

Customer Development through Social Media

This is Dr. Constantina Katsari-Muston again and I would like to explain how to conduct customer development with the help of social media.

The most important act that you have to conduct is that of monitoring. You need to monitor the sector within which your business is going to be. You need to monitor the brands that are already active, you need to monitor the competition of your business, the future competition of your business and you need to do that online. Just go into whatever threads of conversation you find and start reading them. Try also try to note discussions that mention problems, not only problems but also discussions that mention the solution to the problems. Its going to be an excellent way for you to find out what the problem of you customer is, how deep it is and what type of solutions already exist.

The second step is to develop your own community. Number one, you need to build trust with the consumers. Consumers are not going to buy your product until they trust you, and in order to trust you they need to get to know you. So, please, go ahead and engage in any conversations that are happening now online. While you're doing that, analyze the behavior of the consumer. What do they buy, how do they buy it, for what reason? How do they refer about it to their friends and family? In the end, you can also define customer segments online, based on the information that the community has given you ... than the individual customers are giving you. So, the same work that you do in person and during the interviews, you can do it online, in the course of a conversation, in a thread of a conversation.

What you'll be asked to do is what we call 'Inbound Marketing'. 'Inbound Marketing' is not about pushing your product out. It is about pulling the customers into your business. While you do that with the help of social media, you need to have 'Call to Action Messages'. Call To Action Messages are messages that are asking the customers to take action. For example... 'subscribe to my newsletter' or push this button and you'll get a PDF file. These Call to Action messages should only be 20% of your entire stream, whether its Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn or anything else. Otherwise, people think that your messages are too 'salesy' and they don't bother coming back to check out what you have been writing. Call To Action messages are obviously only part of what you'll be doing online. Education is the bigger part of it, the other 80%.

While you're at it, make sure you have an online customer service. For example pay attention to what your customers are saying. If they're not happy, intervene. Get into the conversation, find out what was wrong, answer to their questions and make life better for them in one way or another. On the whole you need to engage with your clients actively online. And when you push a product out, you have to measure their response. How do they respond to that, what is the feedback they're giving?

Obviously, social engagement happens through different means. The first step you need to take is to follow people. That's what lurkers do, while they 'listen' to the threads. Occasionally you may want to 'Like' what you see online. The next step is to get involved actively into the conversation... and in some cases to sign up to whatever packets of information they're offering. After you start engaging a little bit more with the company, with the business, the next step is to purchase the product. Once you purchase it, you're either going to be happy or unhappy, if you're happy, you're going to refer the product to your friends. These are more or less the steps that the customers take from following a business to actually referring the product to their friends and family.

Let's check out now the different platforms you can use. LinkedIn is one of the first that comes to mind and it's perfect for B to B, business to business services. If you follow threads of conversation on LinkedIn, sometimes you can find answers to your problem. I would strongly suggest that you join LinkedIn groups. These may be closed or open groups for people with similar interests. And, of course, you'd have to post not only to your stream but also to LinkedIn networks, so that the appropriate people can see your messages. Occasionally, you can post LinkedIn ads or you can update your profile and you can set in mail messages to your potential customers.

Facebook is the drug of choice especially for women, especially for mothers. Your first step would be to ask your friends to like your page, like that page that is set up for your business. This way they will be able to see the information that you produce and they may refer you to also to their friends. Look for pages with similar content on Facebook and contact their owners, you may actually be able to post into their pages and maybe in return you can allow them to post in your page.

My favourite aspect is Facebook Ads. Facebook Ads are fantastic for finding out exactly how many people are in your market, and I will show you how this can be done. In some cases, you need to boost a post to reach more people. While you're doing that you can make the choice whom do you want to target. In this ad I'm targeting men and women between the ages of 13- 65 from Turkey. I decided to have a minimum budget of 3 pounds. Don't click the button that said, 'Sent'. I found out that people with these characteristics in Turkey are 22 million. So, my ad effectively has got to reach between 3500 to 9100 people. The information I'm interested in is that there are 22 million people with these characteristics.

Now let us go to a more targeted ad... Let's assume I decided to organize a startdom weekend in Leicester, and I want to advertise on Facebook. So, I am looking for a city and people that live 5 miles within that city, that would be Leicester...ages between 23 and 40... I know that some people are going to be younger or older but the average age of the people that come to these weekends are between 23 and 40. I'm also choosing men, I rarely have women that come to start home weekends. I've decided also to put some keywords in to specify what kind of people I'm interested in. So, I write down startups and entrepreneurs. The next step is to see how many people I

have. So, men between the ages 23 and 40 with interest in startups and entrepreneurship within the city of Leicester and its surroundings... I put in a minimum budget of 3 pounds... the 3100 people targeted. My 3 pounds are going to buy between 430 and 1100. These people are actually going to see my ad but the interesting part is there are 30000 people that are interested in start ups and entrepreneurship in Leicester. You can do the same thing in order to find out who your market is. These are for very targeted ads.

Twitter is also a very, very useful tool for most businesses, and in some cases its more useful than Facebook. You can ask your followers what their problems are. Most times I conduct customer development on Twitter, and I get very immediate answers, which I follow afterwards. You could ask them to retweet your questions so that you can get more answers. Once you engage with them on Twitter, you can follow the discussion with direct messages or in emails. You can run Twitter ads that are very effective or you can participate in existing Twitter threads. Just follow hastags to see who is talking about your subject. This is the most effective way to search on Twitter for the problems of your customer.

Another time consuming but very important way to do customer development is through the blog, your blog... You can write a post about the customer's problem... and maybe in the same blog post or in another blog post, you can offer a solution. Once you write your post, post it everywhere, on Facebook, on Twitter, on LinkedIn, on Pinterest, wherever you feel your customers are. You may want to include your questions for the customer development in the 'About' page. The About page is the second most visited page of your blog, the first one obviously is the landing page, the main page. Make sure you address only your market segment. This is not going to be a blog post for everybody, you need to find your niche in the market. You need to find your ideal customer... Its also important to make connections with fellow bloggers. This is a community with very strong bonds and I know this because I've been blogging since 2008, and I made a lot of friends this way. You can ask bloggers for interviews. The bloggers will actually know your customer and know their problems. Or you can ask bloggers to write about your business or about your solution and then see what kind of feedback they're going to receive. Or you can ask to become a guest blogger, a lot of bloggers are looking for new content. They may allow you to write in their blog. Please, grab the opportunity and talk about the problems and the solutions to your customers.

Email is also a very powerful tool. If you have not already started creating an email list, you should start today. This is the most effective tool for Inbound Marketing. In order to cut off customer development, you can talk to people individually or at a later stage, you can send them a poll. 'Survey Monkey' maybe one of the tools you can use.

If you would like to meet new customers online to conduct your interviews, the best tool is 'Meet Up'. If you don't want to create your own Meet Up on the specific topic

that you'd like to talk about, you can join one of the local meet ups in your sector and in your region. Occasionally you may be able to send messages to this group for more information. Make sure you ask the organizers for permission, because they don't want to spam the people who are in their Meet Up. And now it is time to go and find you customers online or, in fact, its time to get out of the building and start talking to your customers.