



Power to the People: Customer Care and Social Media

Facebook and Twitter are increasingly important channels for interacting with and serving customers. Yet to fulfill the promise of customer care on social media, businesses must first tackle a number of issues.

Executive Summary

The pervasiveness of social media is compelling businesses to increase their presence across all platforms where customers congregate. Yet most brand strategies around social media focus on top-of-mind challenges in sales and marketing, with customer care often taking a back seat.

This is changing, however, as more brands, particularly those in the transportation industry, turn to social media to strengthen their customer-care initiatives and offer customers consistent, seamless and gratifying experiences.

In this white paper, we offer recommendations for B2C-focused communications services providers, independent software vendors and technology companies as they pursue social media-based customer care initiatives. Our approach involves a two-stage framework for prioritizing customer posts and effectively allocating personnel to resolve customer-related issues. For the purposes of this paper, we identify Twitter as the primary social media platform, and a “tweet” as the mode of customer interaction with a brand. (The same

method can be applied to other social platforms). Finally, we propose a process for streamlining the redirection and resolution of customer queries.

The Importance of Social Customer Care

The growth of social media – Facebook, Twitter, forums and blogs, for example – offers companies more opportunities than ever to enrich encounters with customers and learn more about them. In fact, many organizations already have a mature social-media strategy for engaging and selling to customers, and the majority of brands have established a presence on social networks.

Still, few are taking full advantage of social media’s potential when it comes to customer care; most still see social channels as an extension of their traditional sales and marketing channels. They use their social media pages or accounts to run campaigns to increase awareness of their brand, and motivate prospective and existing consumers to buy their products and services through discounts, coupons and other promotional offers.



Social customer care is a high-stakes, high-payoff game that companies are now compelled to play.

In our view, the need for more effective customer interactions and closer customer relationships will only grow stronger as more users (beyond digital natives) adopt social media to communicate with their favorite brands. The following points

highlight the growth of user engagement on social networks and the importance of social media in providing customer care:

- Inbound user engagement with brands on social networks is growing nine times faster than social networks themselves.¹
- Brands on average receive about 39 messages per 1000 fans on Facebook, and about 60 messages per 1000 followers on Twitter per month.²
- One in three social media users prefer to reach out to a brand on social media for customer service, and 63% expect companies to offer customer service on social media.³
- Based on our 2014 social care survey, 75% of consumers using social media expect to hear from customer service in an hour or less; half want a response in real time. (See the Appendix on page 8 for survey details).

Clearly, companies can no longer settle for an “if you need us, just contact us” approach with respect to customer service; they must become ubiquitous across key social channels, and proactive in managing customers’ expectations for outstanding service. Social customer care therefore is a high-stakes, high-payoff game – one that companies are now compelled to play.

Newly Empowered Customers

In social media, people hold the power. Customers have a greater say in relationship-building, as well as the direction of products and services. At the same time, one unhappy customer can be a potential PR disaster – making it critical to ensure that every customer experience begins and ends on a positive note.

Compared to conventional customer contact centers, social customer care carries several unique attributes:

- Service interaction among users and service providers is highly visible and public.
- There is a greater chance of users advocating a brand through retweeting or sharing a good experience throughout the network.

- Because of this “network effect,” the risks normally associated with poor customer service – negative brand perception, less or lost customers and weaker profits – only increase.
- Complex customer issues can be harder to resolve through social customer care than through traditional contact centers.
- Redirecting customers to other contact channels can be a potentially frustrating experience for them.

A well-executed social customer care strategy with a sustained focus on providing a superior service experience can lead to huge payoffs, given the very public nature of interactions and the high probability of building and/or increasing brand advocacy.

Improving the Service Experience

How can companies improve the service experience on social media? The performance of brands that apply social customer care provides some important insights:

- By Q3 2013, the average time it took for companies to respond to queries was 11.3 hours, with four out of five inquiries going unanswered on social media.⁴
- Even with the top brands on Twitter, the average response time is said to be greater than five hours, and the average response rate only 42%.⁵
- Brands are redirecting queries on social media (Twitter, in this case) to other channels. In a 2013 report by Conversocial, a week-long monitoring of Twitter showed that the extent to which brands redirected tweets varied considerably – from a low of 0.21% to a high of 43.5%.⁶

Rather than trying to make everything better at one time, companies should focus first on actions they can take to provide positive, transparent experiences to their social media-savvy customers. This involves rectifying issues such as:

- High response times and low response rates to customer queries on social media.
- Handling the redirection of customer issues to other channels.

We propose a two-stage prioritization framework to address the first of the above issues, namely high response times and low response rates. Managing the redirection of customer issues to other channels is more complex – requiring the

A Two-Stage Prioritization Framework

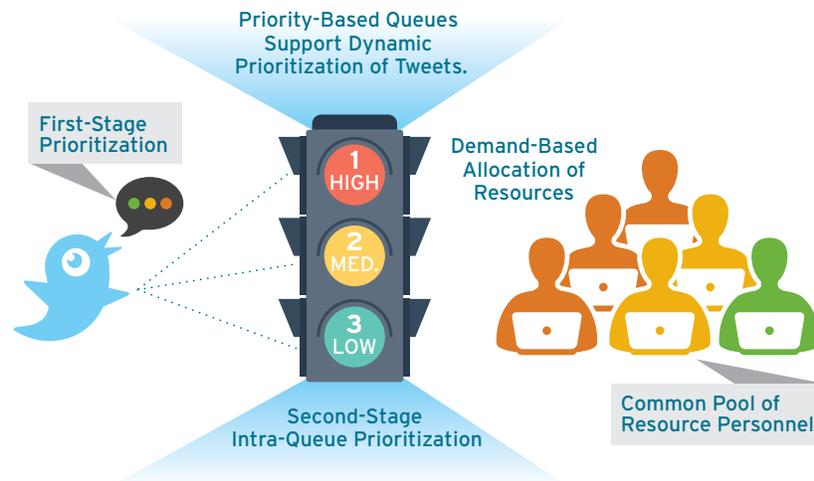


Figure 1

re-alignment of customer support processes throughout the company.

While this paper focuses on customer queries (tweets) on Twitter, the concepts and frameworks we recommend can be generalized and applied to customer service messages on other social media platforms.

A Two-Stage Framework for Addressing Response Rates

Our approach (see Figure 1 above) prioritizes certain tweets, rather than attempting to improve the response times and rates for all. This framework encompasses:

- **First-stage prioritization** categorizes incoming tweets in three queues, based on the severity of the issue.
- **Second-stage intra-queue prioritization** ranks tweets within each queue, based on the attributes of users and tweets.
- **Demand-based personnel allocation** assigns employees to each of the queues, based on resource requirements. Customer service personnel are asked to address high-priority tweets first.

First-Stage Prioritization

In first-stage prioritization, incoming tweets from users are separated into three priority-based queues, depending on the severity of the issue and the need to redirect to other channels. These queues also support dynamic intra-queue prioritization of tweets.⁷

The seriousness of a reported issue is determined by alert tools and services configured to reference specific keywords in user tweets and analyze the sentiments in those messages. Since this is largely context-specific, an easily configurable and customizable solution is usually needed. One such tool is Cognizant's Social Prism, our social-media monitoring and intelligence solution (see Appendix on page 8 for details). The severity of an issue is categorized as:

- **High** when the customer has an issue that requires immediate support.
- **Medium** when the customer tweets to make general inquiries, question or express dissatisfaction about a service, or complain about the product or company, for example.
- **Low** when the customer tweets to compliment, make an observation, or acknowledge the company's response.

Alert services using sentiment analysis can be configured to filter tweets consisting of words like "help," "not working," "issue," "outage," etc., to indicate major issues with high severity. Words and expressions such as "not happy," "why," "how," and "can't" are indicative of customer complaints of medium severity. Feedback, compliments and general questions with words such as "thanks," "happy," "great," "wow," "nice," etc., reflect low severity.

Apart from generic words and expressions, and depending on a brand's requirements, alert tools and services can also be configured with industry, brand and product-specific keywords to

determine the level of severity, and the need for channel redirection (depending on the brand's policies for handling different types of problems). For instance, if a company decides to handle all matters related to a specific issue, product, department or geographical market through the contact center, all incoming tweets with keywords related to these criteria can be redirected to the center. Based on the severity of the problem and the need for channel redirection, all incoming tweets are then routed to different queues, according to the decision matrix (see Figure 2).

First-Stage Prioritization:

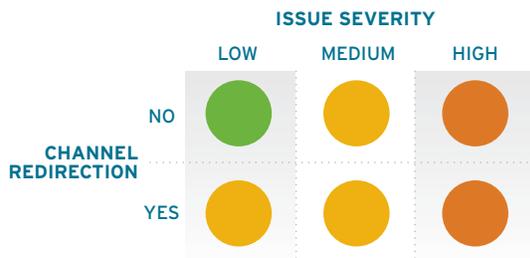


Figure 2

The Decision Matrix

Instead of a single priority-based queue for handling all incoming tweets, three queues are preferable for the following reasons:

- In a single priority-based queue, there is a chance that low-priority tweets may never get processed unless their position increases dynamically with wait duration.
- Investments can be minimized with multiple queues, since responding to tweets in the Priority 3 queue would not require the same computational (hardware and software) requirements as tweets in the Priority 1 queue.
- With multiple queues, there is also more likelihood of identifying and reprioritizing tweets that have been incorrectly ranked due to the limitations of alert and sentiment-analysis tools.
- Low-priority tweets, such as compliments, can play a significant role in building the brand image, and should be replied to/retweeted at every opportunity.

Personnel who respond to user tweets on each of the queues have the option to manually assign the tweet to another one. This makes it possi-

ble to handle tweets that have been incorrectly assigned to a queue for reasons cited above.

Second-Stage Prioritization

In second-stage prioritization, all tweets within each priority-based queue are ranked dynamically. The intra-queue prioritization model regularly updates the priority of tweets; personnel respond to tweets with the highest priority within the queue.

In the first stage, incoming tweets are segregated and prioritized based on the acuteness of the reported issue. In the second stage, depending on the brand's service strategy, the tweets are ranked based on the user and message (tweet) attributes:

- **User attributes** pertain to the total number of status updates, number of followers, number of favorite tweets, etc.
- **Tweet attributes** concern whether the tweet is a reply to a previous tweet, the number of retweets, and favorites.
- Brands can also include **other attributes**, such as manual reassignment to another queue and channel redirection to determine the priority of the tweets.

Depending on the brand's policies, for each tweet a priority index (PIx) score is calculated as a function of response time and the above attributes. The lower the PIx score, the higher the priority given to a particular tweet. Below is an illustrative PIx scoring model.

$$PIx = 6.99 - 2.25(IsReply) - 0.27(Ln Status)$$

Where:

PIx - Ln (Response time in minutes) for each tweet

$IsReply$ - "1" if the tweet is a reply to a previous tweet, otherwise "0"

$Ln Status$ - Ln (number of user status updates)

Note: The above equation was arrived at using multiple linear regression on a sample of 100 tweets to @comcastcares. All of these coefficients are statistically significant at a significance level of 5%. Other attributes considered in the model but found not to be statistically significant include number of followers of the user, number of favorites and number of retweets of the tweet.

From this model, it can be inferred that tweets that are replies are given high priority. This makes

sense, given that replies are usually part of ongoing issue-resolution and should be addressed quickly. Similarly, tweets of users with a high number of status updates typically suggest user activity or seniority, and are accorded precedence.

Depending on its requirements, a company can choose a different strategy for prioritization that gives higher importance to other attributes, such as the number of followers, number of retweets, etc.

Demand-Based Personnel Allocation

In our framework, addressing tweets with higher priority comes first. The structure consists of a common group of specialized, highly trained personnel who can handle tweets in any of the three queues. These individuals are assigned to the three queues depending on resource requirements, with preference given to the requirements of higher-priority queues.

Assuming all personnel are equally skilled and productive, the number of people required to handle tweets in a particular queue can be obtained from the equation:⁸

$$n = (Tq) / (p * wq)$$

Where:

n = Number of personnel needed for a particular queue.

q = 1, 2 and 3 corresponding to the three priority queues.

Tq = Total number of tweets pending in the queue.

wq = Target average lead time for tweets in respective queues.

p = Average number of tweets handled per unit time per person.

Redirecting Customer Issues

Customers who reach out to brands on Twitter prefer to have their issues resolved through that channel rather than being redirected to another, such as the contact center, e-mail, etc.⁹ Even if the issue needs to be forwarded to another channel, the customer expects the experience to be as easy and effortless as possible.

Managing the redirection of queries thus becomes paramount, since a seamless service experience goes a long way in building brand loyalty. There are two techniques that organizations can use to resolve this issue:

- Minimize the redirection of issues by leveraging a dedicated social care team.
- Realign the channel redirect process to simplify the user experience.

Minimizing Redirection Problems

Redirecting customer concerns from Twitter to other channels can be made easier with a well-trained task force dedicated to serving the social channel. They typically have a better understanding of issues reported by customers, which increases the chance of resolving them through the same channel (see Figure 3). A case in point is Comcast's customer support on Twitter.¹⁰ Comcast's Twitter account @ComcastCares is managed by a team that can provide technical support and troubleshooting for a wide variety of problems posted by customers. The team identifies issues, answers questions and works with customers to help them resolve their concerns about their wireless connectivity, cable connection, modem and outages, for example.

Similarly, a robust, intuitive and easy-to-use knowledge management solution can help reduce

Redirecting Issues

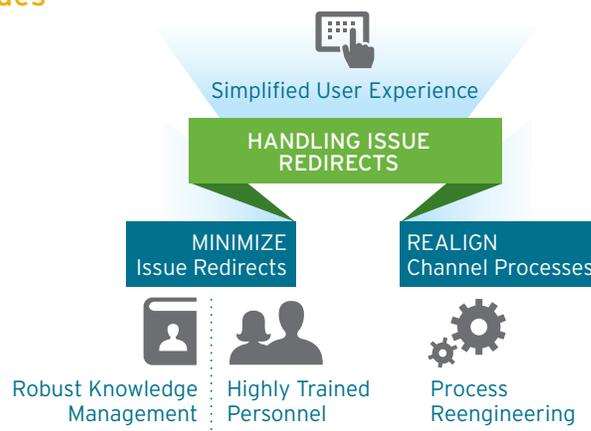


Figure 3

issue-resolution time by ensuring that personnel don't waste time hunting for information from different sources, deliver accurate responses to a list of all previously known issues, and minimize redirection to other channels.¹¹

Realigning Processes to Simplify the User Experience

In scenarios where redirection to another channel is unavoidable, the objective should be to simplify the customer experience – a process that should be reengineered from the customer's perspective. Figure 4 provides a high-level realignment process map that emphasizes easy handoffs between Twitter (original channel) and the brand's favored channel (contact center, e-mail, etc.). This process

can be customized, based on a company's customer-service strategy and users' preferred channel options.

Channel-redirection involves the following:

- In the realigned process model, the brand's initial user touch point is on the original social media channel. The company's preferred channel becomes active in the service interaction during the execution phase if the issue needs to be redirected to another channel for high-priority tweets (Priority 1 and 2).
- For low-priority tweets (Priority 3), personnel engage with the customer and resolve the issue on the original channel.

Realigning the Channel-Redirect Process

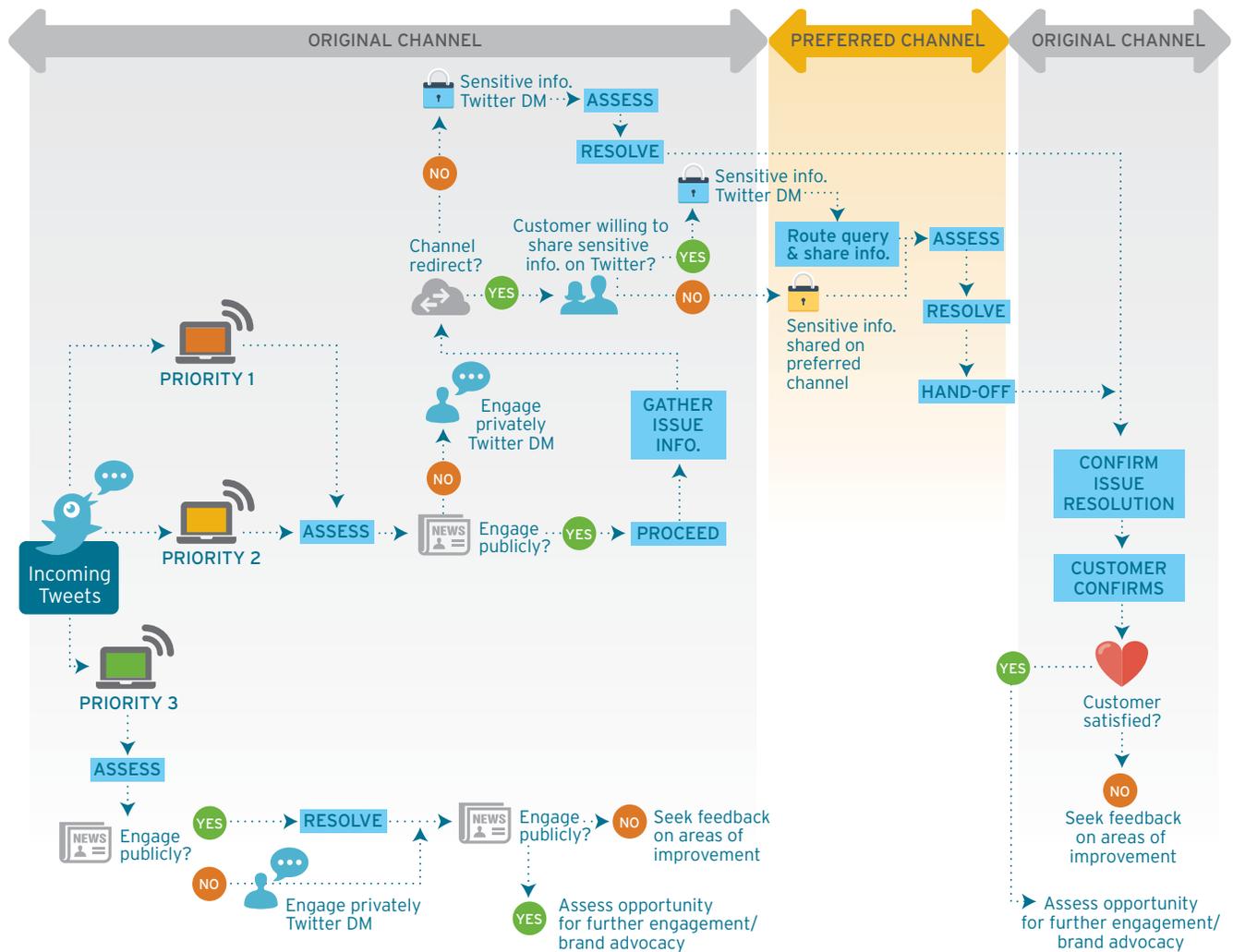


Figure 4

- To simplify the customer experience, interactions with the preferred channel are minimized. All information pertinent to the issue is obtained through the original channel and communicated to the preferred channel when the issue is redirected.
- For sensitive information, such as customer- and account-related information, the customer has the option to share their concerns on the preferred channel; if he or she has reservations about sharing via Twitter, a Twitter Direct Message can also be offered.
- The process also allows for the brand to reach out to the customer via the preferred channel and collect the information, rather than putting the onus on the customer to do so. The channel's interactions with the customer are limited to this extent. Based on our recent survey, when consumers request support via social media, phone contact followed by direct messaging is favored (refer to Appendix on page 8 for survey details).
- Once the issue is resolved, depending on whether the customer is satisfied with the overall service experience, the rep needs to assess opportunities to further engage the customer and secure their brand loyalty.
- Following issue resolution, all relevant details are shared through the original channel to confirm that the matter was successfully settled, and to ensure that the customer's followers are made aware of this. This increases the chances of the customer acknowledging the tweets and appreciating the services received. Messages can be retweeted to reinforce a positive brand perception.

Looking Forward

Social customer care is prominent in almost every consumer-facing industry, including consumer electronics, e-commerce, retail, consumer goods, telecom, banking and airlines. As more people rely on social media to interact with the brands of their choice, companies must meet their

requirements for real-time engagement and deliver superior customer experiences to differentiate themselves from the pack. Hence, it is important for brands to develop a customer-centric, issue-driven social customer care strategy that opens new avenues for engaging customers. The frameworks we have proposed allow brands to implement solutions, and redesign and effectively manage processes for delivering superior service.

Below are some questions CSPs, ISVs and other consumer-facing organizations should ask themselves when developing a plan for social customer care:

- **What platform do our customers prefer?** Determine your customers' preferred support channel. For customers who choose social media as one of their options, determine their preferred social media platform.
- **What are others doing right?** Complete a social care health check and benchmark your performance vis-a-vis your competitors.
- **What are you doing wrong?** Map out your customers' social care journey to uncover their issues and pain points.
- **What are your customers looking for?** Create a simple and easy way to index a library of possible customer issues and proposed resolutions.
- **What are you looking for?** Define your company's end state and identify the capabilities required to achieve it in terms of organizational structure, processes, systems and resources.
- **How would you measure social care success?** Determine key metrics to monitor and track customer experiences.

It is important for brands to develop a customer-centric, issue-driven strategy for social customer care.

Appendix

Illustration of Demand-Based Personnel Allocation

If there are 100 tweets pending in a Priority 1 queue (T_q), the targeted issue resolution time for each issue in Priority 1 queue is one hour (W_q), and each person on average can handle 25 Priority 1 tweets per hour (p), the number of personnel required (n) would be $100/(25*1) = 4$

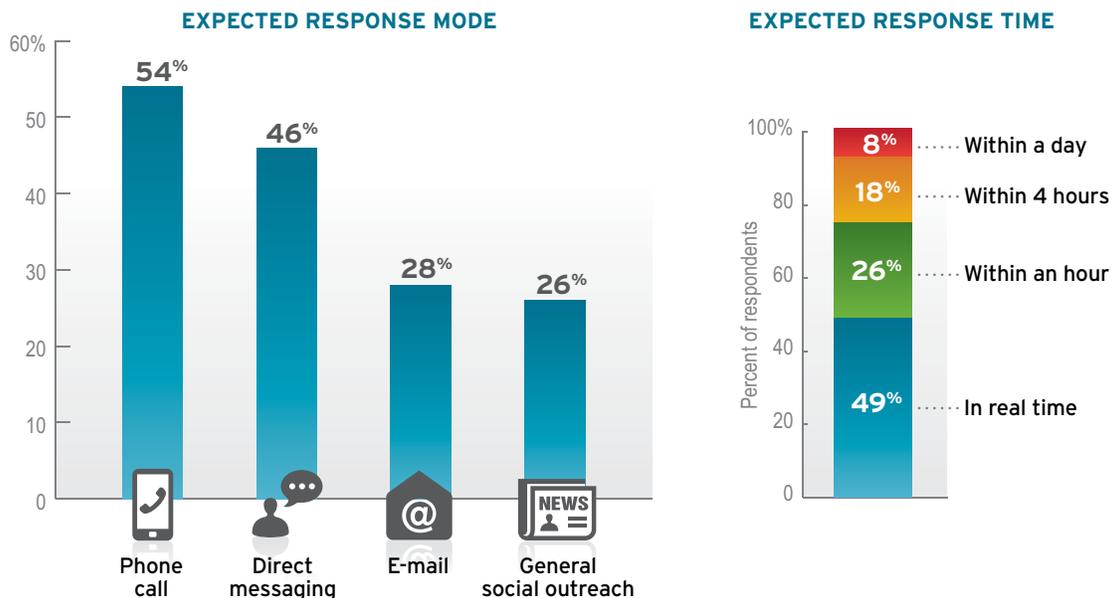
Therefore, four employees can be assigned to handle the pending 100 tweets in a Priority 1 queue to meet the targeted resolution time of one hour.

Figure 5 offers a snapshot of customer expectations concerning social care interaction. This is based on results from the 2014 "Cognizant Communications Industry Customer Experience Survey."

Note: The 2014 Cognizant Communications Industry Customer Experience Survey was conducted online and completed in late 2014 by 2,150 respondents spanning the U.S., Canada, the UK and Australia.

Expectations from Customer Service Requested via Social Media – U.S.

When consumers request support via social media or phone, followed by direct messaging, what is the preferred response mode? Three-fourths of the consumers using social media expect to hear from customer service in an hour or less; half want a response in real time.



Response Base: Respondents who use social platform for customer support activities; $n=39$.

Figure 5

Cognizant's Social Prism

Social Prism is Cognizant's monitoring and intelligence solution for social media. Its capabilities include sentiment analysis and text analytics, supported by a flexible platform that can be tailored to suit specific business requirements. Social Prism enables organizations to:

- Analyze data from a wide variety of data sources, including Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, blogs, forums, news sites and Web sites.
- Analyze data across spatial, temporal and different hierarchical dimensions.
- Employ an easy-to-figure model for adapting the solution to specific business requirements.
- Provide real-time, 360-degree insights through easily navigable dashboards.

Additional details on Cognizant's Social Prism can be found at <http://www.cognizant.com/OurApproach/Cognizant-Social-Prism-Getting-out-in-Front-of-Online-Customer-Sentiment.pdf>.

Footnotes

- ¹ <http://www.digitalinformationworld.com/2014/01/how-brands-respond-customer-social-media-infographic.html>.
- ² http://downloads.sproutsocial.com/The-Sprout-Social-Index_December-2013.pdf.
- ³ Tweet, Email or Call? (Which Brands are Re-directing Social Media Complaints to Traditional Channels). Conversocial, 2013. <http://landing.conversocial.com/tweet-email-or-call>.
- ⁴ The Social Customer (Highlights from the Sprout Social Index). The Sprout Social Index: December, 2013.
- ⁵ Customer Service on Twitter: How Top Brands Respond (A Study of the Interbrand Top 100 Brands on Twitter). Simply Measured, 2013.
- ⁶ Tweet, Email or Call? (Which Brands are Re-directing Social Media Complaints to Traditional Channels). Conversocial, 2013. <http://landing.conversocial.com/tweet-email-or-call>.
- ⁷ This paper does not cover the implementation of intra-queue dynamic prioritization.
- ⁸ This equation is modeled on Little's Law, which defines the relationship between the number of units in a system, the throughput rate and the process lead time.
- ⁹ Tweet, Email or Call? (Which Brands are Re-directing Social Media Complaints to Traditional Channels). Conversocial, 2013. <http://landing.conversocial.com/tweet-email-or-call>.
- ¹⁰ Rachel Sprung. Four Examples of Excellent Twitter Customer Service. <http://www.socialmediaexaminer.com/exceptional-customer-service-on-twitter/>. Published: August 1, 2013. Accessed Jan. 12, 2015.
- ¹¹ This paper does not cover the framework or model for implementation of knowledge management solutions.

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About Cognizant

Cognizant (NASDAQ: CTSH) is a leading provider of information technology, consulting, and business process outsourcing services, dedicated to helping the world's leading companies build stronger businesses. Headquartered in Teaneck, New Jersey (U.S.), Cognizant combines a passion for client satisfaction, technology innovation, deep industry and business process expertise, and a global, collaborative workforce that embodies the future of work. With over 75 development and delivery centers worldwide and approximately 211,500 employees as of December 31, 2014, Cognizant is a member of the NASDAQ-100, the S&P 500, the Forbes Global 2000, and the Fortune 500 and is ranked among the top performing and fastest growing companies in the world. Visit us online at www.cognizant.com or follow us on [Twitter: Cognizant](#).



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