

You Can't Hide Bad Service

by John Tschohl - October 10, 2011

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Social Networks Share Customer Complaints With the World

Never before has timing been as critical to an organization's success as it is today. While it certainly is critical to, for example, the introduction of a new product or the infusion of cash, it is equally critical when it comes to solving a customer's problem.

Technology—specifically social networks—has driven the need for timely customer complaint solutions to a new high. Those networks have put businesses throughout the world under a technological microscope, as disgruntled customers share their experiences with thousands, if not millions of people, in a matter of seconds with a simple click of a button.

In the past, customers who had a problem with a company would tell, on average, 20 of their friends, coworkers, and family members about it. Social networks, however, allow anyone anywhere to share their customer service complaints quickly and with people in every corner of the globe.

The power and appeal of social networks is undeniable. Consider this: More than 800 million people are active users of Facebook, and each of them has an average of 130 friends. More than 350 million of those users access Facebook through mobile devices such as cell phones, which means they are in touch with their friends even while they're on the go.

What do those numbers mean to you and your organization? It means that, if one of your customers has a problem, and you don't solve that problem quickly, that customer can—and probably will—blast you to hundreds, if not thousands, of friends. And their comments and complaints often remain on social network sites for years.

Let me give you an example: When United Airlines broke a passenger's guitar in 2009, that passenger put a posting about it on YouTube. It's still there—and it has had almost 11 million hits. Another YouTube video, posted in 2006, involves a Comcast technician, who fell asleep on the customer's couch while he was on hold for an hour with the company's central office. That video has had almost 1.7 million hits.

Consumers of all ages are increasingly turning to social network sites before they make decisions on where to spend their money. My daughter Christina is 31 and lives in China. Before my wife Pat and I visit her, she logs onto various social network sites to check out hotels and restaurants for us. My friend, Vicki, is 62 and uses Google—which has 1 billion visitors each month—to be directed to sites, including Trip Advisor, that provide customer reviews on hotels before she finalizes

her travel plans. Other popular sites are www.my3cents.com, and www.screwedbyforums.com.

You can spend millions of dollars on advertising and marketing, but if you don't solve your customers' problems, you will suffer bad publicity that will cost you millions more in the loss of potential customers. No longer do you have the luxury of waiting a few days or a week to handle a customer's complaint; you must do it within a matter of minutes. That means you must empower your frontline employees to do whatever it takes to satisfy your customers. If you don't, your sales, along with your chances of survival, will plummet.

About John Tschohl:

John Tschohl, the internationally recognized service strategist, is founder and president of the Service Quality Institute in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Described by USA Today, Time, and Entrepreneur as a "customer service guru," he has written several books on customer service and has developed more than 26 customer-service training programs that have been distributed throughout the world. John's monthly strategic newsletter is available online.