

Build Customer Loyalty & Evangelism

Businesses are increasingly turning to social media to strengthen relationships with their customers. By engaging in a rich, ongoing dialogue with customers, companies can better understand their evolving needs, resolve service issues more effectively and gain true brand advocates.

This guide can help you understand how to use social media to enhance your customer relationships with information and practical advice, including:

- The Power of Social Media to Help Improve Customer Service, *pg. 1*
- Using Social Media to Monitor and Respond to Customer Issues, *pg. 4*
- Customer Service Toolbox: Improve Satisfaction With Social Media, *pg. 5*
- Cardmember Profile: Amelia Ceja, Ceja Vineyards – *Winery Taps Social Media to Connect With Customers, pg. 7*
- Social Media Resources, *pg. 8*
- Glossary of Social Media Terms, *pg. 9*

THE POWER OF SOCIAL MEDIA TO HELP IMPROVE CUSTOMER SERVICE

Today it can be easier to understand your customers, track their needs and provide the service they want — or even exceed their expectations. Online tools such as blogs, Facebook®, Twitter™, YouTube and countless others can help provide small businesses with opportunities to enhance customer relationships, almost in real time.

These same applications can make it easier to engage with your customers by allowing you to contact them the way they want to be contacted. And the benefits can be more than just satisfied



MID CITY LANES ROCK N BOWL

John Blancher
Member Since: 2000

customers. In many cases, prospects may choose a company based on the strength of its customer service.

Here are some of the ways you can help put social media to work to improve your customer service so customers will want to promote your company in a positive way.

Monitor Customer Comments

One of the biggest advantages of social media is the ability to see how buyers review a product or service. If you've been influenced by customer reviews on Amazon.com® (amazon.com), eBay® (ebay.com) or Yelp® (yelp.com), for example, you're not alone. In a recent survey by the Society for New Communications Research, nearly 75% of respondents said they make purchase

Learn more about social media at openforum.com/socialmedia.



LAUGHING LOTUS YOGA CENTER

Dana Flynn, Jasmine Tarkeshi
Members Since: 1985

decisions based on customer comments they read online.¹

To learn what is being said about your company, designate someone on your team to track all social media mentions. Make that person's job easier by using free services, such as Google™ Alerts (google.com/alerts) to track online mentions of your company and TweetBeep (tweetbeep.com), to see when your business is mentioned on Twitter.

Address Complaints

Act quickly when you discover negative comments online, since bad news can spread rapidly. Determine what went wrong, resolve the customer's problem and then state publicly how you took care of it.

Some businesses are wary of responding to customer complaints in public forums, but demonstrating that you care enough to reach out and fix a problem can showcase your business in a very positive light. A blog post or tweet response to a complaint that states how a problem has been fixed demonstrates that you are responsive and take customer input seriously.

¹ *Exploring the Link Between Customer Care and Brand Reputation in the Age of Social Media*, Society for New Communications Research, 2008

Anticipate Needs

Social media also provides an opportunity to help you anticipate and fulfill customer needs:

- A negative comment about your company can identify an important gap in your capabilities.
- A large number of positive comments may be your cue to expand a product line or sell more aggressively in current or new markets.

To be proactive about identifying customer needs, consider promoting a survey via social media. You can create an online survey using a service such as SurveyMonkey.com (surveymonkey.com) or Zoomerang™ (zoomerang.com), and use a URL shortening service such as bit.ly™ (bit.ly) or Ow.ly™ (ow.ly) to drop it into your tweet. Or, you can post it to your company's Facebook or LinkedIn® presence. Such a survey can help with new product development, branding and positioning, and overall reputation.

Engage Customers

Instead of, or in addition to, conducting surveys, many businesses encourage customers to share feedback directly, via comments on blogs or a Facebook page, or via Twitter. These channels create exciting new opportunities to gain real-world insight into your customers' attitudes and needs.

For example, if you want to quickly determine if a new service offering is being well received or if a new bug fix did the trick, you can reach out through your social media channels. It's a way to gain the feedback you may need to make informed decisions and correct your course, if necessary. You can also use crowdsourcing — putting out a request for opinions from a large group of people — to gain insights from your audience.

Encourage Satisfied Customers to Talk

It used to be that businesses asked satisfied customers or clients to provide a quote or testimonial for brochures or other marketing materials. Social media applies the same concept to different tools

and can be done by businesses with limited advertising budgets.

To do this, many businesses encourage satisfied customers to share their experiences through sites like Google's Local Business Center (google.com/lbc), Yelp and Angie's List® (angieslist.com). Every day, customers shopping for a whole range of goods and services — from veterinarians to vacation homes — review customer ratings on these sites to choose the best providers for their needs. This new twist on word-of-mouth marketing can be invaluable for a business.

Many consumers use social networking businesses to help make their purchasing decisions. Before choosing a caterer or a home repair contractor, consumers can reach out through sites like Twitter to ask for recommendations. If you have raving brand advocates who love your service, you may well be at the top of the list of recommended names.

You can also take advantage of a relatively new type of third-party site designed to organize this input from customers and users. Sites like IdeaScale (ideascale.com), SuggestionBox.com (suggestionbox.com), UserVoice (uservoice.com) and Imaginatik (imaginatik.com) provide an organized structure to collect and prioritize customer and community suggestions on everything from developing new product features to improving your web site layout. Other sites, such as Get Satisfaction (getsatisfaction.com), help you handle customer issues and complaints, in addition to providing you with suggestions.

Personalize Your Brand

Giving customers a glimpse into the real people behind your brand can have a powerful impact. Many small businesses have been pleasantly surprised to find that customers respond well when they let their personalities shine through on social media outlets like Facebook and Twitter. Just remind your staff to remain professional at all times. When it comes to social media, the world is watching.



ELI WILNER & COMPANY

Eli Wilner
Member Since: 1986

Get trusted staff members involved with your social media efforts. By turning these individuals into content creators for your blog and other social media sites, you help bring a broader set of voices to the table. This allows your customers to hear from experts in multiple subject areas and enables you to spread the workload among multiple individuals. It also gives customers a real feel for the people on your team.

Customers no longer feel like they're interacting with a faceless business. They're getting to know the people that make your business work, which can turn them into advocates for your company. This can help strengthen their loyalty to you and multiply the impact of your social media interactions.

Create a Reason for People to Talk About You

Providing great customer service entails sharing your expertise with prospects and customers. For example, a travel agency can post tips for staying productive on the road on its blog. A resort in ski country can tweet about lift ticket deals. An ad agency can post videos about marketing, branding and design. By sharing useful news, tips and advice, you help build buzz and give customers a reason to continually come back to your site. By addressing challenges clients face every day and providing helpful solutions, you provide real value that strengthens client relationships. ■

Using Social Media to Monitor and Respond to Customer Issues

By Anita Campbell



Using social media to address customer issues requires you to (1) listen closely and regularly, and (2) respond quickly. Here are five do's and don'ts to remember about customer issues and social media:

- **DO provide multiple ways for customers to contact you.**

Even though you shouldn't hesitate to respond publicly to a complaint on a social site, the best way to deal with customer issues is still one-on-one. Encourage customers to address their issues to customer support directly in the first place. Make it easy for them to contact you using email, an online customer service contact form, live chat or a toll-free number. Go through the customer complaint process yourself to make sure it is friction-free.

- **DO assign staff to monitor social media.**

Monitoring social media has to be a regular activity. To make sure you work this responsibility into your company processes, assign it to one or more of your staff, depending on the size of your company. Remember, if you leave it vague and as everyone's responsibility, it's as if it is no one's responsibility.

- **DO act quickly.** The social media world moves fast. A negative situation raised by an angry customer's comment can quickly escalate and take on a life of its own. The longer it festers, chances are the harder it can be to resolve satisfactorily in the customer's eyes. Prevent it from getting to that point by acting immediately.

- **DON'T argue.**

Arguing with the customer, especially in public, is a losing battle.

Remain professional and unemotional. If you are wrong, calmly admit it and indicate that you want to make it right. Your brand can be judged not only by the fact that you responded to the customer, but how you responded.

- **DON'T fail to live up to promises and commitments.**

If you promise a customer on Twitter or a blog that you will handle a matter, make sure you do so. Dropping the ball in a public way only exacerbates the negative consequences.

Social media makes resolving customer issues a bit more complex because you now must monitor more places where customers may be discussing your brand or airing an issue. But once you work social media monitoring into your business processes, you can soon master it. ■

Anita Campbell is Editor and Founder of Small Business Trends, LLC, which manages online communities touching more than 250,000 small business owners and managers each month. Her flagship web site is the award-winning Small Business Trends (smallbiztrends.com). Anita is also a featured expert on the subject of Innovation for OPEN Forum. Find more insights from Anita at openforum.com/innovation.



Customer Service Toolbox: Improve Satisfaction With Social Media

There are countless online tools available for you to better serve your customers, each with its own strengths and weaknesses. To help you determine the best tools for you and your customers, here's a brief overview of the most popular formats. Review this list to decide which might be right for you.

Blogs and Forums

Blogs and forums enable the kinds of discussions with your customers that can ratchet up the level of service you provide. They are simple to update and maintain, and it's easy for visitors to add their comments. If a customer expresses a complaint — which might be shared by others — you can address it quickly and effectively in a blog or forum discussion.

Here's how you can use blogs and forums to improve your customer service:

- Provide information and advice so customers get the most from your products and services
- Provide an outlet for customers to voice their concerns or complaints in a context where you can respond and have some control over the discussion
- Alert customers to delays, outages or other issues
- Create a platform for customers to share tips and advice with each other on getting the most from your products or services

Facebook

Facebook makes it easy to create a presence that can support your company's customer service. Its ease of use and popularity make it a good platform to post customer service-related information.

Here's how you can use Facebook to improve your customer service:

- Create a fan page so you can share company news and information
- Post a survey to gather customer input
- Share a video on customer service issues
- Provide status updates on product and service availability
- Alert customers to delays and outages or other issues
- Publicize webinars and other events for customers

LinkedIn

As the most popular professional networking site, LinkedIn provides a forum to gather and share information in a business-focused environment.

Here's how you can use LinkedIn to improve your customer service:

- Share tips to enhance the experience your customers have with your product or service
- Post a survey to gather customer or prospect input
- Gather customer feedback regarding service and other issues



Customer Service Toolbox: Improve Satisfaction With Social Media, cont'd

Twitter

The power of Twitter is its reach and immediacy. You can set alerts to receive any tweets mentioning your company or offerings, enabling you to promptly identify any dissatisfied customers. You can also communicate updates on product availability and service issues.

Here's how you can use Twitter to improve your customer service:

- Monitor complaints and reach out to customers to address their concerns
- Provide updates on product and service availability
- Alert customers about issues such as delays and outages
- Publicize webinars and other events for customers
- Help build your reputation by getting satisfied customers to retweet your posts

Also check out OPEN Forum PulseSM (pulse.openforum.com), which brings together the Twitter feeds of some of the most-followed business owners and industry leaders.

Yelp

Yelp is a community web site devoted to the description and review of local places, including restaurants, shops, medical practices and more. The site offers Yelp for Business Owners (biz.yelp.com), a free suite of business tools to help small businesses engage with their customers.

Here's how you can use Yelp to improve your customer service:

- Monitor the number of page clicks to your business page on Yelp
- Write up your own description and history of your business
- Post special announcements and deals at the top of your business page
- Use Yelp's toolset to directly connect with consumers who have reviewed your business

YouTube

YouTube gives you easy access to a huge audience looking for unique, interesting and/or educational video content. With its rating and sharing functionality, your video has the potential to spread virally.

Here's how you can use YouTube to improve your customer service:

- Provide usage tips to help people get the most from your product or service
- Educate customers about a workaround or troubleshooting to address product or service issues
- Showcase company principles addressing customer service issues

Cardmember Profile: Amelia Ceja, Ceja Vineyards

Winery Taps Social Media to Connect With Customers

Amelia Ceja and her family operate Ceja Vineyards (cejavineyards.com), a thriving vineyard nestled in the Carneros region of Napa Valley, California. Using social media, they have helped find a way to engage and educate customers from across the country.

Ceja has posted on YouTube short, quirky videos featuring everything from the creation of the vineyard's bocce ball court to its free Salsa Saturday events at the tasting salon to tours of the wine cellar ([youtube.com/watch?v=raeRcRqLT1s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=raeRcRqLT1s)). Customers can view Salud! Napa, Ceja's bicultural online cooking show about cuisine, wine and the arts ([youtube.com/watch?v=R6EQIU6c58s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R6EQIU6c58s)). Viewers learn to cook a meal and pair it with the right wine. The videos have been very successful at improving the customer experience and driving repeat business.

Inform Community

Amelia Ceja has mastered the art of using social media to create a true online community. Beyond sharing her love of food and wine, Ceja keeps her online community informed of the latest community happenings. Those considering a visit to Napa Valley can find a wealth of information to complete their visit. This outreach has strengthened the service experience and the Ceja brand. In fact, the vineyard has received numerous new visitors based on favorable reviews on sites like Yelp.

"Social media puts us on the same playing field as big companies," says Ceja. "Without spending a lot of money, we can win potential customers and enhance customer loyalty. It gives us an opportunity to be creative in how we build our brand presence."

Let Your Personality Shine

Ceja advises those using social media not to take themselves too seriously. "Let your personality shine through," she says. "Several members of our family regularly contribute to social media channels. For example, my son Ariel's posts have their own twist that's different from what I post. It's that connection that keeps people coming back."

If the content you provide is useful and interesting, you'll win more followers, Ceja says. The company spends an average of five to six hours per week on social media activities. Each morning, Ceja rises early to read about the latest happenings in the wine and food world. By 7 a.m., she's online sharing insights with her blog (cejavineyards.com/index.cfm?method=blog.bloglist), Facebook ([facebook.com/CejaVineyards](https://www.facebook.com/CejaVineyards)) and Twitter ([@CejaVineyards](https://twitter.com/CejaVineyards)) followers. Through her social media outreach, Ceja has become a respected resource in the industry. This has increased the company's exposure to an eclectic group of fans. Wine bloggers and journalists have written positive reviews of the vineyard's wines, which has won Ceja Vineyards a loyal following.

"The content must educate and engage," Ceja says. "Once you're seen as an online expert, this offers great value to your brand. If someone with thousands of followers retweets something I tweeted, then I just got access to all those additional people, and they might start to follow me. This gives us access to more people who learn about our wines and what we're doing. Then next time they're in Napa they'll visit us — or they'll order wine right away."



Improve Customer Insight

With just one special discount to its Facebook fans and Twitter followers, Ceja Vineyards increased wine sales by \$10,000, which they tracked through web analytics. But even more importantly, these sites have given Ceja Vineyards unprecedented opportunities to better understand their customers.

“One of the challenges for small companies is to really listen to customers,” Ceja says. “We now have a lot more eyes and ears out there. We definitely pay attention to what our Facebook fans and Twitter followers are saying and what they want to get out of a visit to Ceja Vineyards.” ■

View Ceja Vineyards’ business profile in the OPEN Forum Connectodex® at openforum.com/cejavineyards.

Social Media Resources

OPEN Forum®

openforum.com/socialmedia

OPEN Forum’s social media hub can help you learn from industry experts and Cardmembers who use social media tools to drive business growth. Also download other guides and the OPEN Book: Social Media, listen to a podcast and watch videos on how to harness the power of social media.

OPEN Forum on Twitter

twitter.com/openforum

Tap into the collective ingenuity of other business owners.

OPEN on Facebook

facebook.com/open

Discover insights, make connections and get exposure that can help your business grow.

OPEN Forum Pulse®

pulse.openforum.com

OPEN Forum Pulse is a tool that can help you find and follow small business thought leaders on Twitter by aggregating and organizing their tweets in one place, where you can search by business name or industry. This custom platform was designed for small business owners.

80 Ways to Use Twitter as a SMB Owner

smallbiztrends.com/2010/01/how-to-use-twitter-as-a-smb-owner.html

Article that lists ways to use Twitter, many of them to positively impact customer service.

Building an Online Reputation video

openforum.com/buildingreputation

In this video, Wired’s Chris Anderson explains the steps in developing a reputation online.

Customer Service via Twitter

images.businessweek.com/ss/08/09/0908_microblog/index.htm

BusinessWeek article that profiles companies that have used Twitter to improve customer service.

Google Local Business Center

google.com/lbc

Free tool that allows you to create a listing for your business that you can connect to your web site and other social media efforts.





Social Media Resources, cont'd.

Small Business Trends

smallbiztrends.com

Tips from Anita Campbell, editor and founder of Small Business Trends, LLC, which manages online communities touching more than 250,000 small business owners and managers each month.

Yelp Business Owner's Guide

yelp.com/business

Includes tips on how to respond to reviews, update business information and post special offers.



Glossary of Social Media Terms

In order to use social media effectively for your business, it's important to understand the terminology.

Blog: A web site with regular entries, typically consisting of news and commentary, graphics and video focused on a particular subject area. Blogs typically enable readers to post responses.

Brand Advocate: A person who talks favorably about a specific product or service and passes favorable messages about those products and services along to others, typically through online forums.

Crowdsourcing: A way to conduct research or other work through an open call to a large group of people — a crowd — and soliciting their contributions.

Facebook Fan: An individual who has signed up to receive regular feeds from an organization's Facebook page.

Facebook Group: A Facebook page based on a topic that creates a community of people to promote, share and discuss items of interest.

Facebook Page: A public profile where companies can share business and product news with Facebook users.

Forum: An online discussion site or community where visitors may read and post topics of common interest while also allowing businesses to monitor what is being said about their brands.

Retweet: To repeat someone else's tweet and give them credit for it. This is generally a vote of confidence for the original author. Retweets can help improve a Twitter account's ranking.

Social Bookmarking: A method employed by Internet users to share, organize, search and manage content. Some social bookmarking sites have a system that allows users to vote on what bookmarks they found interesting.

Tweets: Short messages of up to 140 characters that are sent over the Twitter network.

VISIT OPEN FORUM®

You can find articles on social media and a broad range of other business topics on openforum.com, the online community from American Express OPEN designed to give business owners information and insights that can help them build their businesses. There are articles by business experts such as:

- Guy Kawasaki of Alltop®
- John Jantsch of Duct Tape Marketing
- Anita Campbell of Small Business Trends
- Henry Blodget of The Business Insider
- Adam Ostrow of Mashable
- And more ...

In addition to the articles and discussions on OPEN Forum, Cardmembers can create a profile and connect with other business owners in the Connectodex®, giving them an opportunity to build exposure on OPEN Forum.

OPEN SOCIAL MEDIA TOOLS

- facebook.com/open — Discover insights, make connections and get exposure that can help your business grow.
- [@openforum](https://twitter.com/openforum) — Follow us on Twitter for the latest headlines from OPEN Forum.
- pulse.openforum.com — Nominate yourself for OPEN Forum PulseSM, which brings together the Twitter feeds of some of the most-followed business owners and industry leaders.

NOW, TAKE OPEN FORUM ON-THE-GO

- OPEN Forum App for iPhone® — Download our free app* available in the App Store and get the latest from OPEN Forum experts.
- Visit openforum.com on your mobile device — Whether on your iPhone, iPad™, or Blackberry® smartphone, OPEN Forum is available.

iPhone and iPad are trademarks of Apple Inc., registered in the U.S. and other countries. [App StoreSM is a service mark of Apple Inc.] BlackBerry, RIM®, Research In Motion®, SureType®, SurePress™ and related trademarks, names and logos are the property of Research In Motion Limited and are registered and/or used in the U.S. and countries around the world. American Express is not endorsed, sponsored, affiliated or otherwise authorized by Research In Motion Limited.

**Message and data rates may apply.*

To learn more about our products and services, call 1-800-NOW-OPEN or visit us at open.com

For more OPEN Insight Guides, and other resources to help you grow your business, visit openforum.com

AMERICAN EXPRESS OPEN



facebook.com/open



follow us [@openforum](https://twitter.com/openforum)

Copyright© 2010 American Express Company. All Rights Reserved. The information contained in this document is meant for advisory purposes only. American Express accepts no liability for any outcome of its use.