

Embracing customer service in the digital world

 By [Jaco Pienaar](#)

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Customer service. Two words that strike fear in many companies more than load shedding, hostile takeovers, and rising costs. Customer service requires time and resources to be effective. Put the immediacy of social networking into the mix and you have something few businesses know how to manage.

In South Africa, very much like the rest of the world, the increase in mobile device adoption rates and more affordable mobile data mean consumers have access to a wider variety of services and information than before. Mobile operators in the country are pushing entry-level smartphones and creating bundles that are more accessible to a broader segment of the economy. And then there is the growth of freely available Wi-Fi hotspots at coffee shops, restaurants, airports, hotels, and even in cities themselves that are further enabling people to live the connected lifestyle.

Rise in customer complaints

This connectivity has resulted in millions of South Africans flocking to social networks to stay in touch with family and friends. Even instant messaging services have becoming mainstream with the likes of schools, church groups, and sport clubs creating discussion groups where like-minded people can share their views and other content.

While this has been a boon for the end-user, organisations have watched with concern on how it has led to a rise in complaints about customer service. Granted, many of the complaints are valid. However, the ease of posting a comment or passing remark has also given rise to the posting of complaints that are either hyper-critical or serve no basis of the truth. It also provides only one version of events with companies rarely able to respond with their side without looking like the 'big bad corporate'.

Empowerment of the consumer has resulted in discounts being given, free products being shipped, and other complimentary offerings provided just to turn something negative (whether true or not) into a positive experience for the world to see. Companies have also realised that having a profile on social networks is a must-have instead of a nice-to-have. It is no longer just teenagers and tech-savvy people active on those platforms. In the connected world, even grandparents are using social networking.

Return to basics

So what is a company to do to realistically deal with what has been a spate of complaints, criticisms, and other negative feedback leading to potentially significant brand damage? Even well-known brands in South Africa who have been very effectively managing customer service on social networks have struggled at times to cope with the sheer amount of engagement required. If companies with significant budgets have difficulties, what hopes do smaller ones and start-ups have of dealing with it?

Ultimately, it boils down to returning to basics. Even though social is a new customer channel, the same rules still apply. Companies need to utilise their existing customer service departments and train them on how to use their skills sets on social. Often, social networking teams are put in place to focus on this channel. Unfortunately, there is often a lack of integration between these teams and customer service ones. When it comes to monitoring and tracking issues around online reputation, companies also need to realise that not every negative comment needs to be responded to or managed necessarily. There are those who simply create a social profile to slate a company or companies.

Monitoring interactions

One of the biggest mistakes a company can make is to try and keep everything in-house. Social has grown exponentially in recent years, leaving the organisation with precious little breathing room to evolve quickly enough to cater for all the vagaries of the platforms. It is no longer good enough to just pass the social channel over to customer service and hope for the best. Relying on a third party to help with this raises many internal eyebrows but a trusted monitoring firm is worth its weight in gold.

These firms should be able to sort the wheat from the chaff and advise the relevant internal teams of the social comments to respond to in order of priority. An organisation needs a firm who can easily link up to the relevant internal departments and address the most fundamental issues around customer service on social platforms. The risks to the online reputation of the company are too big not to be as pro-active as possible about this.

However, customer service in the social world need not fill companies with dread. By adopting a focused approach and using a trusted service provider who understands the business, a potentially negative environment can be turned into a positive one.

ABOUT JACO PIENAAR

Jaco is an MA Information Science graduate who specialises in research, analytical framework development, and content analysis. His thesis was on Intellectual Capital measurement and he applies this to his framework developments as well as knowledge strategies. Professionally, Jaco has worked in the journalism field, academic environment, multi-national research environment, and media analysis environment. He is currently the Chief Knowledge Officer at Professional Evaluation and Research.

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