



Timeliness, transparency, and trust: A framework for managing online customer complaints

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Abstract This article discusses several practical solutions for dealing with online customer complaints. Online complaints are inevitable; how a firm responds can make the difference. There are techniques that managers can use not only to minimize the detrimental impact of online complaints, but also to produce beneficial outcomes. Herein, we introduce our 3T framework, designed to help managers and support teams respond to online complaints in a thoughtful and measured way. We build on word-of-mouth research and several theories from marketing, service marketing, journalism, and business ethics. With so many reviews posted online every second, firms must employ best practices grounded in empirical research and solid conceptualization to deal with this important component of online customer service.

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1. Challenges of the digital complaint department

One thing that e-commerce and social media have taught us is that consumers are not shy about

making their voices heard online. These voices take the form of online comments, product reviews, blog posts, and aggregated rankings. They can be shared on a multitude of platforms, including social media sites, corporate sponsored websites, and online review sites. Collectively, these communications are called *electronic word-of-mouth* (eWOM). eWOM is defined as “any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the internet” (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh,

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& Gremler, 2004, p. 39). Unfortunately for marketers, dissatisfied customers generate more word-of-mouth and eWOM than satisfied customers, and the most highly dissatisfied customers are also most likely to leave online reviews and comments (Anderson, 1998; Richins, 1983). These online reviews play a large role in consumer attitudes toward firms and brands as “one of the most trusted sources of consumer confidence” in purchase decisions, despite the fact that research indicates that reviews may be biased and easily manipulated (Aral, 2014, p. 47). Indeed, a Cone Research study found that four out of five shoppers have changed their decision to purchase a product or service based only on a negative review they read online (Cone, 2011). These findings from this respected market research firm are consistent with academic research demonstrating that customers do indeed find eWOM from other consumers to be more useful in general (Bronner & de Hoog, 2010) and more trustworthy (Utz, Kerkhof, & van den Bos, 2012).

Online complaints are not always bad news for the reviewed firm though. Through ongoing social media dialogue, firms have direct access to consumer opinions and knowledge. Negative reviews can allow firms to quickly and easily identify existing problems. Smart marketers value this opportunity and utilize the information to improve upon weaknesses. Social media provides new channels for firms to interact with customers and recover from service or product failure. Because of the very public nature of social media, service recovery efforts that are well managed can shine a spotlight on superior customer service, impacting not only the original poster but other potential customers as well. Despite the increased power of the consumer, the firm now possesses the capacity to manage the potential damage from an online complaint effectively and do so in a way that even improves its reputation. The key, though, lies in the way the firm responds.

A firm must first be willing to recognize that traditional management and customer service approaches may not always translate perfectly to an online setting. Providing support to dissatisfied customers who express their displeasure online presents a unique set of challenges. Traditionally, a customer provides feedback through direct contact with the firm or another individual, but online reviews are grounded in the idea of sharing. Sharing operates outside the hours and channels controlled by the firm itself. Thus, an online review is not limited to a small number of people or to any posted hours of operation. The marketer is then forced to pay attention to this ‘digital complaint department’ wherever and whenever it may emerge.

To assist managers who may feel unprepared to navigate the potential pitfalls of online complaints, a team of researchers with backgrounds in retailing and relationship marketing presents best practices to online complaint management. The research presented demonstrates that there is normative, practical advice for managers that will not only minimize the detrimental impact of online complaints, but may even produce beneficial outcomes. By adhering to the framework outlined below, a firm can increase the chances that customer loyalty is undamaged and that customers’ relationships with the brand are just as strong as before complaints were posted.

2. The 3T framework of managing online customer complaints

Consumer complaints are no longer a private matter. Instead, upset consumers now take to public forums and social media to express dissatisfaction with a firm (Ward & Ostrom, 2006). Consumers can now spread negative WOM not just to their close network, but an almost infinite number of others. The increased power that consumers yield has changed the way a brand must develop and maintain its reputation since firms are no longer in total control of the posted message (Breazeale, 2009). Yet we suggest that firms that embrace the ability to hear, not ignore, the amplified voice of its consumers will obtain a competitive advantage. However, recent market research about American Express customers suggests that firms are still not adequately handling online complaints; only 21% of respondents report always receiving an answer and having their customer service issues resolved when using social media to complain (Ebiquity, 2014). How can firms embrace the negative and successfully turn it into a positive?

We conducted four empirical studies that examined customer reactions to several real-world scenarios related to online complaint management. These scenarios—the impact of the responding party, the nature of the response, and removal of the original complaint by the marketer—were studied in relation to the impact they have on customers’ attitudes toward the brand, ultimate satisfaction with the product, and relationship with the brand. Based on these findings as well as research findings from a thorough investigation of existing literature and a comprehensive review of current firm practices, we developed a framework (see Table 1) to lead managers through the process of managing online complaints. Overall, the research revealed that three key themes exist with respect to

Table 1. 3T framework of managing online customer complaints

Timeliness	Transparency	Trust
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hire and train the right people • Respond promptly 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain the public record • Encourage customer interaction • Empower brand advocates 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Humanize and personalize responses • Encourage civility • Act ethically

minimizing the damage of online complaints. We call these the three Ts: timeliness, transparency, and trust. For each, we offer actionable recommendations for managers to manage online complaints more effectively.

2.1. Timeliness

Timeliness addresses the need for firms to address online complaints before they have a chance to spread negativity about the brand. This requires firms to consider both proactive (i.e., hiring and training the right people) and reactive (i.e., responding promptly) approaches to complaint management.

2.1.1. Hire and train the right people

Before the age of the internet, marketers knew when and where their customers were most likely to complain. It was reasonable to have an on-site complaint department or customer service desk that fielded consumer concerns during regular business hours. Today, firms must be willing to seek out and listen to consumers when and wherever those consumers share their feelings. This necessitates having a trained support team to respond quickly to online complaints and to continuously monitor what is being said about the brand and its products and services online.

Who are the right people? The need for specially trained personnel is even more apparent as it pertains to customer service via social media sites and other online media in which interaction with customers is emphasized and usually very public. Employees in charge of managing online relationships must have strong customer service skills in addition to a thorough understanding of the image the marketer wants to maintain. Some specific personality traits (e.g., emotional stability, agreeability, and need for activity) are critical components of a service employee's customer orientation, a significant predictor of performance ratings (Brown, Mowen, Donovan, & Licata, 2002). Unlike traditional offline customer service, employees tasked with responding to online complaints are responsible not only for resolving the initial failure for the customer, but also for diminishing the potential negative impact on other customers.

These employees are engaging with customers and managing impressions on multiple fronts simultaneously. It is in a firm's best interest to hire and train trustworthy employees to handle this task and to ensure that those employees represent the brand well.

Furthermore, firms should consider utilizing this specialized support team through a designated account. This provides consumers with a clear forum to voice complaints while keeping a brand's main account clear of customer service requests. A leader in the arena of online customer service, Xbox (@XboxSupport) holds the Guinness World Record for most responsive Twitter feed (Bennett, 2013). As of May 2017, the Xbox support team had posted nearly 3 million tweets, directly interacting with consumers one-on-one. Microsoft's Xbox Twitter support, referred to as the Elite Tweet Fleet, saw a dramatic increase in customer satisfaction and issue resolution rates after implementing its dedicated Twitter support team (Hibbard, 2010). The Elite Tweet Fleet earned this recognition by requiring a public response to every mention unless the tweet is from an automated bot or is overly vulgar. Efficient and expedient online support teams provide an important competitive advantage in the digital age.

Box 1: Take action

- Find people with the right temperament for managing online complaints and hire them.
- Build a specialized support team for online complaints.

2.1.2. Respond promptly

"We're sorry we didn't respond in time. We hope you were able to get an upgrade." (Airline customer service employee via Twitter)

"I was not able to get an upgrade. Totally bummed out." (Customer response)

Consumers share their dissatisfaction via online reviews and complaints so they will feel they are

being heard. In traditional service recovery, ignoring customer complaints is one of the most severe mistakes a firm can make, as the customer is looking for a chance to vent and seeking an explanation for the reason a problem occurred (Michel, Bowen, & Johnston, 2009). Firms must listen and respond to the customer to minimize the impact of the complaint, as well as to recover from the failure itself.

But services marketing research tells us that simply responding is not enough. The speed with which a support team addresses customer complaints is a critical factor in service recovery (Davidow, 2003). A faster response to a customer complaint has been shown to have a positive effect on satisfaction and repurchase intentions (Conlon & Murray, 1996), valence of WOM interactions (Davidow, 2000), and procedural justice (which in turn had a positive effect on recovery satisfaction) (Smith, Bolton, & Wagner, 1999). Thus, responding promptly to complaints should become a critical part of an online support team's role. This is an even more important issue for firms to consider as social media sites are now publicizing marketers' response rates and times, as well as awarding badges for superior customer service online.

Responding quickly also necessitates staying on top of what is being said online about the firm's brand, products, and services. Using social media monitoring systems as well as continuously lurking on online forums are important techniques to ensure no complaint goes ignored. For example, some social media users may use a hashtag to complain about a brand rather than mentioning the company directly. This can cause some companies to miss out as they are only notified when the consumer mentions the company using the @ symbol. A Twitter user recently experienced this loophole as they tweeted “[airlinecompany]sucks. Extremely poor customer service. No response from u is an absolute insult after screwing me over 35 hrs.” While this airline successfully responds to complaints posted directly to its page, it is missing out on several disgruntled consumers waiting for a response.

What should the response be? Research indicates that, at a minimum, an apology should always be given (Jenks, 1993). An apology is not necessarily an admission of guilt, but rather an acknowledgment of the issue and that the firm is taking steps to resolve it (Goodman, Malech, & Boyd, 1987). It can be viewed as a form of “psychological compensation” in that it helps restore equilibrium between the customer and firm (Davidow, 2000, p. 477). Beyond the apology, the incident—assuming it is worthy of remedy—should be treated seriously and should be personalized (see Section 2.3.1).

Box 2: Take action

- Continuously monitor online mentions of brand, products, and services.
- Respond quickly to online complaints with an apology and evaluate for remedy.

2.2. Transparency

Transparency addresses the fishbowl nature of executing customer service in the age of the internet. That is, all customer comments and firm responses are free for the world to see, emphasizing the need for firms to consider not only the initial poster's complaint, but also other consumers that may view the complaint.

2.2.1. Maintain the public record

“WOW!!! My review was deleted, why, because I did not give a rating of 4 or above?! People need to read ALL reviews . . . I find this rude and disrespectful!” (Facebook review of a healthcare professional)

While it might seem logical to strive for 5-star ratings or universally positive comments from customers, the reality is that a diversity of comments is more favorable. Consumers value online reviews because they trust the opinions of fellow consumers more than official product literature or advertising (Nielsen, 2015). This trust is rooted in the perceived authenticity of reviews and, for many consumers, few or no negative reviews may look suspicious. An industry report by Reevoo noted that 68% of consumers trust reviews more when there is a mix of good and bad reviews present (Jones, 2015). Thus, the first thing that digital marketers should contemplate when presented with online complaints is not how to remove or minimize them, but how their presence lends credibility to an online feedback venue. Online complaints are also the perfect opportunity to show off great customer service. Because firm responses are open for the world to see, handling them carefully (see Section 2.3) has the potential to enhance credibility further still.

Our own research found that customers' attitudes toward the brand, their level of satisfaction, and their brand relationship quality are all diminished when they perceive that the marketer has removed a negative review. This was the case even

if it was not their own review that was removed. Of course, as one would easily imagine, those effects were much greater when it was the customer's own review that was removed. These findings are supported by congruity theory (Brock, 1968), which suggests that people pay more attention to a comment when they perceive that effort was expended in order to conceal it.

This is not to say that online complaints should never be removed. Some online comments can clearly cross a line and their removal is critical to maintaining civil online discourse. However, removal of comments should not be arbitrary. When maintaining an online feedback forum, it is critical to have a terms of use policy that all customers posting comments are required to follow and would cover under what circumstances a comment would be removed (e.g., offensive or threatening language).

"I have written several reviews of this restaurant. The owner complains and my review is then deleted. How do I get an explanation from TripAdvisor as to why the review has been deleted?" (TripAdvisor review of a restaurant)

If someone on the support team identifies an unacceptable comment and removes it from the feedback forum, one more step should be taken. A placeholder for the removed comment should be put in its place. This placeholder should specifically state why the comment was removed (e.g., "This review has been removed for violating our terms of use"). Since 95% of consumers suspect censorship when there is a lack of negative reviews (Jones, 2015), a placeholder will at least address why a comment was removed and will likely quell allegations of censorship should missing comments be noted.

Box 3: Take action

- Avoid the temptation to remove negative comments; your response gives you an opportunity to shine.
- Publish a Terms of Use policy that covers the circumstances in which a comment would be removed.
- Replace any removed comments with a placeholder describing the reason for removal.

2.2.2. Encourage customer interaction

Many firms make the mistake of taking their traditional marketing strategy and trying to apply

it to social media. Firms that find success on social media often do so because they use social media as a platform for their customers to engage with each other rather than simply a new channel for direct brand-to-consumer communication (Piskorski, 2011). The impact of offline customer-to-customer interaction on firm profitability and reputation are well established (Arndt, 1967) and these benefits are only exaggerated in online settings as consumers seek to reduce the risk of online purchases through broad social support. Research indicates that a response written by a fellow consumer is generally more persuasive than a response from the firm itself or an employee of the firm (Naylor, Lambertson, & Norton, 2011). We also found that loyalty to the brand and satisfaction are significantly higher when another customer responds to a negative review than when the marketer responds. Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) supports these findings; it suggests that customers give more credence to communication that they perceive as coming from someone similar to themselves. Thus, the most effective response to minimize the harmful impact of online complaints likely comes from another consumer.

However, while many firms allow their customers to review products on corporate sponsored feedback forums, they often limit feedback to initial reviews or a simple vote on whether a review was helpful or not. That is, fellow customers are not allowed to respond to the original reviewer. These locked-down feedback forums have limited or nonexistent customer-to-customer interaction. Locked-down feedback forums may seem more advantageous at first, especially when control of brand image is of utmost importance to managers because consistently monitoring customer interaction does require the allocation of additional firm resources. Yet opening a feedback forum to customer-to-customer interaction can provide benefits that outweigh these costs. Open feedback forums can pave the way for building online brand communities (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006; McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001) and they can encourage the most effective method of minimizing the negative impact of unfriendly reviews: defense of the brand by loyal brand advocates.

Box 4: Take action

- Enable customer-to-customer interaction in feedback forums.

2.2.3. Empower brand advocates

“I used this product three times. The first two times it worked great, but on the third attempt it malfunctioned and spewed the contents all over my white kitchen cabinets, stove, and floor.” (Amazon review of a blender)

“There is no way if properly used it would do this. Mine has always worked perfectly. So much better than the other options available!!” (Blender brand advocate response)

Brand advocates are highly loyal customers with a desire to influence others to love the brand as much as they do (Smith & Wheeler, 2002). While few customers end up as brand advocates—most are mere adopters or perhaps adorers—it is in the firm’s best interest to provide the necessary environment and resources to transform as many adopters and adorers into advocates as possible (Rusticus, 2006). Since customer advocacy of your brand directly correlates with business growth (Reichheld, 2003), it is well worth the effort to encourage it.

Aside from the potential revenue advantages, brand advocates can also serve other important roles for the firm. Specifically, brand advocates can be an effective online customer service front line for the brand. In an online review scenario, brand advocates can say what the firm cannot. It is not uncommon, for example, to see a brand advocate response that shifts blame for a product failure back on the reviewer in instances when a product might have been used incorrectly or beyond its specifications. Brand advocates are more willing to respond to other customers and defend the firm’s reputation, and offer an authentic and ethical opportunity to negate the harmful impact of a potentially damaging review. Obviously, this would be an undesirable interaction for the firm to engage in, as it would make the firm seem defensive and unwilling to take responsibility for its possible failures.

How can a firm create brand advocates? It can groom current customers by creating unique customer experiences, building strong brand communities, and arming them with facts (Algesheimer, Dholakia, & Herrmann, 2005). Unique experiences might include special events for loyal customers or access to special products or services. Firms can build a brand community by hosting online and in-person shared customer experiences devoted to the firm’s products

and services (McAlexander et al., 2002). Finally, arming customers with key facts about its products or services allows them to provide information on the firm’s behalf and provide some forms of customer feedback the firm itself should avoid.

Box 5: Take action

- Identify your loyal customers and provide unique experiences or special offers that help strengthen their connection with you.
- Create shared customer experiences that help form bonds between customers and your brand.
- Arm customers with resources that will help them defend your brand and its products and services.

2.3. Trust

Trust underscores the importance of how the firm interacts with customers online in a civil and ethical manner.

2.3.1. Humanize and personalize responses

“Sorry to hear that. May I suggest talking to a manager? Or tell us more at XYZ.com” (Generic Twitter response to a fast food restaurant complaint)

“Too late going next door instead, thanks though.” (Response to generic tweet)

Responses to online complaints should remind commenters that there are, and indeed should be, fellow human beings behind those words on the screen. Recent research suggests that when a complaint is submitted on Twitter, consumers perceive a generic response tweet (i.e., “@customer Please contact our customer service staff to address your issue.”) to be equivalent to no response at all (Abney, Pelletier, Ford, & Horky, 2017). When a customer receives a generic automated response from the firm, this gives the impression that the firm does not value the customer. Many customers complain because they feel a need to be heard, and when an automated system is used—or even perceived to be used—they end up feeling like no one is truly listening. Empathy is one of the most important aspects in customer

service (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988), and this simply cannot be achieved through a generic response.

Instead of automated or generic responses, firms should instead focus on humanizing their responses. Social interface theory describes the ability for humanizing cues displayed via computer to elicit reactions from users like those evoked by face-to-face interactions (Dryer, 1999). How we treat customers in person should be the model for their treatment online since it can bring about the same emotions. Some techniques a firm can use to humanize its online responses include appending the name of the support person making the response so the commenter has a specific identity to interact with, creating separate identifiable accounts for each support team member, and having responses reflect a unique personality.

Another important component of humanizing responses is making sure that responses are tailored specifically to each customer. Consumers increasingly desire personalized experiences (Pralhad & Ramaswamy, 2003) and this preference is never more evident than in responses to online complaints. One of the reasons that Xbox Support is recognized for its great customer service on Twitter is that they include personalized and humanized responses to connect with their customers (e.g., “Hmm, that is odd,” “Gotcha, we totally understand the frustration there”). Overall, support teams should aim to provide either direct personalized support or a link to a page on the support website that will address the specific issue.

Box 6: Take action

- Humanize your responses with individual support team member names.
- Allow your support team to develop a personality for their online responses.
- Personalize responses to specific complaints rather than using automated or generic responses.

2.3.2. Encourage civility

We know intuitively that negative reviews can have differing effects. A calm and critical comment would likely not have the same impact as an irrational tirade. In fact, research shows that the impact of online complaints can be nuanced and counterintuitive (Hamilton, Vohs, & McGill, 2014). Specifically, the tone of negative reviews can make

a significant difference in how they are perceived by customers. A study of online complaints found that when reviewers precede their criticisms with polite phrases such as “I’ll be honest . . .” or “I don’t want to seem mean, but . . .,” other customers’ willingness to pay for the product increased and judgments of the product as more credible and likeable—core measures of trust—improved as well (Hamilton et al., 2014). The small addition of a polite phrase has an outsized effect.

Our research found that the best outcomes for a brand are the result of another customer’s response to the negative online review that points out how the original poster was the one who likely caused the problem in the first place, either through misunderstanding instructions or misuse of the product. When the responding customer pointed out the error of the original complainer, brand relationship quality, brand loyalty, satisfaction with the brand, and attitude toward the brand actually increased above the levels reported prior to the posting of the complaint.

The wording and manner of writing can also make a difference. Another study found that conversion rates increased when posts to a product interest group mirrored the typical linguistic style within that group (Ludwig et al., 2013). In other words, feedback venues can exhibit specific semantic content and style properties that, when consistently followed, can benefit the rate of converting site visits into sales.

The takeaway is that not all bad reviews are necessarily bad news. Managers should encourage a steady stream of reviews from customers—7 out of 10 customers will leave a review if asked (BrightLocal, 2016)—and also encourage brand advocates to leave civil responses. If they do, product favorability could improve and the feedback venue could increase in overall positivity of tone. Managers can ensure this happens by modeling the behavior they hope to see. Responses to comments should be unfailingly polite and exhibit a consistent pattern of civility. In addition, for firm-controlled feedback venues, requiring the use of actual customer names instead of anonymous handles will increase the likelihood of civil interactions (Santana, 2014).

Box 7: Take action

- Encourage exceedingly polite responses from support team members.
- Use consistent language and tone in feedback forums to establish interaction norms.

2.3.3. Act ethically

“I will say that I have thought about having an employee post a positive review before. We didn’t have any reviews at that time and I thought more people would start posting if they saw it. I’ve even thought of responding as a customer because disagreeing with the customer [who posted the original review] would seem less controversial coming from another customer.” (Realty franchise owner)

Instructing businesses to act ethically is a seemingly simple direction, but one loaded with potential interpretation issues. Because ethical norms may vary significantly, it is best to use accepted industry guidelines to direct ethical standards of behavior. A code of ethics is an important thing to let customers know about as its mere presence can be enough to create the positive perception of actual ethical behavior (Adams, Tashchian, & Shore, 2001).

The Word of Mouth Marketing Association (WOMMA), for example, provides a ready-made code of ethics suitable for online businesses (WOMMA, 2009). Included are several standards of behavior, among which are disclosure of identity and disclosure of relationship. These standards necessitate a commitment not to engage in activities such as instructing employees to pose as customers to leave online reviews or working with any third party to pay for positive feedback online. Consumers are increasingly evaluating the world in terms of real or fake and they desire authenticity within experiences and brand relationships (Brown, Kozinets, & Sherry, 2003; Gilmore & Pine, 2007). This search for authenticity applies to customer evaluations of online reviews as well and firms can quickly lose the trust of existing and potential customers by posting fake reviews.

According to a recent *New York Times* article, law enforcement agencies are more closely regulating potentially misleading or deceptive reviews posted by firms, which may result in hefty fines (Streitfeld, 2013). US Coachways recently agreed to pay \$75,000 in fines after an investigation uncovered that the firm was hiring freelance writers and mandating employees to write positive five-star reviews on public review sites. The firm’s chief executive reported feeling pressured to do so in response to a host of online complaints. A study of Yelp reviews showed that a one-star increase in overall ratings can lead to 5% to 9% increase in revenue (Luca, 2011). The temptations to act unethically are very real.

Box 8: Take action

- Adopt a code of ethics.
- Strive to consistently follow ethical standards of behavior.

3. Final thoughts

As online retail channels continue to grow and brick-and-mortar businesses maintain strong online presences, managing online reviews and customer complaints becomes more important than ever. With nearly 30,000 reviews posted every minute on Yelp alone (Arkalgud & Partridge, 2017), online complaints are an inevitable consequence. Smart marketers recognize that any online review or complaint—no matter how negative—represents an excellent occasion to enhance customer loyalty and improve brand relationships. Marketers cannot afford to ignore online complaints, nor can they afford to bungle the opportunity presented by those reviews. The transparency afforded by the internet allows firms to display their genuine concern for the customer experience and to ensure that their efforts to correct service failures will not only improve their standing with the dissatisfied customer, but will also remind other customers how much they are valued. Our 3T framework provides an easy-to-follow set of instructions for marketers who understand the value of online complaints, but do not know how to ensure that they receive the most benefit from properly managing those complaints.

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