The connected consumer code of ethics

By Mike Stopforth   26 Sep 2011

There is much being said about how brands should engage with customers in social media. Words like "authenticity", "transparency", "immediacy", "personability" and others are bandied about as we as consultants, together with our clients, figure out the rules of content and community online.

This is a good thing. Brands tend to forget that platforms like Facebook and Twitter were created for individuals to connect with other individuals, and not as business tools. When creating profiles, responding to and initiating conversations, businesses are constantly challenged with this dynamic and as a result have had to unlearn some of the long-standing principles of traditional marketing to succeed.

But that is only one side of the story. Not enough, in my opinion, is being said about the responsibility consumers have when they interact with each other, and with brands, online. The power of freedom of speech and the open and democratic nature of social platforms tends to encourage behaviour that is incongruent with how individuals might behave in "real life". Consider the recent example of Ard Matthews' well-documented foul up of the South African National Anthem on live television. Angry citizens on Twitter and Facebook hurled violent insults and jibes at him - statements I'd be willing to bet they'd never say to him face to face.

I recently had a public spat with Dale Immerman (who is in fact a rad dude, I just didn't agree with him in this instance), about a conversation he had with @StandardBankGrp, Standard Bank's Twitter presence. I felt like Dale was bullying Standard Bank (you can see the whole conversation here - http://bettween.com/mikestopforth/idale), and I had a bit of a go at him as a result. I'm probably hyper-sensitive to this dynamic because of the abuse I witness our clients receiving at the hands of sometimes unreasonable consumers.

Uncle Ben (from Spiderman for the non-geeks out there) told Peter Parker that "great power comes with great responsibility." To say that the average Twitter user with 200 followers has great power is a bit of a stretch, but it's an undeniable fact that social media users (who have no access to any other media platforms) have greater reach and influence than what they would have had before they built those profiles, and it cannot be ignored. Surely consumers should be more conscious of their behaviour online? Surely, seeing as businesses are made up of individuals and have Twitter and Facebook profiles run by individuals, they should be treated with a degree of respect too? As much as we as consumers expect brands to use social media to connect with us in revolutionary new ways, we should understand that we are required to do so in an equally respectful manner.

There is a danger that consumers who have gained significant levels of influence use that to manipulate and bully brands online. In my experience, practicing responsible consumerism (I made that up) elicits a more positive responsive from

brands.

With that in mind I'd like to propose a Connected Consumer Code of Ethics - a set of 'rules' (maybe guidelines is a better word) that I believe consumers should follow when interacting with brands online. We had a debate at the office about this, so feel free once you have read through it to disagree wholeheartedly!

The Connected Consumer Code of Ethics

- **Do some homework**. Your insurance company messes up a claim. It's one thing if you try the website, phone the call centre, go in to your branch, receive no help and then rant and rave on Twitter. But ranting and raving on Twitter because the volume knob comes off the console of your Toyota Auris before taking it into the dealership is unreasonable. Give the brand a fair chance to solve your issue before dragging their name through the dirt.
- **Speak as you would expect to be spoken to**. If and when you get to the point where ranting and raving on a social platform is your only solution remember there are other human beings behind the social profiles of even the biggest organisations. Profanity and defamation will probably not get you the results you hope for.
- **Don't be a 'mobster'**. Mob mentality kicks in on social platforms, and all too often. One person complains and before you can say "brainless" hundreds more are retweeting and sharing and re-posting the same complaint. If you have an issue with the brand in question, feel free to echo the sentiments of the originator. But if not, why perpetuate negativity? Surely we have enough of that already? (this tip courtesy of @HeikeMey)
- **Balance the scales**. It's human nature - it's so easy to complain when something goes wrong, but so much harder to remember to give kudos when they're due. Try developing a habit of complimenting brands as often as you slate them.
- **Temper your expectations**. Even though you as a consumer should not be expected to differentiate between company structures, departments or silos, you should still have a realistic expectation of what a brand is capable of doing online - specific to the limitations of the platform (this tip courtesy of @KeenyKeenz)

Perhaps if we are all a little more conscious of and responsible for our actions online, brands will steadily improve their response rates and willingness to take social platforms more seriously as customer service channels. Regardless, I think how you conduct yourself in relation to brands or other users (especially when it's safe to hide behind a digital mask), says much about your true character. That should be reason enough.

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