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SOCIAL LISTENING: A STRATEGY TO BOND WITH THE NEW AGE CUSTOMERS

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ABSTRACT

The good old days for businesses where they were only concerned with conceiving and communicating a message to its target audience are long gone. The conversations since then have turned into two ways between the business and the customer, and vice versa. While businesses are gearing up to this new reality, a new conversation reality has emerged where the conversations are happening among customers about brands, but without them. Businesses are losing control of the narrative and the conversations have become more interactive and engaging instead of preachy and one-sided as they used to be. Essentially, conversations are happening on multiple platforms in multiple ways and multiple spaces, with or without the business being involved. Social Listening can help.

IMPORTANCE OF LISTENING TO YOUR CUSTOMERS?

In this changing reality, brands must listen to their customers and not just hear them. Customers are using more channels than ever to voice their opinions and expressions. Listening to customers not only helps businesses to connect with them at a personal level, but it also opens up various avenues for innovation and solution design. At its core, listening to customers is one of the causes as well as the outcome of customer-centricity, which is essential to create an endearing bond with customers resulting in a sustainable relationship.

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While customers express their opinions and voice their concerns with brands, an acknowledgment from brands is often deeply appreciated. It is a matter of satisfaction and feeling of self-worth for customers when brands respond to these conversations in an effective manner. An engaging brand which attends to, observes, interprets, and responds to a variety of stimuli (Stewart & Arnold, 2016) is often attractive to current and potential customers. This not only creates a multiplier effect for the brand when it comes to conversation with its customers, but also encourages potential customers and fence-sitters to join the conversations for then, and maybe the brand in future.

Listening to these conversations is no more optional, but a critical endeavor for businesses. Tracking these conversations helps businesses understand sentiments about the business among its audience, which may present itself with opportunities to redirect their focus and efforts efficiently. A 'listening' strategy must necessarily include answering the below questions:

- Why do you want to listen to the customers? - The objective of this endeavor
- Whom do you want to listen to? - Target Audience for listening
- Where do you want to listen to them? - Space/Channel for listening
- How do you want to listen to them? - Tools and software for listening
- What should be your executables? - Actions based on listening to the audience

More customers than ever are present online now and businesses are making conscious efforts to reach out to their target audience on the internet. Businesses are trying to influence every single step of a customer's decision journey starting from problem recognition (influenced by invoking latent need of customers) up to reducing the post-purchase cognitive dissonance. It is hence appropriate for businesses to invest efforts in listening to customers and in general people on the internet where oodles of conversations are going on for various brands and businesses as it affects firm's brand as well as bottom line (Genpact, 2012). Social media, with its expanse and penetration, has democratized information and communication between customers and brands, as well as among customers themselves. Internet and in particular social media are hence the right space and channel for brands to 'listen' to their customers. Listening to customers on social media to understand audience sentiments and undertake appropriate actions is the easiest way to define 'Social Listening'.

In a nutshell, it is an active monitoring of your brand on social media channels for customer feedback and mentions while tracking discussions to gain insights and act on those opportunities by using hashtags and keywords (C., Atilano, & Arnold, 2017; Wagner, 2014). Social listening attempts to understand the root causes behind social conversations and take action to strengthen the relationship between the brand and the customers. The conversations that are analyzed are not just around the brand, but also about the industry as a whole, which give a larger perspective to the social listening strategy. Hence, social listening is considered as a dynamic process of gathering online attention and is an embedded part of social engagement (Crawford, 2009)

CHALLENGES FACED IN SOCIAL LISTENING

Social listening while presents a lucrative opportunity for brands, does not come without its flaws. There are three major challenges than can mar your social listening strategy:

- Inability in responding appropriately to customers' concerns
- Inability to engage with the customers in a meaningful manner
- Unable to handle negative conversations around the brand

Several brands have been able to create engaging conversations with the customers which have not only helped the brand create a bond with the customers but also brought in a host of potential customers to its fold. Brands must be able to respond to customers' concerns in a timely and appropriate manner. While it presents brands with an opportunity to gain customer loyalty after a service failure (often known as service recovery paradox), a timely response calms an irate customer as she realizes that someone is listening to her concerns and working to resolve it.



Figure 1: Seamless: Being empathetic to the customer is important

However, some brands are not able to handle these concerns in a satisfactory manner which further agonizes the customer and is detrimental to the overall social listening strategy. Sometimes, brands can engage with users in a way they not only make the user feels valued but also encourages others to interact with the brand on various aspects.



Figure 2: Customer convenience must not be taken for granted

However, some brands do not have a strong backend to further their social listening strategy. It must be understood that while social listening is different from social monitoring. Unlike social monitoring which is only about keeping a track of messages and mentions about the brand, social listening also goes on to resolve issues faced by the customers.



Figure 3: The back-end must be aligned to be able to address customer concerns

This means that a strong back-end resolution process for issues is the backbone of the social listening strategy. An absence of incidence resolution ability leads to a gap between what you aim to achieve through social listening and what you end up delivering. This can lead to accentuate the agony of customers and further damage the brand.

Social listening is an expansive avenue for businesses to build a strong connection with their existing and potential customers. Though customer service is considered a mundane application of social listening (Dougherty, 2015), with a clear social listening strategy aimed at customer satisfaction with customer-centricity as its core, businesses can create an edge for themselves against competitors. It is however critical for businesses to commit completely to this strategy to ensure that there is a sync between the front end (social media) conversations and back-end (operations). A gap between these two will inadvertently lead to broken promises and dissatisfied customers. Keep listening!



Figure 4: You never know what comment, feedback, message, or engagement gets you your next customer! (No, I'm not buying a jeep!)

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