

A man with grey hair and a beard, wearing a yellow sweater over a blue and white checkered shirt, is sitting at a wooden desk. He is looking down at a silver laptop with a distressed expression, his hands pressed against his temples. The background is a blurred office or home workspace with a window showing a street scene.

Lithium

8 Social Customer Service Fails You Can't Afford to Make

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Overview

What a time to be in social customer service! With the push of a button—or the failure to push a button, for that matter—brand reputations can be tainted, customers can be turned away, and revenue can be lost. When this happens, it is simply called a “fail.”

The responsibility of being in charge of customer service can sometimes be overwhelming. Without a strong strategy and tools, disaster can rear its ugly head. Some brands know this all too well.

What are the most egregious examples of bad customer service in the recent past? Where, specifically, did these brands go wrong, and generally, what can customer service teams learn from these mistakes?

The following are eight cautionary tales for any team hoping to avoid negative publicity, angry customers, and lost business.



1. Inauthentic Corporate Speak

When a robotic brand Twitter voice gets involved in a sensitive socioeconomic issue, outrage ensues.

The Fail: Bank of America Using Canned Corporate Responses on Twitter

An activist from the Occupy Movement tagged Bank of America on Twitter in a complaint. His issue was not so much with the bank itself, but about the NYPD's treatment of him when he happened to be on Bank of America's property. A Bank of America customer support agent—not a robot—technically responded, but by no means did they address the user's particular concern. This mistake was unfortunately repeated like a broken record as the agent addressed multiple users with the same canned response:

Bank of America missed the mark by failing to understand that customer service is about more than the response—it is about making the customer feel valued. Context is key, and a brand's ability to have real conversations and create meaningful interactions via social is critical to the customer experience.



BEYOND THE FAIL

Bank of America's fail was its inability to see these complaints through a human lens and address them with honesty. In an example of personalized responses, San Francisco's Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) public transit system recently opted for transparency and authenticity when addressing customer complaints. Customers had taken to Twitter to complain about a fail in the service of its trains.

This honest approach gives any company its best chance of eliciting understanding and respect among its customer base. It takes a human touch to read each comment and understand each user's concerns, but it also requires a social listening system that enables customer service to process each individual comment in a streamlined fashion.



2. Underestimating the Power of a Dissatisfied Customer

One frustrated Jeep owner uses Kickstarter to turn his “lemon” into lemonade, and becomes a national advocate for consumer protection along the way.

The Fail: Fiat Chrysler Australia Refuses to Replace a Lemon

Australian Jeep owner Ashton Wood had experienced one too many issues with his new vehicle. Twenty-two too many, to be exact. So, he did what any dissatisfied customer would do and requested a full refund or replacement vehicle. But with a lack of strong laws in place in Australia to protect automobile consumers against defective motor vehicles, also known as lemon laws, Wood was fighting an uphill battle. After a reported four years of relentless communication with the auto dealership, manufacturer, and various civil agencies, he was eventually offered a partial refund for less than half of the vehicle’s purchase price.

Instead of accepting the offer, Wood launched a national “Destroy My Jeep” campaign to raise awareness of the need for consumer law review and the implementation of lemon laws. He raised nearly \$19,000 AUD—the same amount offered by the manufacturer—toward the destruction of his Jeep on the crowdfunding platform Kickstarter. Not long after, sponsors, supporters, international media outlets, lobbyists, and legislators stood by to watch the event unfold in October 2014.

WATCH THE VIDEO



I Made A Mistake I Bought A Lemon Jeep song by Teggy – Jeep Grand Cherokee, what a lemon!



The vehicle may be no more, but the “Destroy My Jeep” momentum and message lives on. The campaign has over 10,000 fans on Facebook, and has even inspired other automobile consumers to take their frustrations viral. One YouTube parody, released over a year after Wood’s stunt, and has already garnered over two million views.

BEYOND THE FAIL

The “Destroy My Jeep” campaign shows how underestimating the reach and impact of just one dissatisfied customer can figuratively—and literally—have destructive consequences. But what can brands do to ensure they are able to capture every customer issue on an individual level, before they explode into a viral sensation?

Take Telstra—an Australian telecommunications company—who utilized Lithium Social Media Management formerly Lithium Social Web to create its CrowdSupport Community. An award-winning digital ecosystem, their Community connects customers to Telstra support and, more importantly, to other customers, allowing customers to share their experiences and product feedback. Telstra utilizes this feedback to keep a pulse on customer satisfaction, and learn how they can improve their products.

No customer service portal could have prevented the defective automobile purchase, but with the proper infrastructure in place, the brand could have facilitated a more appropriate forum for these grievances.



3. Unable to Keep up with Rising Customer Expectations

One angry airline passenger proves to be a savvy marketer and maybe an evil genius.

Fail: British Airways Neglects a Twitter Complaint

A frustrated British Airways passenger lobbied a complaint on Twitter about his flight. His father's luggage was lost, which was irksome enough, but his real frustration lay in how British Airways was handling the issue.

When he believed too much time had passed (8 hours) without a response to his tweet, he decided not to let sleeping customer service reps lie. Instead, he paid to have his negative tweet promoted to all 406,000 of British Airways' followers.

British Airways responded the next day, clarifying their customer support hours of operation, but seemingly still missing the point.

That would spell trouble for just about any brand. Fifty-three percent of consumers expect a brand to respond to a tweet within an hour, and this number jumps up to 72% of consumers if the tweet is a complaint about the brand or its products.

Still, many brands have yet to take notice. Less than 2% of 85 brands studied consistently respond to complaints or comments posted on social media about them, according

to Lithium's "The State of Social Engagement 2016" study. Whether they're underestimating the importance of timeliness in response, or simply haven't found a way to increase their service efficiently, this will continue to be a risk moving forward in the digital age.



BEYOND THE FAIL

Canon is one brand leading the charge in responsiveness. When a Canon Facebook post from November of 2014 drew harsh comments and product reviews, it could have spelled disaster for the camera maker.

Canon, however, responded swiftly to each individual with honesty, addressing product-related concerns and taking customer support to the next level. They also used this as an opportunity to direct users to their Lithium-powered

Community site for increased support and brand engagement. Not only did this approach help avoid a customer service disaster, it even received a few accolades.

Whereas British Airways' customer's paid tweet came with a price tag, positive customer feedback is priceless. With the right social strategy in place, customer care agents can be everywhere, all the time.

Canon **Canon** ✓
November 13, 2014 · ✱

The EOS 7D Mark II is now shipping across the country and into your arms! Order yours at the Canon Online Store before November 30, 2014 at 11:59pm ET and receive a FREE Gadget Bag 2400 (a \$65 Online Store value.) Capture the magic of the holiday season with Canon! Shop now: <http://shout.it/KTF1>

EOS 7D Mark II
NOW SHIPPING

FUEL YOUR CREATIVE PASSION

Canon ✓ Hi Londa! This is Stephen in Support. We can always recommend Image Browser or the EOS Utility, but if you want other non-Canon options, we invite you to look to our users at our vibrant community on the Canon Forums: <http://forums.usa.canon.com/>
November 13, 2014 at 9:47am · Like

Canon ✓ Hi, Omega Broadcast Group! The EOS 7D Mark II does not have a touch screen. We hope this clarifies!
November 13, 2014 at 9:49am · Like

Canon ✓ That's awesome, Cory! We can't wait to see how you #BringIt with your new #EOS7DMarkIII!
November 13, 2014 at 9:51am · Like · 👍 1

Canon ✓ Hello, Mike! The Digital Photo Professional software that comes bundled with the camera does support the RAW files from the EOS 7D Mark II. Adobe creates their own RAW updates for new camera support in Lightroom and Photoshop, so they can advise you when updates will be available for their software. Hope this clarifies! - Jason in Support
November 13, 2014 at 9:51am · Like · 👍 1

Michael Hampton Thanks for listening Canon! This is a GREAT update to the 7D. As a wildlife shooter and replacement for the 7D the price is right and the weather-proofing is more important to me than a touch screen. The 70d fills that category.
November 13, 2014 at 11:14am · Edited · Like · 👍 1

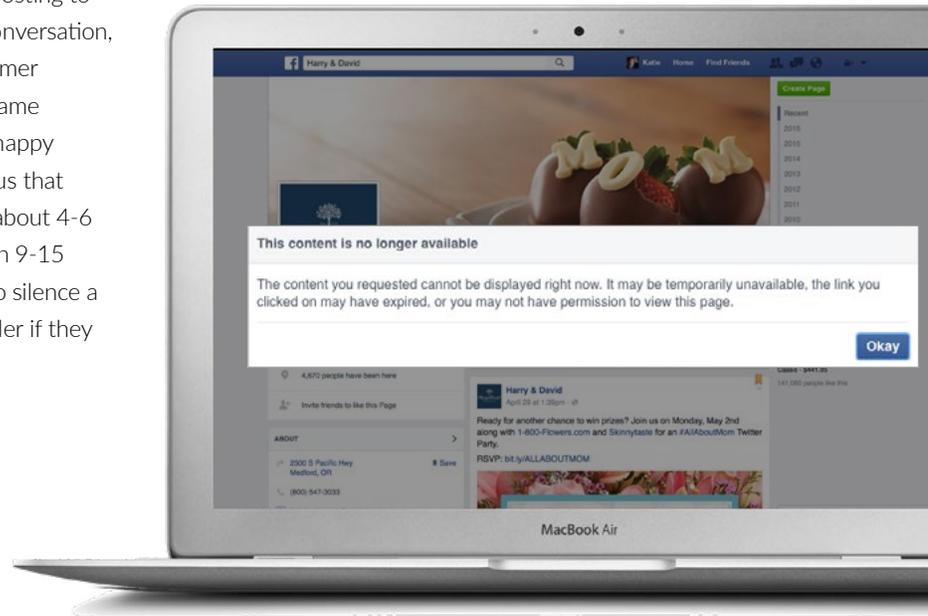
4. Burying or Deleting Complaints

No posts for you! Gift company bans unhappy customer from posting complaints to social media, but does not get the last laugh.

Fail: Harry and David's Over-Moderation of Social Media Complaints

When Harry and David failed to deliver a birthday gift for a child, the customer sought out an explanation and restitution. When he received neither, the customer took to the brand's social media profiles to lobby complaints about the situation and the lack of customer service that ensued.

In response, Harry and David deleted the customer's comments and banned the now ex-customer from posting to their Facebook page. Instead of helping guide the conversation, they missed an opportunity to turn a negative customer experience into a positive one. That's a dangerous game to play, as unhappy customers are more vocal than happy ones. Customer experience expert Colin Shaw tells us that "Happy customers who get their issue resolved tell about 4-6 people," but "a dissatisfied customer will tell between 9-15 people about their experience." Before attempting to silence a negative customer experience, brands should consider if they can afford the word of mouth.



BEYOND THE FAIL

The first step in facilitating a positive customer experience is corralling the conversation. Consider MoneyGram, whose customer support process was fragmented and time-consuming. The easiest route would have been to delete any negative comments that appeared across their various customer touch points. Instead, this brand chose to streamline the process with Lithium Social Media Management. The result? A 46% increase in the number of customers assisted, a 93% increase in response time, and a drastic decrease in the likelihood of a public relations disaster stemming from customer service.

Then there is Woolworths, who actually found themselves in the crosshairs of negative publicity, but managed to mitigate the situation with Lithium's social media listening and response tool. The Australian market chain received a video post to its Facebook page that showed a live spider crawling inside a salad product container. The video went viral for its shock value and posed a serious threat to Woolworths' reputation.

WATCH THE VIDEO

Woolworths wasted no time in handling the situation, though their solution was not to take the video down. Instead, Woolworth's was honest and apologetic, and worked directly with the customer in rectifying the situation.

In doing so, they saved their reputation and began to re-establish trust with not just this customer, but their entire social network.



Woolworths We're very concerned about this Zoe, and take incidents like this very seriously. Please let us know your phone number and state in a Private Message at <http://www.facebook.com/messages/woolworths> so that we can follow this up with you ASAP. To let you know, this is not affected by our recall and the product is from a different farm and supplier. Thanks.

Like · Reply ·  9,525 · February 4 at 5:24pm · Edited



Rach Kate I wish I'd bought mine from Woolies considering their prompt response and instructions. I bought mine from Coles- there's nothing on their fb page about this. Plenty of concerned customers writing on their wall about it but no replies on that either.

I sent them an email from their website- let's see how long they take to reply.

Like · Reply ·  725 · February 3 at 10:36pm · Edited

5. Lacking Awareness of Sensitive Topics

SeaWorld's attempt to engage customers in corporate-approved dialogue ends up drowning in animal rights outrage.

Fail: SeaWorld #AskSeaWorld Campaign Sparks Troublesome Questions

SeaWorld's #AskSeaWorld campaign in 2015 was an initiative meant to inform curious customers in a 1-to-1 digital environment:



It did not have the intended effect, as it elicited a collective “are you kidding me?” from animal rights activists everywhere. SeaWorld's treatment of killer whales has been under scrutiny since the 2013 documentary Blackfish, which positioned captivity as a detrimental and therefore unethical environment in which to keep these animals.

Animal rights activists could not believe SeaWorld would be so brazen as to promote their treatment and practices when it came to killer whales.

However, SeaWorld stood by their facilities and practices, and even tried their hand at retaliation:



For a sensitive animal rights issue, this may not have been the best approach in terms of tone and gravitas. Instead of getting combative and defensive, Sea World would have been better served taking a sympathetic and respectful approach.

BEYOND THE FAIL

According to Nielsen, 42% of corporate executives report that their customers will use social channels to shame them (source). Best practices in community management can help brands better gauge the sentiments of customers before launching a campaign, not just to manage social backlash.

6. Lacking Scalability

One customer is willing to wait for eight hours on hold with customer service, as long as he can take social media along with him on the journey.

Fail: TigerDirect Leaves a Customer on Hold for 8 Hours

When online electronics retailer TigerDirect informed Corbin Smith that his order was cancelled, he followed up with a phone call to customer service in hope of finding a resolution. He was put on hold, and where most customers would have hung up frustrated after 15 or 20 minutes, Smith was determined to see how long TigerDirect would leave him waiting. The result was staggering: eight long hours.

Smith took to social media to document his record-breaking hold time, which turned out to be no small cry. BuzzFeed picked up the story, and Smith's customer service nightmare became TigerDirect's PR nightmare.

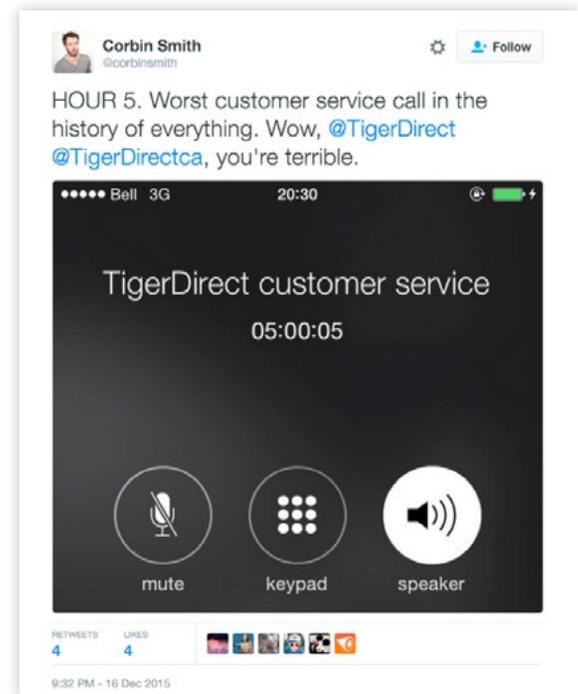
Timing can be everything in customer service, and this was a lesson that Tiger Direct learned very publicly.

BuzzFeedNEWS

This Guy Hilariously Live-Tweeted A Huge Customer Service Fail

This will put your holiday customer service struggles in perspective.

share this whitepaper



BEYOND THE FAIL

There's ample evidence of the importance of timing in customer service, and traditional support channels like email and phone are inefficient and challenging to scale. But there are solutions. A growing number of brands are choosing to implement online communities as a way to streamline customer service, and provide 24/7 access to common support questions.

Accounting software provider MYOB saw their average response time plummet from a few days to a few hours after implementing their online community, while National Instruments estimates \$7.5M in annual savings from call deflections as a result of their forum.

Phone support will always be a challenge to scale, but with the right tools in place TigerDirect could have avoided a fail—and retained a customer.

7. Unrelenting Honesty is Not Always the Best Policy

A Scotland hotel clerk tells it like it is...and it isn't that pleasant.

Fail: Georgian House Hotel is Unapologetic for Bad Service

Is honesty the best policy? One hotel manager ended up in hot water after he made a habit of replying to negative customer complaints on TripAdvisor, suggesting that the customer is not always right. The hotel in question was inexpensive, and the manager used this as an excuse to write-off poor customer service and amenities. This came off as brash, and worse yet, customers were made to feel that their business was unappreciated from his condescending tone.

Rumor has it that this manager has since been replaced.

georgianhouse1000, Owner at The Georgian House, responded to this review

What do you expect for so little cash?

georgianhouse1000, Owner at The Georgian House, responded to this review

With only one person to look after the place what do you expect? Think about what you paid.

georgianhouse1000, Owner at The Georgian House, responded to this review

If you want a good breakfast go to the Hilton and pay £100.00 a night. You pay little you get little.

BEYOND THE FAIL

Brands shouldn't always have to feel like they are on the defense when communicating with honesty. When a brand's values reflect integrity and its tone is sincere and understanding, honesty in customer service can have a profoundly positive impact. Individual employees can become Internet celebrities for the *right reasons*, which is exactly what happened to Dan from Optus.

When the Australian telecommunications provider Optus rolled out a campaign in Arabic in Sydney, many Australians took to social media to express their outrage. This was in the weeks following the Paris terrorist attacks, and a damaged sense of security had morphed into xenophobia and anti-Islam sentiment for many customers.

Optus customer service representative Dan believed that its customers' complaints were unfounded. He took it upon himself – with the help of a Lithium Community solution - to support his company's open approach and explain it to those disgruntled customers. His explanations were honest, but sympathetic and relatable.

In this case, the honesty came from the right place and the tone was informative and respectful. An effective customer support agent should not only manage a negative situation, but use the opportunity to shine a positive light on the brand they are representing.

NEW YORK

Dan From Optus, Destroyer of Bigots, Might Be the World's Best Customer-Service Guy

By Jay Hathaway

An Australian customer-service bloke earned praise from around the world after he delivered some extremely sick – yet also extremely polite – burns to bigoted Facebook commenters who had a problem with his company's policy of communicating with customers in their native languages.



No one is disputing the multi lingual language...you just picked the wrong language in the wrong decade and environment. Read the local market and read what consumers are passionate about. Glad you fixed a marketing disaster. Well done.

3 Likes 13 Comments

Like Comment Share

3 people like this.

Chronological

View 11 more comments

Optus We believe it's the right language, right decade, right location, Franki. Casula itself is listed as having over 10% of the population speaking Arabic at home. How can we expect people to make a contribution to society if they don't feel welcome in it? English is a hard language to learn, and I say that as a certified TESOL teacher. "A bandage is wound around a wound", "I decided to desert my dessert in the desert" are just a couple of examples of what make English such a tough language to learn. I'm so happy that we can offer services in other languages, especially Arabic. If it helps the local community feel more welcome, then we can tick that off on our to-do list - Dan

Unlike Reply 8 · 2 hrs

Suggested

how dare you optus, use our national anthem as an excuse for your disgusting display by using posters in arabic. you surely are aware that these same walked out on a school during this very same anthem. you are a disgrace. surely you are also aware that this is australia and we speak english and if people really do want to assimilate they will do everything in their power to learn OUR language

4 Likes 16 Comments

Like Comment Share

4 people like this.

Top Comments



Write a comment...

Optus Hi Jason, I'm happy to discuss this with you. The children who walked out of an assembly were not walking out because it was the national anthem, but because it was music that is full of joy. They are Shi'a Muslims, and as part of their faith are required to not participate in displays of joy or celebration during a month of mourning for one of the key figures in their religion (this year was October 13th to November 12th). Those same children will probably be singing it just as loud and proud as any Australian once that month of mourning is over. The tradition is similar to Lent, a Christian period of solemnity as they practise their faith. That all said, Shi'a Muslims make up only a part of the followers of Islam, and are not by themselves a complete representation of the religion. This is the beautiful thing with diversity, it's diverse. Optus is proud to be able to welcome our customers and deliver good service, regardless of their faith, language or country of origin. We support a welcoming and inclusive society, and that means we are here to help everybody - Dan

Like Reply 67 · 22 hrs

Suggested

8. Alienating Key Constituents

Abercrombie & Fitch learns the hard way that a controversy isn't always good for business.

Fail: Abercrombie & Fitch CEO declares clothes are for the “cool kids”

Former Abercrombie & Fitch CEO Mike Jeffries famously shared his exclusionary marketing strategies in a not-so-strategic way over his tenure. His most damning revelation came in a 2006 interview with Salon magazine:

“Candidly, we go after the cool kids. We go after the attractive all-American kid with a great attitude and a lot of friends. A lot of people don't belong [in our clothes], and they can't belong. Are we exclusionary? Absolutely. Those companies that are in trouble are trying to target everybody: young, old, fat, skinny. But then you become totally vanilla. You don't alienate anybody, but you don't excite anybody, either.”

It wasn't until seven years later that the power of social media took his collection of comments alienating the plus-sized, the “uncool” and the homeless viral. The backlash was swift, and had everyone from teens to A-list celebrities boycotting. “Fitch, please” and #FitchtheHomeless were just a few of the trending phrases that brought a dose of reality to the brand's image.

After weeks of silence from Abercrombie & Fitch an apology was eventually issued, but declining sales over the next three years suggest it may have been too little, too late. Describing your “ideal” customer in a way that is not only exclusionary, but also insulting is a recipe for disaster.

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Lululemon is another brand that recently stepped blindly into an unpleasant social backlash when its attempt at humor alienated a very active and passionate online community: Beyoncé's fan base—the BeyHive.

When a Twitter user referenced Lululemon in a tweet about Beyoncé's new active wear line, Lululemon decided to join in on the conversation with a playful remark about the pop icon.

Beyoncé's fan base lashed out in response, and the incident forced a sea of apologies from Lululemon on social media.

Whether you side with Lululemon or the BeyHive is almost irrelevant, but it is strong reminder of the effect that a large and influential digital community can have on a brand. Luckily for Lululemon, they were able to keep it under control and admitted their error, taking down the tweet to appease the “Beyhive”. As this and the Sea World fail also showcased, brands must be extremely tactful when engaging in humor on social media.

BEYOND THE FAIL

It is more crucial than ever for brands to engage in social listening and monitoring, but knowing when and how to engage can be half the battle. Classic adages like, “There is no such thing as bad publicity” or “Any press is good press,” no longer apply in today’s social ecosystem, as it is near-impossible to erase the digital footprint once a customer service snafu has gone viral.

There is opportunity, however, to rebuild trust in a brand by being proactive with social. British Gas, for example, holds over 800+ proactive digital conversations per month through their integrated social care strategy. Many of these social conversations don’t even mention British Gas, but the voluntary support and engagement these conversations have created has had a measurable impact on brand favorability and sentiment.

SLY
@GoodGuySly 2h
is ivy park supposed to be like lululemon?

lululemon athletica ✓
@lululemon Follow
@GoodGuySly They do say imitation is the best form of flattery. Maybe Beyonce is so Crazy In Love with our brand, she made her own.
11:25 AM - 31 Mar 2016

amanda pls
@sailorpandaxo 31 Mar
@lululemon you realize the mistake you've made right? the #beyhive never forgets.

lululemon athletica ✓
@lululemon Follow
@sailorpandaxo No harm meant, we're big fans.
12:47 PM - 31 Mar 2016 · Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada
9 26

abby salmeron
@AbzSalmeron 31 Mar
@lululemon ugh lulu... Don't talk about bey like that 😞

lululemon athletica ✓
@lululemon Follow
@AbzSalmeron We hear you, thanks for calling us out.
1:10 PM - 31 Mar 2016
1 2

Conclusion: Avoiding The Fail

Social customer service is part art, part science. Following the protocol without a human touch will only accomplish so much. Conversely, having empathy and respect for the customer without the proper protocol can be equally problematic. It's finding the right combination of both elements that spells success for customer service teams.

The eight social fails featured here showcase brands that got it horribly wrong. Some issues were systemic, others were highly personal, but each fail had at its core a profound neglect or disregard for the customer.

What can Lithium do to help? By providing customer service teams with the tools to succeed, you can ensure that every person who interacts with your brand can help shape the customer experience, and deliver it in a fast and seamless manner. This is what we call a Digital CX approach, and this is what it takes to drive a better customer experience in the digital age.

Digital Customer Experience harnesses the power of everyone in your community at scale, leading to increased responsiveness, efficiency, and ultimately increased customer satisfaction. Look no further than the positive examples of brands that could have fallen victim to one of the “fails,” but instead saw it as an opportunity to engage with customers, address their needs, and exceed their expectations.

Is social customer service in the present day more of a frightening proposition or promising opportunity? The answer rests in your platform, and in your people.

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