

Lithium

the changing dynamics of
customer care



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we help companies unlock the passion of their customers.

The Lithium Social Customer Suite allows brands to build vibrant customer communities that:

abstract

Customer care is “going social” and there’s no turning back. The market has spoken. That means it’s important to keep a strategic focus on the three C’s: Customers, Communities and Contact Centers. Each plays a distinct role in contemporary social customer care. This whitepaper focuses on the ways contact centers — forced by the need for massive scalability and internal social data management — can strategically leverage the social web and peer-to-peer forums to gain value from the socialization of all interactions with customers. Evolved contact centers drive marketing success as well as overall business success through a repeatable process that results in faster ascension to “customer advocacy” and hence a faster time to sales through direct, measurable benefits (like fiscal ROI) via gains in NPS or similar satisfaction-based customer lifecycle value methodologies.



customer care: the new marketing outpost

Customer care is the new battlefield in the fight for brand advocates. Whether you view this as an expansion of Operations into Marketing or the simple necessity that marketers increasingly focus on customer experiences both pre- and post-sale as significant drivers of measurable conversion, the end-game is the same: Marketing and Operations—what is promised versus what is delivered—fuse in Customer Care, where they form the experiential basis for the majority of the brand-related conversations happening now on the social web. It's a trend that is accelerating and as such has become a prime challenge for CMOs and COOs.

This whitepaper dives into the new social dynamics—the new role of the customer as a brand advocate and the ways in which proper attention to the social conversations occurring on Twitter, Facebook, in peer-to-peer support forums and in blogs can either wreak havoc inside your purchase funnel or be the most important driver of measurable bottom-line gains you're likely to find anywhere. The following sections lay out the underlying themes, drawing in presently observed customer behaviors and connecting to the best practices and immediate actions through which you can tap into and take advantage of the social web.



customers, communities and contact centers

Most remarkable about the transformation of customer care is the simultaneous rise of customer-driven assistance and the adoption of social networking, fueled by web-enabled phone with their ubiquitous connectivity. Whether directly answering each other's questions about a brand, product or service on the social web or working together in a moderated support community, individual consumers have recognized—sometimes correctly and sometimes not—that they are as able to resolve their own support issues as well as any “800” based agent whom they may have called on in the past.

And, they can do it without automated attendants, without having to repeatedly punch in the same basic information into an IVR and without having to comply with a rigid phone service schedule. “If you’ve reached this number after hours it means we’re not here right now.” Yah, no kidding.

Popular as they may be, clichés about traditional customer service—the primary interface between most brands and most customers—do a disservice to the overwhelming majority of trained professionals who really want to help, are eager to solve, who take pride in their work and are bullish on the brand they work for.

It's important to recognize the real value that human agents add, too, because there is an entire class of issues that require or can be made better with an agent's assistance: rebooking a ticket, seeking a refund or return authorization, inquiring about an order status, initiating a funds transfer and more. Many of these are real-time and considered “urgent” by the person calling, adding complexity and expense to the mix. So while the mechanics of the service transaction itself may be in flux, the requirement for an agent is likely a reality for the foreseeable future.

At the same time, customers are, simply, more empowered. From the self-serve web pages of the 90s to the secure online business applications that are now as close as your smartphone, customers have moved rapidly toward individualized commerce and service models, and more importantly, self-sufficiency. That means that anything that can be solved without talking to an agent is fair game for peer-to-peer self-service in a support community or similar forum.

Even more so, it means that anything that does require an agent had better be as available, as frictionless and as satisfying as what the best self-service platform can offer up. So, as an operations or marketing professional you have to focus on all three Cs: Customers, Communities and Contact Centers.

Of the three, perhaps the biggest challenge facing business today is effectively integrating agent-based customer care processes with social media and doing it in a way that scales to meet thousands of daily social posts without breaking the bank.

The consumer expectation is that your agent is as available and ready as that smartphone app and adds those uniquely human elements of compassion, understanding and expertise, all with zero wait time. That's a tall order. But that's the order the marketplace and demographic shifts have evolved toward, and now it's up to you to deliver. Because if you do, the conversations around your brand will help you sell more. Think Zappos.



today's problem. yesterday's tools.

Social customer care is rapidly coming of age, in theory at least. The promised business benefits include cost reduction and more timely, in-channel responses. Being where your customers are makes sense, and amortizing a single solution incidence over a larger customer base, reducing calls and reducing expenses in general are typical promised benefits.

In fact, a lot of self-serve and peer-to-peer models were implemented based on a projected ROI rooted in call reduction and deflection. But that's probably not the biggest benefit, and is almost certainly not the primary benefit going forward.

Instead, the real benefit is visible public advocacy for your brand. How so?

Stop for a moment and consider the following: Your customer (or even potential customer) has an issue and calls your help line. Your phone agent pleasantly and quickly solves the problem and thanks the customer for calling. Your customer hangs up happy and gets on with life.

But what your happy customer doesn't do next is notable: your customer probably doesn't call three friends to share this experience. Instead, that customer hangs up the phone and concludes use of that support channel, because that's what customers have been trained to do: Make a call, resolve the issue, hang up and then move on.

Now consider the same interaction on the social web: Your customer posts a question in the hopes of gaining resolution in public, where your customer gains social leverage. Besides, someone out there just might have the answer! You see the post come in through your listening service (you are listening, right?) and watch as your brand representative resolves the issue. Now wait for it...because you know it's coming: Your happy customer says "Thank You!" in public, kicking off a series of retweets and likes that traverse the social graphs of all those connected. You just picked up brand points — points that go right into your brand value bank account. And this account definitely earns interest.

When you combine the dynamics of social with the real need for advocacy the question of tools naturally arises. The social media marketing solutions are well-established, but as the name implies they were built for marketing.

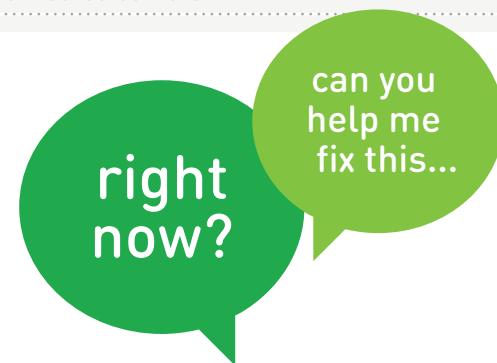


platform property	marketing	support
purpose	listen and monitor	engage and triage
currency	trends	1:1 conversations
success metric	share of voice, reputation	satisfaction, time to response
measurement	quarterly	minutes
work environment	shared ownership	individual accountability
social success	retweets	case resolution
typical response	"thanks!"	"how can we resolve?"
location	headquarters	distributed centers

Customer care is different.

For light-duty or one-off responses nearly any solution can be made to work: Google Alerts, a branded Twitter presence and a handful of social media agents can get you started. But what happens when your customers turn on in large numbers and begin to expect that you'll answer their posts? You know the answer, and it has something to do with a fan.

Take a look at the table below: It outlines the biggest differences between the marketing solutions that are available and the enterprise-grade customer care solutions that you really need. As you read through the table, think about how many of these points you've heard mentioned by your own Operations and Service managers when sitting in social media marketing capabilities presentation: The two disciplines really are different.



As you press toward customer care as an undeniable source of advocacy, scalable response capability and cost reduction, the differences between marketing solutions— built to answer the question “Generally speaking, what is being said about the brand” and customer care, where the question is “Can you help me fix this right now?”—and what’s needed in operations could not be more different. Hammers are great for nails, and when all you have is a hammer a lot of things look like nails. But take a closer look: Customers’ posts on the social web are nuts and bolts that can be used to build advocates. And instead of a hammer, what you really need is a wrench. This is the new generation of purpose-built tools for social customer care, built by design to do a better job.

in search of a better answer

Top analysts across the industry have their own points of view on a lot of industry trends. But they all agree on at least one thing: Social technology is becoming more important. Research firm Gartner projects that 40 percent of the top 1000 companies will have some component of peer-to-peer support as a part of customer care by 2015. That same group, plus some share of the remaining 60 percent will also likely be investing in equipping their existing agents to respond to social media posts either sent directly to the brand, or, mentioning the brand directly, by name, in the post itself. That means businesses, across the board, are going to demand agent-based solutions for social customer care, both as a front-end response and as a complement to their to investment in peer-to-peer social care efforts.

Agent-based social customer care—at scale—is all about systematically ensuring “better answers that delight your customers and drive sales.” It’s about participating directly in the larger context of social care, of communities and the channels through which customers are serving each other. By building a combined presence in self-serve and peer-to-peer support communities and equipping your direct support agents to respond at scale and guide your customers to the best solutions you ensure the long-term success of your brand. By helping customers to participate, to take ownership and to resolve issues in partnership with your customer care team you build loyalty.

As your agents increasingly find themselves in social—rather than phone-based—interactions, it will be essential that your customer care infrastructure can scale to thousands of posts per day and switch seamlessly between agent-based and peer-to-peer resolution modes. Both are needed, and they must be tightly integrated.

Building social customer care at scale—across all channels—is therefore the new frontier in brand marketing: By pulling customers and agents together as collaborators, by encouraging the resolution of issues in public and training the entire organization to participate and support social efforts, savvy organizations greatly increase their likelihood of success as they press forward. The social web is a boon to consumers seeking an empowered voice, to be sure. But it’s also the way in which winning brands will build loyalty, drive innovation and convert thousands of customers into brand advocates. In an increasingly connected world—think “customers, communities and contact centers”—the empowered brand advocate is the new prize.



about the author

As vice president of social strategy, Dave Evans brings his vast experience in social innovation to connect our customers' requirements to Lithium's product roadmap. As an industry recognized social media strategist and practitioner, Dave has worked in social business consulting and development for over four years. Most recently he worked internationally with India's 2020 Social and its clients, including Bengaluru International Airport, Intel, Dell, PepsiCo and United Spirits, with Philips Consumer Business Unit (Amsterdam).

Before that Dave held leadership roles at Austin's GSD&M (now Idea City) and worked with clients such as Southwest Airlines, AARP, Wal-Mart, and the PGA TOUR. Dave is a frequent keynote speaker and in-demand social strategist in Fortune 1000 companies as well as early ventures. He is the best-selling author of "Social Media Marketing: An Hour a Day," and his second book "Social Media Marketing: The Next Generation of Business Engagement."

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