How social media can help you win at omnichannel

By Lynette Hundermark

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Omnichannel from a consumer viewpoint is the ability to have a seamless and consistent experience across multiple touchpoints, to engage with brands or to purchase a product. From a brand's perspective omnichannel means leveraging and coordinating the customer experience across multiple channels of communications (web, face to face, emails, social media or mobile) to understand consumer behavioural patterns with the aim of delivering relevant product information to help with recruitment or retention strategies.

The retail shopping experience has changed dramatically over the last few years. Shopping for a Fathers day gift at a local mall ten years ago literally meant trawling the entire mall until a consumer found that perfect gift for dad.

The finest consumer experience

Times have changed as shopping for a Father's day gift today as a digital savvy consumer would take on a very different experience. Before entering the mall, consumers are already empowered with pre-shopping research. Consumers would be aware of deals available at shops that have already sent their promotional offers whether it be via email or apps push messaging, consumers would know what items are on sale, and 'whats new' and available in stock.

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Consumers would also have likely seen reviews, and images of intended items to purchase via social media channels such as Facebook, Instagram and Pinterest (all of which have popular apps utilised on a mobile phone).The traditional linear approach to shopping is likely to be replaced with consumers walking into a mall and going into the intended shop of purchase, simply purchasing what they had planned to purchase then leaving the store. The post shopping experience is where consumers would then share their shopping experience via social media channels whether it be anger, frustration or pure delight.

An omnichannel journey is the least customers expect as they increasingly dictate how they want to be engaged and serviced. With the addition of social media and mobile channels, the challenge for brands is to tailor across all the channels for the finest consumer experience. The impact social media has on the omnichannel customer journey can range from increasing awareness, influencing purchases, earning loyalty and gaining brand advocates.

The core idea of omnichannel is a seamless customer experience, that bridges the gap between online and offline. But as we all know that is not easy, because if it was, more brands would be winning at it. While not a silver bullet, social media has made creating an omnichannel experience for consumers more achievable for brands of any industry (not just retail).

Start with the mobile customer 'who is indeed queen'

Both omnichannel and social media starts with the mobile consumer. With 23.6 million smartphones as reported by Mobile Consumer in SA 2015, World Wide Worx, customers want and expect to be able to contact organisations via social media channels on their phones via the Facebook and Twitter apps or mobisites and have their questions answered, issues resolved and points of view heard in real time.

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Research has shown that at least 1/3 of consumers have contacted a brand for customer service via social media to date and the number is rising. Failure to engage will be regarded by customers as a service failure meaning that consumers are looking for a meaningful real-time response from a brand on social media whether it be during the day, night, weekends and holidays 24/7/365.

Social media has provided customers with a platform on which they share their views. If a brand's products, services and customer relationships are good, then their commentary will most likely be positive with greater brand loyalty, better customer retention, more repeat purchases and ultimately higher revenues (and who does not want that?)

When social meets omnichannel

Consumers are found on social media and can be easily researched from their profile information and engagements. The data gathered from social media can be used to start the execution of your omnichannel strategy. A consumer-centric

strategy includes content too, therefore, use social media to take note of your consumers' behavior. When do they engage with your posts the most? What content do they like? If you've been successful at something, create more content based off of that, for example, a case study blog.

Your consumers care about other consumers' experiences - they are more likely to trust the content developed from experiences, therefore, use them to create consumer-centred content.

Social media shouldn't exist in silo

Social media can be a great tool for making the consumer experience seamless. Brands can use social media to respond in a timely manner, to keep track of every question, complaint or engagement from a consumer. But, social media alone cannot accomplish a truly seamless experience - that takes a close relationship with all your channels in the marketing team.

All the data collected from social media is useless if it never makes it to the marketing team. Creating an omnichannel experience for your consumers means creating a unified customer experience across all channels. Social platforms can't be the only area personal and seamless interactions between consumer and brand occur. Connections between your brand and your consumers should be made between web, mobile and in-store or in-office actions. To execute this cross-platform strategy, your marketing, and social media teams need to be in constant communication.

A few days ago I saw a sponsored ad on Facebook by a well-established bookstore encouraging me to update my personal details relating to their loyalty programme, with an incentive of winning a prize. While attempting to update these details, I noticed that the page was hosted on an insecure site and naturally I was hesitant to proceed with the update so I paused and reported the incident on Twitter (as I knew Twitter was likely to have more of an immediate response than Facebook).

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It took over a week to get a response from Twitter with a reply stating that the social media team was not responsible for removing the pages that were hosted and that the appropriate line manager will be informed if I sent further information via email. The conversation was then ended with the page still getting promoted on Facebook. This left me and other twitter followers (who were following the conversation) quite perturbed by the response and, needless to say, I have not had any immediate inclination to use online channels of this bookstore, and I have also shared this experience with all of my peers.

Winning the hearts of the customer

In our current digital age, omnichannel is no longer a strategy just for retailers. Social media makes all brands accessible and exchanges seamless. On social media, you can reach your consumers, research them and personally engage with them. While not the only part of an omnichannel experience, social media does make an omnichannel strategy viable for

any business.

The key to winning the heart of the consumer is without a doubt listening and making smart decisions around the conversations (the real time social intelligence should give the team a heads up on what they need to know about anticipating issues, in the case of the bookstore example, removing the insecure page that was reported), and last but not least giving the customers a quick response without sacrificing quality for speed.

ABOUT LYNETTE HUNDERMARK

With over 15 years of experience in the tech, digital marketing and mobile solutions space, Hundermark co-founded specialist mobile solutions consultancy Useful & Beautiful. With a passion for developing mobile products that are aligned to business goals, Hundermark's appetite for keeping abreast of the latest industry trends is fast establishing her as an expert tech commentator and opinion leader in South Africa. Follow @lynetteanthony on Twitter.

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