

Managing Customer Loyalty Challenges by Using Social Media

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ABSTRACT

Loyalty evokes a strong sense of emotion in human beings and is one of the pillars that support successful relationships. Business relationships between brand and customer are no different. When a consumer feels loyalty to a particular brand or product, they tend to stay lifelong supporters and champions of the brand. They promote the product to their peers and continue to look forward to and purchase newer models, editions, etc. Since its evolution and subsequent adoption, social media has changed the way businesses interact with their customer's and audience. This new dynamic has created a unique opportunity for businesses to connect and build brand loyalty with their customers. Because of its simplicity combined with immediacy, social media is an ideal way to reach out to or talk about a particular brand, product, or service. It has also paved the way for businesses to create a two-way dialogue as they can now directly connect with their audience and customers in a very personal and timely way. Successful businesses have recognized the direct link between social media and building brand loyalty. The two-way communication allows for the two seemingly separate entities to connect and build relationships that scratch deeper than the surface. And because of the volume of people that social media can reach, it increases the chances of developing and cultivating new loyalties. Present Paper has descriptively discussed various factors and issues related to Building Customer Loyalty through Social Media

Key words:- Customer Loyalty and Social Media

1. MAIN TEXT

Customer Loyalty and Social Media

Customers should define your marketing strategy. Without a targeted user base, a social media marketing plan is unsuccessful. Customers should involve in deciding the marketing budget, strategic plan and creative process for the company. While this customer-centric marketing concept is easy to understand, it is sometimes neglected in the marketing process. Building brand loyalty is important to maintaining a strong customer base, and personally understanding customer's demands that will pay dividends throughout the organization. One issue marketers run into when attempting to strengthen brand loyalty is communicating why the customer should be loyal to the organization's mission, services, and products. Social media is a competitive edge that often needs brand advocates to ramp up their marketing strategy to stand above the rest. It's important to analyze how to maintain a customer base, while continuing to foster brand's reach. Customers can be engaged by employing following steps to ensure brand loyalty.

1. Reward Testimonials: People want to feel appreciated and the best way to show them appreciation is to reward. Current customers can help the organization with customer acquisition strategy through their positive testimonials, so make customers feel appreciated for their contribution. It can be accomplished by running a photo/video contest, or simply support them through a social media channel. Also, consider the promotional benefit B2B testimonials perform. For example, environmentally-focused companies want to provide testimonials to companies in the sustainability industry because it helps showcase their commitment to the environment.

2. Returning Customers: For customers who have purchased a product and/or service, treat them to a discount on their next purchase. This not only demonstrates your gratitude, but lets them know they are a valued customer. Target this discount/promotion to returning customers on your social media platforms, and ask them to 'Like' or 'Follow' you before claiming the offer if they haven't already done so.

3. Customer Service Program: In order to guarantee your customers are happy campers, it's important to have a customer service strategy in place to address concerns and complaints. This is extremely crucial when monitoring negative comments on social media networks. Don't ignore the problem in hopes that it will go away. Rather, take an immediate, direct approach to each customer's concern. This will position the company as a brand that cares about their customer's satisfaction.

4. Unique Value Proposition: People want to know what makes you stand out. In other words, why should customers pick your company over a competitor? Therefore, it's necessary that your company develops a UVP that reaches the targeted audience, and communicates why you're worth their investment and time.

5. Competitors: Find out what shared or potential customers are saying about the competitors. By performing a competitor analysis report, one can avoid common pitfalls, and situate the brand as a thought leader in the industry. The common saying: "Learn from others' mistakes" is significant in cultivating relationships with current and potential

customers. Not only should the customer feel loyal to the brand, the brand should also feel loyal to its customer. This means that the brand stays true to who it says it is and continues to develop in a way that is in line with their branding, messaging, and mission statement. In turn, there are many customers who only purchase products made by their favorite brands because they believe and trust in the brand. These lifetime users are more likely to recommend the brand to friends and speak highly about the brand on their social channels. Word of mouth is one of the most popular forms of advertisement and it's no doubt that social media helps contribute to its popularity. People are constantly talking about what they have, want, or need on their social networks. Before consumers make the decision to purchase, they often check online to read reviews from peers or see how people are reacting to the product or service. Smart, social media savvy brands take advantage of the honest, unfiltered feedback from online users and use these platforms to their benefit. Brands can reach out to those who are positively advocating their products and thank them for their support or offer a discount. These small gestures will go a long way in building customer loyalty. And because sometimes a customer may have a negative experience with your product or service, when a customer does reach out to voice their displeasure, it's important to react quickly. Customers know that sometimes things can go wrong, and they're usually willing to forgive it if you can rectify the situation in a timely way. What they won't forget is when a company does not bother respond to their complaint or responds too late. Your timely response can often time be the deciding factor in turning a detractor into an advocate. Social media is an easy channel for customers to reach out and, in turn, your company to respond. Social media allows for brands to quickly and easily directly engage with their audiences proactively. Whether you're reaching out to a brand new customer or a lifelong advocate, the key to maintaining a successful relationship is staying engaged. Just like any other relationship, there needs to be communication between the two parties. While it may seem like a no-brainer that companies would want to build brand loyalty, not all brands are taking advantage of the ways social media can help them achieve this. Social media provides businesses with all the tools they need in building loyalty online – the players, the outlets, and the means. Take the time to follow these simple steps and start building and cultivating online brand loyalty today.

Social Media and Changing Customer Loyalty

There is no denying the influence of social media on the way that we as human beings communicate on a daily basis. The impact of the digital age will be felt even more in the future if things continue on the same path that it is currently. Not only have we been put in contact with each other like we have never been before, businesses are making the most of social media networks as well. Since the majority of people in the country are constantly on social media sites at all hours of the day, companies realized that they had a whole new market to reach. But how would they do it without slameless promotion? With social media sites like Facebook, companies from every industry are gaining from a new found connection with their customers. Since people are constantly updating their activity streams and current states of being, businesses are also able to update their clients and loyal customers with special discounts, offers, and marketing endeavors. A really great thing about being able to do this is the fact that they can connect with their customers timely. People are connected through sites like Foursquare, Twitter, and Facebook and enjoy the intimate bond that can be formed directly with owners and managers of businesses. Social media networks open the doors to new types of customer experiences by connecting you with them when they are a few feet away from their stores. Many companies have interactive collaborations with social networks in order to bring customers special discounts and notifications of new opportunities at any given moment. Many social media networks are accessible by such devices as the I Phone, Android, and the Blackberry, which give companies a 24 hour window for advertising to the countless masses. Sites like Facebook, allow artists like Alicia Keys to reward the loyalty of their customers and fans by allowing them to listen her new album before anyone could even buy it. Not only does this give an exciting interactive experience for the fans, but it allows for new ways of self promotion in the music industry. Foursquare is the first choice in loyalty reward programs for many. They send out information to smart phones anywhere that people find themselves shopping. This means that not only the company sending the notification will have an increase in sales, but the location that the customer is pointed towards will also profit from this type of marketing. For companies that offer many common products to the masses, this means that they are able to maximize the exposure to their target audience like never before. For many customers, this type of marketing brings a new and innovative way to shop and be entertained in the modern age. Social media is changing customer loyalty programs also by identifying problems through monitoring what people are saying about their brands. They also join the conversation to show that they are listening, to clear up miscommunications, or to add clarifications. As an example, Rackspace Cloud Sites have had problems where Robert Scoble acted as a channel of information to their customers on what is happening in real time. Instead of having to wait for quarterly reports to see where a company shines or is in need, they are now able to have instant response as to the impact of that particular promotional project or product. The amount of time and money wasted before is astronomical, and in retrospect, was a very unnecessary expenditure. Having the ability to track their customer's behaviors and patterns in buying gives company priceless information about the way to further market a particular angle. Sites like Zappos have been building more personal relationships with their customers by allowing their employees and executives to communicate directly with the public/marketplace. If this is a sign of things to come, we have a lot to look forward to here soon.

DECLINING CUSTOMER LOYALTY AND COMPANIES RESPONSE

Various studies point in the same direction: customer loyalty is disappearing in a hurry. Consumers put less trust in brands and tend to switch brands a lot faster. The famous 80/20 rule (20% of the customer's account for 80% of the turnover) has turned into a 60/40 rule (40% of the customers generate 60% of the turnover) and is slowly evolving towards a 50/50 rule. In the latter case, loyal and disloyal customers generate the same amount of income. This shift is putting quite a few established marketing tactics in doubt. Should marketers invest less in loyalty programs? Or should they invest more? Should marketers favor proven methods such as investing in mass media?

Brand Inconsistency

On the one hand it's no surprise that brand loyalty is on the wane. Apart from the odd exception, top brands aren't able to retain their status as market leaders as long as they used to. A loyal customer base can melt away in twelve short months. Many of Nokia's loyal customers switched to Apple or Samsung without a second thought. On the other hand, consumers do tend to attach themselves to certain brands. Research shows that consumers are prepared to commit to up to five brands as long as they provide a clear added value. Consumers have an emotional attachment to these brands. As a result, loyalty to these brands is almost self-evident. In other words, there exists a certain brand paradox in the world today. People like specific brands while putting less trust in brands in general.

Factors of Customer Loyalty decline

Several causes explain the decline in customer loyalty:

- **Companies can't keep up with rising consumer expectations.** In recent years, declining customer loyalty has been an issue for most companies in spite of heavy investments in service improvement. This is because the consumers' pattern of expectation is evolving even faster. Consumers don't compare a company to where they were a year ago; rather, they compare companies to the 'best-in-class'. If Amazon doesn't question a faulty delivery and deals with the problem immediately, consumers will expect the same of their local supermarket. The best examples create expectations across all sectors. Companies with a certain history and an older infrastructure have trouble coping with today's rate of change.
- **Loyalty programs are missing their mark.** Many companies thought there was a shortcut to creating customer loyalty: the loyalty card. However, all the latest studies agree that loyalty cards slash profit margins on existing customers. Instead of creating loyalty you're really losing money. Loyalty is not for sale but must be earned.
- **Digitization makes everything transparent.** The world is becoming more and more digital. The fast adoption of smartphones and tablets has further enhanced transparency. Today, more than half of the consumers use their mobile devices to compare prices while shopping. If a company or brand doesn't provide a clear added value then consumers will shop for price. The online world has made price transparency very accessible, a trend that spells danger for any company out there.
- **Focus on individual touch points instead of on the customer experience as a whole.** Companies are divided into various departments, with every department being responsible for the customer's experience of one specific aspect of the customer relationship. There's hardly any contact between the sales and after sales departments and invoicing is housed three floors down. Few companies take a holistic approach to customer relations, with just one person in charge of every aspect of the customer relationship. In a recent article in the Harvard Business Review, McKinsey claimed that disloyalty is caused by a lack of understanding across the various touch points rather than by customer dissatisfaction with a single interaction.
- **No unique relevance to consumers.** When customers are disloyal, they are really saying that a product or service was not relevant enough for them to remain a customer there. The product or service in question didn't stand out from the competition. In recent years marketers have launched scores of innovations, often a new flavor or packaging. Too little thought is put into the role a brand has to play in consumers' lives. The relationship is too rational in nature instead of emotional.

Everything becomes a commodity

The five causes of declining customer loyalty described above all point in the same direction. Digitization has created a rift between the consumer's expectations on the one hand and what the average company is offering on the other hand. The ever-increasing transparency is turning nearly every industry into a commodity industry at a record pace. The problem with a commodity industry is its high focus on price. Some sectors even find themselves competing against a free alternative. For instance, free online content is becoming the bane of the printing industry. When paying solutions no longer have an edge on the free alternative, the outcome is predictable.

Remedies

According to popular theory, there are two ways to escape the commodity market. On the one hand a company can work more efficiently, making it possible to sell its products cheaper. On the other hand, you can offer a unique added value, thereby reestablishing differentiation so you can charge higher prices again. In today's society, though, this theory should be revised. Rather than an 'or' question, we are now looking at an 'and' question. If companies are to

survive, they will not only have to work more efficiently; they will also have to build a unique added value for their customers. Organizations should explicitly ask themselves: what is our place in our customers' lives? What is our relevance to their lives? The answers to these questions provide the basis for devising a new method of approaching customers. It all starts by approaching customers with a transparent story that goes beyond mere product information. In addition, modern consumers expect companies to act properly on three levels. Ranked in order of importance according to the customers themselves, these are:

1. Treating customers well: customers primarily expect an excellent and proper treatment.
2. Treating employees well: companies that exploit their employees or use child labor can get into trouble.
3. Doing good for society: customers like companies with a sound world view. While they don't expect companies to wear a cassock, they do expect them to make a difference in a way befitting the company's identity.

To meet this expectation, the story needs to be the same on all three levels. A company like Ben & Jerry's is a prime example. They make delicious, high-quality products. Their employees and customers are treated the same and meanwhile they've started working according to fair trade principles. The overall picture fits, which enhances Ben & Jerry's credibility on the market. No wonder Ben & Jerry's boasts an above average customer loyalty. This means you can't boost customer loyalty through a simple marketing trick. A new customer program is not the answer and a new ad campaign won't solve the problem either. The solution is not to be found in the marketing department (alone). Instead, we should look to the company's top echelon. Those on the highest rung of the corporate ladder should have a clear vision of the added value their company has to offer and they should be able to translate that vision for their employees and customers. Getting your story straight on every level is the first step towards reaffirming customer loyalty

MODERN MARKETING AND CUSTOMER LOYALTY

Along with the rise of the cloud, it's also about the rise in complexity in connecting with the modern customer whose behaviors, activities, needs and expectations are changing in real-time as they embrace technology to improve their everyday lives. And part of that improvement is geared towards using technology to gain more leverage from vendors they choose to form relationships with – including using filters to limit the ever-growing amount of noise blasted at them in the form of emails, tweets, texts, etc. So as modern customers get better and better at using technology to improve their lives, it's important for businesses to use modern marketing techniques and strategies to improve the likelihood of capturing their attention long enough to build meaningful relationships with them. And as illustrated in the below image of the Pyramid of Customer Loyalty, it takes a great deal of time, effort and resources to go from click to customer, to loyal customer, to brand advocate and finally trusted partner. Because it's getting tougher to consistently make successful trips up the pyramid with customers, Oracle Eloqua has identified a mix of five key marketing competencies they believe contribute to marketing success today:

- Targeting
- Engagement
- Conversion
- Analytics
- Marketing Technology (includes workflow automation, marketing automation, integrated CRM, social monitoring and biz intelligence)

According to a recent study BtoB study of SMB marketers commissioned by Oracle Eloqua; these marketers feel they are operating at approximately 65% of what Eloqua has identified as being optimal in terms of what it takes to be an "ideal" modern marketer. Ideal Modern Marketing percentages, targeting and engagement are the two biggest challenges, as they are in business overall according to the graphic. It also signals that we're still very early on in the adoption cycle for marketing automation tools in general. When looking at an Aberdeen Group survey from last year on B2B marketing technology adoption, 98% of those surveyed use email marketing and 86% use landing pages in their marketing toolbox. The numbers drop significantly to 69% for reporting/analytics, 62% for lead nurturing, and 55% for lead scoring. Modern marketers know that it's about creating attractive experiences all across the customer lifecycle. This includes needing a better understanding of who should go on that customer journey, what that journey should be like, and how can we create enough great experiences along the way to ultimately make that person a customer for a long time. To make that customer feel like a valued part of our team – not just adding value by way of their wallet, but also by collaborating with us to create even better products and services – and then helping to spread the word about them. Going back to the Eloqua survey, smaller companies are more reliant on technology overall. Both SMBs and marketers in general feel they can improve their technology adoption and usage strategies, as well as the development of engaging content, and efficient conversion techniques in conjunction with sales. But marketers in smaller companies are more committed than bigger marketing organizations to using digital marketing technology. And as the below figure shows, the most important thing they need from marketing technology vendors is help with using the service to understand how they can find the right metrics to help them understand the right actions to take, at

the right time, with the right customer/prospect to keep relationship building process moving efficiently. This is more important to them then:

- 35% more important than getting a quick ROI
- 2.5X more important than training on how to use the system
- 3.7 more important than needing the service to be cloud-based
- 6X more important than attractive financing

SMB marketers understand that it's a new ballgame, and they can't do things the way they did in the past. In order to get up the pyramid with customers, they realize they need a better strategy, made up of better processes, implemented with better applications, in order to create better experiences for customers and prospects... to entice them to go on this journey with them. This should get them closer to being ideal, modern marketers today. More importantly, it gets them closer to the modern customer. Social Media as a Tool to Build Brand Loyalty

Remember life before the Internet? What about life before social media? It's scary to think that these tools are not that old. It makes us wonder! **How we ever lived without them.** We can now instantly communicate with others whether they are in the same city, the same country, or halfway around the world. Not only have the Internet and social media made it easier and faster for us to communicate with each other, but these tools have also helped companies significantly. Before social media became the buzzword of today, companies found it challenging to gather feedback about their products, services and brand. Most of the time, companies didn't know how customers felt, especially if they weren't happy. Some may have written a letter or some may have expressed their feelings to a store manager but companies didn't truly know what their customers were thinking. It's definitely a different story today, with the Internet and social media, anyone can express their opinion about anything, making it much easier for companies to gain feedback from customers. Whether it's a comment posted on a company's Facebook page, a hashtag on Twitter, or a picture posted on Pinterest or Instagram, customers can now express their pleasure or displeasure at any time. This is extremely valuable.

Improve your products or services

There is always room for improvement, no matter how amazing your products or services are. Think of Apple – they have superior products and great customer service but they are always improving and developing. Listening to what customers have to say through social media allows your company to get a firsthand look at what consumers think about your products or services, which gives you a sense of their overall view of your brand. Let's say you sell pens and you're seeing many customers complain online that the ink bleeds all over the page when they write. Knowing this allows you to take action and fix the problem so that your customers will be happy and continue to buy pens from you. Think about it - if this situation were to happen when social media didn't exist, you may have no idea that customers were experiencing this problem! By listening to what customers are saying online, you are ultimately going straight to the source so that you can resolve issues faster.

Build and maintain strong relationships

Social media makes it easier than ever to develop strong relationships with your customers. It not only gives your business a platform to keep customers up-to-date with the happenings of your company, but it also allows you to humanize your brand and give it some personality. With this, you are able to develop relationships with your customers which they will notice and appreciate. They want to be able to connect with your company and be heard. By listening to what customers have to say, you can address any issues they may have and possibly turn a negative experience into a positive one.

Manage your reputation

The Internet is great for sharing information instantly but this can also be a bad thing. Negative information about your company (even if it's not true) can spread like wildfire and quickly destroy your company's image. Luckily, social media can help you address both positive and negative comments. Be sure to thank or reward people who step up and say great things about your company and brand. Not only does this make the person feel great that they are being recognized but it will encourage others to voice their support as well. When it comes to negative comments, the worst thing you can do is ignore them. Remember Lulu lemon and their transparent yoga pants? At first, they were ignoring comments by posting on their social media accounts about unrelated topics. This only made customers angrier that the company wasn't acknowledging their complaints. What you should do instead is address negative comments as soon as possible. This will allow you to take action and solve the issue which will make those customers happy. Ignoring them will only make them feel like you don't care about their business, which could make them switch over to your competitors.

Stay Ahead in Competition

We've discussed how listening to what your customers have to say online about your brand can help improve products or services, relationships, and your reputation, but you can also gain excellent information about your competitors. For example, if a competitor has come out with a new product or has implemented a new marketing technique that seems to be successful, you can use this to help improve your company's own strategies. Also, if you see complaints about a

particular issue, this can help to prevent your company from making the same mistakes. As you can see, listening to what your customers have to say about your brand and company is extremely important in order to stick out from the crowd. If you don't, customers will feel ignored and you risk losing them to your competitors. Come out on top by investing in a social media listening strategy that will give you great insights on what your customers are thinking. You have probably heard over and over again that the notion of "loyalty" has all but disappeared in the past few years. With an abundance of options to choose from, little seems to be truly effective in retaining current customers and turning them into brand loyalists. Is all hope truly lost, or is there a secret recipe that can keep your guests coming back? As a matter of fact, there is and it's called social media intelligence. So what does this business buzzword mean? It's knowing what your customers want and providing it consistently across your locations. Marketers and operations managers ask themselves 'what do customers want' everyday. The smart ones use a social media listening tool to learn what their customers actually say they want in real-time.

Acting Intelligently

Social media intelligence can be used to remedy a variety of issues in any business. A certain hotel chain got comments from guests that the complimentary Internet provided in the rooms was too slow and unreliable. While it was possible to improve the Wi-Fi quality by switching providers, managers were uncertain if the issue warranted such a hefty investment. So what did they do? You guessed it. They turned to social media intelligence. Majority of the guests in that particular hotel location cared more about the great location and the killer breakfast buffet. Still, there were those who minded the Internet and threatened not to return. The manager then came up with a cost-effective solution based on the social media feedback – provide reliable high speed Internet for a small fee. A few weeks after the decision, complaints about "weak signal" and unreliability virtually stopped, and the flow of regulars increased. Remember loyalty is rooted in exceptional service. It is essential to provide superb service and address your guests' concerns – but first you have to know what those are. Just don't do it alone, find a tool that fits your team's needs.

Techniques for Building Customer Loyalty with Social Media

Social media connects you directly with customers and provides a venue for building customer loyalty. Remember that there's more to social media than a post here and a tweet there. Keep these five tips in mind when it comes to social media.

Keep your word

Keep your promises. Yet what often happens is that companies get so caught up in offering exclusive discounts and offers in an exchange for a "like" on their page that they forget to deliver. But the great deals that were promised aren't delivered. Companies promise to tweet "you don't want to miss this" news, but their tweets are few and far between. Loyal customers feel betrayed, and they start looking elsewhere. Make your social media accounts – and the promises you make on them – a priority.

Listen and respond

Ignoring a question, complaint or concern from a customer via a social media site is like not returning a voicemail left by a customer. Eventually that customer gives up – and probably tells a number of his/her friends about the bad customer service he/she received. When you have a social media presence, you create another way for customers to interact with you. Treat compliments, questions, complaints and concerns the same way you would if they were sent via email or phone.

Be consistent

Think of your social media presence the same way. Why should customers trust you if you post updates or tweet inconsistently? Is your latest blog entry six weeks old? Inconsistency presents itself as a lack of caring and a lack of commitment. Don't get dumped; be consistent.

Accept criticism

When you enter the world of social media, you enter the world of "putting yourself out there." Sure, customers can email you or call you with their criticism, but the whole wide world doesn't see it. When a customer leaves a less-than-glowing remark or review, your initial response will most likely be one of defensiveness. Tell a co-worker, write your response on a sticky note and tear it up, close your door and have your rant, whatever it takes. But whatever you do, don't get emotional on the social media site.

Be committed and caring

With social media, you have the chance to show people how much you love your business and your customers. You get to show your passion! You get to show you're committed and that you care. Yet while social media is a revolution in our ability to connect with customers, both one on one and on a bigger scale, successfully improving customer loyalty through social media requires a different approach than standard brick and mortar strategies. Nothing replaces world class products and great customer service. But they're not enough either. Here are six strategies to keep in mind that will kick your word of mouth marketing to the next level.

Make it easy to follow you: Social media can provide direct access to your most valued customers. It's important that you give customers an easy means to connect with you on different networks. Prominently display your social account icons on your website, and install an easy sharing app for all your content. List your accounts on your collateral, in email signatures, newsletters, and anywhere else that your customers are likely to encounter your brand.

Make it easy to find you: Make sure to use your brand name, or as close as possible, on the major networks and list your company name and URL in your social media account descriptions. Sounds simple, but so many businesses miss this step when setting up accounts. Getting the right infrastructure in place goes a long way to helping you build your social following.

Reach out to your existing customers and contacts: Getting connected with as many customers as possible is the first step in using social as an effective loyalty tool. Before you start buying advertising and worrying about tips and tricks for attracting likes and followers, make sure you're proactively using your existing network to get established.

Offer high value content that shows your expertise, including social media exclusives: Use great content to demonstrate your knowledge, products, and unique value proposition. Social gives you an unusual ability to do that through short bytes, video, images, and more. Diverse content types help you establish a foothold on different networks.

Gear that content directly to your customers: But the most important factor is that your content is targeted specifically at your customers. Don't write for your industry peers or your colleagues. Conduct market research and find out what problems are urgently facing your market and offer content that helps educate, inform, and inspire them. The more valuable your content is, the more it will help deepen your relationships over time. It will also help create the context to convert customers into brand advocates, encouraging them to share your content with their friends, family, and colleagues.

Actively engage with your customers: Many companies talk about the importance of doing social media. The key to powerful business-to-customer social relations is that you need to change your mindset from "doing social" to actually "being social." Don't just constantly push content out to your users, no matter how valuable. Take the time to really have a conversation. Are you responding to comments that are left for you? Thanking people for retweets and sharing other people's content is good social etiquette. By being social, you create the kind of persona that goes "beyond a brand" and allows people to make a genuine connection.

Quickly address customer service concerns: We're now in an age where one of the fastest ways to get customer service concerns addressed is through public complaining. Any number of businesses can tell you about the potential impact of dissatisfied customers taking to Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube with their complaints. Use customer concerns to build loyalty, with that customer and with the audience that's watching.

Embrace a transparent approach: Acknowledge every complaint and work to address it quickly. Adhere to your policies, but do your best to find a resolution that satisfies everyone. Don't be afraid to approach problems in a spirit of transparency, and instead focus on your commitment to resolving issues when they do arise.

Develop special promotions and contests: Customers have a choice to engage with you through a number of channels. Social presents a unique opportunity to "meet your customers where they already are." You never want your social media activities to feel like an interruption; instead, you want to capture people's attention and get them to engage. Exclusive promotions and contests are a great way to do that in a format that's optimized for social. Country Outfitters' ongoing Facebook promotion is a great example: each week, they present a new panel of cowboy boots. Followers are asked to like and share the boots; everyone who does is entered for a weekly drawing and someone wins a pair. At last count, they were up to over 5 million followers.

Know your metrics: Is social media really contributing to your customer loyalty efforts? The only way to know is to measure it. Initially, this can feel difficult to quantify, but it's all about identifying the right metrics. Hoot suite developed a particularly useful white paper on this issue. Specific customer metrics can include looking at the following on a per customer basis: brand mentions, web visits, referrals, and time on site. If these are increasing on the average, that's a good sign your social efforts are yielding results. You can also look at specific processes to evaluate the impact of social, including customer recruitment, resolving service concerns, and cancellations. If the time and money spent and customers lost are decreasing, you're on the right track. Smart entrepreneurs approach social interactions with a customer oriented, value creation mindset and look for opportunities to create genuine engagement.

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