

Peter Shankman

Peter's a buzzsaw of ideas. The big risk is that your head will explode before you implement this all.

—Chris Brogan, President Human Business Works and publisher



Customer

New Rules for a Social-Enabled World

Service

Customer Service

New Rules for a Social Media World

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CONTENTS AT A GLANCE

Introduction	1
1 Putting Together a Social Media Team	11
2 Examples of When It Doesn't Work (and What Happens)	19
3 Before the Explosion: Winning Your Customer	37
4 Customer Service Is a Way of Life	53
5 Social Media Damage Control: Stopping Small Problems from Becoming Big Ones	71
6 Making Customer Addicts Online: Best Practices That Work! ..	93
7 Keeping the Addiction Going	113
8 Monitoring Your Successes and Failures	135
9 Putting it All Together: What Did We Learn?	157
Index	179

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
1 Putting Together a Social Media Team	11
Meet Your Team	12
The Customer Service People	13
The PR Person	13
The High-Level Exec	14
The Marketing Guys	15
The Guy from Accounting Who Has a Facebook Page . . .	15
The Flip Side: Meet Your Audience	16
The One-time Complainer	16
The Constant Complainer	16
The Axe-to-Grind	17
The Happy Customer	17
The Prima Donna	17
End result	17
2 Examples of When It Doesn't Work (and What Happens) . .	19
Hope for the Best, Plan for the Worst	24
Always Be Aware—It's the Thing You Don't Think of that Can Kill You	25
Trust Your Instincts	27
Cooler Heads Prevail	28
Doing Something Is Better Than Doing Nothing	31
Your Audience Is Smarter Than You Are	33
Never Deceive Your Audience	34

3 Before the Explosion: Winning Your Customer 37

- Before the Customer Is Even a Customer 38
- Driving Revenue 39
 - Find Out Where Your Customers Are 39
 - Pay Attention 41
 - Devise a Plan to Reach Your Customers 44
- Case Studies 49
 - Solemates.com 49
 - HARO 50

4 Customer Service Is a Way of Life 53

- Self-Promotion Versus Helping 59
- Case Study: Bravo! Italian Restaurant and Bar 61
- Case Study: Risdall Integration Group 61
- Case Study: Law Offices of Daniel R. Rosen, PC 62
 - Background 62
 - A New Approach 63
 - From Invisible to the First Page 63
- Case Study: Grasshopper 63
- Case Study: Peter Kuhn’s Food Truck 65
- Case Study: Inclind, Inc. 66
- Case Study: Which Wich Superior Sandwiches 67
- Summary (and a Challenge) 69

5 Social Media Damage Control: Stopping Small Problems from Becoming Big Ones 71

- First Things First: Different Types of Complainers 73
- Overarching Rules for Handling any Complaint 75
- Handling Different Kinds of Complainers 76
 - The Never-Complained-Before Complainer 77
 - The Multi-Complainer Complainer 79
 - The I-Can’t-Believe-He’s-Complaining Complainer 80
 - The One-with-Photos-and-Videos-and-Multiple-Camera-Angles Complainer 84
- Dealing with Complaints That *Are* Personal 86
 - The @cnbreakingnews Complainer 90
- Wrap-up 91

6	Making Customer Addicts Online: Best Practices That Work!	93
	A Few Rules of the Road	95
	So, How Do You Do It?	96
	So You Have a Physical Presence	97
	Make Them Feel Welcome	100
	Make Them Feel Appreciated	103
	Make Them Want to Return	105
	Make Them Want to Share	107
	Loyalty Codes	108
	Recap	112
7	Keeping the Addiction Going.	113
	Ten Rules to Live By	115
	You Want to Hook Your Customers	116
	Poor Quality = Fewer Returning Customers	117
	Yours Better Be <i>Better</i>	119
	Breed Loyal Customers	120
	Offer New Value	122
	Make It Easy for the Customer	124
	Refine, Refine, Refine	124
	Know How Customers Want to Receive Information	126
	Keep an Eye on the Competition	128
	Freebies = Loyalty	131
	Supply and Demand, Baby...	132
	Summary	133
8	Monitoring Your Successes and Failures.	135
	Google Tools	137
	Google News Alerts	138
	Google News (http://news.google.com)	141
	Google Blogsearch	141
	Twitter	141
	Facebook	145
	Email Marketing	148
	An Example of Email Marketing Done Right	151
	Finding the Time to Monitor Social Media	152

9 Putting It All Together: What Did We Learn? 157

 The World of One Screen160

 Be “*That* Guy”163

 Saddling Up164

 Recovering from Social Media Face-plants166

 Paying It Forward Pays Off at Crisis Time167

 Learn It. Know It. Live It.169

 Head ’em Off at the Pass171

 Creating Customers for Life172

 Thinking Like a Drug Dealer174

 The Right Tool for the Job175

 A Few Final Words175

Index. 179



Introduction

When I was a clueless sophomore at Boston University in 1992, I was taking the Amtrak from my home in New York City back to Boston right after winter break. The East Coast was living up to its freezing reputation. About halfway through the trip, the train suddenly lurched to a stop. We sat in the very quiet cars for a bit, unsure of what was going on. Eventually, the conductor got on the PA system and said, “We’re having some kind of electrical problem with this train; everybody out.”

It was around 8 p.m., it was freezing, and we were somewhere between New York and Boston. But we got out and waited—not even at a station, but “near” one—for three hours, in the cold, until another train showed up. When it did, we got on (now having no seats because this train was already full) and stood the next four hours until we arrived in Boston.

It was what it was because we had no other options. We got off the train in Boston, seven hours late, tired, cranky,

and cold. We went home and went to sleep. The next morning, Amtrak continued on and no one in the world was any the wiser that 400 or so people were majorly inconvenienced. It was what it was, and Amtrak knew it. “Oh well,” they probably said. “We still got paid.”

Several months ago, I was giving a speech at a hotel in Florida. About 20 minutes before my speech, the Wi-Fi in the hotel went out. I couldn’t connect to save my life, and of course, I wanted to show my audience a video from YouTube.

I pulled out my BlackBerry and sent a message (see Figure 1) to Twitter: “Dear Omni Hotel, Jacksonville: Your key lime pie: Win. But your Wi-Fi: FAIL.”

Eight minutes later, a technician from Omni Hotels walked into my conference, with t-minus 12 minutes until my speech. He asked, “Is the Wi-Fi down for you, sir? I’m going into the basement and rebooting the router. Stand by, ok?”

Three minutes later, I was online, downloading my video as my audience was starting to walk in and take their seats. I quickly sent another tweet, reading, “Omni Hotels Customer Service: FTW! (For The Win!)”

Omni Hotels saw a problem, responded to it in real time, and made me a fan for life.

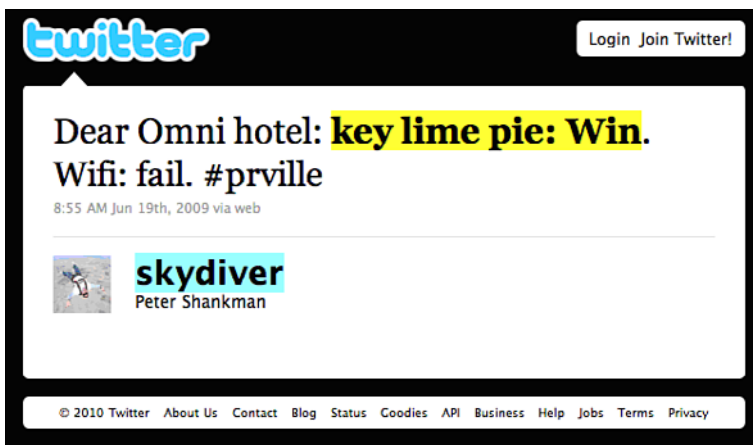


Figure 1 *Customer feedback has never been this instant.*

Why? Because Laurie Kopstad, Revenue Manager at the Omni Jacksonville Hotels, plays by the new rules of customer service. She saw an opportunity to turn a complainer into a fan. She took the opportunity, and it paid off. All it took was one walkie-talkie dispatch to the tech asking him to look into and resolve a problem. She turned a small complaint into a huge win for her hotel, while preventing it from becoming a big problem. More importantly, Laurie saw the benefits in *listening*.

Omni Hotels rocks. And I'm not afraid to tell you so. As a matter of fact, I'll go out of my way to make sure you know. Does your company rock the new rules of customer service in the age of social media? For your sake, you better hope so.

If you've bought this book on Amazon, or if you're reading it in a bookstore while sipping a latte, chances are, it's because you run a business or are in charge of the public face of one and you're seeing the changes all around you. You're watching people have great customer service experiences because you're reading about them on Facebook or you're noticing them being "tweeted," even if you're not entirely sure what that means.

You're also seeing companies get in serious trouble when they don't take their customer problems seriously. You've noticed some groundswells, and you've seen some movements. You've even noticed that all of your friends have stopped going to one specific store—or even better, they're all going to one specific store. People started mentioning things such as "United Breaks Guitars," or "Kevin Smith and Southwest" and you realized that something was up.

And you're thinking, "Gee, maybe I should get into that."

Yeah. You probably should.

Let's get some things out of the way first: Who am I, and why are you listening to me?

I've been fortunate enough to have been working in this industry since before it was an industry. I've watched customer service go from "the customer is always right" to "the customer can kill you in under 120 characters." I've seen hundreds of companies rise to the top of their game using the new rules of customer service, and seen thousands of them fall to the ground and be decimated by not believing the rules applied to them.

I've been "online" in one capacity or another since 1983, when I got my first computer and incredibly slow modem. When I got out of college, I started my career as one of the first editors in the America Online newsroom (Keyword: News) down in Vienna, Virginia. AOL had less than a few million people online at that time, and the Web as we know it hadn't been invented yet. "Social media" back then meant you talked about journalism in a bar with some friends.

The thing was, working at AOL gave me an incredible window into customer service. See, I'd spend all day building huge news packages that people could read and

download. I'd test them at the office, on a zippy computer with a super-fast Internet connection. Then I'd go home and look at them again with my crappy computer and incredibly slow modem. I'd get truly frustrated because it would take hours to load the same thing that it took seconds to load back in the office.

That's when I realized that—from the largest of companies to the smallest of mom-and-pop bakeries—the majority of us don't understand the customer experience.

We run our companies the way we want to and then wonder why our customers leave when we refuse to change. We don't listen to our customers because we are sure we know better than them. And then we're shocked when they go somewhere else.

When I left AOL and started The Geek Factory, Inc.—my own PR firm in New York—I promised myself that I'd go to any extent to make sure that my clients understood that I understood them. The biggest problem clients of PR agencies had (and continue to have) is that they feel like they're a small fish in a big pond of clients. Agencies take tons of time to return calls, and they take almost as long to respond to emails. In short, they don't give a crap. In some ways, that's why they're agencies. If they cared more, they'd be working for the company in-house.

I vowed my agency would never be that way. And I vowed to do it in one unique way:

Pizza.

(This is the first of many points in this book where you scratch your head and assume I'm just insane.)

Pizza? What does pizza have to do with good customer service?

Well, here's the deal: The majority of agencies bill by the hour. They spend all their time billing and billing, rounding up every 5 minutes so harshly that in the end, you're afraid to call them, lest dialing their number equates to a \$100 charge. And if you're afraid to call them, well, they're not going to be much good to you.

In short, PR firms act like law firms.

I simply decided that I was never going to bill hourly, and, once every few months, I was going to show up at a client's office, armed with nothing more than a few pizza pies, right around lunchtime. I wasn't going to bill the client, and I wasn't going to charge them for the pizza. Rather, I'd show up, find my contact, and then simply ask whomever was in the office to join us, have some pizza, and talk.

The first time I did this, the client thought I was insane. The conversation was primarily them asking me why I was doing this. They didn't truly understand that my agency was different. We were bringing them pizza and not charging for it. The best part was that we weren't doing so to curry favor or to prove that we thought differently than other agencies (that was just a nice byproduct). Rather, we were bringing in pizza, on a random Wednesday, for no other reason than this:

We wanted to listen.

We wanted to listen to the client. We wanted them to talk to us. We wanted them to tell us what they were working on. Tell us what they were doing that could potentially lead to new ways of talking about them. What stuff were they doing that we could publicize? What ideas were they thinking about that we could look at from “outside” the box and perhaps put a new spin on?

Once clients realized why we were doing it, they were incredibly appreciative. In fact, we got every single client we ever had through current client referrals. And in an entirely service-based industry such as PR, that’s huge. It says something important about what we had built.

We quickly became the agency known as “the pizza agency.” But in reality, all we were doing was listening. And in a world where there’s too much noise and not enough signal, listening is critical.

I once dated a woman from the South whose mother had all these very funny “Southern sayings.” I don’t remember most of them (the majority of them involved food and usually ended in “Shug”), but the one I do remember was this: “God gave you two ears and one mouth so you could listen twice as much as you talk, Shug.”

The daughter and I broke up, but I’ll never forget her mom’s comment—so accurate, even with the Southern drawl.

I’d always been a listener. Malcolm Gladwell calls people like me “connectors.” We know lots of people, and we put them together whenever we see a benefit to them.

I don’t know how much of a connector I am, but I do know that I’m blessed with having ADHD—so much so that I rarely sit still. The person I pity the most is the one on the plane seated next to me. Why? Because by the time we land, until he fakes his own death midway through the flight, I’m going to know a lot about him. It’s just who I am—and it’s paid off in both my personal and professional lives.

As I started flying more and more for work, and meeting more and more people, I started collecting quite the Rolodex of the most random people in the world—a child psychologist who only treats high-risk youth. The head of music education for the city of New York. A former Navy SEAL. Skydivers. You name it.

As I listened to their stories and thought, “Wow, they have a great story—I should remember this person!” And over time, I was remembering more and more people.

Then one day, I had an epiphany: What if I let all my journalist friends know about all the people I knew? Not to benefit my clients or anything, but just to be helpful?

So on a cold winter day in 2004, I sent my first “Good Karma Email” to about 150 journalists. It went something like this:

Dear Jonathan,

Consider this a PR guy's attempt at good karma for a Sunday afternoon, when it's snowing, and quite frankly, just too cold to go outside into the freezing depths of Manhattan. So I'm sitting on my couch with my two psychotic cats (<http://www.geekfactory.com/geekcats.htm>) and figured it was a good time to do my yearly "PR karma."

First off, this is SO not a pitch. Quite the opposite. This is an offer of help. I do this about once a year—the media seem to like it.

In a nutshell, I'm inviting you to source me. Add me to your email list when you're desperately seeking a quote at 11 minutes to deadline. Call me when something major breaks. Put me in your Rolodex, and feel free to dial.

And, no, this is not to get me in the press.

Basically, I just know a LOT of people. Between the amount of time I travel for business (in excess of 200k miles a year), the number of advisory boards on which I sit, the amount of clients I have, and the fact that I'm just a talkative (some might say hyperactive), nice, ADHD guy who only sleeps about four hours a night to begin with, I have a Palm Pilot bursting at the seams.

This isn't about my clients, by the way. In fact, they're the smallest category. Mostly it's people I've become friends/colleagues with in some capacity, who do the most random things. Identity theft investigators. Litigators who only work on animal-related lawsuits. The guy who manufactures the laces that are used in 75 percent of the world's sneakers. Knitters who only knit with soy, bamboo, or hemp yarn. The Director of Arts Education for the NYC Department of Education. A director of security for a large nationwide upscale department store. A child psychologist who only works with high-risk, suicidal kids. A guy with over 5,000 skydives under his belt. A former Navy SEAL who now teaches mortals like me how to stay in shape. A guy who designs solar clothing that lights up with messages on the back. All friends, people I've met on airplanes (or while jumping out of them), at sushi dinners, while running marathons, or while swimming the Escape From Alcatraz Triathlon (which was, as expected, REALLY cold).

Really RANDOM people—I happen to know them. Mostly because I do really random things.

I also have some great clients—Dream Catcher Retreats, AirTroductions, OpSec Security, and a bunch of others. In addition, I throw a good number of events and parties during the year and am constantly looking for members of the media who would enjoy attending. If that's you, let me know as well. See, I don't sleep much.

So, like I said, consider it good karma. I run a PR shop in New York called The Geek Factory, Inc. (www.geekfactory.com). If I'm able to offer you a source that winds up helping you get in under a deadline or makes a story more colorful, then cool. If it helps a client, great, but if it doesn't, like I said, it's all about karma. Who knows where it will lead?

Anyhow, source me. That's my offer for this afternoon. My contact information is below. Add me to whatever Rolodex you're currently using, and if I can help in any way, feel free to call.

All the best,

Peter Shankman

CEO

The Geek Factory, Inc.

P.S. Don't worry—this isn't a list from which you need to be removed. I won't start sending out weekly updates or anything, I promise. And to answer the second most frequently asked question, I got your name from Media Map, the PR/journalist tool.

I got back about 10 or so emails immediately, all of which said, "Why are you contacting me? You must want something. Don't email me again." Or something concise like that. And that's fine. You're always going to encounter fear-based resistance when you create something new.

But then, I got an email from a reporter at a small newspaper on the West Coast who said something to the extent of, "I don't know if this is real or a joke, but what the heck, I'm desperate. Do you know anyone who knows about the new Dell laptops that are coming out next week?"

One phone call later, I'd connected this reporter with someone who'd used Dell computers exclusively and was a member of several Dell chat rooms. The reporter sent me an email after the story ran, saying, "Hey, thanks Peter. Not sure what you get out of it, but I appreciate the help!"

What the reporter didn't know then was how much I really was getting out of it! I was starting to become known as "that guy"—you know, the guy who everyone emails or calls when they have a question or a problem. The guy who knows everyone.

RULE: You want to be "that guy."

That guy has an incredible amount of power. That guy knows what's going on, has his ear to the ground at all times, and gets the most valuable information given to him when it happens. He's the guy who avoids the line at the restaurant or bar, who's escorted past the velvet rope.

Why? Because "that guy" knows everyone and is valuable to everyone.

Why? Because that guy listens.

That one "good karma" email I sent back in 2004 has now turned into a 3x per day, 100,000 member mailing list, with close to 1,500 reporter queries sent each week. It's turned into a full-fledged company called Help A Reporter Out (HARO: www.helpareporter.com). It's free and is supported by a small little text ad at the top of

each email. Those ads currently sell for \$1,500 a piece, and we're normally sold out four months in advance.

All this because I listen to people.

It's all about customer service. We never spent a penny on advertising. Rather, we've let word-of-mouth do the trick. I respond personally to every email I receive, usually within a few minutes. (Try it—peter@shankman.com). I talk to people personally. My assistant is in charge of my schedule, not because I don't want to do it, but because I'm so scattered across the globe that I'll screw it up. But never has a person told me that he couldn't get in touch with me. It simply doesn't happen. I listen, I respond, and I help when I can.

That's customer service.

It doesn't matter whether your company is one person, or a million people. People want to know they matter. They want to know they're listened to. And the best (and only) way to do that is to actually do it. I try and do that every single day.

That's customer service.

I respond when people tweet me, and I comment when they post on my Facebook wall. I forward their resumes if I know them and know they're looking for a job. I can be reached.

That's customer service.

More important than ever, my customer service is mixed with speed. In today's economy, speed is life. People post on Facebook, tweet on Twitter, and blog on their blogs because it's instantaneous. Have a bad experience at a restaurant? You're in the moment. You want the world to be in the moment with you.

For the first time in history, we have the ability to do that, and it's only going to get more intense.

It's no longer about "Oh, I wish I had a camera." In the next few years, you won't be able to buy a mobile phone *without* a camera! What does that mean? It means 365 million citizen journalists walking this country alone, each one ready to broadcast photos of your screw-up within 5 seconds of it happening.

You think photos are bad? What about video? Mobile video is just starting to come of age. Today, I was in line at security at Newark Airport. They had two of seven lanes open, and about 10 TSA agents were standing around talking and not working. I took out my BlackBerry, took 12 seconds of video of the agents standing around, and uploaded it to 12seconds.tv. In 30 seconds 61,000 people who follow me on Twitter ([@petershankman](https://twitter.com/petershankman)) knew that the TSA agents at Newark Airport were caught on film not doing their jobs.

What if it wasn't a government agency with no need to get better? What if it was your restaurant? Or your company? Or your store? It's happening more and more, every single day.

There are no guaranteed ways to make sure this doesn't happen to you because at some point, it's going to. What you can make sure of is that it happens so infrequently that it's just a blip on the radar screen. More importantly, you can be so well versed on the new rules of customer service that when it *does* happen, not only do you take the steps to correct it, but you have an army of fans, made up of happy customers, who will immediately come to your defense. And when you've achieved that, you've built a wonderful customer service landing pillow for yourself to cushion the inevitable bumps and bruises you'll encounter along the way.

That's what we're going to do here. Through practical, real-life examples of both social media customer service wins and losses, we're going to build you that pillow. The goal of this book is to arm you with the tools to grow your business, using your number-one resource—your customers—and also to provide the emergency beacons to help guide you back when the occasional disaster strikes.

If I wanted you to take away one rule from this book, it's this:

For 99.9% of us, we don't listen anywhere near enough. And not listening is the leading cause of failure in today's economy. Not listening to our customers, not listening to our advisors, not listening to the markets, not listening to the wind. We need to become a society that again learns the power of listening.

If you're willing to let me, I'd like to help you learn once again how to listen.

Bruce Hornsby once wrote, "That's just the way it is. Some things will never change." Except when they do. Keep reading. Let's change some things.

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Before the Explosion: Winning Your Customer

The goal is to get, thrill, and keep the customer—in that order. Your job is to build your customer's loyalty to you long before you ever make the first sale and continue building it so the next customer comes on the first customer's recommendation.

*Ever hear the phrase *the tip of the iceberg*? Supposedly, 90% of the iceberg is below the surface, where it can't be seen. People see a few hundred feet of ice in the ocean and assume that's all it is. What they don't see is the few thousand feet below the surface, extending down to the depths of the sea below.*

Or, how about a skyscraper? Hundreds of stories tall (and a BASE jumper's dream) rising like a spire to the sky. But how come the wind doesn't tip it over and knock it all down like a house of cards? If you'd watched the skyscraper being built from the beginning, you'd notice that

the first thing the workmen do is use heavy machinery to excavate the ground and then ram beams way into the earth, sometimes as far as hundreds of feet down.

What do icebergs and skyscrapers have in common? A strong, stable, and trustworthy foundation. The building doesn't get knocked down because the foundation extends hundreds of feet into the earth. The iceberg doesn't tip over because it has thousands of feet of ice balancing it below the water.

The strength of anything—a home, a family, a corporation, a building, anything—is almost entirely dependent on the strength of the foundation below.

In a world where social media is quickly becoming the norm, the same rule is true. Want to make sure you keep your customers when your company has a breakdown? You'd better make sure you've spent all your time up until that point building the most solid foundation possible. Want to use current customers to bring in new customers? Want to make customers so happy that they'll go and do your PR for you, without you even asking? (Customer-driven PR is the coolest form of PR there is.) In this chapter, we discuss how to do that in a few basic moves.

Before the Customer Is Even a Customer

When I was 14 and a freshman in high school, I remember my parents attending a “What to expect now that your kid is in high school” assembly the first week of school. And what I remember the most about it (other than the natural embarrassment a 14-year-old feels when in the presence of his parents) is that the guidance counselor, Dr. Wile, gave out his number to his private office line as he stood on the stage. He told something like 1,200 parents how to reach him, allowing them to bypass the switchboard, if they ever had a problem or needed to talk to him.

I remember that stuck with me—and with my parents, who wrote down his number, like the other 1,198 parents in attendance. He did something completely unexpected and quite beneficial. For my entire four years of high school, my parents remembered Dr. Wile—and obviously, 20 years later (ugh! 20 years!), so do I.

How can you be different before your customer is even a customer? Social media, being about customer service, is also about servicing the pre-customers. You want to reach them before they even know they need to buy from you and you alone.

One of the countless beauties of social media is that there are so many ways to start earning a good reputation long before the customer is a customer, when he just finds you for the first time on Google or—best of all—hears about you from a friend or trusted associate. (Get to know that term—*trusted associate*. As social media continues to become the norm rather than the exception, it's going to be the biggest link to you getting new customers and clients.)

So, if that's the case (and it is), it comes down to this: You have one goal right now, and that's to sell. However, you really need to have two goals at all times: To sell, and to do so in such a way that you make your customers feel like rock stars from the second they find you and for the rest of their lives.

Driving Revenue

I've said this before, and I'll continue to say it—social media for the sake of social media is pointless. If you really want to “own” this thing we call customer service in the social media world, you need to understand one thing: It has to drive revenue. It can drive revenue in any form:

- It can save money.
- It can earn money.
- It can bring in new clients who will spend money.
- It can cut costs and let you keep more of the money you're already earning.

But at the end of the day, customer service must generate revenue. End of story, case closed, go start the car.

Here's the ultimate, absolute kicker: Ready? It's really not so hard to do. Honestly. So, let's talk about it. How do we do it before they're even customers?

Find Out Where Your Customers Are

The First Rule: Before they're even customers, find out where the heck they are.

Casey Stengel, the manager of the 1969 New York Mets, was once asked how the team had such an amazing winning season. He thought for a second and then responded, “Well, we hit 'em [the baseball] where they [the opposing players] ain't.” In other words, the Mets won ballgames by making sure to get hits. How did they get hits? By hitting the ball to places where the opposing team members weren't.

Your job is to do the opposite. Hit 'em where they are. So, before your customers are even customers, how do you use social media to find them?

The answer is simple: Know your customers before they're your customers by finding out where your current customers are. Creating a company page on LinkedIn won't do a lot for you if all of your current customers only use Facebook.

So, to paraphrase Casey Stengel: How do you find potential new customers and convert them into current customers? "Hit 'em where they are." Find your current audience's hangouts, and start there.

But, that raises several questions: in a world full of fractured media—where people have multiple options to receive their email each day in different formats, genres, and paths—how do you know how to reach them? How do you find the right way to contact them? Where should you go to make sure your audience is not only receiving your information, but also responding to it and acting on it?

In other words, how do you know where to reach your oh-so-coveted audience?

The answer is surprisingly simple: Ask your audience how they like to get their information.

How does your audience like to get their information? Twitter and Facebook? A podcast and an RSS feed? The *New York Times* and *BusinessWire*? Telegraph? Whichever way they choose to get their information, you'd better know. And you'd better make sure you're doing regular updates to see if anything's changed.

If you're just getting your feet wet in the social media space, talk to your most trusted clients and customers. Ask them where they go. Ask them where they hang out online. (You'll see several repetitive themes here—asking is way, way underrated.) You want to know where your best customers spend their time. Why? Because that's probably where your *potential* customers are, as well.

Take good notes. The information you get from your best customers will be gold-mines. Here are some questions to ask your best customers:

- How did they first find out about you?
- Where do they spend most of their time online?
- Do they use social networking? In what capacity?
- What kind of mobile phone do they have? (You think this is too nitty-gritty? Well, if for some reason, 85% of your audience DOES NOT carry a smartphone, investing in mobile campaigns might be jumping the gun and a waste of money right now.)
- Where does your audience hang out online?
- Where does your audience hang out offline?

- How would your audience prefer you communicate with them? (This is an important question—the answers from this alone, if appropriately understood and used, can double or triple your sales overnight.)
- How socially active are your customers online? Unless you're selling party equipment, you don't need to know how socially active they are, well, socially.)

And so on, and so on. If they're truly your best customers, ask them and they'll be willing to share. Don't bombard them, but get some information out of them. Then look at that info. Are you seeing patterns?

- Are most of them on Facebook? Twitter? LinkedIn? Foursquare?
- Do they prefer email?
- Do they have smartphone devices?
- Do they text? Email? Both?
- Do they have kids? (Ask this because, if they don't know how to use the features of their new smartphone they got for Christmas, their kids surely do.)
- Or, by chance, are they part of the 21% of the United States that's NOT on the Internet?

This is the kind of data you want and the kind of information you can use to start building your customers' social profiles. That social profile will enable you to target the right areas and get to the right places. For you, those right places are, simply like Casey said, where they are.

Chances are, where your customers currently are is the place you're going to start finding new ones. So that's the first rule: Hit 'em where they are.

Pay Attention

The second rule: Listen.

I don't think anyone would argue that right now, the number-one real-time social media listening device is Twitter, with Facebook a close second and closing the gap daily. The ability to listen to your audience (or your competitors' audiences) in real time, as they complain, compliment, or just talk in general terms about your industry is unprecedented. Take full advantage of it.

Use the free tools at your disposal to listen in: Tweetdeck is one of the best and easiest ways to listen to multiple conversations about multiple topics in real time.

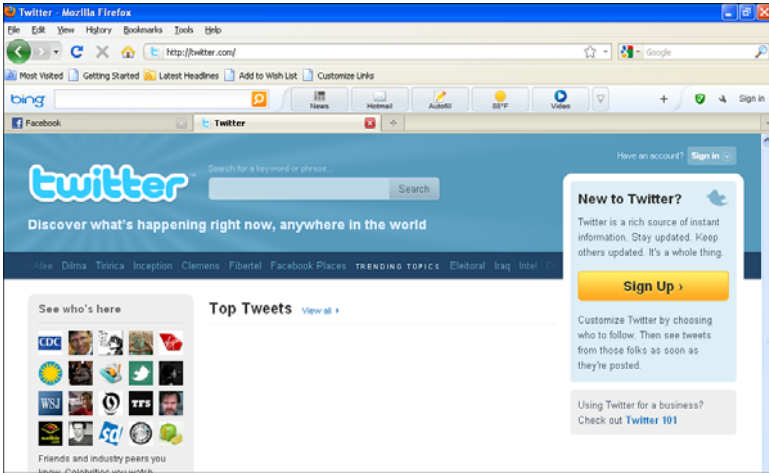


Figure 3.1 *The Home Page of Twitter at <http://twitter.com>*

Head to Facebook and start searching for your company name and for your competitors' names. Don't forget to include popular misspellings!

Use Google alerts (<http://news.google.com>) to find the same things in the blogosphere, as well as what you might have missed when you were sleeping or not paying attention. (Face it, we all have to watch <http://www.tmg.com> at some point in our day. It can't all be work.)

From a simple glance on Tweetdeck, Google, or Twitter, I can see who's talking about my company, who's mentioning my name, who's talking about my industry, and what the hot trending topics currently are. It's quite easy, and I can leave it running on my desktop, glancing at it a few times an hour for a few seconds at a time. There's literally no easier way to take an immediate pulse of any topic in which you might be interested, professionally, personally, or otherwise.

What are potential customers saying? Are they complaining about the way a competitor does business? If so, is there a way to engage them and turn them into customers for you? (We discuss this later in the book.)

WORKING WITH—INSTEAD OF AGAINST— THE MEDIA

Perhaps you hear current or potential customers talking about something in your industry that could be considered a trend. If that's the case, why not write it up in a few paragraphs, explaining what you think the trend is, and send it off to a reporter you know who covers your industry? What better way to a) make friends and b) get a story mentioning your company? And, of course, we all know what happens when you get a story with a positive mention of your company—you get new customers! Wowza! (Added bonus? You're now the first company to “discover” this trend. You're über-cool! Reporters will call you directly from now on! Score!)

Like any construction worker or contractor, you want to use the tools that work best for the situation in which you find yourself.

Let's go back to the first rule for a second (finding out where your customers are): Once you know where your audience is, it's a lot easier to reach them.

Again, we should go back and remember the “ask your current customers questions” rule. They're already your customers! Asking them a question or two won't hurt! In fact, it'll help. (I bring that up again because it's relevant again, and it always will be.)

It could be something as simple as, “Are you on Facebook?” Or perhaps, “Do you tweet?” Afraid to even go there? Ask them simply, “How do you get your information?” They'll talk. Trust me, they'll talk. Simple questions like that will tell you where your audience is. Stop asking people for their home numbers. Ask for their mobile numbers, and only their mobile numbers. Ask them if they text. (Betcha they do.) Find out if they use any GPS on their devices.

Consider it covert ops. But know that you don't have to be covert about it at all. So, I guess you could consider it...ops. Just ops. Tell all your employees as well. There's nothing wrong with everyone asking the occasional question or two. Good operatives ask questions. That's what they do. Haven't you ever watched a James Bond movie? Villains (and for that matter, customers) just *love* to talk. It makes them feel important. Why do you think James Bond always gets out of those sticky situations? Because the villain has some random need to tell Mr. Bond exactly how he's going to kill him, what he's going to do once Bond is dead, and how he's going to escape.

The REALLY smart wanna-be worldwide dominators and psychopaths would be smart to just shut the heck up once in a while, no? But anyway, I digress. Ask your customers questions, and get them talking. And, hey—taking notes every once in a while wouldn't hurt, either.

Devise a Plan to Reach Your Customers

The third rule: Once you know where your customers are, devise a plan to get them.

There's a survivalist named Les Stroud. He used to have a TV show called *Survivorman*, on which he'd go out into the jungle, or a snow-covered tundra, or the top of a mountain. He'd be there, all alone, for one week, having to film the entire ordeal himself. Totally fun show. The part I loved the most, though, was how he always managed to make things out of nothing. He'd be in the hottest spot in Africa, yet he'd find a way to make water out of sand. And the coolest thing was that he'd show you what he was doing, so you could do it, too! You know, just in case you ever randomly found yourself in the hottest spot in Africa. I usually find myself at my local pizza shop, but if the whole place ever just randomly turned to sand, I'd be set for water, thanks to *Survivorman*.

Point being, you can't just find your audience and then walk to where they are and start talking to them. You have to have a plan. You have to do something I call *LLR*: Listen, listen, react.

You want to listen to your audience, then listen to the response your audience gets, and then react with something that provides value to both parties. Some quick examples and lessons follow:

Example: When a passenger complained via Twitter about Airline A making an unscheduled landing at an unexpected destination with no valid way to get the passenger home that day, the airline could have listened and immediately reacted. They didn't. In fact, they didn't say anything at all. They stayed silent, reacting by not reacting and ignoring the pleas of the customer. Airline B listened to the complaining customer, listened for a reaction from the Airline A, and when they didn't hear one offered the customer a flight leaving an hour later—at no cost. The customer is now a huge fan of Airline B, tells everyone who will listen how great they are, and travels a few hundred thousand miles on Airline B each year. Quite the financial windfall for Airline B. How could Airline A have staved off such a poach? By listening and responding. They did neither, and Airline B has a new customer. Perhaps more importantly, Airline A doesn't have that customer anymore.

Lesson: To grow, listen, and respond.

Example: When a restaurant in the Midwest saw more and more of its current customers using a new geo-location game called Foursquare, they hopped on the bandwagon to figure out what it was all about. They discovered that their best customers were coming to their restaurants more often than those who didn't use the game. Those customers were visiting often to gain "status" on the game at this particular restaurant. So, the restaurant threw its own prizes into the mix and attracted more customers than it ever thought possible.

Lesson: To try something new, listen, and respond.

Example: When a small flower shop wanted to drum up some new business, they created a Facebook fan page and encouraged their current customers to post their best reasons for giving or receiving flowers. When they posted, each fan was given a code to use for a few dollars off his next flower purchase. Some of the stories written were so good that they got passed around—and each one had the flower store name included. Result? New customers through old customers.

Lesson: To build, listen, and respond.

So now they're your customers....

Congratulations! They've bought something! That's always a nice feeling. But now what? Just because they're customers doesn't mean they'll stick around. Remember that other companies sell the same things you do. You've got to be better.

Following are some additional ideas for reaching your customer:

As the Sale Is Happening

Remember the rule listen, listen, react. Ask questions. Are you on Twitter? Do you use Facebook? Would you care to follow us/fan us? One online store will automatically deduct a dollar from your order if you become a fan on Facebook. How do they do that? They have a new coupon code each day on the fan page. If you go to the fan page and enter it, it takes a dollar off the price. That's an easy way to gain some valuable insight about your new client while adding a fan. Additionally, it makes the customer happier because she saved a buck!

I know a small bottled water company that personally includes thank-you notes written by the packers for each new customer the first time they buy their water. It's just a quick note, explaining how they're happy to have them as a customer and look forward to serving them again in the future, but it makes a world of difference.

Zappos almost always upgrades to free overnight shipping on a customer's first order. Why? Because they want you back, and they want you happy, and they want you sharing those emotions!

A diamond dealer started giving out little flip-cams (www.theflip.com) to his best customers to let them record the look on their wife's or girlfriend's face when they opened up the small little box. He posted some online and got rave reviews. The cost? Each camera is about \$100.

What can you do—what *little thing* can you do—to make a customer happy that they purchased from you? Remember that happy customers talk online second only to unhappy customers. You want to tip the scales in your favor.

Customer service has changed dramatically thanks to social media. Now more than ever, the little things matter even more than the big things because it's easy to get people to talk about the little things for you.

Right now—as you're reading this—come up with three little changes that don't cost you much (if any) money that you can implement today to make your customers smile and talk about what a nice surprise they received from you. Go ahead. I'll wait.

I can implement the following ideas right now:

- 1)
- 2)
- 3)

SeamlessWeb.com, an online food delivery service in several major cities, lets you tweet your order right after you buy it. "I'm starving, but getting Ray's Pizza delivered, thanks to Seamless Web!" You know they can monitor who's tweeting when and back it right up.

If your customer is ordering online, it's easy to put a "tweet this!" button next to the order. People love to share when they buy stuff—perhaps it makes them less likely to regret spending the money.

Once the Sale Is Complete

Mom always told me to write a thank-you note. I hated them, but what an impression they made. Thank-you notes are great for countless reasons. They make you think of the person sending them, sometimes a few weeks after the initial transaction. They're a physical object that is received via mail, yet almost no one sends them anymore. Today? The mail is primarily bills and junk. All the real stuff happens on email. Or does it?

What would happen if, every time a new customer bought from you, you sent a thank-you card to her? Not after every purchase, but the first time. What if the card had a code for 10% off the second purchase, as a thank you?

Every time I call my concierge at American Express for something, I get a follow-up email a few days later asking how what they did for me was. Did I enjoy the dinner they reserved? Did my mom like the flowers they sent?

They're always striving for improvement. You can, too. Doing so will result in repeat visitors and word-of-mouth action.

If the product is physical in nature, ask for photos of it in action! Tifosi makes really nice sports sunglasses. After I received a pair, they emailed me to invite me to

submit photos of me wearing the sunglasses during a race. I did, and it made the front page of their fan page. It didn't take long to do, and everyone got a little happier from the experience. Check them out here: <http://3.ly/EyNT>

I'm a huge fan of SportBeans, which are jelly beans designed for people who do strenuous workouts—adventure racers, marathoners, triathletes, and so on. When I signed up to complete my first Ironman, I knew I'd have a lot of training ahead of me. So I emailed SportBeans, told them I kept a blog where I wrote about my training, and asked if I could somehow get them involved.

Two emails later, four huge boxes of SportBeans showed up, along with racing shirts, a cap, and a few water bottles.

SportBeans fan for LIFE, yo! And think about this: not only do they get the knowledge that I'm going to tweet about it (which I did) or mention it on Facebook (which I did), but I also now have clothing to wear during my race. And, of course, what happens as I race? Photos get taken, which get uploaded to my blog and to Facebook and to friends' Facebook pages. And they now all have giant SportBeans logos floating across the middle of their pages. Not bad as a result of my email, is it?

And by the way, other companies who are doing this right are listening to what their competitors are doing. What does this mean? It means they're doing it and you're not. If I could wag my finger at you through this book, you know I'd be doing it right now. Come on, now. No one likes to have a finger wagged at them. So to avoid that, here are a few more examples of things you can do to trounce your competition and assume that first customer becomes a customer for life and, more importantly, *does your PR for you!*

I showed up at a Sheraton Hotel a little while back and found waiting for me in my room not just the regular "here's a bottle of water" that one would normally get, but a plate of fruit and a few PowerBars. Why? Because someone at the Sheraton Overland Park in Kansas City had taken the time to research me. I'm one of their most loyal customers, but they went above and beyond. They found that I had a blog at www.shankman.com and had mentioned that I was training for an Ironman. The Sheraton included a note saying how much they like my blog and if I needed anything, to call them. Check it here: <http://twitter.com/petershankman/statuses/14734644857>.

That blew my mind. So the first thing I did was tweet about how spectacular that hotel was. I mean, come on, they read my blog!!

Ask yourself this question:

With the information your new customer has given you, what can you do to make that customer feel special? What can you do to make this transaction "the transaction of the day" for him?

I'll take it a step further. What kind of *homework* can you do on your client before he even buys/steps foot in/checks in/walks through the door/makes the purchase? What can you tell him about him? And not in a creepy-stalker kind of way, either!

I know a woman who runs a shopping service for men. When a man calls her looking for the perfect gift for his wife, not only does she help, but she also sends a “top-ten-ways-not-to-screw-up-your-anniversary” PDF file that she wrote a long time ago. The article is written tongue-in-cheek, and all of her customers get a kick out of it. A lot of them forward it to their friends, and of course, on the bottom, is her website and contact info.

Can you write a quick article that you can send out as a “pre-thank-you?”

There's a restaurant in Manhattan I go to from time to time. Not a lot, and I'm certainly not what they'd call a frequent diner. But one day, I walked in and there was quite a line. I mentioned to my friend that we should go somewhere else and started to turn away. The person behind the desk came over to us when he noticed we were leaving and said, “Hey guys, there's a bit of a wait, but why don't you have a drink at the bar on us? What's your name? We'll let you know when a table is ready.”

It cost them the price of a drink, but it kept us there for dinner and made us loyal. We go there more often now. That, of course, leads to better treatment and recognition, which is what we all desire, anyway. What do you desire? Can you give it to your customers? Chances are, they desire it, too.

You want that first customer to “go loyal” from the second she walks in. Customers who “go loyal” are more likely to blog, post, Facebook, and so on and are more likely to become influencers for their friends. You want to spot the person in the group to whom all the others turn for questions and advice. Treat that person well, and she'll do your PR for you. And again, that's your goal—both online and off.

Think really hard. You know this has happened to you in the past. The key is remembering how you felt at that point and turning it around so your customers feel the same way.

Remember how you felt when you got your last airline upgrade? Or when you got the free drink or someone got you in without waiting in line? Remember how you wanted to tell people that so fast and share it with the world? Welcome to that world—you can do that now. Social media will get it there. And you don't even have to ask your customers or clients to do it. They'll *want* to do it to simply show how well they were treated!

Look around and ask everyone near you to raise their hands if they DON'T have a camera installed in their phone.

Note crickets.

Or worse, you probably aren't even reading this book around other people. You are alone; in front of your computer; or reading this on a Kindle, an iPad, or an iPhone. Okay, if that's the case, post it in your status, "Hey, @petershankman wrote this book I'm reading and he asked everyone to tell if they don't have a camera in their phone. Anyone reading this NOT have a camera in their phone?"

Then watch no one comment.

So, if everyone's walking around with a camera in their phone and a way to transmit, then that means that everyone's a journalist. And if everyone's a journalist, then everyone has to be treated like a journalist.

And I pretty much guarantee you that if Larry King or Bill O'Reilly walked into your restaurant, you'd give him a free drink while you cleared a table.

Do you have to do that for everyone? Of course not. But simply "reacting nicer" is one of the easiest ways to go about starting that shift.

"Sitting at the bar, having a drink because my table isn't ready" could easily turn into "Sitting at TaCocina; they just gave me a free drink because my reservation was delayed! Sweet!"

When was the last time you heard anyone say "Sweet!" in conjunction with "My reservation was delayed!" Win!

Even the simplest things can make the biggest differences. The thank-you card is one example: "Thank you, @petershankman, for becoming part of the <company name> family." I don't care how big your company is, you're not so automated that you can't figure out a way to thank your new customers. This is how you turn them into fans for life.

Case Studies

Following are a pair of case studies illustrating the points I've made in this chapter.

Solemates.com

SoleMates—<http://www.thesolemates.com/>

Solemates is a small, two-year-old company that produces items that women stick on the bottom of their high-heeled shoes to prevent them from sinking into the grass when they're at garden parties or outdoor weddings. Recently, the company took all fulfillment in-house, as opposed to outsourcing it. This allows Solemates to send little notes of congratulations in the box each time they know they're sending a wedding party order. From this simple act, they've seen their referral orders increase dramatically.

How can you continue to make these little differences, resulting in big increases in sales and revenue?

Here's a simple example of SoleMates' website navigation bar. Note the Facebook and Twitter links on the bottom. It's simple, easy, and—most importantly—inviting.

React when your audience reaches out—Whether it's a purchase, a question, or a comment. Check it out:

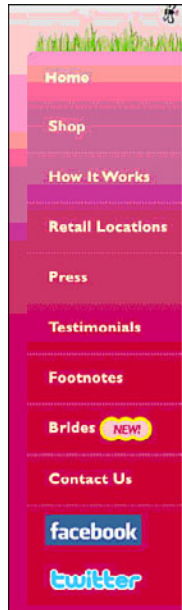


Figure 3.2 *Adding social media links to your site is easy.*

HARO

Every time an advertisement is purchased on the HARO mailing list (about three or four times a day), I get a quick email to my BlackBerry, set up with the person's name, email, and what he bought. It takes less than 10 seconds to see his name, click on his email, and compose my own email to him saying, "Hey, thanks for buying a HARO ad! Any questions or problems, let me know!"

What does this do? Well, automatically, it makes the customer happy about his decision to purchase from me. Almost immediately after he has spent \$1,500, \$3,000, or as much as \$18,000 on HARO advertising, he gets an immediate (not automatic!) email from the CEO of the company. This is personal. This is REAL. This instantly puts him at ease.

Plus, now he has a personal (not a corporate) contact at HARO, and it doesn't get any higher-level than the CEO. Does he have a problem? He knows he can come to me, and even if I pass it off to a subordinate, the customer knows he'll be taken care of.

This is how you achieve loyal, almost rabid, fans willing to tell the world, without any prompting, how great you are. HARO is living proof. It works every day, sometimes multiple times a day.

And what does it take from me? Just a BlackBerry and the willingness to quickly send a 10-second email. I don't care how many customers you have or how busy you are.

Rule: WE ALL HAVE TEN SECONDS.

We can all send those kinds of emails. And we can do them personally, and we can make our new customers loyal immediately. That's the goal, and that's harnessing the power of social media.

What will it take for you?

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A

- access methods to customer service, 160-163
- accuracy of content, checking, 126-128
- addresses (email)
 - obtaining, 149-150
 - secondary email addresses, 78
- Adium, 153
- advertising, PR versus, 93, 95
- airport encounter example, 53-54
- alerts (Google), 138-141
- Amtrak, 1-2
- AOL (America Online), 3-4, 121
- apologies to customers, 82
- appreciating customers, 103-105, 172, 174
- asking questions, 40-41, 43
- audience
 - appreciating, 103-105, 172, 174
 - avoiding deceiving, 34-35
 - axe-to-grind complainers, 17
 - constant complainers, 16
 - encouraging to share, 107-110, 112, 172, 174
 - enticing to return, 105, 107, 172, 174
 - finding, 39-41
 - happy customers, 17
 - inviting to join social media, 97-100
 - one-time complainers, 16
 - perception of brand, 33-34
 - potential customers
 - building awareness*, 38-39
 - listening to*, 41-49, 167-169

plans for reaching, 44-49,
167-169

reacting to needs of, 44-49,
167-169

researching, 47

prima donnas, 17

providing value to, 116-117

social profiles, 41

types of, 165

welcoming, 100-103, 172, 174

author contact information, 176

automated email messages, 103

automated outreach, personal
outreach versus, 104-105

automated surveys, 101

awareness

building in potential customers,
38-39

in customer service, 55
of problems, 25-27

aweber.com, 106, 149

axe-to-grind complainers, 17

B

baboon example (implementing
change), 125-126

backing up Facebook data, 147-148

batteries, charging, 154

best-customer lists, 83

Blendtec, 122-123

blogs, tracking competition, 129

Blogsearch (Google), 141

Blue Sky Factory, 149

brand, customers' perception of,
33-34

Bravo! Italian Restaurant case
study, 61

C

Cadbury, 60

calmness in problem handling, 28-31

case studies

Bravo! Italian Restaurant, 61

Grasshopper, 63, 65

HARO, 50-51

Inclind, Inc., 66-67

Law Offices of Daniel R. Rosen,
62-63

Peter Kuhn's food truck, 65-66

Risdall Integration Group, 61-62

Solemates.com, 49-50

Which Wich Superior Sandwiches,
67-68

changes, implementing, 124-126

Chapman, Marianna, 61

charging batteries, 154

@cnbreakingnews complainers, 75,
90-91

Coach, sharing photos via
Twitter, 142

Coca-Cola, customers'
perception of brand, 33-34

code-stealing example (responding
calmly), 31

coffee shop case study, 61-62

Comcast Cable, 16

compelling content, creating, 119-120

competition, tracking, 128-129, 131

complainers

- axe-to-grind complainers, 17
- constant complainers, 16
- one-time complainers, 16
- types of, 73-76, 165
 - I-cant-believe-he's-complaining complainers*, 80-83
 - multi-complainer complainers*, 79-80
 - multimedia complainers*, 84, 86, 88, 90
 - never-complained-before complainers*, 77-79
 - news media complainers*, 90-91

complaints, handling, 72-73, 166-167, 171-172

- awareness of problems, 25-27
- conference call example, 19-24
- customers' perception of brand, 33-34
- deception, avoiding, 34-35
- identifying problem types, 85
- planning, importance of, 24-25
- remaining calm, 28-31
- remaining silent, 31-33
- rules for, 75-76

trusting your instincts, 27-28

types of complainers, 73-76

- I-cant-believe-he's-complaining complainers*, 80-83
- multi-complainer complainers*, 79-80
- multimedia complainers*, 84-90
- never-complained-before complainers*, 77-79
- news media complainers*, 90-91

conference call example

(problem handling), 19-24

connectors, 5-8, 163-164

constant complainers, 16

Constant Contact, 106

contact information for author, 176

content

- checking accuracy of, 126-128
- creating compelling content, 119-120
- ease of use, 124

contests on Twitter, 142, 144

Continental Airlines, 81-82

corporate culture, overcoming, 121-122

crisis management. *See* complaints, handling

customer engagement, rules of, 115-116, 174-175

- checking accuracy of content, 126-128

- creating compelling content, 119-120

- ease of use, 124

- fostering loyalty, 120-122

- investing in employees, 132-133

- maintaining quality information, 117, 119

- offering free products, 131-132

- offering new value, 122-123

- providing value to customers, 116-117

- refining the product, 124-126

- tracking competition, 128-129, 131

"customer is always right," 95-96

customer service

- focusing on end results, 160-163

- knowledge versus implementation, 157-160

- problem handling. *See* problem handling

customer service people on social media team, 13

customers

appreciating, 103-105, 172, 174

avoiding deceiving, 34-35

axe-to-grind complainers, 17

constant complainers, 16

encouraging to share, 107-110, 112, 172, 174

enticing to return, 105, 107, 172, 174

finding, 39-41

happy customers, 17

inviting to join social media, 97-100

one-time complainers, 16

perception of brand, 33-34

potential customers

building awareness, 38-39

listening to, 41-49, 167-169

plans for reaching, 44-49, 167-169

reacting to needs of, 44-49, 167-169

researching, 47

prima donnas, 17

providing value to, 116-117

social profiles, 41

types of, 165

welcoming, 100-103, 172, 174

D

Dalch Wellness, 57-58, 169

Dalch, Lara, 170

Darwin Awards, 27

deception, avoiding, 34-35

Dell, silence in response to problems, 33

demand and supply, 132-133

Domino's Pizza, problem handling, 26-27

E

ease of use, 124

email addresses

obtaining, 149-150

secondary addresses, 78

email marketing

SCOTTEVEST example, 151

tips for, 148-149, 151

email messages, automating, 103

employees

investing in, 132-133

satisfaction of, 95-96

trusting with social media, 96-97

engagement, rules of, 115-116, 174-175

checking accuracy of content, 126-128

creating compelling content, 119-120

ease of use, 124

fostering loyalty, 120-122

investing in employees, 132-133

maintaining quality information, 117, 119

offering free products, 131-132

offering new value, 122-123

providing value to customers, 116-117

refining the product, 124-126

tracking competition, 128-129, 131

enjoyment in social media, 175-176

Ettmueller, Chad, 67

executives on social media team, 14

F

Facebook

- as alternative to MySpace, 117
- fan pages, creating, 98
- implementing changes, 126
- liking on, 108
- listening on, 42
- on mobile devices, 155
- terms of service, 147
- tips for, 145-148
- tracking competition, 129

fan pages (Facebook), creating, 98

fear, instincts versus, 28

finding

- customers, 39-41
- social media team members, 12

focus of social media, 160-163

food truck case study, 65-66

foundation, importance of, 38

Foursquare, 154

free products, offering, 131-132

G

The Geek Factory, Inc., 4

Gladwell, Malcolm, 5

Google alerts, listening on, 42

Google Apps, 154

Google Blogsearch, 141

Google News, 141

Google tools, 137-138

- news alerts, 138-141

Google Trends, tracking competition, 130

Grasshopper case study, 63, 65

GrillGrate, sharing photos via Twitter, 142

H

happy customers, 17

Hardee's Restaurants, 131-132

HARO (Help A Reporter Out), 116

- case study, 50-51
- start of, 5-7

Haworth, contests on Twitter, 142, 144

helping, self-promotion versus, 58-60, 169-170

high-level executives on social media team, 14

Hootsuite, 142

Hornsby, Bruce, 9

I

I-can't-believe-he's-complaining complainers, 74, 80-83

"I Wear Your Shirt," 110-111

identifying problem types, 85

implementation, knowledge versus, 157-160

impulse buys, 109-110

Inclind, Inc. case study, 66-67

information personalization, 114-115

initial contact with complainers, 77

instincts, trusting, 27-28

inviting customers to join social media, 97-100

J–K

Jordan, Scott, 151

Klout, 171

knowledge, implementation versus, 157-160

Kopstad, Laurie, 3

Kryptonite Locks, silence in response to problems, 32

Kuhn, Peter, 65-66

Kum & Go, 99

L

Law Offices of Daniel R. Rosen case study, 62-63

liking (Facebook), 108

links, checking accuracy of, 126-128

listening

- connectors, 5-8, 163-164
- importance of, 9
- pizza example, 4-5
- to potential customers, 41-49, 167-169
- to your audience, 21

loyal customers. *See* top customers

loyalty

- building with free products, 131-132
- fostering, 120-122

loyalty codes, 108-109

LUPR (listen, understand, plan, respond), 21

M

Mailchimp, 149

marketing case studies

- Bravo! Italian Restaurant, 61
- Grasshopper, 63, 65
- HARO, 50-51
- Inclind, Inc., 66-67
- Law Offices of Daniel R. Rosen, 62-63
- Peter Kuhn's food truck, 65-66
- Risdall Integration Group, 61-62
- Solemates.com, 49-50
- Which Wich Superior Sandwiches, 67-68

marketing people on social media team, 15

Mentos in Coca-Cola example, customers' perception of brand, 33-34

messages, automated email, 103

mobile devices, Facebook on, 155

monitoring social media, tips for, 152-156

monitoring tools. *See* tools

Motrin, 166

- problem handling, 26

multi-complainer complainers, 74, 79-80

multimedia complainers, 75, 84-90

MySpace, 117

N–O

Nestle, calmly responding to customers, 28-29

never-complained-before complainers, 74, 77-79

news alerts (Google), 138-141
 news from Google News, 141
 news media complainers, 75, 90-91

Omni Hotels, 2-3

one-time complainers, 16

one-with-photos-and-videos-and-
 multiple-camera-angles complainers,
 75, 84-90

ostrich video example, 60

P

patterns, 113-114

personal outreach, automated out-
 reach versus, 104-105

personalization of information,
 114-115

photography complainers, 75, 84-90

photos, sharing on Twitter, 142

pizza example (listening), 4-5

Plancast, tracking competition, 130

planning

- to fix the problem, 21
- importance of, 24-25
- for reaching potential customers,
 44-49, 167-169
- social media presence, starting,
 56-57

Porter Airlines, 161

potential customers

- building awareness, 38-39
- listening to, 41-49, 167-169
- plans for reaching, 44-49, 167-169

reacting to needs of, 44-49,
 167-169
HARO case study, 50-51
Solemates.com case study, 49-50
 researching, 47

Power Public Relations, 68

Power, Amy, 68

PR (public relations)

advertising versus, 93, 95
 inviting customers to join social
 media, 97-100
 rules for, 95-96

trusting employees with social
 media, 96-97

WARS (welcome, appreciated,
 return, share), 100, 172, 174

- appreciating customers, 103-105*
- encouraging customers to share,
 107-110, 112*
- enticing customers to return,
 105, 107*
- welcoming customers, 100-103*

PR people on social media team,
 13-14

Price Chopper, calmly responding to
 customers, 30

prima donnas, 17

problem handling, 72-73, 166-167,
 171-172

awareness of problems, 25-27
 conference call example, 19-24
 customers' perception of brand,
 33-34

deception, avoiding, 34-35

identifying problem types, 85

planning, importance of, 24-25

remaining calm, 28-31

remaining silent, 31-33

rules for, 75-76

trusting your instincts, 27-28

types of complainers, 73-76

I-cant-believe-he's-complaining
complainers, 80-83

multi-complainer complainers,
79-80

multimedia complainers, 84, 86,
88, 90

never-complained-before
complainers, 77-79

news media complainers, 90-91

public relations. *See* PR (public relations)

Q-R

quality of information, maintaining,
117, 119

questions, asking, 40-41, 43

reacting to needs of potential cus-
tomers, 44-49, 167-169

HARO case study, 50-51

Solemates.com case study, 49-50

recommendations, importance of, 55

refining the product, 124-126

reporters. *See* HARO (Help a
Reporter Out)

researching potential customers, 47

responding to customers, 21

remaining calm, 28-31

return on investment (ROI) of social
media, 97

returning customers, enticing, 105,
107, 172, 174

revenue generation, rules of, 39

finding customers, 39-41

listening to potential customers,
41-43

plans for reaching potential cus-
tomers, 44-49, 167-169

Risdall Integration Group case study,
61-62

ROAR (Responsibility, Opportunity,
Awareness, Results) system, 14

ROI (return on investment) of social
media, 97

Rosen, Daniel R., 62-63

Roy, Jared, 61

S

Sadler, Jason, 110-111

Salt, Simon, 167

sandwich shop case study, 67-68

SCOTTEVEST example (email mar-
keting), 151

SeamlessWeb.com, 46, 106, 108

search engine optimization
(SEO), 130

search terms on Google, 138-139

searching with Google Blog-
search, 141

secondary email addresses, 78

self-promotion, helping versus, 58-60,
169-170

SEO (search engine
optimization), 130

- sharing
 - encouraging customers to, 107-112, 172, 174
 - photos on Twitter, 142
- Sheraton Hotel, 47
- silence in response to customer service problems, 31-33
- Sinelli, Jeff, 67
- Social Location Sharing* (Salt), 167
- social media
 - case studies
 - Bravo! Italian Restaurant*, 61
 - Grasshopper*, 63, 65
 - HARO*, 50-51
 - Inclind, Inc.*, 66-67
 - Law Offices of Daniel R. Rosen*, 62-63
 - Peter Kuhn's food truck*, 65-66
 - Risdall Integration Group*, 61-62
 - Solemates.com*, 49-50
 - Which Wich Superior Sandwiches*, 67-68
 - enjoyment in, 175-176
 - focusing on end results, 160-163
 - inviting customers to join, 97-100
 - knowledge versus implementation, 157-160
 - monitoring, tips for, 152-156
 - ROI (return on investment) of, 97
 - trusting employees with, 96-97
- social media engagement, rules of, 115-116, 174-175
 - checking accuracy of content, 126-128
 - creating compelling content, 119-120
 - ease of use, 124
 - fostering loyalty, 120-122
 - investing in employees, 132-133
 - maintaining quality information, 117, 119
 - offering free products, 131-132
 - offering new value, 122-123
 - providing value to customers, 116-117
 - refining the product, 124-126
 - tracking competition, 128-129, 131
- social media plan, starting, 56-57
- social media team members, 11-12, 164-165
 - customer service people, 13
 - finding, 12
 - high-level executives, 14
 - marketing people, 15
 - PR people, 13-14
 - tech-savvy people, 15
- social profiles, 41
- Solemates.com* case study, 49-50
- speed of customer service, 8-9
- SportBeans*, 47
- Stengel, Casey, 39
- Stroud, Less, 44
- Sun Tzu, 11, 96
- supply and demand, 132-133
- Survivorman* (television show), 44

T

team members, 11-12, 164-165
 customer service people, 13
 finding, 12
 high-level executives, 14
 marketing people, 15
 PR people, 13-14
 tech-savvy people, 15

tech-savvy people on social media
 team, 15

terms of service (Facebook), 147

thank-you notes, 46, 49

“that guy,” 5-8, 163-164

Tifosi, 46

time requirements for social media,
 152-156

tools
 email marketing, 148-151
 Facebook, 145-148
 Google tools, 137-138
news alerts, 138-141
 Twitter, 141-145

top customers, complaints from, 74,
 80-83

trusted associates, 39

trusting employees with social media,
 96-97

trusting your instincts, 27-28

12 Seconds, 155

“tweet this!” button, 108

Tweetdeck, 42, 142
 tracking competition, 129

Twitter

contests on, 142, 144
 listening on, 42
 sharing photos on, 142
 tools, 141-142, 144-145
 tracking competition, 129
 “tweet this!” button, 108

Tyndall, Shaun, 66

U–V

UberTwitter, 142, 152, 154

understanding the problem, 21

Urban Bean Coffee case study, 61-62

value
 offering new, 122-123
 providing to customers, 116-117

videography complainers, 75, 84-90

Vimeo, 155

W–Z

Wal-Mart, avoiding deception, 34

WARS (welcome, appreciated, return,
 share), 100, 172, 174
 appreciating customers, 103-105
 encouraging customers to share,
 107-110, 112
 enticing customers to return,
 105, 107
 welcoming customers, 100-103,
 172, 174

welcoming customers, 100-103,
172, 174

Which Wich Superior Sandwiches
case study, 67-68

word-of-mouth example, 58-59

YouTube, 155

Zappos, 45, 120-121