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Customer Reference Forum®

Solving Facebook's Customer Advocacy Challenge, and Yours

by Bill Lee

One of the most enticing possibilities for Facebook is helping businesses identify, cultivate and leverage customer advocates among its billion users. Facebook's current challenges with Sponsored Stories are significant, of course. Identifying users who "like" an advertisement as advocates, without clear and explicit permission, violates the basic trust that real advocacy requires.

As Influitive CEO Mark Organ put it, "It would be like the phone company recording snippets of conversations about some product, and broadcasting that information, without context, to other people loosely affiliated with the people being recorded."

But such missteps need not, and should not, be anything more than a stumble. The potential is too great for customer advocacy on Facebook. In addition to having a billion users, Facebook is establishing a distinctive identity, and carving out an especially valuable and timely niche, in the minds of corporate users: it's where companies can become human in the minds of customers and prospects, where they can show their personality, where actual people (employees) can engage naturally in authentic conversations with customers and prospects that help build relationships — which are key to successful customer advocacy.

Needed: A Customer Advocacy Apps Exchange

That said, two major challenges exist: Facebook is a platform, with just a few thousand employees. Thus, at this point, it is unable to develop and innovate the sort of software that could realize the full potential for customer advocacy and engagement on its platform. Corporations with Facebook pages can't (or simply don't) do this, either. For the most part, they haven't yet developed the skills necessary to build such genuine engagement. As a result they view their Facebook page as just another channel for traditional advertising and PR — an approach that's typically antithetical to authentic customer advocacy.

The answer, of course, is some kind of apps exchange for corporate customer advocacy programs. While most companies aren't there yet, there are several that have built superb advocacy programs over the last decade or more. The experience and lessons learned at firms like Salesforce.com, Intel, Procter & Gamble, Intuit, Microsoft, USAA and others can act as a model for advocacy apps developers. And the advocacy vendors who've been serving these companies for years can kick start a vibrant apps market for Facebook's platform.

Here are some of the possibilities for Facebook advocacy apps. These aren't theory — they're already being done by companies such as those mentioned above and their vendors.

Building customer communities

Salesforce.com's Marc Benioff recognized early on that Facebook is how people, including his customers and prospects, want to communicate online. His team developed a "Facebook-like" platform called Chatter as a result. Among other uses, it serves as a superb customer community-building tool. For example, it's used by attendees and employees prior to and during the firm's annual user conference, Dreamforce, to reach out, establish connections, and form personal interest groups prior to the conference. That has substantially raised participation in Dreamforce — since 2009 when they started using the Chatter platform, attendance at Dreamforce has grown 40% per year, during a period when conference attendance in general has declined. Salesforce gives the credit entirely to its Chatter platform.

Automating customer content creation

This is an area of explosive growth for several reasons: Buyers demand customer content, but it takes too long and is becoming too expensive to create customer case studies and success stories the old fashioned way. And once you do, corporate approvals can take forever. A growing number of major corporations — IBM, SAP, Hitachi Data Systems, Dell, Hewlett-Packard and others — are automating customer content in ways that completely bypass such hurdles. They use targeted surveys and software that not only compile results, but also generate a variety of marketing communications such as testimonials, blog posts, success stories and the like. They can even produce broad market data — verified by an independent third party source — such as this: "86% of the organizations surveyed increased their performance with our platform by 10- 25% or more, compared to other enterprise strategy systems in their prior environment."

Using gamification to engage advocates

Gamification technology — one of the most effective ways to engage people on the Web — has only recently found its way into corporate customer advocacy efforts but is already positioned for serious growth. Some of the more innovative, fast-growing B2B technology companies — like Xactly, Eloqua, Dell KACE, Brainshark and Ektron — are using game-based "advocate mobilization" programs.

Using advocacy to improve demand generation

With the rise of the Internet, demand generation has gone from a marketing backwater to a multi-billion dollar industry in itself. One of the challenges facing the demand gen industry now is developing a steady stream of interesting content that will attract buyers and move them through the sales funnel. Another is to tease out where the buyer is in her "buyer's journey" as well as what her specific need is. Software at firms like Eloqua is helping to guide buyers to the content they want to read or watch, or even the person they may want to talk to — in both cases, that will often be a current customer.

Managing customer advocacy programs

Companies new to customer advocacy predictably go through a rude awakening: Customer advocacy is a great idea. They know they need to do it. But it's invariably more difficult, time-consuming and expensive than they bargained for. For any sizeable effort, you can't get by with a couple of interns working off a spreadsheet. Most firms who've been running advocacy programs for years have long since learned this, and can draw from a variety of applications to manage such efforts, as well as the all-important tracking of results.

Of course, many companies focus exclusively on their corporate websites as the default tool for interacting with the world. The truth is, for the most part these sites are pretty bad — the result of too many constituencies vying for real estate, and having lost sight of the customer and buyer experience. My own view is that companies should take everything on their websites that isn't either a customer testimonial or a customer story, and put it on trial for its life. Unfortunately, most companies are too lax and don't give nearly enough thought or space for customer views and voices on their sites.

For firms that want to build a Web presence on a foundation of customer engagement and advocacy, Facebook might be a natural alternative.