



Customer Twervice

Exploring Case Studies & Best Practices
In Customer Service Efforts Using Twitter

A Social Media Explorer Report

by Jason Falls

October 2, 2009

From The Author

Thank you for downloading "Customer Twervice: Case Studies & Best Practices In Customer Service Efforts Using Twitter." This report will hopefully give you a look at how your company can supplement its current and traditional customer service efforts by extending those on Twitter. In this report, you'll hear about 10 companies, how they started their Twitter efforts, their strategic approach, how much time and resources they devote and more. The document culminates with a one-page list of best practices I've compiled from both talking and working with companies who have been there and done that.



And at the end of the report, you'll learn how you can continue to learn and interact with people from around the web who know a little something about Twitter and customer service there.

Enjoy the read. I hope you find it useful. Please feel free to share this report with others and reach out to me with questions, comments, suggestions or even corrections. What would a report on customer service be without a little customer service of it's own, right?

Thank you again!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jason".

Jason Falls

Social Media Explorer



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Case Studies & Best Practices
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Tweet Me! I Can Help.

If you haven't heard, [Twitter](#) is all the rage. While millions of people have been conversing, sharing and even marketing on the microblogging platform for several years, newcomers to the roster of Tweeples (people on Twitter) like Ashton Kutcher ([@aplusk](#)), Oprah Winfrey ([@oprah](#)), *CNN Breaking News* ([@cnnbrk](#)) and Shaquille O'Neal ([@The_Real_Shaq](#)) have taken, "What are you doing?" mainstream.

And where there are people, there will be marketing. Companies, brands and organizations are flocking to their agencies, consultants or even just people they know, trying to figure out how they can use Twitter to further their business. While some accounts (see [@delloutlet](#)) have proven you can, in fact, sell products successfully with Twitter as your mechanism, the first use companies tend to discover for the platform is customer service.

There are several reasons for this gravitation. First, Twitter is primarily a conversational platform. The majority of the users there are genuinely interested in just chatting. But with those chats come opportunities to discuss products and services, brands and companies. And sometimes those opportunities include customers complaining about poor service, faulty products and worse.



Because the core use of Twitter is conversational, marketers who trumpet their products and services in the traditional, one-way mechanism of old are normally ignored at best; blasted as spammers at worst.

Another reason customer service has emerged as the starting point for many companies using Twitter is the inordinate positive sentiment explosions for companies that tried it first. From Dell to Comcast, big brands with a voice trying to help customers on Twitter has helped, if not been the impetus for, massive shifts in brand reputations.

Think of the two companies referenced above in terms of 2005. Dell and Comcast had less than positive customer service reputations. But when Lionel Menchaca ([@LionelatDell](#)) and Frank Eliason ([@comcastcares](#)) started asking, "Can I help?" the pendulum swing from "they suck" to "they're alright" was, in corporate life spans, almost immediate.

Finally, (and honestly) the media coverage -- both traditional and blogs -- of these companies has made customer service the go-to use case discovered by brand managers and executives looking for ways to leverage the platform. Whether it's via search or conversations, when you talk about companies using Twitter successfully, Comcast and Dell are normally included in the first response.

What This Report Offers

Sure, it may seem simple to start using Twitter as a customer service function. Start a Twitter account ... monitor Tweets for mentions of your company or products ... respond to people to mention it ... maybe also hang a “find us on Twitter” link on your website’s, “Contact Us,” page ... wash, rinse, repeat. While that process may very well work for you, chances are you will run into unforeseen issues, hiccups and challenges that you’d wish you had prepared for. And as many of you are well-aware, you won’t get very far in the board room without planning and setting goals and objectives.

This document is meant to give you some initial ideas on how to build a customer service effort on Twitter. And fear not: this document isn’t full of only my ideas. I interviewed several people who actually utilize Twitter for customer service and included their comments to help you understand how they attacked this initiative, including everything from staffing efforts to success metrics. My hope is that you’ll use this document as an inspiration, if not a planning assistant, to bring your company to the list of case study candidates.

I’ve also included a list of best practices and ideas that will help you launch your Twitter efforts. This list is comprised of insights from conversations with the companies mentioned in the document, as well as my own work in helping companies develop Twitter Customer Service practices.



Photo by Mike Baldwin on [Shutterstock.com](https://www.shutterstock.com)

A note of caution: Following this document’s advice is not a guarantee of success. A company’s individual culture, environment, competitive landscape, product quality and more must be factored into your approach. You have a better grip on that than I could even hope to. These ideas should supplement your knowledge.

To round out the charts and graphs, pointers and lists sections, I’ve included some narrative descriptions of several companies conducting customer service via Twitter to inform and inspire you.

The Methodology



Photo by yelloj on [Shutterstock.com](https://www.shutterstock.com).

It probably won't surprise you that I am more of a journalist than I am a researcher. Frankly, I have a personal aversion to math. So this "report" won't come with any crazy statistics except those reported by the company representatives I spoke with.

How did I collect this information? I simply had conversations with the people doing it. Some conversations happened via Twitter, others email and some even on the phone. Through them, I gleaned some useful information

and anecdotes to share from asking questions I thought you might like to have answered. They included:

- How many people are devoted to customer service functionality on Twitter?
- How many hours are dedicated to the task?
- How did you get started using Twitter as a customer service tool?
- Was there lots of planning and strategic thinking that went into this or did it begin more organically?
- What do you highlight as your success metrics and how do your executives define success?

My hope is these answers are helpful for you.

The companies I spoke with included Comcast, Network Solutions, Verizon, DirecTV, Ford, ShareASale, Alaska Air, Radian6, Southwest Airlines and United Linens. Below is a chart of the basic answers to illustrate a comparison of these companies and how their Customer Twervice works:

| | Comcast | Network Solutions | United Linens |
|---------------------------|--|--|--|
| # of staff | 10 | 2 | 1 |
| Hours/Day (Per Person) | 8 (Twitter just one part of full community engagement efforts) | Less than 1 | Less than 1 |
| Special Staff/ Integrated | Digital Care Department | Social Media Team is own department | Marketing Department |
| Success Metrics | How we change the organization | Low negative online sentiment; No. of people engaged; Media placements | Relationships built for new business potential |

| | Alaska Air | ShareASale | Ford |
|---------------------------|--------------------|-----------------|-----------------------------|
| # of staff | 1 | 1 | 10 |
| Hours/Day (Per Person) | 8 | Less than 1 | 1 |
| Special Staff/ Integrated | Subset of CRM Team | The CEO himself | Subset of customer service |
| Success Metrics | Not defined | Not defined | Not defined - Pilot Program |

Findings

The common thread in these companies wasn't surprising to me. No one seemed to approach Twitter as a customer service channel with an elaborate plan or strategy. This is a direct result of Twitter being so new to the marketplace, as well as its lack of any established best practices or rules. Those who are using it for customer service, sales channels, media relations vehicles and more are pioneers in doing so simply because the service hasn't been around long enough for others to create best practices. The companies profiled here are the role models.



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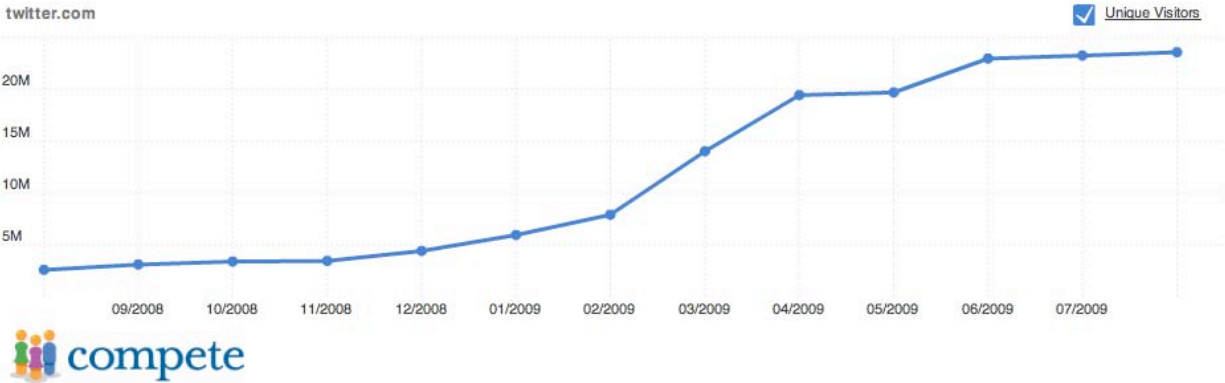
However, strategic planning and rigid policy-driven approaches may not be the most reasonable way to evaluate Twitter's effects. Twitter is a place for conversations. Conversations aren't planned.

In addition, the Twitter audience, which until recently skewed heavy toward technology professionals and social media early adopters, is pretty adamant that brands in the Twittersphere behave as people, not brands.

"Never try to solve customer service issues with PR bullet points," advised Amber Naslund, director of community for [Radian6](https://www.radian6.com). "The Twitter community is hyper-sensitive about scripted, corporate-like interactions. You have to engage people in a conversational tone or, in most cases, they won't listen to you at all."

Radian6 is a social media monitoring solution that uses software to scan the web and show all of the locations where people are mentioning your company. Radian6 and solutions like them ([Techrigy](https://www.techrigy.com), [Scout Labs](https://www.scout24.com), [Visible Technologies](https://www.visibletechnologies.com), [Spiral16](https://www.spiral16.com), [Infegy](https://www.infegy.com) and more) are often the technology engine that drives good social media engagement. In other words, Radian6 should be really experienced and knowledgeable about using Twitter in a customer service role. And, lucky for us, they are.

This is not to say that strategic planning and forethought is irrelevant when approaching Twitter as a company or brand. Those who engage must understand that prescribed statements and scripted interactions won't get you very far here. Think of Twitter as a cocktail party. There are dozens of conversations going on around the room. It's up to you to choose your conversation group. You can meander through the crowd and overhear little



Compete.com's measure of Twitter.com's unique visitor count from August 2008 until August 2009 illustrating the mainstream explosion in March 2009 and over 23 million unique visitors in August. Many estimate the actual Twitter.com traffic to be much higher.

snippets of this and that until you hear someone talking about a subject that interests you. You ease yourself into the circle, introduce yourself and inject value into the conversation. Soon, if the input you've given is valid and the small circle appreciates what you've added, you become a trusted participant.

Now think of approaching that cocktail party as an official business representative. Diving in and turning the conversation immediately to "buy my stuff" will not only alienate those in your immediate circle, but everyone else in the room as you make your way from group to group. But if you ease in, introduce yourself, provide valid and useful contributions to their conversation and become a trusted group member, you can look for opportunities to ask or talk about your product, service or industry that may lead to a valuable business connection.

Taking that example a step further, imagine your five-person customer service team walked into the cocktail party and was ordered to find people talking about your company and walk them through the scripted, legal department-approved, customer service work flow questionnaire. Do you really want your company's presence at the cocktail party to be clipboard-carrying nerds interrupting conversations with their multiple choice surveys?

The environment of Twitter demands your customer service representatives become more conversational, less corporatized ... more human. Your immediate reaction is probably to say, "Well, how do I train them to be that?" Well, your employees aren't livestock. They *are* human. You just need to give them permission to act like it.

Still, the company reputation is at stake and the environment of Twitter dictates that android-like handling of customer service there won't fly. Your Twitter team will need to be people you can trust to speak on behalf of the company. They will need to be motivated by the company good and success. They will need to be the types of employees who show

initiative, can think on their feet and make sound decisions, sometimes in stressful situations.

In the companies I spoke with there were two distinct descriptions of the employees engaging on Twitter. The overwhelming majority of Twitter customer service handlers for these businesses were marketing or social media types who found their way to Twitter because it was a trendy new Internet website. In their exploration of it, many for personal reasons, they found individuals chatting about their companies and naturally eased into having conversations with those people. Soon, they were routing issues as other users realized they could find a real, live person that works at company X instead of waiting on hold for 27 minutes only to talk to an operator who might have a firm grasp of English.

The second type of customer service operations I found was the senior customer service specialist. These individuals, like Charles Miller of DirecTV, are seasoned veterans in having conversations with customers. Twitter is just another venue for those conversations. The operation is no different than the typical call center for customer issues, except for the fact that the people handling the issues are more senior and experienced.

The commonality in the two employee types that emerged is that they are designated and trusted to speak on behalf of the company and are experienced enough to know where to find answers to a variety of questions within the company infrastructure.

The takeaway? Your customer service teams need to be educated on the dos and don'ts of social media or you'll need to be comfortable with someone (not necessarily a customer service rep) who understands the social web to perform that function on Twitter.

Listening

It is impossible to contribute meaningfully to a conversation without first knowing what the conversation is about. The only way find that out is to listen. Listening is the first rule of participation in social media. How can you know what to say if you don't first listen?



Photo from sxb.hu.

When people first encounter Twitter, they normally spend a fair amount of time listening. They don't quite know how it works, what to say, whom to follow and so on. Listening first is natural. Why then, do companies think it's perfectly acceptable to jump in and start campaigning to the masses?

Fortunately, when we talk about companies moving toward utilizing Twitter as a customer service

platform, listening first is probably already a shared mindset. The intent of customer service is to read and react, and there are dozens of ways to read or listen to messages on Twitter.

From the simple and free methods like using Twitter Search (<http://search.twitter.com>) to complex and fee-based solutions like Scout Labs (reasonably cheap), Spiral16 (moderately priced) to [Nielsen Online](#) (pricey depending upon your configuration), listening solutions abound. The good news is that focusing on Twitter alone means you don't have to spend any money to start. (Though listening beyond Twitter should be in your future plans.)

Only four companies who participated in my research actually paid for social media monitoring solutions. All four were national brands with relatively large social media budgets and all were also monitoring and participating in other social media venues beyond Twitter, so there is a need for the more complex solutions.

What that shows us is that free solutions like Twitter Search, [Google Alerts](#), [CoTweet](#), [PeopleBrowsr](#) and others methods are often enough to keep a watchful eye on brand mentions and customer interactions on Twitter. Arm your Twitter response team members with one more of those tools, plus [TweetDeck](#), [Seismic Desktop](#) or similar Twitter desktop clients, most of which are free, and your Twitter Customer Service effort is up and running with no startup costs.

A look at what tools our companies in question are using to monitor Tweets:

| Company | Monitoring Solution |
|--------------------|--|
| Alaska Air | Twitter Search, CoTweet |
| Comcast | Radian6, PeopleBrowsr, CoTweet |
| DirecTV | Visible Technologies |
| Ford | Radian6, Google Alerts, Twitter Search |
| Network Solutions | Radian6, Google Alerts, Twitter Search |
| Share-A-Sale | Twitter Search, Google Alerts |
| Southwest Airlines | Twitter Search, CoTweet |
| United Linen | Twitter Search, Google Alerts, CoTweet |

Each listening solution offers a slightly different functionality. Twitter Search is real-time, meaning if a Tweet about your company goes live just as you type in the search term, you'll see it. When newer Tweets are published that feature your search term, a notification pops up at the top of the page, inviting you to refresh the page to see new Tweets.

This functionality is ideal, provided you can monitor the page and constantly hit "refresh." Sure, you can subscribe to an RSS feed of the search term, but then you lose the real-time aspect. The good news is you can download and install some scripts and plug-ins that will set your Twitter Search results to refresh automatically (see [MattyMC's Greasemonkey script](#)) or use third party applications like [Twitscoop](#) which has automatic refresh built in.

CoTweet, used by several of the companies I spoke with, is a nice, web-based Twitter manager. It allows you to conduct Twitter searches as well as manage multiple accounts and assign follow-ups to team members. The tool is built for businesses already using Twitter that have multiple colleagues performing similar tasks. The tool is free allows individual users to Tweet both through their personal account and through the company's account in the same interface.

Desktop clients like [TweetDeck](#) and [Seismic Desktop](#) have similar features for managing multiple accounts, built-in search functionality and more. You should survey several different solutions to determine what you and your team would be comfortable with, as well as what your IT department would be comfortable with before you make your decision.

Solutions aside, all each of the companies I spoke with were quick to point out that the solution does not dictate the service. It's the people within your company utilizing the solutions who make the difference. Southwest Airline's Twitter Manager Christi Day said it

best: "I think the tools should only supplement what we should be able to do as humans, and that is communicate."

Plan To Listen More

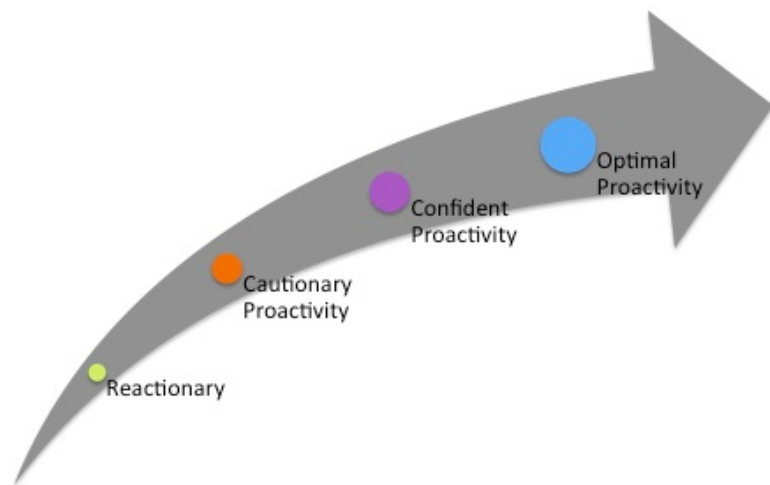
While this report and the questions asked and answered in preparing it focuses on customer service through Twitter, I would be remiss if I didn't give you some thoughts on what to expect, or even plan, with listening.

You'll find that listening to conversations about your company, brand, organization or industry on Twitter is simultaneously enlightening, frightening, encouraging and frustrating. Someone will probably Tweet a use or potential use of your product that you'd never thought of. Another might point out a design flaw. Some may say they love your company, while others may constantly complain about it.

But frankly, you may find it incredibly boring. The vast majority of businesses who aren't already active online aren't really being discussed on Twitter -- unless, of course, they have horrific customer service or other black eye issues like product failures.

Still, wading into the shallow end of the Twitter pool is a step in the right direction. Listen to what customers are saying and react to any and all messages as if they had arrived through your traditional customer service portals.

But watch out for those messages that do not fall into the "customer service can respond" category. This is where the future of your listening should move. You'll start in the Reactive Phase with customer service. You can then move to the Cautionary Proactive Phase of thanking people for saying nice things about you. You may even move into a Confident Proactive Phase, responding to the naysayers just griping to gripe by challenging their assumptions, directing them to facts to refute their claims or even extending olive branches to try to rebuild their confidence.



The Conversational Confidence Growth Span, Ver. 0.1 - ©2009 Social Media Explorer.

But there exists something even more advanced on the listening horizon. You will likely realize the power of conversation and grow more comfortable engaging with customers of varying degrees of like or dislike of your company. Your conversational confidence level will move from reactionary through cautionary then confident proactivity to optimal proactivity. There you will expand your search terms to find people not having conversations about your company, but having them about your category or industry. You'll look for people shopping for exactly what you sell. In your newly discovered Conversational Confidence, you'll find non-threatening ways to introduce yourself to people looking to buy and make yourself available to them in the midst of their buying decision. This places you in the Optimally Proactive Phase of Twitter use: That which delivers sales results.

This Conversational Confidence Span, depicted above, applies to all business communications, but is keenly applicable to Twitter as it has proven to be the evolutionary path most business users have followed. It should serve useful in your planning and anticipation of what is to come beyond your Twitter customer service efforts.

Case Studies

It's easy to look at charts and graphs and pull an anecdote or two that might be helpful, but a more effective way to gain inspiration to help you put your company on the Customer Twervice map is to learn what others are doing. Within each case study there exists an element or two that can potentially serve as the idea that helps champion your cause in introducing Twitter customer service efforts to your company or employees. We'll start with DirecTV, who saw from the start that Twitter was a natural extension of their existing customer service efforts.

DirecTV

Few groups of people are more spirited in their fanaticism than sports fans. On September 10, 2009, those dialing in to watch the Georgia Tech vs. Clemson rivalry in high definition on DirecTV were suddenly given a jolt of potential misery.

From [@viperfish](#)

Anybody else having trouble with @ESPN reception on @DirecTV?

7:21 PM Sep 10th from TweetDeck

Charles Miller and the DirecTV digital care group was on the ball, however, flagging the issue and routing it to the broadcast group. Miller and his group reminded users they could still watch the game in standard definition while the problem was resolved and assured them DirecTV was on it.

More folks saw the reception problem and turned to Twitter to express their frustrations or see if other viewers were having similar problems. Because DirecTV was listening, they snapped into response mode and continued to update the masses.

ESPN HD – our broadcast teams working on it. Tune to the SD Ch. 206 (delete "Hide SD" in set-up) or try Ch. 73 while we get that solved.

8:13 PM Sep 10th from web

Saw your tweets re: ESPN in HD – our broadcast teams on it. Tune to the SD channel 206 while we get that solved. (check "Hide SD" in set-up)

7:46 PM Sep 10th from web

An hour later, football fans were back at ease watching the game in glorious high definition. The result for DirecTV was noticeable.

From [@TimCary](#)

Nice job by DirecTV to use social media promptly. RT
[@DIRECTV](#): ESPN HD is restored. Thx again to our
customers for letting us know details.

8:38 PM Sep 10th from web

From [@techsaavy](#)

Wow [@directv](#) acknowledged my tweets and said they're
working on it. I'm slightly less perturbed. How about a
partial credit via Twitter ;)

8:18 PM Sep 10th from Tweetie

This is just a snapshot of what customer service via Twitter means. You have customers who are frustrated, angry, hurt, confused or sometimes just in need of help. Twitter is the platform-du-jour these days for both conversations and online venting. To be there is to ensure that when someone vents about your company, you can see/hear it and respond accordingly.

Miller is one of the many company representatives who was good enough to share his customer service function. I lead off with DirecTV not only because of the fantastic case study snap shot from the Georgia Tech vs. Clemson game, but because of DirecTV and Miller's unique perspectives.

"We've been having conversations with customers since the dawn of man," Miller said referring to customer service professionals. "We launched (our Twitter efforts) out of our customer service department."

Miller said marketers coming at Twitter looking for the bottom line benefit are probably clouding the issue a bit. Customer service and Twitter go hand-in-hand. And Miller has folded Twitter activity into DirecTV's customer service unit quite naturally.

“We have a team of folks that primarily answer emails,” he said. “Because there’s a certain type of arrival pattern for issues that come in on Twitter, staffing for something like that is intermittent and not very efficient. Leveraging folks who work on email to take on those that come in from Twitter just makes a lot more sense. That way, you’re optimizing their time.”

Miller reported DirecTV has a “thin layer” of people who actively respond to Twitter users with issues and a larger team that routes issues to appropriate departments. However, his team uses social media monitoring services to scan the entire web, and Twitter is just a small portion of that team’s responsibilities.



The department checks Twitter for new mentions of DirecTV about, “once every half-hour or so,” plus keeps a watchful eye on the alerts from their monitoring service (they use Visible Technologies). Miller said his team responds if the issue is “something we can add to.” Many times, they respond with a simple, “That’s better handled by calling customer service,” to route issues more efficiently.

Miller says DirecTV’s success metrics are, not surprisingly, typical customer service metrics like outreach attempts, successes and resolution and other key performance indicators like average response time. Because it’s social media, though, they tack on metrics like number of online mentions and the like.

Comcast

You can't talk about customer service on Twitter without talking about Frank Eliason and @ComcastCares. The now famous, "Can I help?" tweet from Eliason has interrupted complaints about the company since 2007. The company's effort has gone from just him trying to figure out Twitter and tackle mentions of the company one customer at a time to a 10-person, full-time staff in charge of monitoring and responding to the entire World Wide Web and serving as forum and community managers on Comcast's website.

Eliason has been featured in the *New York Times* and caused *Business Week* to declare him, "the most famous customer service manager in the world."



Many have documented Eliason's success and rightfully so. Brian Stelter's July 25, 2008, *New York Times* piece perhaps best illustrates the use case for customer service efforts on Twitter. In describing examples of Comcast's good work, Stelter writes:

Lyza Gardner, a vice president at a Web development company in Portland, Ore., used Twitter to vent about a \$183 cable bill last month. (The bill was prorated for almost two months of service.) Her comment — "very angry at Comcast" — set off Mr. Eliason's search tool, prompting him to type out his typical reply: "Can I help?" The response caught Ms. Gardner off guard.

"It's one thing to spit vitriol about a company when they can't hear you," she said in an interview. It's another, she said, when the company replies. "I immediately backed down and softened my tone when I knew I was talking to a real person."

Perhaps the most fascinating business insight about Comcast's Twitter effort is its lack of formality in it. Eliason told me he never had permission to Tweet. He just did it because it fit his department's mandate of reaching out to customers online. There were never formal discussions, strategies or planning involved. The success metrics he reports? In his words, "How we change the organization."

"We can measure success in many ways, such as the number of the people we assist, or things like sentiment, but that is not what our goal is," he said. "We simply want to listen to our customers and assist when we can. The listening is where the benefit is."

Radian6

For Radian6 to not be on the forefront of using Twitter as a customer service channel would be contradictory to the company's entire existence. The social media monitoring platform exists to help companies monitor the Internet with the intent of participating in the conversations they find. For Radian6 to not do so would leave potential clients wondering if they have all their screws tightened. Enter Naslund, who became Radian6's director of community early in 2009.

"As a company we don't have a prescribed, scripted formula for how to engage on Twitter," she said. "Twitter sits on our desktops, and we respond to posts, comments and participate in conversations as they happen."



Naslund says Radian6 treats Tweets much like phone calls, reporting that the "line" is "staffed" probably 12 hours per day (most often her and a "traffic coordinator" though others monitor as well) with another couple of hours added on for the periodic checks at night. But it's not like she and her co-workers are locked into watching Tweets all day.

"(CEO) Marcel (Lebrun) is fond of saying, 'We treat all of these channels as a new telephone,'" she said. "Twitter is up and open on my desk as part of my Radian6 monitoring. I respond to conversations as they come to me and our traffic manager routes issues to others appropriately. It's just part of our daily environment."

But what's the plan? The strategy? The agenda?

"I don't have an 'agenda,' or a script," Naslund answered. "I don't have an agenda or a strategy for talking on the phone, either. I respond to calls that come in accordingly -- say thank you or provide information or help someone out. Twitter is a tool. It's one part of our overall community strategy to support and engage with our customers."

Naslund told me Radian6 also doesn't view Twitter as exclusively customer service, either. Much like the telephone, it's a communications channel that is used for a variety of reasons and tactics, none of them formulaic.

"We've organized Twitter-based community chats around events like the Video Music Awards," she said. "We helped provide analysis of celebrity- and event-focused tweets during the event. It was something cool for MTV that we collaborated on, with Stamen Design and Twitter. Fortunately, there were no Radian6 customer support issues that arose in the middle of all that activity, but we would have captured and routed them appropriately had they shown up. Twitter is a way we communicate with and contribute to the overall community, not just a customer service platform."

Verizon

John Czwartacki, the executive director of external communications for Verizon, admits a lot of what he did for the first year or so of using Twitter was akin to operating a, "one-room schoolhouse." He spent much of the spring and summer of 2007 just trying to "figure it out." But Czwartacki, or "C.Z." as he is known, even so far as to carry the handle @cz on Twitter, was doing more than just figuring it out. He was watching, learning, reporting back and making notes on best practices.



In the meantime, several different departments and individuals at Verizon were also exploring Twitter. One might think that having multiple departments, people, retailers and more all playing on the microblogging platform could lead a company to fits. "We've got a lot of toes in the water," Czwartacki reported. "We've got about six people on the front lines conducting customer service on Twitter, but we literally have

thousands of people helping." And it's not just employees. Verizon customers jump in and offer assistance to customers as well.

"Our customer service team is plugged in as part of their overall operations now," he said. "They're talking directly with customers about the products that we offer. We have several people on the media team actively involved in Twitter as well. There's no set of governance, rules or structures in place. There's a much greater awareness and self-guidance from the individuals actually doing it to make sure our efforts match up to the brand direction."

That's pretty bold for a multi-billion dollar communications company. But the fluidity and immediate news cycle of the new medium dictates boldness and stealth structure.

"In the beginning people were surprised we were on Twitter," Czwartacki said. "That's changed now. Nowadays it's, 'Companies better be listening.' It's been interesting to watch that."

He also reports that Verizon is closely watching to ensure that it can adjust to scale. As volume of Twitter interactions increase, they hope to ramp up human resources to ensure Verizon customers are looked after on the microblogging platform.

Is it working? "I would say 95 percent of the interactions I have with people end with them being satisfied their issue is resolved."

Working it is.

Alaska Airlines

Elliott Pesut joined Alaska Airlines' customer relationship management department as a specialist in February. A long time Twitter user, his boss asked him to, "figure it out," for the company. So Elliott began listening to what people were saying.

Pesut reports there was no formal policy or process to establish what he did with AlaskaAir's account. The company simply trusted him to act in their best interests. And he did. Today, Pesut is still largely a one-man show, monitoring Tweets and responding when appropriate. He says five of AlaskaAir's customer support team members are on Twitter, familiarizing themselves with the environment, but not responding. Tweets still go through Pesut.



"But having them there helps them understand why we need to turn around issues faster," Pesut said. "The way we've worked in the past, with our processes and email tickets for customer service, doesn't work with Twitter. This has been a change for them."

AlaskaAir responds publicly to people having issues but immediately invites them to take the issue "off-line" and communicate via email or a phone call. Pesut coordinates and performs triage, routing issues to the appropriate channel within the company for follow up.

"Ninety percent of the time, people just need a link to our website to explain a policy or answer a question," he said. "We don't advertise the account because we didn't really have an idea of how much support it would need. We just said, 'We're here to help,' and went from there. It's been a very organic thing."

Pesut says AlaskaAir is now going through the process of establishing official policies and procedures for social media in general, Twitter included. Part of that process is also determining measures for success and reporting for his efforts.

AlaskaAir experimented, tried something new, started seeing some benefit from it and then began looking at policies and procedures based on that experience. That timeline, although counter-intuitive to the typical corporate approach, isn't uncommon with brands using Twitter for customer service. What helped AlaskaAir buck the conservative, risk-averse trend?

"Twitter saved us," Pesut declared. "We had a volcano eruption in Alaska in March. Our Twitter effort was one-month old. When the eruption happened, we used Twitter to post on-the-fly updates about airport closures, cancellations and delays. Instead of issuing multiple press releases, we just updated status on Twitter. We put a link from our home page for

people to follow us. The news media started pointing people to our Twitter stream. Our operations officer said, 'This is awesome!' They started pushing updates to us and completely embraced it."

Pesut said since then, the light bulb has come on and AlaskaAir can't turn off the faucet of ideas. Now, they only need to build the guidelines and infrastructure to fully embrace the medium and make it work.

Ford

The first thing friends and followers of Scott Monty noticed when he arrived as Ford Motor Company's head of social media is that Ford suddenly had a Twitter account for almost every make and model.

"We've got a number of Twitter accounts," Monty said. "The most prominent is @ford which is the catch-all and corporate oriented. Conventional wisdom is that if you put the '@' symbol in front of a company name and Tweet something, you'll get a response. But our customer service is mostly channeled through @fordcustservice."

That channel's bio on Twitter reads, "Monitored Mon-Fri 8 am - 5 pm EST by Shawn and Mike." The duo spends most of their energy responding to people, thanking folks for heads up on issues and the like. But Ford customer service isn't quite that simple, either.



According to Monty, the National Highway Traffic and Safety Administration instituted the Tread Act in 2002. That piece of legislation requires vehicle manufacturers to document and provide a paper trail relative to how the company handles any customer complaint brought to the company's attention. The fact that Ford is monitoring Twitter leaves some gray area with the law. If they see something on Twitter, is it "brought to their attention?" Monty reported there's no reason to chance it.

"Twitter lends itself easily to a system where we can identify problems and steer people into the Tread system we already have in place," he said. "We're not going to be performing recommendations and diagnostics for your car on Twitter the way Comcast or some other companies might. Our machinery is a bit more complex than that in most cases. But we can say, 'Thanks for the question. Here's the right number to call or link to follow to find the answer,' and document their issue."

For little issues, like where someone can find replacement wipers for a certain model car or truck, the team responds with the nearest dealer or link to an online order form.

"In that case, you're offering an immediate solution to a minor problem," Monty said. "Sure, it's customer service, but because you're doing it in public, it's more than that. It goes to brand perception and awareness. You're showing everyone watching how Ford cares for and interacts with its customers."

Network Solutions

For a company that had very low positive sentiment scores in online conversations just two years ago, Network Solutions is probably one of the best examples of reputation management via customer service out there. In fact, when I asked Shashi Bellamkonda, NetSol's social media swami, about measures of success for the company's Twitter efforts, he immediately talked about reputation management and online sentiment scores. You can bet Twitter plays a major role in their recent reputation success.

"The four things we look at in terms of our social media strategy are brand and reputation management, connecting with our customers, connecting with our community and driving new business," Bellamkonda said. "The social media team is trained as customer service representatives."



Bellamkonda explained once he or fellow social media team member Steve Fisher receive a Tweet, they route the issue to the appropriate department. If it's a question that can be answered by pointing people to website resources or with a simple answer, the duo handles it themselves. Right now, the volume is doable, but they are looking to the future and thinking of scale.

"Our long-term goal is to have more customer support front-line people there," Bellamkonda told me. "We have 40 people on Twitter from customer support right now, but they don't do regular monitoring. We have Twitter volunteers who engage with customers to help the social media team, but our philosophy is to train everyone else to engage in it."

Bellamkonda said even product managers have jumped on Twitter to respond to certain suggestions or questions as well.

(Disclosure: I've been asked to serve on NetSol's social media board of advisors. To date, I have had no official role with the company, however.)

ShareASale

ShareASale is an affiliate marketing clearing house that allows bloggers and other web-centric businesses to find and connect with advertisers for their web properties. CEO Brian Littleton admits that while they're a niche industry and may not have the volume of a Comcast or Verizon, he still sees customer complaints about payments, technical issues and other customer service-related matters on Twitter.

"Most emails and phone calls that come in have positive tones while people on Twitter seem to be much more willing to express their negative opinion," Littleton said. "Basically, my job becomes one of turning that interaction around."



Littleton says the process has been fascinating to interact with people who seemingly refuse to email call or otherwise try to solve their problems. And he says that not with a tone of incredulity, but of a company CEO learning insights about his customers.

Littleton reports spending just a couple of hours per week dealing with customer service functions on Twitter. ShareASale manages separate Twitter presences for new business and client interaction outside of service.

United Linen

When a company's tag line is, "First-Class Service, First-Class Products," one would assume they're on Twitter. United Linen, a medium-sized uniform and linen service company in Oklahoma City, not only is on Twitter, but is thriving on it. Populating Tweets with links to pictures of interesting napkin folds, 101-level slide shows on social media and even fun YouTube videos, Marketing Director Scott Townsend doesn't just serve customers with answers, but with valuable content.



"The whole thing is having a desire to communicate with the customer and enhance their experience with our company," Townsend, once an intern with the Walt Disney Company told me. "That Disney training has stuck with me all these years. It's about creating a great customer experience."

United Linen is not just a small-to medium-sized company on Twitter, but also a business-to-business (B2B) company, meaning Townsend has tread the waters of social media in a segment of business that doesn't seem to know how. He reports he manages the Twitter account himself, responding to anyone and

everyone who mentions United Linen or asks questions his company can provide relevant answers to. Plus, he's connected with restaurateurs and other potential customers.

"At a B2B business, the buying decisions are few and far between," Townsend said. "Our customers buy once a year. We're dealing with customers under contract. This means potential customers may not be doing business with us now, but hopefully they will in the future. We're trying to court them. We've had some say, 'I see what you guys are doing and that's really cool.' Hopefully when it's time for his contract to be renewed, he'll make the decision to go with us."

Townsend says the old school higher-ups don't really demand official success metrics be reported yet. He told me the owner of the company once told him, "I don't understand what it is you're doing, but keep doing it." In some companies, just doing what the boss wants is your measure of success, I guess.

Southwest Airlines

Another well-documented social media success story is Southwest Airlines. It opened its first Twitter account in July, 2007 and intended to use the channel as a marketing platform, sharing discount rates and special deals, plus driving people to the company's awesome blog for interesting stories and engagement. But when they opened their Twitter doors, it immediately shifted to a customer service platform.



"Once people knew someone was there to interact with, they started asking questions," Christi Day, who mans SWA's Twitter account, said. "Flight cancellations, lost bags, you name it. People asked it."

Day reports that the Twitter account has shifted its purpose once again as the company has learned both how they want to use it and how the customers react to it.

"Twitter just might not be the best way to solve the problem," she said. "It's a good way to make your voice heard, but most of the time the issues are too complicated to back-and-forth about over Twitter. Ultimately, the problems we solve are normally solved via telephone or email."

Day reports that while she spends 75 percent of her day responding to Tweets, Twitter isn't her only job. She is a part of the communications team and helps with a number of company initiatives. But she is often the only voice of SWA on the company Twitter channel.

“The good thing about the set-up is that it provides us with a consistent voice,” she said. “It can get a little frantic if I’m juggling other projects, but it’s manageable. It’s also challenging because the day doesn’t end at five o’clock. Twitter conversations go on 24-7.”

In terms of monitoring and managing the work, Day reports a healthy use of CoTweet and just being present and using Twitter itself is almost all you really need.

“If you’re in these tools, using them, you’ll know when people are talking about you,” she said. “We’ve looked into some of the monitoring solutions out there but I haven’t been wowed by any of them. I think they miss a lot of conversations and Tweets. I’m in there everyday talking to people. I have a hard time relying on a tool to tell me when issues are bubbling up. I’m there, so I know when they do.”

Day reports the level of social media activity and community Southwest Airlines has built and sustained over the years has equaled one marketing weapon most companies would die for: passionate fans.

“We have a lot of really loyal followers who go to bat for us and D-M (direct message) me when I may miss something,” she reported. “That’s a great part of the relationship-building that we’ve done.”

What These Tell Us

From strategically planned to “winging it,” companies and brands are diving into Twitter as a customer service function in many different ways. Some are accidental; some are intentional. Others, because of the Twitter mainstream explosion of 2009, are cautiously or reluctantly diving in as an attempt to keep pace.

While some best practices are emerging, there still remains a large void in what to do and what not to do because, quite frankly, companies haven’t been doing it long enough. However, some underlying pointers and commonalities emerged in the conversations that formed this report that are worth noting.

Twitter Customer Service Best Practices

1. Be Present

Simply being present and offering to help is ironically powerful. Do this at the very least.

2. Walk Before You Run

Don’t advertise the customer service function if you aren’t prepared to quickly scale up staffing and time allocated for Twitter-based contact.

3. Be Prepared For Scale, But Expect A Slow Growth

Unless you’re a major brand with millions of customers, even large companies spend less than a few hours per week dealing with Twitter customer service issues.

4. Have A Quarterback

The primary monitoring and routing person needs to know your company personnel, policies and story well. Invest in a good one and you’ll have good results.

5. Making Rules Is Prohibitive

Act first. Figure out how to fit these rules in the employee handbook after you fully understand how they work for your company.

6. Immediacy Is Imperative

Responsiveness to Twitter conversations is useless if it’s three days later because of a complex approval chain. Trust that your quarterback will manage the routing and user expectations until customer service can resolve the issue.

7. Look For Buy-In Opportunity

Executives will be convinced when crisis communications illustrates nimbleness and usefulness of the platform or when another company is embarrassed because of not listening. Share those case studies regularly.

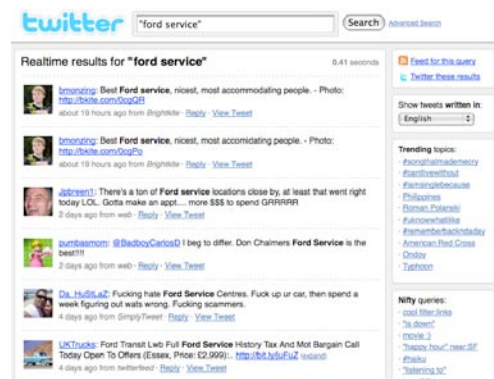
What Now?

As I told you earlier, this report is meant to give you starter ideas on how to build a customer service effort on Twitter. The best practices and other pieces of advice sprinkled throughout will hopefully also serve useful in your efforts.

The first thing for you to do at this point is share this document with your internal team and then discuss how your company could or should approach Twitter. Do you have the human resources to commit to it? Are you ready for the time commitment? If you're not sure of what that might be, go to <http://search.twitter.com> and type in the name of your company. How many "Tweets" appeared in the last week? Month? If it's a lot, see how many of them are questions or comments you would be comfortable responding to. You can then gain a sense of how much time it might take for someone to perform the function we're talking about.

Are you prepared with financial resources? Sure, they're minimal in most cases, but make sure you're ready for them, too.

As you can tell from the case studies and best practices, I'm not going to be a staunch advocate of formalizing a bunch of policies and procedures before you get started. While I do think that each organization should have some agreed-upon approaches and lists of topics that are off-limits to discuss, depending upon your industry, regulations and so on, the best thing you can do to establish yourself on Twitter is to just do it.



Sign up for a Twitter account. Make sure you name it something that people will instantly recognize as your company. Some companies choose their name (@SouthwestAir), the department (@FordCustService) or even individuals with connections (@LionelatDell). My recommendation for the former two is to clearly state in your Twitter bio or customized Twitter background (an image you can create and upload to serve as your Twitter account's wallpaper) the names of the individuals manning the account.

Start searching for your company name or keywords around your business. From the obvious (Ford, Ford Mustang, Ford service) to the not-so (buying a car, car repairs), search for terms that can help you cast a wide net and see a lot of possible conversations.

Once you see a customer in need, reach out by using the "@" before their user name at the start of your Tweet. This is Twitter's way of telling that user someone is talking to or about them. They call them "mentions." You should check your mentions tab, too, and see who is

talking to you. After you reach out to them, (e.g. - @JasonFalls Saw you mentioned some trouble with your car. Can we help?) wait for their response or click over to monitor their Tweets. You can even follow them if you'd like. Hopefully, they'll respond and your customer service efforts will be underway.

A Community Of Service

And what would a Customer Twervice report be without a little customer twervice of my own? If you have questions, suggestions, comments, corrections, or just want to chat about your efforts in customer service on Twitter, post a Tweet with the hashtag #twervice. I'll see it and respond when I can.

If you or your company would like more than just an informal chat, my contact information is below. I'd be happy to talk to you about helping in an official capacity, too.

But I'm not the only person out there who has done this or has ideas on how to do it. Not only are the people interviewed for this report generally responsive to those types of questions on Twitter, but there are dozens of very qualified folks out there. Follow the social media thinkers you find. Ask them their thoughts. I'm sure you'll find some good direction and input.

After all, Twitter is a place for conversations. I'm sure you can find plenty of people there willing to chat about Customer Twervice.

Thank you for reading. I welcome your feedback.

Official Stuff

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