

SOCIAL NETWORKING LEADS A HELPING HAND

FB, Twitter are becoming real-time customer feedback tools for companies

PRIYANKA JOSHI

In a world where reaching out for help either means a recorded message stating how important the consumer is followed by a list of numerical choices or a webpage where "help" diverts to an index of frequently asked questions, the old-fashioned way to provide direct assistance has been a far away call.

However, the Indian consumer is increasingly realising the importance of the social media as a real-time customer feedback tool. Sample this: When Ahmedabad-based pharmacist Rahul Sharma experienced a data connectivity problem on his Tata Photon Plus, he was quick to note that the service provider had a customer feedback page on Twitter. "I wrote to them about my data troubles and within three hours, my problem was responded to online. Soon a customer-care executive called asking me details of the problem."

Shirsendu Roy, a Mumbai Indians fan, opted to book match tickets on the team's Facebook page. "When I booked tickets through the MI page, I could directly share the date and time of my tickets with my Facebook friends and ask them to join me, instead of telling everyone individually."

The MI Facebook page, one of the top five brand pages accessed by over 1.5 million fans, has seen close to 100,000 users joining the group in the past 30 days, reports online metrics' site Facebakers.

The overwhelming response by the net-savvy social networker to help desk services offered on sites like Facebook and Twitter is reflected in a study by Experian.

The compiled data suggests that social media, which accounts for 13.16 per cent of the total Internet visits in India, is led by Facebook with 32 per cent of total hits and 51 per cent of market share with respect to page views — i.e. one in every two social network pages viewed is a Facebook page. Twitter, a microblogging site, is also fast catching up with the trend. India ranks in the list of top 10 countries in terms of twitter users, contributing around 6.5 per cent of the site's total traffic, an Alexa data release says.

It's not surprising that the platform is being used as a customer feedback tool: Brands such as Cleartrip, MakeMyTrip, Idea Cellular, Tata DoCoMo, Airtel, Vodafone, Jet Airways, Kingfisher, Bajaj Allianz, HDFC Bank, ICICI Bank, Pizza Hut

and Barista, among many others, are seen actively engaging users on social platforms.

Users like Deepti Kalra, a regular on e-commerce site Flipkart, prefer to type in their queries on the Twitter page instead of dialling the customer care number. "When I was unable to complete my transaction on Flipkart, I posted my query on their Twitter page and within minutes they answered my query online and a customer care executive on phone assisted me to resolve the billing issue," she says.

For companies, the focus on Facebook and Twitter pages, especially for consumer-dependent businesses like Flipkart, makes sense because customers are comfortable with the experience of real-time support to their queries. Subsequently, telephone calls to Flipkart's toll-free customer care number have declined, says Sachin Bansal,

ONE IN EVERY TWO SOCIAL NETWORK PAGES VIEWED IN INDIA IS A FACEBOOK PAGE. Twitter is also fast catching up with the trend. India ranks in the list of top 10 countries in terms of Twitter users, contributing around 6.5 per cent of the site's total traffic

CEO of Flipkart. Instead, the e-commerce portal's 750,00 Facebook fans and over 5,000 Twitter followers post feedback on its offers, services and products in real time. "There's a limit to what we can do on our website or blogs, as opposed to content that can be consumed and shared on Twitter and Facebook."

Realising that the concept has caught the fancy of the Indian consumer, the company decided to market its stock of Apple iPhones and iPads on the Facebook page. "For any marketing message that we put out on social media platforms, we get an average 100,000 customers sharing the news with friends or responding to the communication. We are able to convert about a few hundred of such users in to actual sales," adds Bansal.

An independent study by Iffort, a web-strategy & social media consulting firm, revealed that brands like Acer India's Twitter account has been inactive since November 2009. The other prominent profile is that of Apollo Hospitals who haven't posted a single tweet since July 2009.

Daksh Sharma, director at Iffort Consulting, has been working with brands like www.dealsandyou.com — a daily deal site — where customers prefer to connect via social media channels. "Since the brand has over 200,000 followers on Facebook, we are also able to collate a lot of feedback through wall posts, by asking questions and constantly adapting to what customers are looking for and when we do — our customers show their appreciation in a public forum — which is great for the brand."

Recently, the site ran a promotion on the Cricket World Cup using the social media platform to engage customers — the game had over 13,000 unique players where the winners won prizes and the brand gained a lot of user mileage online.

But handling disgruntled users on sites like Twitter or Facebook is a trick that Indian companies are beginning to learn. Financial institutions like ICICI Bank actively offer support to its banking customers over Twitter. The Iffort study reveals that there were irate customers who took on the bank for not receiving support through the conventional methods. For such cases, ICICI Bank has dedicated staff to constantly monitor its tweets and address concerns on net banking, transaction charges and debit card issues.

Hareesh Tibrewala, joint CEO of Social Wavelength says: "We recently did a project for a major pharma company that makes OTC drugs. The company had certain hypothesis about consumers' perception of their brand. Using social media listening tools, we were able to validate those hypothesis."

Tibrewala, who essentially manages social media communication for brands, adds that almost 40 per cent customer support requirements are emerging on Twitter. "Facebook would account for less than 10 per cent and sites like Mouthshut, CustomerCourtForum.in, ConsumerComplaint.org are also very popular with consumers who want to vent their frustration."

An Experian analyst says the popularity of social networking sites as a feedback tool arises from the fact that consumers feel emboldened by voicing and sharing their opinions. "Word of mouth and personal recommendations are extremely powerful tools in advertising, because people instinctively trust the recommendations of real consumers rather than the marketing slogans of a company."