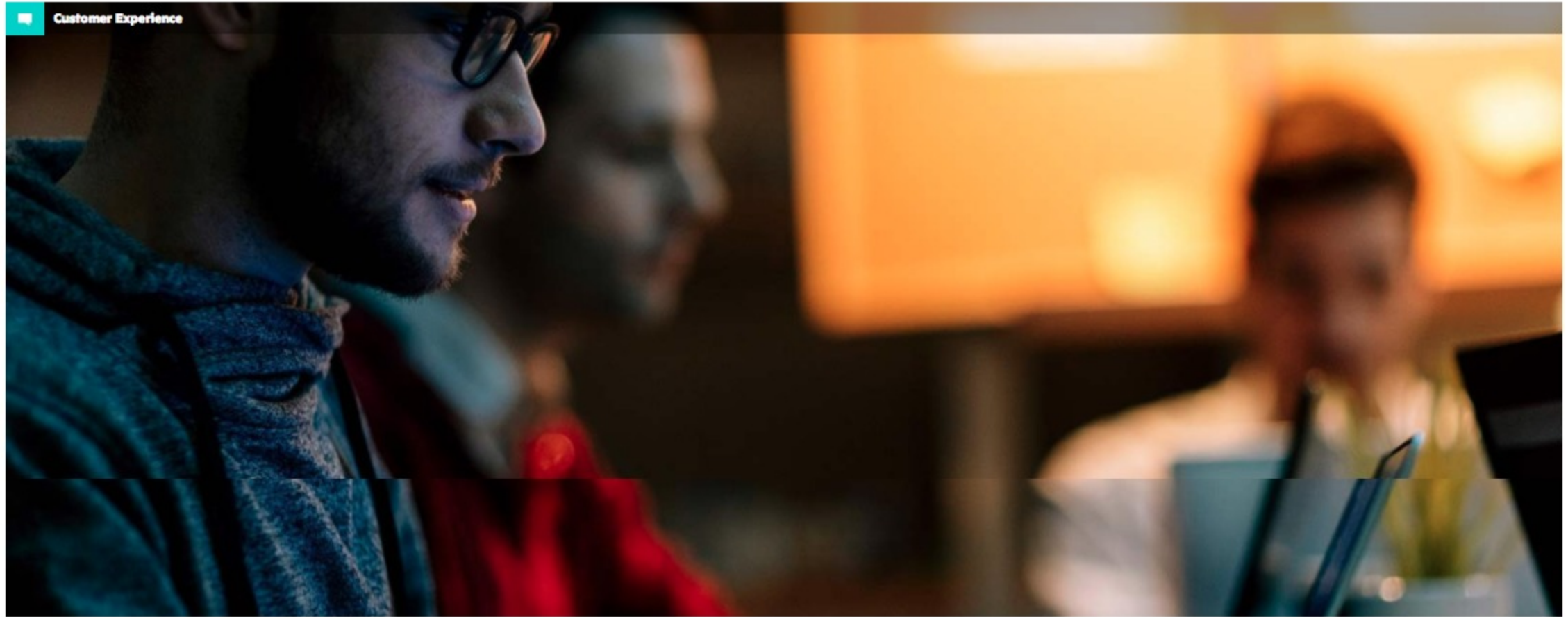


September 29, 2016

Likes IRL: Offering Customer Support on Social Media

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Can you afford to offer customer support on social media? The real question is whether you can afford not to.

What do you do when a customer posts a complaint about your company on Twitter, Facebook, Yelp, or another social media site? There are three options: ignore it, contact the person off-line and work through the issue, or respond immediately on the social media platform to resolve the problem. With each strategy, there are potential drawbacks.

The first two options send the message that the company either doesn't care about the customer, or isn't tech savvy enough to understand the importance of a response, both of which damage brand equity in the minds of millennial customers, Tansley Stearns, chief impact officer at the [Filene Research Institute](#), told Enterprise Forward. Further, resolving the issue off-line also keeps it hidden from everyone who saw the initial complaint, removing an opportunity to reinforce the brand and show how the company has turned an angry customer into a happy one. However, the third option can open the organization up to risk, depending on who is representing the brand and the nature of the promise. (The risk analysis and management team may cringe at the thought of a real-time response.) So what's the most productive way to respond? It starts with training the right people for the most productive outcome.

The Ambassadors Respond

Stearns participated in a pilot project with [QUEsocial](#) that trained credit union employees to use social media as a platform for customer service. Because financial institutions work under strict regulations, she said many of them were wary of participating. What if staff failed to provide a needed disclosure while making a statement? Or someone misquoted a rate or account term that cost the credit union money? The only way to ensure concerns like these would be avoided was by following a step-by-step program focused on communication and risk avoidance.

The Program Takes Shape

The first step was selecting the team that would be trained to provide social media service, a group dubbed the "ambassadors" by Stearns' camp. Risk analysis and management staff were involved in the process to ensure compliance, mitigate risk, and identify potential issues. In the end, success came down to following three basic steps, according to Stearns.

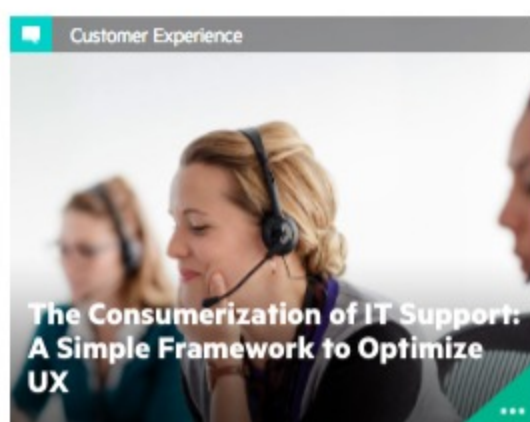
- **Identify the right ambassadors.** "You know who the right people are in your organization," Stearns said. All of the credit unions she worked with in the pilot found that the ambassadors were more nervous about doing something wrong than the leaders were.
- **Train to a T.** Your social media ambassadors "don't have to be experts in social, but you do want to teach them how to use social as a business tool," she said. For example, they should use social listening to find customer service opportunities not explicitly directed at the team.
- **Provide great content.** "You don't just want these ambassadors throwing out pithy comments," Stearns said. "You want them to position themselves as the experts in your field." Give the ambassadors guidelines to use in responding, rather than canned responses.

Credit unions in the pilot program found that they now had a team of ambassadors who they could trust to work with their customer community on social media. Filene is still providing [social media ambassador training](#) to credit unions that want to begin using the ambassador model. Hootsuite CEO Ryan Holmes wrote in a [trend piece for Fast Company](#) that engaging employees in social media this way will become more and more common.

The reality is that customers are talking about your organization on social media. Rather than considering if you can afford to be part of that conversation, think about whether you can afford *not* to.

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