

COLUMNS

Make customer care rewarding with SMS

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According to CTIA: The Wireless Association, 1.5 trillion SMS text messages were sent in 2009.

Given its rising popularity, companies are not surprisingly looking at ways to leverage this mobile channel in their communications with customers and prospects.

To date, marketers have focused on SMS mainly for polling and surveys, discounts and coupons, point-of-sale information, and travel or event-based promotions.

While valuable in generating short-term sales and other results, often overlooked are the service-related communications that could significantly enhance the customer experience, build brand loyalty and foster greater lifetime value.

Holistic view counts

In considering the customer-care uses of SMS, it is important to recognize that customers take a holistic view of the companies with which they do business.

Customers do not differentiate between your business units, marketing or service messages and the channels of communication used. All become part of that composite view of your company known as brand perception.

This makes every interaction, regardless of touch-point, important as an opportunity to add value and enhance the customer experience.

In a very real sense, it makes every interaction a marketing interaction. Because even if not a direct sales opportunity, it certainly influences how customers see your brand and their willingness to act on that perception in buying product.

Of course, you should also be aware that in our wired world these perceptions positive or negative are often widely shared with others.

With this viewpoint in mind, let us examine the uses of SMS for customer care.

Typically, your customer care communications are the type of important, time-sensitive transactional messages that customers want and expect to receive.

These communications could be issued in response to actions that customers have initiated, such as notices about product purchase, shipping or back-order and service inquiries.

Or they could be triggered by important changes or risks that you have spotted, such as alerts on potential identify theft or fraud, overdraft avoidance on bank accounts, critical product bug fixes or updates to travel itineraries involving flight, hotel or rental car arrangements.

Alternatively, the communications could be prompted by other information that customers would want to hear about right away, such as notices on investment portfolio buy or sell opportunities or the chance to secure a desired product on better terms.

The point here is that all of these customer-care circumstances and many more are well suited for SMS communication. All companies have them in one form or another. And all represent untapped potential to enrich the customer experience, enhance loyalty to your brand and set-up revenue opportunities.

Text context

Why is SMS so well suited for customer care messages? The answers are simple:

1. Mobile devices have become virtually ubiquitous all of your customers have one.
2. The nature of the medium is a perfect match for messages that tend to be short and time-sensitive. SMS messages arrive in minutes, if not seconds, after being sent, and on a device that customers typically carry with them all the time and check frequently.
3. SMS is an interactive medium. It enables companies to take customer care to whole new level to not just inform but resolve issues through a two-way dialogue.
4. SMS for customer care is the perfect bridge to other uses, such as marketing. In fact, carefully paired marketing messages can be incorporated into a SMS communiqu directly or via a link to a landing page just as is done with transactional email today.

This final point is an important one.

Many companies are excited about the potential for SMS, but do not know where to begin.

Others have rushed in and attempted to force fit SMS into their acquisition programs only to encounter adverse customer reactions not surprising given the highly personal nature of the medium.

SMS for customer care

Using SMS for your customer care communication may be the most natural place to begin.

By delivering messages that customers want, need and expect across a medium that is well suited for them, you can add value to the relationship and establish trust.

And once trust is established, you can then bridge to broader uses of SMS consistent with customer preferences.

In other words, a good strategy may be to allow your use of SMS to grow organically.

However, letting your use of SMS evolve organically does not mean doing nothing or allowing things to just happen on their own. You will need a strategy and systematic game plan for using SMS to enhance the quality of your customer care.

Below are some pointers:

Inventory your customer touch-points. The ownership of customer communications is frequently splintered within a company by business unit or communication channel, inhibiting a unified view of customer relationships and coordinated messaging.

So this first step involves some heavy lifting in terms of reaching across organizational boundaries to determine where the company touches customers today and how SMS can be integrated into current business processes to deliver more effective customer care.

Capture customer permission and preferences. Gaining permission is not optional, especially for a one-to-one channel such as SMS.

Knowing preferences is mandatory, too.

Understand your customers' choices about channel, content, context and cadence.

Understand too that their preferences are not binary or static. Customers may prefer to have messages delivered in tandem across both SMS and email or vary their channel choice by topic or time of day. And be prepared to adjust these preferences as their needs and circumstances change.

So seek preference data that is specific and actionable, and use it to inform the SMS messages you send and any marketing add-ons at your various customer care touch-points.

And as you interact with customers and gain their trust, build-out your profile over time so you can bridge into other topics suitable to SMS messaging.

Provide for a fulfilling, interactive customer experience. In using SMS for customer care notices, bear in mind two factors as you construct your program.

First, it is inherently a two-way medium, so customers are likely to respond. Second, it is also real time, so customers are expecting real time responsiveness in any follow-on communications.

How you handle this dual nature of SMS will determine whether you are simply using it to inform customers more efficiently or actually leveraging its potential to resolve problems or realize opportunities in ways that add value to the relationship.

Therefore, think through how the communications you initiate on SMS will play out.

Automated, scripted responses may work in some cases. Offering to follow-up with more detailed information via email or directing customers to a landing page may work in others.

But give serious consideration to options for interacting with a real person via SMS, instant messaging or phone chat. These are not only more consistent with the medium but likely to return the highest dividends in terms of an improved customer experience.

Find the right technology solution to realize your objectives. Finding the right messaging platform and technology partner should be an important component of your overall game plan.

After all, talking about best practices does little good without the ability to act on them. But layering on another point solution for SMS is not the answer that just adds complexity and cost, and worsens the fragmented, siloed approaches that impede effective communication today.

What is needed is a next-generation messaging platform that can integrate with your business processes and systems, reference your customers' preferences in real time, dynamically serve up messages across their channels of choice, and transform messages between them to keep the dialogue alive.

What is also needed is a future-proof solution that can keep pace with your customers' evolving communication behaviors.

Elevated expectations

The next generation of customer communications has already arrived. And with it has come elevated customer expectations of the companies with which they do business.

Customers expect companies to know them, be attentive to their needs and preferences, and communicate with them how, when and where they want.

Companies that satisfy these expectations will be rewarded with the customer's loyalty and future business. A good place for companies to begin is in making their customer care a rewarding experience, befitting of the customer's loyalty and business.

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