



Contact centers go social!

Creating a social media strategy
for your contact center

Overview

It's nearly impossible to find a marketer who isn't trying to understand and harness the potential of social media and Web 2.0. Every day brings another story of a business using these technologies to connect with customers and prospects. Or we hear about a social media startup with just an idea, a virtual server and programming talent rolling out a new service or gadget.

Companies that operate contact centers have a particular need to sort out the social media options, select the right ones and integrate them into their operations. Deploying the social media platforms that are revolutionizing communication and interaction can be a game-changing opportunity to expand contact center reach and performance.

But how do you go about it? How do you sort through the myriad offerings? Where should you focus your energy and resources? What mistakes do you need to avoid as you develop and execute social media initiatives?

For companies operating contact centers, social media success hinges on understanding the role and capabilities of the many tools available. Companies will also need to decide what they want to accomplish using social media and then set a strategy that brings focus to social efforts and effectively integrates them into center operations.

Social media options and use grow

The bewildering array of names given to social media and Web 2.0 offerings is stretching the bounds of language. From Agatra to Zimbra, the social landscape is rife with solutions for broadcasting, gaming, microblogging, networking, picture sharing and publishing. Some offerings are innovative, others are lame, and many overlap. Some players are emerging as leaders, others are destined to be acquired, and many won't survive.

Even with considerable sorting out still to come, businesses and their customers are plunging in. Cone Inc.'s Social Media in Business study¹ found that 60 percent of Americans are already interacting with companies on the social Web. Nearly all—93 percent—believe companies should have a presence in social media. And 85 percent believe companies should not just interact with customers and present information via social media, but use it to become more engaged.

The payoff for such engagement is evident in the 53 percent who already say they have developed a strong connection to a brand through social media encounters. Further proof of social media's growing pervasiveness and influence is found in a recent Nielsen study,² which reveals that social media usage now exceeds that of e-mail! This implies that there are parts of the market that don't use e-mail as their primary communication tool—they use social media.

Social media is rapidly becoming the conduit for virtually any online activity, from search, to connecting with people of like interests, to watching and interacting with your favorite TV show. We're not far from the day when you'll vote someone off the island via Facebook instead of a text message.

Bringing social meeting to the contact center

Customer support is an obvious place for many companies to begin building a social media business case and profile. Natural communities form around virtually any product or service, from shoes and clothing, to airlines and automobiles, to computers and communications systems.

When customers have something to say about a brand, they expect the company to listen and respond, especially when it comes to customer service issues. Increasingly, those customers are airing their comments and complaints through social media.

Companies can realize both "soft" and "hard" benefits by engaging with customers through social media.

On the soft side, responding and reaching out to customers in a virtual location gives them a sense of empowerment. They feel the company is listening, understands them and cares enough about their preferences to interact with them in the way they want.

Social media engagement also delivers bottom-line benefits. Enabling customers to communicate with the company, and each other, can actually lower support costs. Computer maker Dell, Inc. was able to reduce the number of moderators in its support forums from 30 to five because community members began moderating and helping one another.

¹"Cone Finds that Americans Expect Companies to Have a Presence in Social Media," September 25, 2008, Cone, <http://www.coneinc.com/content1182>.

²"The Global Online Media Landscape," April 2009, The Nielsen Company, <http://blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire/wp-content/uploads/2009/04/nielsen-online-global-landscapefinal1.pdf>.

Building a social media strategy

There was a time when only a handful of people in an organization used e-mail. Now everyone does.

Similarly, social media is in its early stages. But within 12 to 24 months, it's likely to be as pervasive as e-mail, with people throughout organizations connecting internally and externally using social tools.

So how should companies and their contact centers prepare for the inevitable, rapid spread of social media? In 2007, Forrester Research suggested a "POST" approach³:

- **People**—Begin by identifying the audiences you're trying to reach.
- **Objectives**—Determine what you want to accomplish through social media engagement.
- **Strategy**—Create a plan for social media development and ongoing operations.
- **Technology**—Select and implement the tools that will best support your objectives and strategy.

Forrester's approach has served the valuable purpose of steering marketers away from the "shiny object syndrome"—launching the latest new social technology to "try it" with the intention of setting a strategy down the line. Instead of technology, POST drives marketers to focus on audiences and objectives first.

As useful as it is, though, the POST approach plays to the tendency of many marketers to put people into buckets—a bucket for customers, one for prospects, another for employees, and still others for business partners and company alumni.

With social media, such neat groupings are simply not possible. Whenever a discussion arises that's of interest to your company, it's likely to draw participants from those groups and others.

Instead of segmenting by categories of people, consider organizing around conversations. The topic could be a product or service, an industry or customer trend, or a technology innovation. Whatever the subject, multiple groups will weigh in, perhaps even your competitors.

Key questions to address in developing a conversation orientation include:

- What conversations do we want to be a part of?
- Where are they taking place?
- How can we listen to them?
- Who in our organization will respond when we find them?

Once you define the conversations, establish why you want to engage in them and set your social media objectives accordingly. Objectives can include:

- Listening to conversations
- Dialoging with prospects
- Supporting customers
- Energizing your user community
- Spreading your company vision and thought leadership
- Embracing ideas for new products or services and new ways to use your current offerings

Once you've identified the relevant conversations and determined your objectives, you can establish the foundation of your social media strategy. It can be helpful to focus on a few key social tactics and establish a corporate presence for each. For example, Avaya engages in four social media realms, each with its own strategic purpose:

- **Blogging** creates a company voice, showcasing our perspective, culture and personality.
- **Forums** serve a help desk function, providing product support for customers, as well as a place for customers to help one another.
- **Twitter** fills a "teaser" role, sharing bits of information on current events and topics, as well as monitoring brand and competitive developments and finding new conversations.
- **Facebook** serves as the social media hub, providing company news, event announcements, tutorial offerings, videos, polls and community discussions.

³"The POST Method: A systematic approach to social strategy," by Josh Bernoff, December 11, 2007, Forrester Research, Inc., <http://blogs.forrester.com/groundswell/2007/12/the-post-method.html>.



For each tool, “embassy” positions can be established, such as [facebook.com/avaya](https://www.facebook.com/avaya) and twitter.com/avaya. As these positions evolve, the company can engage more broadly and expand its conversations with constituencies.

A key point: Every conversation arising through these positions should be responded to, even if it’s extending a simple “thank you” for making a comment.

Also be ready to weed the garden. Independent forums can arise around your product or service, including blogs, Facebook fan pages and Twitter feeds. Whether they’re positive or negative toward your company, these sites can increase the noise around the signals you’re trying to convey. You may want to reach out with an invitation to migrate their conversations to your site to reduce the noise.

Executing the strategy

You’ve identified the types of conversations you want to be part of and established your social media objectives, strategy and tools. Now it’s time to engage.

Scanning for a proprietary brand name is relatively easy using do-it-yourself tools such as RSS feeds of Google and Technorati alerts on social activity. But it can quickly become burdensome to monitor that name, find and track topical conversations of interest to your organization, and—most important—respond to both as needed. Brand mentions

alone can run into the thousands per week, plus the typical customer service issues and questions that are the meat and potatoes of the contact center.

To deal with the challenge, companies should consider some key questions:

- Who should do the monitoring?
- How do we route the conversations and issues?
- Which departments and experts within the organization need to be engaged to respond to questions and issues?
- What technologies do we have, or need, to handle the load, and how will those technologies evolve over time?

The routing map in particular will be unique to every organization, and many organizations may not be equipped to build it out of the gate. Exploratory conversations will be needed to sort out who should handle which issues and situations.

Contact centers will play a central role. They’re adept at integrating new technologies, of course, from 800 numbers and e-mail to Web self-service and chat. But social media presents a new group of channels to be integrated into the center flow.

Most centers are inclined to standardize and automate responses as much as possible. Certainly, getting a query into the contact center can be an automated process. But just as no two phone conversations are the same, no two social conversations are alike.

Therefore, try to avoid automating the responses. Instead, create a knowledge-sharing and collaboration space that includes good examples of conversation around recurring issues, such as billing, as well as highly technical questions. This resource can provide information on how issues were handled, including the tone and language used in responding. Weekly meetings or discussions can highlight leading practices to instill in the contact center.

Technologies are emerging to help handle the load. These include TweetDeck to track tweets; Radian6 to monitor blogs, forums and some social networks; and Avaya’s Facephone, which allows customer support representatives to engage through a Facebook environment.

Key performance indicators for social media can include mentions per week as well as the number of conversations engaged in per week. Over time, deeper conversations with more people will occur.

FACEBOOK: THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM

Facebook is a once-in-a-century communications tool like the Gutenberg press or the Marconi radio. It is no longer a Web site or a social network but a communications platform used by one of every five people on the Internet.

Unlike Google, which works on a proprietary algorithm and search history, Facebook offers real data, real people using real names, real e-mail addresses, and real thoughts and tastes. It incorporates an array of other tools, including blogging, radio, video and MP3s.

Facebook provides people the ability to band together and create or support a movement, with huge implications for companies, brands and contact centers. Through Facebook, you can target audiences based on their profiles and behavior.

It's important to begin by identifying the social media conversations relevant to your organization and determining whether and how you want to engage in them. Then, establish social media objectives—for example, communicating with prospects, supporting customers, and energizing your user community. These conversations and objectives will drive development of a social media strategy and selection of tools to execute that strategy, such as blogs, forums, Twitter and Facebook.

An exciting future

Social media is dramatically changing the landscape for companies in every industry. And it's reshaping the role of contact centers. You can be better prepared for this monumental shift by understanding the available tools, adopting a conversation orientation and setting a sound social media strategy.

Some key considerations

Contact center operators seeking to integrate social media into their operations can benefit from keeping three key points in mind:

The shift from synchronous to asynchronous communication is under way. Many people are no longer picking up the phone but instead tweeting or posting to a blog. Listening to these conversations can help you identify trends before they become crises that hit your contact center.

Social media is much harder to route than e-mail in contact centers. Many contact centers try to treat social media like e-mail that lands directly in the operation. However, social media doesn't come packaged in neat bundles. Therefore, much of it will need to be routed manually until more sophisticated analytical tools emerge.

Internal social media teams can't scale. You can't expect an already busy internal team to field several thousand mentions a week, let alone drive engagement on the conversations you want to take part in. Addressing the volume will require having people on your staff to handle social media on an ongoing basis. Establishing the operation will require close cooperation between the contact center and the social media team.

As these points suggest, integrating social media into the contact center isn't easy, and it requires a full organizational commitment. Yet the potential benefits in both contact center performance and contribution to the business can make the effort well worthwhile.

About Avaya

Avaya is a global leader in enterprise communications systems. The company provides unified communications, contact centers and related services directly and through its channel partners to leading businesses and organizations around the world.

Enterprises of all sizes depend on Avaya for state-of-the-art communications that improve efficiency, collaboration, customer service and competitiveness. For more information, please visit www.avaya.com.

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09/09 • GCC4371