Social Media: The Value of Community Managers

Community Managers are an integral part of social media strategy, governance, and crisis management. Their main purpose is to cultivate and maintain a thriving online community.

The Importance of Cultivating Online Communities

Sites commonly referred to as "social media networks" are defined as any digital medium which facilitates the user-generated exchange of content, ideas, and discussion. While the networks themselves are powerful, in that they provide the online space and tools for these exchanges to occur, the true power and elegance of social media lies within the users themselves. Without user-generated content and the emergence and maintenance of subgroups, social media networks would fail to thrive.

Social media's reach is impossible to deny. Just look at its influence and adoption rates. After all, its usage spans from toddlers to seniors alike. Quantifying how to best employ a social media tool for brand success is a little more difficult due to variance in demographics, existing brand equity, maturity of the online community, and other factors unique to specific organizations. It takes a highly functioning social media professional to examine these variables and create an effective social media management program.

Although there are a variety of social media networks available today, this white paper will primarily focus on Facebook and Twitter. Facebook is used by consumers for many aspects of their lives, from keeping in touch with family and friends to joining professional groups and to seeking coupons or brand relevant information. Twitter is a common tool for following specific interests, celebrities, and highly recognizable brands. In addition, Twitter is increasingly being used for customer service and public relation initiatives.

Brands vs. Consumers

The use of social media by brands is nothing new, but is constantly evolving. There appears to be no stronger tool than social media for reaching consumers directly in an efficient and powerful manner.

Social media is directly impacting the purchase cycle for many organizations. The reason being is that it drives broader awareness for products and services. For many consumers, part of the purchase consideration phase involves receiving feedback from other social media users. If a brand can facilitate and promote these types of honest consumer conversations, it ultimately increases the consumer's satisfaction and ability to trust. Additionally,

social media can be used to gauge if customers' actual experiences match the expectations and goals set by the brand's corporate marketing team.

It used to be enough to simply have a brand Facebook page or Twitter account to post occasional updates on. Now consumers are seeking a more authentic and useful relationship with the brand/company. If this type of relationship can be achieved, an increase in direct revenue will result.

Since users with personal accounts have been around longer than brand accounts, consumers and have established the accepted norms and expectations of social media networks and hold the power. This concept and type of interaction is foreign to many traditional marketing strategists. Consumers are the best gauge of authenticity and will be the first to point out a mistake, often with disastrous results. If a brand does not learn the cultural practices of the groups they are functioning within, even when those groups are made up of their own followers, the outcome may be negative. Worse than that, it can turn into a positive opportunity for the competition, who identifies this particular weakness. From this truth stemmed the necessity of a central role (a community manager) to monitor and maintain brand presence on social sites.

The Role and Value of Community Managers

With the advent of Facebook and Twitter being used by brands, the role of the community manager has emerged. These brand advocates are tasked with managing content, responding to inquiries, and ensuring a good user experience for all followers. Unfortunately, brands often forget the "community" portion of the role and treat social media accounts like a push technology. Many have great intentions but think too much like traditional marketers.

Community managers are an integral part of strategy, governance, and crisis management. Because they are on the forefront of social media every day, their familiarity with followers and current trends should directly influence the brand's social media strategy and ensure that the plan is driven in the most effective direction. In addition, a community manager can gauge the reaction of followers and measure interactions by using management tools and analytics. Furthermore, they are well-positioned to spot when applications fail, need to be refreshed or decommissioned, and should always be empowered as the first responders to a social media crisis.

COMPONENTS OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Many times, social media management is thought of only as posting a brand's status updates to platforms like Facebook and Twitter.

Unfortunately, for many companies, this is the extent of their social media programs. However, it is recommended that brands incorporate other efforts which align with overall business goals and marketing plans, to ensure maximum positive impact. A well-equipped community manager should participate in all of these areas.

Strategy

Unfortunately, social media is not always incorporated into a company's overall growth strategy. According to Gartner, "[A] survey conducted by Insight Consulting…found that only 11% of companies using social networks incorporate them into their overall strategies, which leaves some room for improvement." Instead of an afterthought, social media strategy should be an integrated part of a company's efforts in reaching consumers.

From its inception, a robust social media strategy typically begins in marketing and cohesively combines with the community manager role. These roles, if viewed as separate entities, should work closely to ensure that marketing and social media efforts are aligned. It is helpful to view overall social strategy as the foundation of what the brands want to convey using social media sites. Whereas, community management is the maintenance of the relationship with followers and how they react to brand messages.

Since social media is organic, a social media strategy must allow for flexibility on the part of the community manager. For example, aligning scheduled posts with marketing calendars can help create consistent content while still

leaving room for other posts the community manager deems important. The community manager must be held accountable for following the plan yet still given the responsibility and authority to change wording and timing as appropriate.

In many cases, a touchpoint analysis should be performed regularly to ensure that social media strategy is aligned with the larger business strategy including the support and promotion of other departments. For instance, if a link to purchase a product is planned to be shared on a certain date, the community manager should coordinate with the inventory team and site manager to ensure that the item is in stock and that the page can handle a large volume of traffic. If a post is a response to a recent crisis, the manager could engage with the brand's public relations agency to ensure a consistent message. This type of management requires a high level of structural knowledge and a great deal of flexibility.

Governance

Social media governance encompasses everything from the management of vendors developing social media applications to the establishment/enforcement of best practices and the comprehensive implementation of strategy.

The governance of developers ensures that all Facebook applications are built using the latest knowledge, industry best practices, and Facebook developer guidelines. In addition, a governance team can manage timelines, oversee work with creative agencies, officiate over escalations, and provide a defined set of processes to all vendors, in order to drive consistency and lower overall management costs. This governance team works closely with community managers to ensure successful page content launches.

Crisis Planning

Many companies do not have a systemic plan in place for unexpected social media crises. If they do, they are normally limited in scope. Such plans should not only define actions taken by those who manage social media accounts, but should also be a cross-departmental effort, involving human resources, information technology, marketing, site managers, public relations, and other stakeholders in protecting a company's image amid market "gossip." Since community managers should be set up to receive emergency alerts and are familiar with followers and any past controversies, they are in the best position to troubleshoot and respond to any issues that originate on social media.

RESPONSIBILITIES OF A COMMUNITY MANAGER

Let's stop to consider the huge responsibilities and critical nature of community managers.

Many brands boast hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of fans/followers. This results in thousands of comments, opinions, questions, complaints, spam posts, and customer service issues. Each of these issues have the potential to go viral depending on the response (or lack thereof). While only a portion of these fans are considered active/engaged, a brand's Facebook or Twitter presence will quickly become unwieldy without proper management.

Supporting this role are five key responsibilities: engagement, improvement, growth, intrinsic knowledge, and listening.

Engagement

The great challenge faced by community managers is understanding and engaging users. An effective community manager will recognize and record patterns of communication among followers and adjust interaction accordingly. This is an organic process which takes place each and every day. It is not a quarterly effort that can be quantified with a PowerPoint presentation. Instead, a periodic summary and discussion of learnings/insights should take place. It requires a familiarity with not only the brand(s) but also user demographics. Attempting to manage and drive consumer passions requires a nimble approach.

Improvement

If a company tracks analytics and user sentiment, the community manager can interpret the results and apply learnings to future efforts. Many platforms allow brands to measure positive or negative sentiment based on keywords and even track which posts performed best. The community manager can track this data over time and create an action plan based on results, thus improving the social media presence over time.

Growth

A community manager may be asked to begin managing a large existing community or tasked with growing a small one. Growth of a community depends on a variety of factors and efforts. Tools such as Facebook ads, giveaways, and interactive applications are often done in conjunction with marketing and can improve the active number of users.

Intrinsic Knowledge

At its core, the community manager must have significant intrinsic knowledge of Facebook and Twitter (at a minimum). Ideally, this familiarity should be developed through professional and personal use.

"Attempting to manage and drive consumer passions requires a nimble approach."

This person is not a casual user; rather, they are a user who understands why certain post types are universally annoying, who knows a trend when they see it, who admits to being addicted to social media, and just "gets it." Whereas, the casual user will look at social media as a technical tool, the committed user will look at social media as an ongoing opportunity to connect with as many users as possible— especially consumers who can help grow the business.

Additionally, the community manager must have a deep knowledge of the demographic(s) of the brand being managed. Much of this insightful information will come from analytics, consumer data, and marketing briefs. Likely, it will also come from paying attention to the types of content that users share on a brand's page. Effectiveness comes from knowing the types of posts that will get a certain reaction, as well as those which should be avoided altogether. Much of this intuition can come from a past employment role ranging from marketing to customer service experience.

Deep brand knowledge is also essential element for an effective community manager to possess. Does he or she know how to answer your FAQs (or at least where they can find the answers)? Can they direct customer service questions through the proper channels? A community manager needs to know how to get information quickly and convey it effectively/efficiently. For this reason, those with a customer service background can make resourceful community managers.

Listening

While intrinsic knowledge and a sense of intuition are important, the most essential skills of a good community manager are being able to report analytics while listening/monitoring each social media network. Some brands can choose to pay for a social media listening tool which the manager can utilize to manage/schedule these tasks. Yet other companies may choose a simpler and more cost-effective approach such as Google Analytics tagging. The community manager can oversee this data collection to ensure regular reporting.

SUPPORTING YOUR COMMUNITY MANAGER

In order for community managers to be successful, they must receive sufficient executive leadership support. Two of the most impactful and important elements of workplace support are trust and empowerment.

Trust

Community managers must be trusted to directly communicate with consumers on social media and make judgment calls on a daily basis. Trust can make a world of difference between an effective program and an ineffective one.

Empowerment

Even the best community manager in the world will not be effective if he or she must continually ask permission or consult a team before posting anything. A great deal of autonomy is required to turn around inquiries on a short timeline. While it is recommended that the community manager align across other efforts/departments, such as traditional marketing and brand websites, the person in this role should be able to function independently, without fear of discipline or the constant questioning of decisions. The ability to be confident and effective while managing an online community stems largely from the empowerment of the community manager by the company.

WHAT IS LACKING TODAY?

Trained Community Managers

In many companies, the community manager role is an additional responsibility for marketing managers or a public relations resource. Even worse, this role is sometimes taken on by someone with minimal social media experience but with the bandwidth to post status updates. In these cases, strategy, governance, crisis planning, and other important elements are often missing. Therefore, community manager training and evaluation is essential. Consultation and training sessions can be very helpful when attempting to analyze and evaluate your internal communication path. However, finding an experienced consultant that can help you achieve maximum results while improving upon your current programs/resources is a rarity.

Effective Strategies

Strategy is often rudimentary in organizations that do not have a dedicated community manager because the same person is often posting to Facebook and Twitter while creating marketing plans and designing traditional advertisements. Typically, they do not have the bandwidth nor the focus to build and maintain their community while contributing to a comprehensive social strategy. Establishing fluid communication across multiple roles helps maintain checks and balances while ensuring that the social media strategy is custom-fit to each point of contact within a company.

Purposeful Data Usage

Many free and low-cost social listening and analytic tools are available for a variety of business uses. However, what is often lacking is the systematic analysis and application of findings. The practical aspects of these tools allow community managers to adjust posts, content, review strategic goals, and involve other departments in their future plans. One study found that a good deal of companies do collect data, but only about a quarter will actually utilize it: "Business initiatives targeted by social media data collection and monitoring include brand and reputation management (45%), marketing communications (45%), and customer service (40%). Only 25% indicate they will be integrating social media metrics directly into their business processes."

Community Management Services

Gartner defines a helpful maturity model for social programs. This model helps to distinguish between rudimentary programs and those which have maximum potential. In leveraging this same model, Corbus has helped clients increase the value of their social media programs by providing consultation, training, and operational support.

Level 1: Reactive
Any activity is uncoordinated and often underground

Level 2: Exploratory
Pioneers dabble to explore social media opportunities, share findings, and experiences informally

Level 3: Emerging
Groups form to set the rules, coordinate activities, and share best practices while responding to issues

Level 4: Integrated
A formalized approach exists to organize, integrate, and measure social business impact

Level 5: Optimizing
Social media management becomes less of a focused program and is fully integrated into the core business process

Source: Use Gartner's Social Business Program Maturity Model to Plan Your Next Move (2012)

Corbus has helped clients increase the value of their social media programs by providing consultation, training, and operational support.

With an array of highly skilled and experienced resources, Corbus provides a comprehensive solution for your social media needs. By outsourcing the community management role, companies gain additional access to tool and knowledge while allowing their own resources to be freed for other relevant and strategic initiatives.

With an array of highly skilled and experienced resources, Corbus provides a comprehensive solution for your social media needs. By outsourcing the community management role, companies gain additional access to tool and knowledge while allowing their own resources to be freed for other relevant and strategic initiatives.

Community Management Operations

Companies are now opting for third-party management of their online communities. When providing you with a community manager, Corbus considers specific brand demographics, day-to-day operations (such as posting and reporting), and larger strategy initiatives. Additionally, these highly specialized resources can be on call during a crisis with access to a vast array of resources.

The organizations that are investigating and applying the above method into their operating model are also beginning to separate themselves from their industry competitors.

Conclusion

Social media usage can be both rewarding and risky for a company's products or services. In one sense, it takes just minutes to sign up for a Facebook or Twitter account, but it can take months or years to undo damage caused by one unmonitored or ignored post. Companies should ensure a well-equipped and empowered community manager is in place to manage their brands while establishing a larger social and marketing strategy and crisis plan. With the limited capacity seen in most organizations, the outsourcing of the community manager role gives companies access to experienced personnel that can identify issues and offer solutions. Corbus' resources perform operational functions while ensuring that strategic and meaningful measurements are tracked, to help you achieve superior results and significant cost savings.

CORBUS
A Soin Company

About the Author

Jennifer Reed is the Social Media Practice Lead at Corbus, LLC. She is instrumental in developing an end-to-end process for social media vendor and application governance. With a background in user experience, social media, digital marketing and e-Commerce, she helps brands engage consumers and create meaningful conversations online. Jennifer has worked with some of the biggest CPG, luxury and mom/kid brands in the world. She holds a B.A. in English Humanities from Shawnee State University and an M.A. in Communication from Northern Kentucky University, where her area of study was computer-mediated communication.

References

Use Gartner's Social Business Program Maturity Model to Plan Your Next Move. 2012

http://www.forbes.com/sites/yec/2012/12/25/the-4-pillars-of-communitymanagement/

http://www.smartplanet.com/blog/business-brains/only-one-in-four-companies-actually-collect-social-media-data-survey/23288

www.Corbus.com

888-608-9975

CorbusConnects@Corbus.com