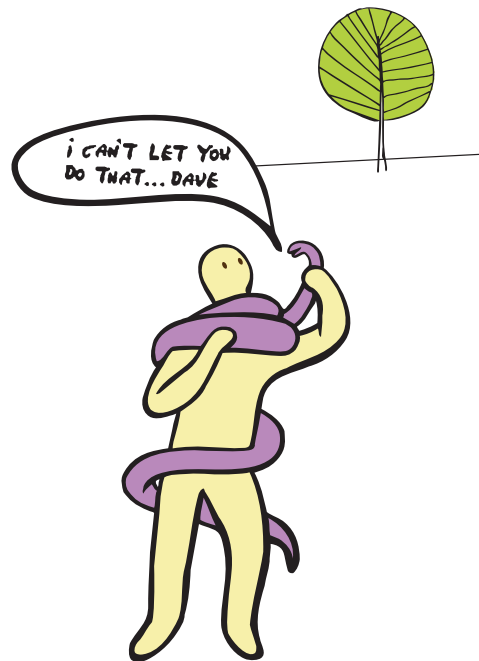

Handling unhappy (*and happy*) online customers



Recent research from Accenture has identified that 36% of adults in the USA want to contribute to user generated content websites (UGC). Although UGC is generally perceived as posting content on community sites such as YouTube or MySpace, the research implies that customers are increasingly likely to rate and discuss their experiences of companies online. This affect is now recognised as increasingly critical to the decision making process of customers when evaluating a company / brand / product versus its competitors.

However, it's difficult for organisations to evaluate and monitor what customers are saying about them online. It's trickier to decide what to do about negative comments or other actions by disgruntled customers. Of course, there is always the legal route, but this can be expensive and may be a killer for brand reputation (*remember the cinema chain who suffered much brand flak when it shut down an 'accessible' version of it's site developed by a customer?*). Today, a brand's reputation is being transformed by its customers' online experiences. So, what can organisations do to mitigate the risk of negative comments and what should be done about the bad comments that appear on third party sites?

Working on the basis that things do go wrong and that some customers won't get the level of service that they expected or promised here's a quick list of things

to do to avoid negative comments being posted.

Follow-up with your customers

Shortly after you deliver a product or service to a customer send an auto-email to the customer to check that they're satisfied (*you could include a rating system in this*). A reply should be flagged to the appropriate people (*automatically*) who should take prompt action. If the customer is unhappy they are most likely to post to a third party site within 48 hours so you've got a very small window to turn them back into brand advocates.

Don't be HAL

When we had a problem with the customer service team at one online retailer, we entered into a prolonged discussion with a nameless individual we nicknamed HAL. If you're going to provide online service then give people someone human that they can relate to. If the customer can humanise the service representative the chances are that they will let them know there's a problem rather than writing it elsewhere.

Put feedback forms on your site - and follow them up

If customers can't send feedback to you then they're going to put it somewhere. Often customers will go back to the website where they first found out about the offering and look to make a comment there.

When we started working with a client in the bar and club business one of our first recommendations was to put in feedback forms across the sites to let any unhappy customers throw their punches at the business rather than to the general public. Aside from taking heat out of the online reputation of the brand it has also meant the client can spot problem areas earlier and act on them.

Make sure the customer knows what's what. Ensure the content throughout the site is relevant and appropriate and provides pertinent help and information. Simply put, if the customer's expectations are unrealistic then they're much more likely to be disappointed.

Encourage brand advocates to post

If a customer has had a good time then encourage them to post it online. Of course, many customers may do this anyway but if you put it in your feedback mechanism so that happy customers are reminded about it then it may encourage them to do so. Although there are a few examples of brands paying bloggers to write nice things about them, this is risky because as soon as a commercial relationship is exposed then the blogger in question loses all credibility and the brand receives negative flak.

Link to positive, objective reviews

If you've got a great review or profile at an independent site then link to it. AOL undertook research that showed that 60% of users switch brands based upon their online experiences. That's phenomenal! If you have good positive reviews that are objective then your customers are likely to rely on them rather than negative comments from someone they don't know.

Talk about the negatives

When an organisation displays customer feedback at their site there is a case for including some negative customer comments as well. This allows a public response to the issue and should add credibility to a brand's trustworthiness. However, we've yet to find an example of an organisation exhibiting this behaviour online...

So, what to do if a customer does post negative stuff about you?

Try to respond

If the UGC site will allow you as an organisation to respond to the customer comments within the context of their site, then this is the most effective method. However, any comments need to be clearly identified as coming from you. To post as a 'jolly

“An unhappy customer is most likely to post to a third party site within 48 hours”

customer' in a blatant attempt to boost positive ratings is dangerous and if applied in the midst of a mire of negativity will likely be discovered and exposed by regular posters.

Ask for untruths to be removed

If the customer's complaint is false or unworthy then it's appropriate to request that it be removed by the website owner as it's not unusual for comments to be falsely posted by unscrupulous competitors.

Check to see if it's true and learn from it

If all the comments at a site refer to a particularly poor feature then there is a lesson to be learnt. Act on it.

Keep calm, carry on

There may be nothing that can be done - some people are simply unhappy with how it worked out for them. Just hope that more people are saying good things and that your site is search engine optimised so that when customers type in the product, brand or company name, you appear above any UGC sites.

To monitor your service delivery beyond the confines of your website then you'll need to track UGC reviews at applicable sites. You probably know which sites they are anyway, but a search on Google or Yahoo will quickly identify any. We recently attended a round-table discussion on online customer service and one of the issues raised by attendees was the difficulty in measuring their service reputation performance online. Perhaps we will soon see an extension to Google analytics where we will be able to see, at a glance, our ranking and long-term performance in a similar way that you can now for marketing goals.

In conclusion

The power of customers to shape brand perception online through comments about their own experience cannot be ignored. A new site recently launched in the US called <http://dotherightthing.com/> allows users to highlight companies doing good and bad things and then to create a ranking for them based upon the number and severity of the individual posts. Although focused on online services at the moment a similar model could be quickly and easily deployed for banks, restaurants, shops or indeed any sector. As more customers comment on UGC sites and their search rankings increase they're likely to evolve into key referrers or dissuaders for all market sectors. Power to the people - possibly.

This is what we do...



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