Tech Line

Collaborative Customer Care

By **Maren Symonds,** Strategic Contact

USING TECHNOLOGY TO BUILD CUSTOMER SERVICE COMMUNITIES.

Ready or not, we've left the Information Age and plunged headlong into an Age of Collaboration. Through blogs, tweets, walls and a variety of other forums, we have ample opportunity to connect with family, friends, colleagues, acquaintances…even complete strangers. We share news and experiences and listen attentively to opinions, delights, horror stories and "expert advice." Social networking has become a way of life.

Despite prolific media attention to this worldwide phenomenon, contact centers may be cautious about collaborative offerings. Some may doubt the value for their customers or their company or be unsure of where these tools fit with more traditional offerings. Others may be concerned about the time, budget and/or staff to take on social media, especially when those resources are in demand for other important initiatives. But with effective use of enabling technology, contact centers can tap into the collective conscience to elevate awareness of customer sentiment, respond to service issues before they go "viral," open valuable channels of support, and increase effectiveness among service representatives (see Figure 1 on page 3).

Listen to the Voice of Your Customer

Your customers and prospects have always shared experiences and opinions concerning products and services with family, friends and acquaintances. They rely on one another when making informed decisions about new purchases or when dealing with particularly troublesome issues—if only to have a shoulder to cry on. In the Age of Collaboration, this communication channel has morphed from personalized word-of-mouth to a global party line with millions of opinion-makers and hundreds of millions of listeners. There's no control over what people say, how they say it or how much they influence others. It's something that's impossible to manage and impossible to ignore.

Fortunately, there are social media monitoring, engagement and workflow management tools that can help you sift through a sea of information to find a treasure trove of useful insights and actionable plans. Software applications from companies like Radian6 and Buzzient search millions of *public* websites—e.g., online news publications, blogs, forums, photo/video sharing, social networks—to

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find and extract content based on mentions of defined keywords. Their sophisticated analytics engines process all of this data to identify:

- The most important channels and influencers based on vote count, comment count, followers/friends, hyperlinks, views expressed
- Public sentiment about your products and services—positive, negative, neutral—based on customer-defined criteria
- Attitudes toward your competitor's products and services
- Topics and issues around which most comments focus
- Individual posts that merit a direct and personalized response

An accompanying contact or workflow management tool assigns individual posts to team members for action and response. Responses and information can be shared within the team. For example, the contact center can take responsibility for answering questions or resolving problems while gaining input from or providing feedback to the product development, marketing, and/or public relations departments. Reporting and metrics tools track activity and assess results and trends. And integration with CRM—or "Social CRM"—solution providers ensures that the transaction history is captured for future reference.

Relative to traditional customer satisfaction surveys, social media monitoring provides greater depth and clarity into what customers *really* think about you and how you stack up against your competitors. Their feedback is raw, real-time and all-the-time. They don't confine their comments to the topics about which you choose to ask in your short after-call surveys or annual polls. Where feedback leads to insights and insights lead to improvements, you'll know where, how and why to institute continuous improvements initiatives that deliver value for you and your customers.

When your analytics tool tells you that "the natives are restless," the contact center has the opportunity to work with their peers in other parts of the organization to craft a response. For example, retailers typically experience an uptick in contact center traffic as anxious parents launch the search for this year's "must have" children's toy. A few well-placed posts about product availability can quell the rising storm and cut call volume during the peak calling season.

Finally, on an individual basis, the company has the opportunity to transform a negative rap to a positive spin by reaching out proactively to solve a customer's problem—whether on a direct contact or a social media site. That person may be annoyed by having a troublesome incident, but the professionalism with which the company responds may yield a "thumbs up" in the final analysis.

Empower Customers and Employees to Help Themselves and Others

In the traditional model of customer support, the contact center and the company's array of self-service venues are the central means through which customers ask questions, obtain information, provide feedback and/or resolve issues. This model assumes that the company has the "sharpest knives in the drawer" in anticipating customer needs/concerns and providing responses. Social media may prove this assumption false. Through forums, blogs, social networks and other venues, a "community" can generate its own ideas and solutions by "crowd sourcing" answers. Moreover, studies show that consumers trust peers more than they trust companies.

Forums are popular among technology-based products offerings with hardware manufacturers (e.g., Dell computers), software houses (e.g., Intuit, maker of QuickBooks accounting software), and service providers (e.g., Comcast) getting in on the action. Tech companies don't have the capacity to explore (*or even be aware of*) every possible use of their offerings or integrations with other offerings. Fortunately, someone, somewhere has been there, done that and gladly shares the story with details on

Below: *Table 1.* Comparison of Typical Knowledge Management Systems and Wikis

Knowledge Management	Wiki
Structured, process-driven	Loosely structured
Hierarchical governing construct	Self-governance within community
User controls	More open user community
Presents content from existing systems/databases with new material in a unified frame	Populates new content on a wiki-based website
Documents and text	Text and attachments
Generally requires submission, editing and approval of content before adding to knowledge base	Generally incorporates new content when written and lets the user community serve as editors
Provides detailed metrics and reports	Provides an edit history on each page plus listings of pages to which it is connected

Social networking has become a way of life.

Left: *Figure 1.* Web 2.0 Enables the Age of Collaboration

Let Wikis Break Barriers to Knowledge Sharing

Take a tour around a typical contact center, and you'll likely see a cornucopia of resources that customer service representatives use to respond to caller needs. Along with the usual complement of software applications, they'll have loose-leaf binders, a few typed and hand-written notes, assorted "yellow stickies" and personalized lists of subject-matter experts. Knowledge management (KM) was supposed to be the "white knight" that brought order to chaos by retrieving and cataloging information from a myriad of resources. Many centers struggle to afford the princely sum that most implementations require. Few have the patience and resources to tackle the design, process change and integration work to reap the value from KM. Then along came wikis…

Wikis are special-purpose websites that give nontechnical users the wherewithal to create and edit any number of interlinked web pages using a simplified markup language or text editor. Pages can be associated with a table of contents, an index or other form of categorization. An integrated search engine delivers content by titles, keywords and phrases. (Think Wikipedia.) For most users, the price of admission is Internet access and a web browser. For → *page 4*

the solution. It's a win-win scenario. Customers gain a comprehensive resource for problem solving while companies gain a host of volunteers who reduce cycle time on customer inquiries and divert volume from traditional contact channels.

Retail shoppers increasingly lean on product ratings and commentaries when making purchase decisions, especially when buying online. *Does this shirt size run small or large?* They're also increasingly open to advice. *Which 32-inch HDTV performs best given multiple angles of viewing?* Customers like to get some words of wisdom before they head for the electronic shopping cart or a local store. Some companies encourage their employees to get in on the action. For example, Best Buy has a 2,500+ member "Twelpforce" that monitors customer tweets on a Twitter site and provides considered opinions on Best Buy products.

Forums aren't just for customers and prospects. You can create an in-house community that lets your customer service representatives share knowledge and experience to improve one another's skills. Let's face it, service reps struggle to retain all of the good information they received during their formal training. Some have the luxury of tapping an experienced peer who happens to sit in a nearby cubicle. Others aren't so fortunate. A forum removes the distance between inquiring reps and their expert peers. These "teachers" take pride in their work and find satisfaction helping others. The online community is also a place to share news and upcoming events, or provide hints and tips that impact all reps. It's "eLearning," community-style.

As for the enabling technology, the market is rife with social collaboration capabilities. You could start with a SharePoint infrastructure, tap one of your core vendors (e.g., ACD, CTI, CRM), or seek a new provider. Be sure to define your requirements, explore the options, and assess the trade-offs before you make a commitment. (See the sidebar on page 4.)

organizations, it includes a web host (third-party or premise-based), some applications software and a community of users who are ready, willing and able to contribute. Unlike KM systems that often take a year or more before the users reap the benefits, wikis can reach a critical mass of knowledge within a few months. (See Table 1 on page 2 for a high-level comparison between KM and wikis.)

A defining characteristic of wikis is the ease with which content can be created and updated by the community. Authoring/editing can be open to a general population or confined to registered users. Most wikis operate under the premise that it is better to post material quickly and correct mistakes after the fact than labor under a time-, process- and cost-intensive regime that tries to prevent errors from happening in the first place. Wikis can provide alerts when new content has been added. They maintain edit histories that specify recent edits as well as all edits made within a defined period. And they allow users to reinstate older versions of pages should the newer content prove undesireable.

Though some are concerned about posting content before it has been vetted thoroughly, most early adopters find such fears unfounded. Participants have a vested interest in the quality of the content and take their role as "judge and jury" seriously. With an appropriate goverance model, a modest amount of user training, and systematic review, a wiki can be a valuable addition to the center's support system.

Get Ready to Dive In!

You don't need a conch shell to hear the waves of web-based commentary, collaboration and content generation lap against the familiar shores of the contact center. Online community formation and participation, dynamic content creation, freedom of expression and collective creativity are irresistibly attractive experiences that seems to be crossing generational lines. It begs for response. But like all forms of customer and employee engagement, you'll need a clear link to business and operational goals before you get started.

While you're getting your business and operations strategies in order, experiment with the new tools to get a feel for what they can and can't do for you. You may be able to tap existing tools (e.g., SharePoint) to build the community you want. Some vendors offer free or very low-cost trials on hosted applications. Or you may be able to work with existing vendors and their partners to try new capabilities that tie in with your other tools. Take a guided tour or test drive to learn what is possible.

It remains a brave, new world. We're not sure exactly how it will change the current structures, processes and modes of interaction. But if the explosion in blogs, forums, social networks and the like is any indication, it promises to be quite an adventure. Ⓟ

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Ready to Dive In? Do Your homework!

As with any developing market, the technology vendors that support collaboration are many, diverse and changing. They may be called "Social CRM," "Social Software," "Community Platforms" or another name—just ask your favorite market analyst at Gartner, Forrester, Frost & Sullivan, or others. The solution offerings may be internal- or external-customer facing and may be delivered by a variety of sourcing models, including hosted solutions, targeted applications (such as wikis), or full suites of capabilities. The vendors range from newer companies such as Jive Software and Lithium to long-time stalwarts like IBM and Microsoft. Many CRM and contact center vendors are getting into the game—through their own tools or through partners or acquisitions. Do your homework, tap the analysts for the latest market insights (if you can), and do some due diligence before you take the plunge. Ⓟ