone.

As social media grows, consumer affairs will need to address more conversations using smart “tools of engagement” to quickly filter the irrelevant from quantifiable sentiment, parse consumer

issues, escalate the actionable for timely resolution and capture insights for improvements that contribute to their companies’ bottom lines.

For Jockey’s Cronce, the real issue becomes “what impact social media will have on business—how clearly the link between social media and profit can be linked. Jockey’s engagement of social media is driven by profitability in its direct-to-consumer channel, whether the value of insights gleaned, or the impact we have had on consumer shopping behavior. In one of the toughest economies in the last 100 years, it’s a safe bet that social-media engagement will be carefully funded.”

@consumer: Hello, how may I help you? **CRM**



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notes

1. Twitter statistics for user engagement, Rotorblog.com, February 2010.
2. Statistics, Facebook.com, February 2010.
3. Statistics, Pewinternet.org, February 2010.
4. Statistics, Internetworldstats.com, February 2010.
5. Alastair Jamieson, “Silent Majority Risk Worse Customer Service as Companies Monitor Twitter, Facebook,” Telegraph.co.uk, December 13, 2009.
6. The Center for Client Retention, “Social Media Benchmarking Composite Report,” January 2010. (See Page 39. This report is also available through SOCAP at www.socap.org.)