



High performance. Delivered.

This article originally appeared
in the October 2009 issue of

Outlook

The journal of
high-performance business

On the Edge

Just shut up and listen?

By Kishore S. Swaminathan

Chief Scientist
Accenture

Remember how simple it was to communicate with
your customers in the good old days?

• Consulting • Technology • Outsourcing

You initiated and managed specific conversations about your company and your products. For example, you could buy a couple of 10-second spots during the Super Bowl. Or you could entice customers to participate in focus groups and fill out surveys. Whatever the medium or venue, you ensured that in any conversation about you, you were the subject as well as the object.

Things have changed. Today, your customers are having various kinds of conversations among themselves out in the open. They write blogs; they argue with each other in bulletin boards; they tweet on Twitter about whatever; they post videos of their kids online; they talk about their lives and feelings in social networks. And they post reviews and commentaries about you.

In other words, you no longer manage the conversations among your customers in which your company or products may be mentioned, often in unpredictable contexts. What's a brand-conscious company to do? Just shut up and listen?

No. But in light of this significant social change, companies need to recalibrate the way they see their marketing, branding and corporate communications.

Discontinuities

Successful technologies often create discontinuities between the past and the present that go well beyond the technologies themselves—discontinuities in individual and social behavior that alter some aspect of society forever. Here are some examples of how recent advances in information technology are leading to important changes in how we communicate and consume information.

From “need to know” to “good to know”: Quaint as it may seem, communication used to have a purpose—typically, to convey

information that I needed to tell and you needed to know. No longer. Technology now gives me an extraordinary ability to talk a lot about nothing to no one in particular for no reason.

As a result, communication today is less a matter of my decision about what to tell whom than it is about your choice of what to pay attention to from whom.

From “tell me” to “show me”: Cheap digital and cell phone cameras that can shoot video plus free distribution media such as YouTube are fueling an explosion in video communication. Want to know how to fix your plumbing? Or learn how to make a Mexican tamale or play the guitar? Perhaps you'd like to see how arthroscopic surgery is done? Today, on the Web, you can find video clips—by amateurs as well as professionals—on almost any subject.

From “talk at you” to “talk with you”: Not long ago, when producing and distributing information was relatively expensive, organizations ranging from companies to hospitals to governments controlled, and were at the center of, the communication with their public. By necessity, they talked at you. Today, two-way dialogue is not only possible but almost expected by individuals from these same organizations—especially from doctors and health care providers.

Eight to-do's for Monday morning

How can a company take advantage of these fundamental changes in communication? Here are some relatively simple things to keep in mind, along with actions you can take immediately.

1. Not only are your employees, customers and competitors all talking and talking openly—so are your competitors' employees and customers, and customers you never knew you had. Technology

Wouldn't it be better for you, and not some fly-by-night podcast, to be the trusted, neutral and transparent online source of information about your company for your customers and investors?

exists to process unstructured text for you to listen to them all—and listen at an industrial scale—enabling you to gauge your customers' latent needs, how they feel about your products and brand, and what your competitors are up to.

There's no reason to spend money on surveys anymore: Everything you want to know—and more—is out there in the open for you to harvest. With technology from vendors such as Sentimine and The Nielsen Co., companies ranging from carmakers to agribusinesses are monitoring and measuring customer sentiment over the Web.

2. Embrace video as a communication medium. If you are like most companies, you produce tons of written instruction manuals in multiple languages and package them with your products. Very few of your customers read them, in any language. With video, you can show them rather than tell them. The Home Depot, Dell, Best Buy and many others are increasingly turning to video as a means of customer support.

3. Create an online community of people who use, like, love—and, don't forget, hate—your products. Facilitate but don't dominate the conversation. Face it: Whatever your product or service may be, it's just a small part of your customers' lives. By creating as much conversation as you can among your customers about as many subjects as possible, you'll ensure that your products become legitimate topics of conversation from time to time. This kind of publicity is more genuine and credible than any ad campaign you can run.

4. Caution: A good, active community is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, your community members are your ambassadors. On the other, your community is effectively offering your customers to your competitors

on a platter as well as a forum where your disgruntled customers can complain. The bigger your community is, the more vulnerable you are.

Which is why you need to create and support brand ambassadors. Give them something to talk about, links and visuals to share. Dedicated customers can make great endorsements, but they can also be your harshest critics. Their enthusiasm and their occasional dings and dissatisfaction are what make them credible.

Censoring or stifling them will prove to be a double whammy—you'll acquire not only a formidable enemy but one with a great deal of knowledge and credibility with respect to your brand in your community. The official Coca-Cola fan page on Facebook—which boasts 3 million plus members—is an interesting example of how to finesse this problem. Although the page was created by two individuals, the Coca-Cola Co. got involved and flew the pair to its Atlanta headquarters, where they made a creative video about the trip and posted it to the Facebook page.

5. Turn the real people who actually design and create your products into a marketing asset. If your brand is based on, say, your engineering prowess, are you encouraging your engineers to blog? Or if it's based on fashion, are you encouraging your fashion designers to tweet on Twitter? Your most enthusiastic customers want to hear from them. For example, Eastman Kodak has created a blog called A Thousand Words in which its employees and customers share stories about film technology, history, old images, experiences and so forth.

6. There are many types of misinformation, ranging from product details (no private rooms for maternity patients in your hospital) to scientific inaccuracies (staring at

computer screens for a long time causes migraines) to business rumors (you are about to merge with so and so). In the past, all these were handled by corporate communications professionals dealing with mainstream media. In the new world, you need to understand an important dynamic of communities: Credibility does not automatically accrue from authority.

Say, for example, a business rumor about your company is floating around in a forum frequented by product engineers and techies. You could just have your CEO address the forum directly, but that would have less impact than having your product engineer, who's well known and respected in that forum, introduce the CEO, who then engages the community.

7. In the past, you probably thought of your website as a portal to your company—one place that concentrates all your essential information. Your goal was to entice everyone to visit. It may be time to turn this idea on its head. You may want to distribute your crucial information in the various places your consumers hang out.

Consider that “cool things you can do with my gizmo” video you made. Instead of burying it in your website and hoping your customers will search for it, why not publish it on YouTube or a Facebook community dedicated to gizmos so that people can stumble upon it? Serendipity is rapidly becoming serendipower. Many companies are using third-party websites such as YouTube and Facebook to reach their customers rather than trying to bring everyone to their own websites.

8. Finally, don't forget your investors. The online revolution not only provides them with a lot more information about your company's finances, it also provides them with relevant information—and possibly misinformation—about your customers, your employees and your competitors.

No doubt you have enough organizational machinery to fulfill regulatory disclosure requirements. But do you have any machinery to help investors understand how loyal your customers are? What your customers like and dislike about your products and services? What your employees like and dislike about working for you?

These may not yet be regulatory requirements in the new world, but your investors have means of getting at this information—perhaps suboptimally—today. Wouldn't it be better for you, and not some fly-by-night podcast, to be the trusted, neutral and transparent source of that information for your investors? As they say, the well informed is less likely to be misinformed.

The new communications revolution is well under way, and that sound you hear is history tweeting. You really can't afford to just shut up and listen.

Kishore S. Swaminathan is based in Chicago.

k.s.swaminathan@accenture.com

Outlook is published by Accenture.
© 2009 Accenture.
All rights reserved.

The views and opinions in this article should not be viewed as professional advice with respect to your business.

Accenture, its logo, and High Performance Delivered are trademarks of Accenture.

The use herein of trademarks that may be owned by others is not an assertion of ownership of such trademarks by Accenture nor intended to imply an association between Accenture and the lawful owners of such trademarks.

For more information about Accenture, please visit www.accenture.com