Social media dispute resolution stumps some companies

Mitch Lipka, Reuters

(Reuters [1]) - If HBO cuts out on you in the middle of the latest "Girls" episode, and if you have Charter Communications Inc as your cable provider, don't try tweeting your dismay to their customer service department. Nobody will hear your lament.

Charter, the fourth largest cable provider in the U.S. with 5.2 million customers across 25 states, closed up its social-media based customer service team in December. "Umatter2Charter," as it was known, had been taking customer complaints over Twitter and Facebook [2] and trying to resolve them, but the company says it is now done with working out customer service issues in social media forums.

The move, which might seem to conflict with the growth of social media, highlights the difficulty some businesses are having with free-flowing, round-the-clock social media, its public nature and the expectation of immediate responses.

With Facebook users numbering about a billion and Twitter drawing 200 million, it might be hard to believe that any retail [3] enterprise would drop out of the fray, but Charter isn't the only major company to announce such a move. Also in December, the largest single grocery store in New England - the Wegmans in Northborough, Massachusetts [4] - shuttered its Facebook page despite having some 8,000 fans.

"It's a tough sport," says J.D. Peterson, vice president of product marketing [5] for San Francisco-based Zendesk, which helps companies manage customer service. "The real-time nature of it - at times the volume that can come from it - it's very new and different for businesses."

While Peterson's company recommends going where the customers are - and a big chunk are clearly on social media - Peterson says not all businesses share the same philosophy or have the ability to engage those consumers in these open forums. But any company that has a significant online presence doesn't really have a choice, he says, working with consumers through social media is expected of them.

Advocates for the use social media say the challenge actually presents an opportunity for businesses - showing they are responsive to complaints and care about their customers can bring in revenue.

"I have seen this time and time again, and the end result is that the interaction often turns an irate customer into an advocate for the brand. And that is worth it's weight in gold," says Mike Rowan, chief marketing [5] office for Atlanta-based Swarm, which manages social media for companies.

That's certainly the way retailer Lands' End, a division of Sears Holdings Corp, sees it.

"When we started using social media tools [6] like Facebook and Twitter in early 2009, it gave us a new opportunity to do what we've done for 50 years, which is connect with our customers," says Michele Casper, Lands' End's senior director of public relations. "Whether it is through social media, our call centers or online, we offer the same level of customer service through each channel."

DIVERTING COURSE

Charter says it is not walking away completely from social media - just the idea of providing customer service via Twitter. The company says it has ample other avenues for consumers to get help - including telephone, customer service counters and live chat on its web page.

"We communicate with thousands of customers each day on the phone and in person, and that's where we'll focus our efforts," says Charter spokeswoman Anita Lamont. "While social media is a method some consumers choose to seek help, Charter offers phone and web-based contact solutions where all customers can access resources to provide assistance."

The abandonment of the Facebook page at the Massachusetts [4] Wegmans store, which caused a great fuss among the store's "fans," was, in large part, due to the inability to respond quickly enough to consumers. Store personnel couldn't break off enough time from their other roles to constantly monitor the page, Wegmans spokeswoman Jo Natale says, allowing comments to sit unanswered - a no-no in the world of social media.

"Our top priority has always been, and will continue to be, providing incredible service to customers who shop in our stores," she says. "And it isn't as though there aren't other avenues for folks to connect with us if they have a question or concern."

As much as customers expressed surprise and dissatisfaction at the decision, Natale says, it came down to a decision that if the store couldn't serve the Facebook page at a level it felt was expected that it shouldn't do it at all.

"They quickly discovered, once the store opened and got very, very busy, that it wasn't so easy to stay on top of comments or to find the time to post," Natale says. "In a retail operation like ours, there isn't anyone sitting at a PC or checking a mobile device throughout the day. It's a fast-paced business that requires our people to be on the floor serving customers."

(The author is a Reuters [1] contributor. The opinions expressed are his own)

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