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Integrating Social Media Into the Call Center

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By Karen Schwartz

It's no stretch to say that to be successful today, contact centers have to embrace social media. But that's not enough; just creating a Facebook page or opening a Twitter account will not enhance your customer relationships or make you successful. In fact, it can make you look really lame if you don't attack the social media world with the same degree of thoroughness, strategy and investment as you do any other important business tool.

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That means not only providing call center agent and supervisor training on these new *social media technologies* and integrating them fully into your *contact center software* platform, but adopting a new set of rules to make it all work — rules such as constant monitoring of each communication channel, along with near-real time response. Without this, your contact center faces the risk of looking like an aging, stodgy company that is dabbling in social media because it has no other choice.

“As social media doesn't inherit the typical company business rules, thoroughly plan staff training and recognize the training is more about education than business software use. Social media radically changes the company/customer communication from monologue to dialogue and with that change are profound implications that call center agents must understand and become comfortable with.

Here is how to do it wrong: Create a Facebook page and assign one employee to monitor it occasionally. The risk? Seeming not to care about responding to your customers. Or assign your customer service representatives more tasks, without more time allocation, to save money—both monitoring phone calls and Twitter, for example. Being pulled in multiple directions only makes the contact center agent want to take the path of least resistance, which may not be the right move for the company.

Now, here's how to do it right: Put the research, thought, planning and investment into understanding the Web 2.0 technologies before you begin. Only after achieving executive sponsorship, early and broad participation and budget, implement the social media strategy as you would implement any other communication or customer strategy. As social media doesn't inherit the typical company business rules, thoroughly plan staff training and recognize the training is more about education than business software use. Social media radically changes the company/customer communication from monologue to dialogue and with that change are profound implications that call center agents must understand and become comfortable with. Also assign a senior staff member to be in charge of social media strategy and evolution. As with any new business strategy, monitor how it's going on an ongoing basis and be prepared to make frequent, incremental adjustments. Wash, rinse, repeat.

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Take the social media case of Best Buy. The company has been working hard on remaking its image, and social media is a major part of that overhaul. Traditionally, Best Buy has been thought of as a convenient but overpriced consumer retail option, with supremely unhelpful salespeople. But with social media, the retail giant is slowly but surely changing its image. It has aggressively embraced Twitter to monitor customer satisfaction and communicate technology information. It also incorporates video blogs and has an active Facebook page. It even has a lively Twitter stream selling returned products.

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Or Avaya. Because the telecommunications company dedicates the time and money necessary to embrace social media strategies, one of its employees picked up on a Twitter message asking whether Avaya or ShoreTel was the best IP phone system option. Avaya quickly contacted the sender and as a result, won a \$250,000 sale. And by the way, that was no accident—the company has well done Facebook pages, blogs, wikis, LinkedIn groups, Yammer and Socialcast. And the company's leaders vow that no messages will ever go unanswered.

That's exactly the spirit necessary to make Web 2.0 technologies successful. These companies have done what more need to do—formalize the integration of social media with the contact center. Really, if you think about it, it's not a choice—it's a necessity. Those call centers first to embrace social media will secure the early advantages.

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