CUSTOMER SERVICE ON TWITTER
A Simply Measured Study - March 2014
In the lead-up to the Sochi Winter Olympics, Twitter was on fire with Tweets from journalists talking about conditions in the city—including things like “dangerous water”, side-by-side toilets, unfinished hotels and uncovered manholes.

This proliferation of feedback is an interesting demonstration of the way Twitter users have adopted the platform to alert businesses to customer service issues. Over the past seven years, the ways in which users use Twitter to contact brands has been a snowball effect. At first, users were pleasantly surprised if brands responded to customer service issues; today, users have come to expect a response and are surprised when brands DON’T. And brands find that when they don’t respond in a timely fashion, the negative sentiment generated around the brand can become a PR nightmare.

At this stage in the digital game, many brands are well aware that they cannot afford not to address customer service issues that arise on Twitter. The word-of-mouth negative Tweets generate greatly impacts their brand’s image. Many top brands are responding by improving their customer service strategies on social networks.

As we continue to monitor social media trends, we’ve found that best-in-class brands benefit from a dedicated customer service handle.
Last year, we published two studies on customer service on Twitter and found that 32% of the Interbrand 100 companies, the world’s biggest brands, were actively using dedicated customer service handles to respond to customer issues. This year, we decided to revisit the list and measure the change in both user adoption of these dedicated handles (as measured by the number of mentions of the dedicated handle; the “inbound” flow) and the brand adoption of a dedicated customer service handle.

After completing the study, we found that the number of Interbrand 100 companies that adopted a dedicated customer service handle hasn’t changed. However, we found that users have adopted these dedicated handles and the increase in mentions grew by 44% year-over-year (Y.O.Y). In addition, we found that the brands with dedicated customer service handles have shown improvements in response rate despite the overwhelming increase in mentions. The best-in-class brands, the top 10 brands on the list, have averaged a whopping 83% response rate to all inbound mentions of the dedicated handle. It’s a testament to these brands' world-class customer service performance.

*Only 32 of the Interbrand 100 companies have a dedicated customer service presence on Twitter.*

So if the benefits are so great, why aren’t more brands doing it?

Our study will try to answer this and other questions. We’ll outline what the world’s best brands are doing and how you can leverage the data to help manage your brand’s reputation on Twitter. But first, let’s define a few terms we’ve used in this study that will help clarify the process as we go over key ways you can improve your Twitter customer service.
32 Companies with customer service handles

31 Days of data (Beginning in January 2014)

186,013 Total Tweets analyzed

95,646 Total Mentions analyzed

57,613 Total @Replies analyzed

32,754 Total Sent Tweets analyzed
DEFINITIONS

Customer Service Handles
When we use the term “dedicated customer service handle”, we’re talking about handles like @NikeSupport, @AskAmex, or @AmazonHelp. These are Twitter handles dedicated specifically to handle customer service requests, independent of the brand’s main Twitter account.

Total Mentions
The total mentions metric is gauged by how many times your brand is mentioned – excluding retweets. In this study, it applies to only handles dedicated to customer service.

Total Responses
Total responses are measured by the number of times your brand responds to mentions of your customer service @handle.

Response Time
This is the amount of time it takes an account to respond to a Tweet and can be measured by subtracting the time of the original inbound Tweet from the time of your response.

Average Response Time
The average of your response time during a specific time frame; in this study, January 2014.

Response Rate
Your response rate is based on the number of Tweets you respond to. To measure it, divide the number of mentions you’ve responded to by the total number of Tweets that mention your brand handle.

Tweets Sent
In this study, we’ve counted the number of overall Tweets sent by a customer service brand handle, including responses to users who may have sent a Tweet to the regular brand handle. Since we couldn’t count the number of customer service Tweets that mention the primary brand handle, this number is the best way to indicate the additional responses that the customer service handle sent out in response to those Tweets.
KEY FINDINGS

#1: Users are adopting Twitter as a legitimate and valid customer service channel. Mentions of dedicated customer service handles increased by 44% year-over-year.

During January 2014, the customer service handles in this study received a total of 95,646 mentions. This represents a 44% increase year-over-year compared to the monthly average during Q1 of 2013.

This shows that users have adopted Twitter and these dedicated handles as a legitimate and valid way to interact with the brand’s customer service team. This overwhelming increase in inbound Tweets is also a testament to the brand's ability to direct users to interact with these customer service handles rather than the brand's primary handle.
#2: Despite the increase in inbound flow of customer service tweets, brands have increased their response rate by 43% YOY, now averaging at 60%.

The brands with dedicated customer service handles have shown improvement in overall response rate, despite the increase in inbound Tweets. This indicates that more resources are given to these customer service teams to handle customer service interaction on Twitter.

Overall, the brands have grown their response rate by 43%, but given the increase in inbound Tweets, they had to more than double their total direct responses (Tweets with @reply). The monthly average increased from 27,652 in Q1 of 2013 to 57,613 in January 2014; an increase of 208% YOY.

These brands are getting better, not only at replying to the Tweets sent directly to the customer service handle (measured as total mentions), but also at interacting with customers that Tweet directly to the brand’s primary handle.
The graph above shows the total number of Tweets sent from the customer service handles on a monthly basis during the three time periods analyzed along with the total responses sent in that time frame (Tweets starting with @reply), and the remaining Tweets sent by customer service handles. The total sent Tweets represent the entire activity the customer service handles generated during the time period. The total responses represent the activity the team handled responding to specific Tweets directed to the customer service handle. The difference between them shows the additional activity the team had outside of responding to inbound Tweets.

We can assume that the vast majority of that activity had two purposes – promoting the existence of the dedicated handle and responding to customer service Tweets sent to the brand's primary handle.

The growth in all three numbers show the sheer volume of activity the customer service team had to manage on an ongoing basis. With such an increase in activity volume, you would expect that without scaling the teams, response rate would decline, response time would increase, or worse, both would deteriorate. If response rate actually improved, what happened with response time?
#3: While response rate has increased, average response time has slowed down by only 10% YOY.

Response time improved in Q2 of 2013 going down to an average of 4:36 hours. With increased Tweet volume in Q1 of 2014, though, the average response time increased - slowing the response time down to 5:36 hours. Though response time increased the fact that it only increased by 10% is remarkable. With a 208% increase in outbound Tweets, we would have expected a much longer response time.

In many industries an average response time of less than 24 hours is acceptable and over 90% of the brands responded to Tweets within that time frame.

However, in some industries, customers expect an almost-immediate response to their inquiry. In those cases, we believe customers would rather use a more traditional customer service channel like a call center or online help.
LEARNING FROM THE BEST-IN-CLASS: TACTICS FOR MANAGING CUSTOMER SERVICE ON TWITTER

We looked at top brands, including Nike, American Express, and Amazon, to find out what they’re doing to improve their customer service strategy using a dedicated customer service handle. We were able to pinpoint just what best-in-class brands are doing to excel at customer service.

Managing response rate: Over the past year, we found that the average response rate increased to 60%, with the top business coming in at a response rate average of 83%. This means that as users turn to Twitter to give feedback or ask questions, these brands are scaling their customer service efforts to keep up with demand.

Managing response time: As the number of customer service Tweets increases so does the average response time, with brands working diligently to keep up with demand. In considering response rate as a function of response time, one impressive statistic stands out: that response time only went up 10%. This figure is amazing considering the significant increase in requests. The top brand is able to respond in less than 30 minutes, which is a significantly shorter length of time than last year.
**Managing how they respond:** Many brands are creating tactics to handle customer service on Twitter, especially if their customer service handle is new, and these tactics have changed very little over the last year. One of the most common tactics used in Twitter customer service is to direct users to a brand web page – whether a FAQ or otherwise. This tactic only accounts for about 23% of total Tweets, while about 17% of total Tweets request that the user contact the company directly by mail, phone, or direct message.

From this statistic, we can assume that brands are relying heavily on predetermined customer service responses to keep up with customer service demands. For brands that see a large number of customer service requests that they must respond to, these “canned responses” can be an effective way to help the largest number of people in the shortest amount of time, especially if you’re a business trying to maximize your response rate and minimize your response time.

**Note:** Not all mentions even require a response. Brands are also fielding mentions that have been directed at the main brand handles in lieu of a dedicated customer service handle.
Managing when they respond: One statistic we noticed for accounts with a dedicated customer service handle is that the response time goes down significantly during business hours. With employees there to staff the customer service accounts, many businesses see a rise in both mentions and response times between 7:00am and 2:00pm. Twitter users are likely to get a prompt answer from a brand’s customer service handle when they know the account is staffed.

This may seem obvious, but the valuable lesson here is that if a brand is looking to decrease response time and increase response rate to handle the largest number of customer service Tweets, the brand must scale up personnel who handle these customer service accounts to compensate for the increase in demand.

Brands with a significant number of after-hours customer service requests may consider adding to their customer service team to make sure that the customer service handle is adequately staffed.
CASE STUDY – AMERICAN EXPRESS

American Express has adopted a customer service handle, @AskAmex, to answer customer support issues. The account currently has 47.1K followers and answers questions on everything from card-member benefit questions, to account issues, to questions about contests and promotions.

Response Rates for @AskAmex

We ran a Simply Measured Twitter Customer Service analysis on the @AskAmex handle to find trends in both customer requests and customer service. Looking at the Twitter Account Activity and Engagement report, it’s clear that during the first week of 2013, the @AskAmex account had around 800 mentions (excluding retweets) and at the highest point, was receiving around 24,255 mentions (in the beginning of December). This is an unbelievable number – an increase of almost 3000% shows how well American Express has done in driving adoption of the @AskAmex handle by its user base.
**How follower counts impact response rate**

Looking at the follower count for @AskAmex, we see that the follower number jumped up in the same week they saw a spike in mentions, adding an extra 1,107 followers to the account. This shows the obvious challenges in trying to respond to every customer’s needs during periods with large numbers of customer service issues.

To confirm this assumption we looked at the Response Frequency by Follower Count and found that as the customer service request load grew, the response frequency dropped from 80% to 14%. Since many mentions don’t warrant a response, we can assume that with the huge jump in mentions, the @AskAmex account became more selective about when it responded and who it responded to.

It’s also very likely that not all of the followers added mentioned the @AskAmex handle specifically for a customer service request. More importantly, a number of the mentions of the customer service handle also came from other American Express handles like @AmericanExpress and @AmexServe, or other companies altogether, which would influence response rate.

JetBlue Airways  @JetBlue  •  Dec 21

@dagongster We think it’s great that we each remind you of the other! We love @AskAmex. #Partners
Effectively managing response times

The @AskAmex account performed well in response time. 76% of customer service responses from the handle happened in 30 minutes or less. Even accounting for longer response times – for example, after hours – the average response time per mention is only 189 minutes (just over 3 hours). This means that there are enough customer service representatives on staff to keep the response time low. We can also assume a number of the responses are canned – that @AskAmex has a standard policy on how to respond to these requests.

We can correlate this data with the company’s business hours. Between 8:00 am and 8:00 pm, we found that the brand was able to handle a proportionate number of mentions in a low response time.
@AskAmex also does a great job of alerting their customers to when the account is staffed, using Tweets like the following:

- **Ask Amex** @AskAmex • Mar 6
  
  Good morning & happy Thursday! Please reach out if we can be of assistance.

- **Ask Amex** @AskAmex • 18h
  
  We are heading out the door. We'll tweet you in the morning when we return. Have a good one!

Here, they are setting expectations for when the customer service account is staffed which reduces the amount of mentions after hours. If we correlate this to the above chart, we can assume that because @AskAmex lets their followers know when the account is staffed, the users who follow the customer service handle do not send in many requests after hours.

For brands that do not staff a customer service handle around the clock, this is a great example of ways to manage outliers that could skew reporting.

**Directing users to the customer service handle**

American Express uses several different handles for several areas of business, but users often direct their questions to the handle they converse with the most. Each handle is diligent in making sure they route these users to the customer service handle when appropriate.

- **Matt Lewandowsky** @lewellyn • Feb20
  
  Guess I'm going to the bank today. Finally tried to add a check to @AmexServe and the iOS app crashes and the Android app can't read it. :(  

- **Amex Serve** @AmexServe • Feb20
  
  @lewellyn Hi Matt. We are so sorry for this inconvenience. Looping in our customer care team @AskAmex who would be happy to assist you.
In an age where Twitter has become the go-to medium for customers looking to provide feedback or solve problems, brands must adapt their Twitter strategy to better serve their customers. We’ve provided a checklist for the five practices best-in-class brands adopt to better handle customer service requests and maintain positive sentiment about their brand.

1. Dedicated handle
As we mentioned in the beginning of this guide, brands who have adopted dedicated customer service handles have an easier time managing customer service requests for both the dedicated handle, and for the brand’s main handle. With a dedicated handle, brands can ensure that customer service requests are being taken care of in a manner consistent with the brand’s overall customer retention strategy.

A dedicated customer service handle can help your brand separate a wide range of customer service requests from other types of mentions so you can effectively monitor your social customer service process. In addition, it can be a great way to naturally gain followers. Through proactive monitoring and engagement, you have the ability to build positive sentiment around your brand, which will help increase your audience size and encourage engagement.

2. Dedicate team and the right tools
The data shows that when a customer service handle isn’t staffed, the response time increases dramatically while the response rate decreases. Knowing when most of your customer service requests come in via Twitter can help you determine the best time to staff your customer service accounts. You can monitor your most active Tweet times using the SimplyMeasured Twitter Account Report.
3. Canned answers + resources
Our study shows that having responses on-hand can help reduce your response time and help increase response rate, as your customer service representatives have more sophisticated resources available to resolve issues. In addition, outline where you’ll direct different types of customer service requests, whether you ask for more information from your customers, direct them to email, direct them to a webpage, or solve the issue in a direct message.

4. Rules of engagement and primary handle guidelines
If you’re debating on whether or not to set up a dedicated customer service handle, you’ll want to determine how to handle customer service requests that are directed to the primary handle. You’ll also want to monitor mentions of your brand name in the event that Twitter users aren’t following, or aren’t aware of your brand handles. Effective monitoring can help resolve customer issues before they start – helping to keep sentiments positive around your brand handle. Not only that, but as we saw in the @AskAmex case study, letting your followers know (daily) when your customer service handle is staffed will greatly help reduce posts when that handle is not staffed.

5. Promoting your handle
When you’re setting up a dedicated customer service handle, consider where you’ll promote the handle – for example, you may want to link your handle via your customer support page, so that users have a range of options to contact your customer service representatives. You may want to also find a way to link your main handle to your customer service handle (for example, in your brand bio) so that users who visit your profile are aware that you’ve got a dedicated customer service handle.
6. Reducing your response time
This is one way of letting your followers know that they are important to your business. In addition, it’s a proactive way to address negative word of mouth that may affect the sentiment generated around your brand.

7. Responding to as many mentions as possible
Responding to a majority of requests is a great way to keep your followers happy, and engaged. If your brand responds to as many mentions as possible, your users are more likely to mention your brand handle more often, which means your handle has the potential to reach followers who may be outside your reach.

CONCLUSION:
Understanding the rules of engagement for customer service on Twitter is a crucial step to managing your overall customer service strategy. As more and more users turn to Twitter to ask questions, give feedback, praise or complain about a brand, brands need to be proactive in managing their brand image – by showing customers that they’re listening, and that they care. Since Twitter is a word-of-mouth platform, these steps are essential for any company looking to increase their business in the digital world.
ABOUT SIMPLY MEASURED

Simply Measured is a fast-growing team of data geeks dedicated to making the world of analytics and reporting a better, more beautiful place.

Our goal is to put the tools to understand business data in the hands of business users. We think reporting should be simple, beautiful, and accessible for everyone – not just data scientists. Our software streamlines the process from data to deliverables and eliminates the countless hours spent on everyday reporting tasks. We do this by putting cloud data sources at your fingertips, providing a marketplace of best practice reports, and generating beautiful deliverables on the web, in Excel, and in PowerPoint with a couple of clicks.

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