



How complaining on Twitter can solve all your problems

Conscious of the damage a bad online reputation can do, companies are starting to deal with customers directly on social networking sites

RAQUEL VIDALES

Movistar has changed my contract. My costs have skyrocketed. Desperate. Where can I complain? Please don't say [customer service phone line] 1004," posts a clearly frustrated user of the cellphone operator on the micro-blogging site Twitter. Ten minutes later, Movistar sends a reply: "Can you send us a DM [direct message] with the details so we can have a look at it from here?"

Conversations like these are increasingly common on social media. Big-name companies, who started off using social networks as just another marketing tool, are now afraid of the damage that an angry customer can cause with his or her comments on open communities. In response, they have opened accounts on the most popular networks, especially Twitter and Facebook, in order to address doubts, complaints, claims and even insults. Experts believe this is a growing trend, and praise the advantages of these new channels over traditional customer service phone lines, which often involve long waits, ineffective automatic voice menus and high calling costs.

The key is to make the customer feel like the company is listening. "We aren't used to getting answers," says Enrique Dans, professor of information systems at IE business school. "Some people post their complaints on the networks as a last-ditch effort — more as a way of venting rather than in any real expectation of getting a response. But then suddenly someone responds and shows concern over the problem, and this creates empathy. For starters, this contributes to transforming negative attitudes toward the brand. Another advantage of these channels is that they eliminate the long waiting times you have on the phone while the operator attending to you is working."

The new social media forums also help keep the conversation short and to the point. As Dans points out, "on Twitter, you have to say what you want to say in 140 characters." He stresses, however, that it is not enough for a company to try to appease a dissatisfied client with a brief phrase; in addition to comprehension, the customer also expects solutions. It's about using the networks, says Dans, to help the consumer, and not to inundate them with hundreds of marketing messages, which can be counterproductive. He gives the example of US cable operator Comcast, a pioneer in the use of Twitter for providing customer

service. Until a few years ago, the company ranked at the bottom of customer satisfaction surveys. Indeed, for a time there was a surge in critical pages such as ComcastMustDie.com, and one user even went so far as to post a video on YouTube of one of the company's technicians sleeping on his sofa while he was kept on hold by his own company.

Consequently, one of the company's employees, Frank Eliason, opened a Twitter account in April 2008 under the name @comcastcares. His aim wasn't to improve the company's tarnished reputation, as Comcast's competitors were doing on social media at that time, but to offer specific solutions. People were initially skeptical of the initiative, believing it to be just another marketing ploy, but little by little the company proved it was coming good on its word and today Comcast is the operator with the highest customer satisfaction ratings in the United

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States. Comcast's success motivated other companies to follow suit, and today almost all of the larger US brands offer customer support through Twitter and Facebook, which is often integrated into their traditional call-center activities.

In Spain, this trend is still in its early stages, but it is on the rise. A study of 75 big brands by tech consultants IZO in March 2011 showed that the majority of them were still using social media as marketing spaces. Though 76 percent had Twitter accounts, 23 percent of the companies had not posted anything in the previous two weeks, and 30 percent had not responded to a user in over a month.

Nevertheless, according to IZO's findings, the rate of reply is increasing every year. This is most prevalent in the telecommunications sector in Spain, above all because this is the sector that receives the highest number of complaints. According to a recent report from the Federation of Independent Users and Consumers (FUCI), 50 percent of the complaints the agency received in the first two months of 2012 concerned telephone and in-

ternet operators. Movistar, which launched on social media two years ago, now has 50,000 followers on Twitter and more than 100,000 on Facebook. The cellphone company uses these channels to offer special promotions, clarify doubts and provide additional product information — but its success stems mainly from the fact that it always responds to comments and incidents.

"Our users really appreciate the fact that we listen to them. There are many cases of people who were initially upset but who changed their perception of us just because they felt they'd been listened to on social media. But more than anything, clients value the fact that we make note of criticism and take action in order to change things," says Paz Noriega, director of National Communications for Telefónica.

An image crisis that originated on the internet led Vodafone España to increase its activity in these spheres. At the end of 2009, one of the company's customers, using the pseudonym "grankoala," wrote the following on a chat forum: "I called Vodafone's 122 line about a problem with my number, and a young lady asked me to hold while she looked into it. I have now been on hold for 50 minutes, listening to music. What should I do? Hang up or wait?" The other users advised the customer to wait and 27 hours later, after the developing story had gone viral without the company noticing it, grankoala wrote: "I regret to inform you that the phone company has just hung up on me!"

"We learned a lot from that. It really made us stop and think, and it was a catalyst for our social media launch," says Ignacio Casado, head of Vodafone España's Online Department. Today the company boasts 34,000 followers on Twitter and 170,000 on Facebook, in addition to having a dedicated chat forum on the corporate website.

Politeness, quick response and a more informal register than that used in the other means of customer service are the principles guiding the majority of the teams who work on the social media accounts of the larger companies. They try to keep conversation polite at all times, although this is not always an easy task. "You have to carefully navigate through some intense moments with people who are really ticked off," says Jonathan Jiménez, community manager for Vodafone. "Being insulted is no fun, but we try not to lose control because part of our job consists of precisely that: calming down people who are upset. We try to offer quick solutions if possible, and if not, we redirect peo-

ple to the appropriate departments."

Although companies try to answer every request, this is not always possible either. Sometimes, they must be prioritized. "It's clear that if a complaint comes from a customer who has a lot of followers, the company in question is going to reply more quickly, because a lot of people are able to see complaints on these public channels; they are no longer confined to the more private arena of a telephone conversation," says Enrique Dans.

The launch of Spanish airline Iberia on social media was also precipitated by a crisis: in that case, the ash cloud caused by the eruption of the Icelandic volcano Eyjafjallajökull, which led to the cancellation of thousands of flights in Europe in April 2010. "We were still in the initial stages, looking for consultants and deciding which was the best strategy for us, when suddenly the volcano erupted and people began filing claims and talking

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about it on social media. We immediately got to work, without having clearly defined our strategy and without the help of experts in the field. We were driven by the need to inform and the desire to help those affected. We couldn't solve every problem, obviously, but clients picked up on our willingness to help, and all of a sudden we had a lot of followers. It was the space the company used to face up to the situation, to explain the problems and to try and help," says Margarita Blanco, the airline's deputy director of media and internal communications.

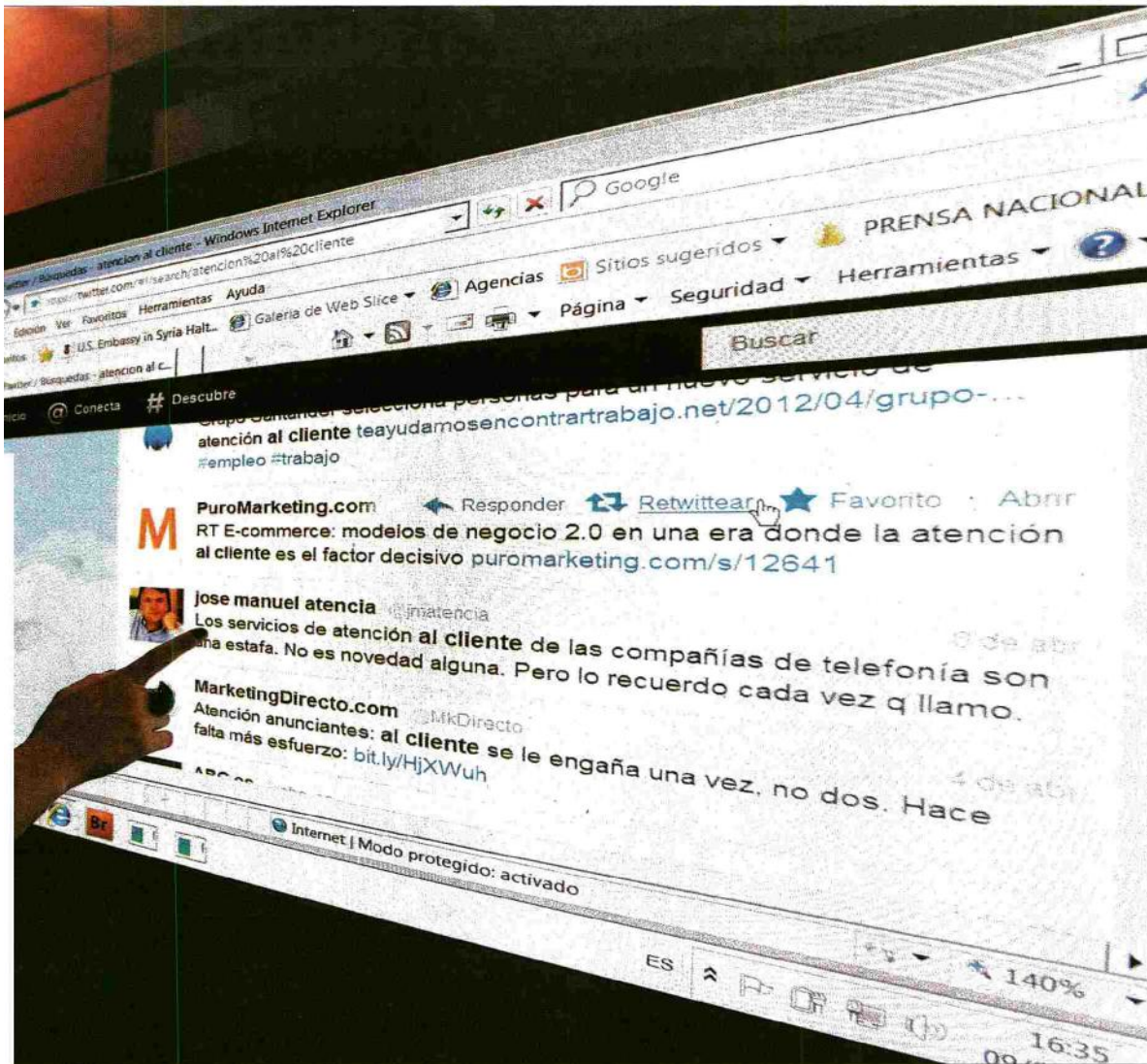
Though a willingness to help is fine, customer service is not provided through good intentions alone. "At the end of the day, the problem is the same as that with telephone service or personal attention. Providing assurance on the internet isn't worth anything if strong interdepartmental relationships that allow customers' problems to be solved quickly and effectively do not exist. A greater degree of internal integration and communication is needed for that, and in that regard, we still have a way to go," says Carlos Molina, vice



president of innovation at IZO.

Consulting companies like IZO provide ever more sophisticated technology to help companies more efficiently manage their online claims. There are tools for tracking every comment posted about a brand in social media or forums on the internet. Other programs automatically generate responses to frequently asked questions and, while still slightly out of reach, some companies are trying to develop a program that can group comments as negative or positive. "Language is full of ironies and complicated twists that machines cannot yet properly decipher," explains Jason Vitorino, technical director at ELife, another company specialized in social media management and follow-up. "Moreover, nobody likes talking to a robot, and dialogue is particularly important on social media. Even though we use technology for many things, we have to avoid mechanical interaction."

The information gathered by comment tracking is not just good for improving customer service. "It's really valuable data that, when properly cross-refer-



In Spain, 75 percent of companies have a Twitter account. / SAMUEL SÁNCHEZ

enced, is also useful for determining consumer preferences and for developing new campaigns for marketing and attracting new customers," says Enrique Burgos, a social media expert and marketing director for advertising agency QDQ. He gives an example from personal experience: "One evening I sent a tweet saying that I was about to see a ballet in the Madrid Royal Theater. A few seconds later, I received a reply from a nearby restaurant suggesting that I have dinner there afterwards. I liked the look of it so I immediately sent another tweet to reserve a table."

Does the fact that their comments are being tracked create distrust among users? "It's true that we track blogs, chat rooms, and social media, but if we see that we can't help, we don't interfere. It's not about persecuting people. We try not to become involved in conversations except when they may lead to something else or when we can help," an Iberia representative says.

"In any case, people don't mind when a problem is solved for them, even if they haven't asked for help. A pleasant surprise doesn't usually bother people," says consultant Jason Vittorino.

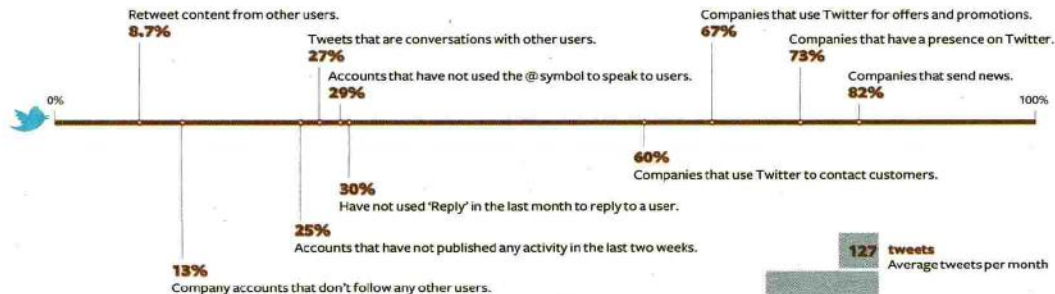
"There has been a cultural change. People were afraid of ATMs at first, and online shopping

A program is being developed that can group comments as negative or positive

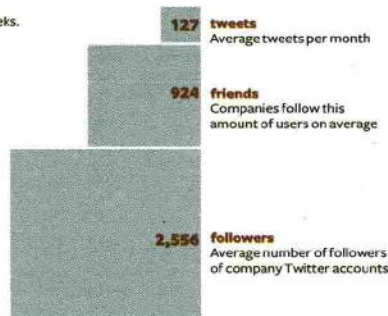
"We try not to get involved in conversations except when we can help"

Activity of companies on Twitter

Study of the presence and the activity of 75 big companies from the main sectors of the Spanish economy on the social network.



COMPANIES ON TWITTER ACCORDING TO SECTOR



Source: Twitter Engage Report (analysis based on data supplied by Twitter and Export.ly).

too. Also, the internaut is free to post what he or she wants; nobody is forcing them to write anything," says QDQ's Enrique Burgos.

Evidence that internauts do not seem to be overly concerned with companies sniffing around their profiles can be found in the case of a KLM campaign launched two summers ago. The airline searched the accounts of its passengers on two different social media sites, Twitter and Foursquare, in order to find out their likes and dislikes and the circumstances under which they normally traveled. While these passengers waited, bored in airport lounges, for their flights, the company presented them each with a gift: a bottle of champagne for a pair of newlyweds, an electronic distance measuring tool for a running enthusiast, first class upgrades for a woman with two small children, and even a small first aid kit containing hangover remedies for a group headed out on a bachelor party. The campaign was a success and bothered nobody—those who received the gifts were delighted, and none felt as if their privacy had been invaded.