Mystery Shopping Identifies & Monitors Social Media Trends in Customer Experience

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Background

Mystery shopping is traditionally used for operational evaluation and monitoring of key performance indicators that lead to strong customer experiences. As new customer experience methods and trends emerge, mystery shopping can be effective in identifying, monitoring, and tracking progression of success. Social media as a customer service channel is one such trend that has emerged, and its importance is not to be overlooked. As brands acclimate to this new service channel, develop standards and execute new protocols, mystery shopping methodologies can be implemented to monitor growing pains and evaluate progress.

This study highlights the use case for mystery shopping in this facet while uncovering insights into the current state of social customer service and gives some clues as to whether or not consumers will continue to drive expectations for brands.

Objective

Ann Michaels & Associates initiated the study focused on customer service in social media in 2012 as the phenomenon started to emerge. The study was replicated in 2015, and vast improvements were noted. It was clear that brands realized that the consumer was driving this need and it was only going to become more significant, and they responded in a positive manner. Over the last two years, there have been great strides made in this area. But, how much progress has really been made?

The current study seeks to answer this question. In addition to evaluating response rates and response times across social channel and time of day, the study also looks to identify any potential gaps in social service and uncover any potential opportunities that may exist to further enhance the customer experience online.

Methodology

A mystery shopping project was designed to collect data for analysis. Ten companies within three verticals of the retail industry – specialty retail apparel, department stores, and drug/grocery stores - were selected to include in the study. The three industries were selected as they represent a nice subset of the retail industry as a whole, and obtaining data from different verticals within the same industry provides a solid overview of performance.

The study focused on two of the largest social media networks, Facebook and Twitter, as well as more traditional contact via email through a company's website. The email response time, while not social focused, can be used as a control group in some respects, as it was a significant customer service channel prior to the advent of social service.

Mystery shoppers were utilized to contact target companies with a simple inquiry related to their business. Days and times of contact varied to gain additional information regarding response time across a variety of days and time frames throughout the day. Each retailer was contacted across each channel three times (once in each designated time period). In total there were 270 contacts made, as well as an additional three contacts indirectly on Twitter - when a customer service inquiry was posted on Twitter, the mystery shopper did not post the inquiry directly on the retailer's Twitter page, send a direct message (DM), or use the @ symbol before the company's name to alert them to a new notification. This indirect piece was included as a secondary evaluation to determine if brands were actively monitoring conversations and reacting to issues when customers are not talking directly to them.

Results were aggregated by retailer and industry, and the result s of the study were analyzed across all retailers included in the study, with a comparison made to data from prior studies.

Results

Overall Response Rate

When looking at response rates across all companies in the study, regardless of industry, results show that a response to a customer service inquiry was received 77% of the time, meaning that no matter which type of contact was made, companies responded to consumer inquiries 77 % of the time within a three day window.

Interestingly, overall response rate across all channels is down 2% since the 2015 study but still up from the initial response rate in 2012, which was 70%. The chart below illustrates the change over time across Facebook, Twitter, and email.
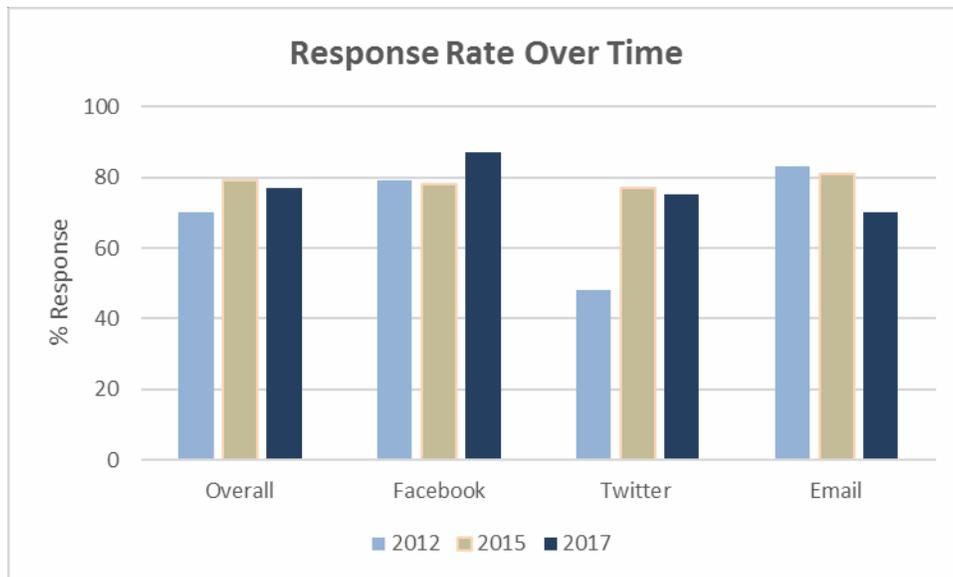
Time of day was incorporated into the study, with evaluations being conducted within three timeframes – weekdays between 8am and 4pm, weeknights between 6pm and 10pm, and weekends.

What's very interesting about the current findings is the consistency across all times of day; response rates were consistently at 77%-78%, with some improvement in weeknight and weekend response rate. Weekdays actually showed a decline this time around, which may signal a focus on non-traditional times and continual realignment of service staff to be able to be consistent in service levels no matter the social channel or time of day.

Response Rate by Time of Day
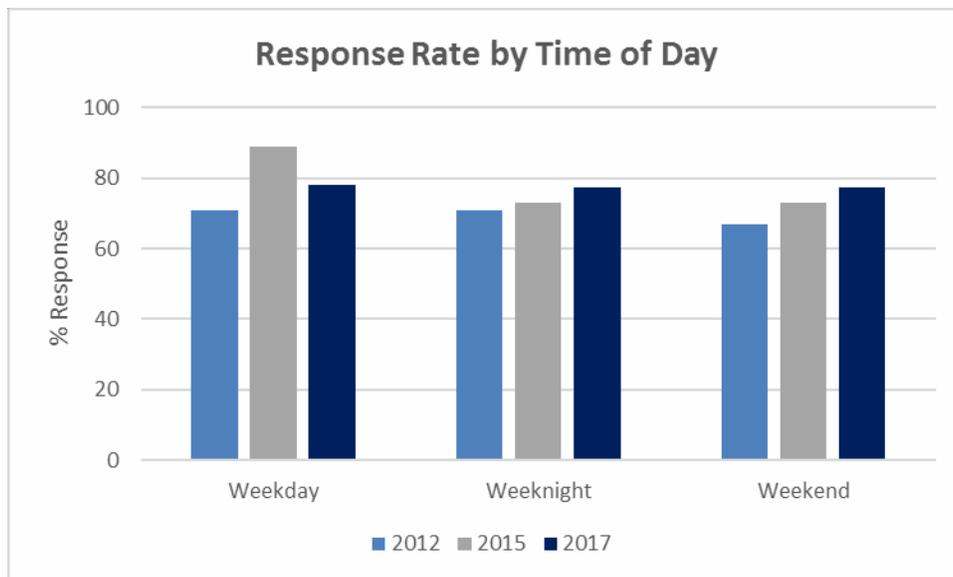
Speed of Response

Overall Response Time

This set of findings is extremely positive; response times have consistently decreased over time. In an effort to focus on only the social service aspect, response times for email/web form communication were eliminated in this analysis in to make a solely social comparison across time periods.

Response Times 2012-2017
Overall & By Social Site
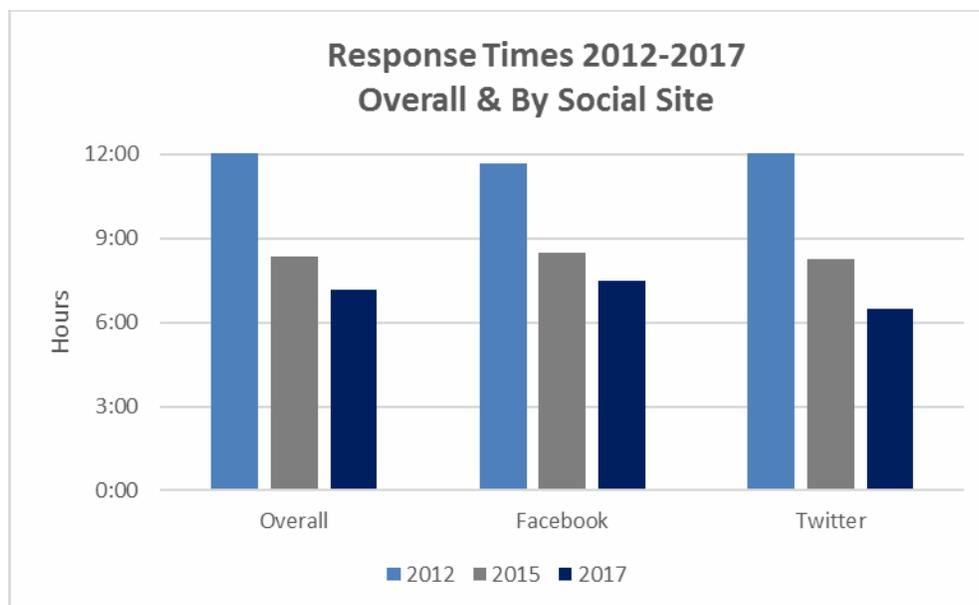
Response times dropped approximately 50% since the 2012 study, and quite a bit since the 2015 study. During the 2012 study, Facebook was more predominantly used by brands compared to Twitter, and it made sense that the response time was slightly better. During the next study, in 2015, Twitter tended to dominate slightly, and the response time decline

illustrated a response to this shift. Facebook responses were received in just under eight and a half hours on average in 2015, compared to the seven and a half hour average response time in this study. Response times decreased on Twitter between 2015 and 2017 (8 hours, 15 minutes hours vs 6 hours, 30 minutes) as well.

Response time was also looked at across time of day and social channel, with additional comparisons to prior years. The full study provides these results as well as indications related specifically to retail segment and brand specific information.

Conclusion

The results from this study support the research that has been done previously with regard to social media, though some assumptions made in 2015 did not fare as anticipated in the current study. Specifically, it was theorized that Twitter would continue to make strong strides in response times, but data shows that Facebook has closed the gap to customer expectations more so than Twitter in both response rates and response times. While this data departs from the earlier theory, it does fall in line with Sprout Social's Q1 2017 index which stated that, despite the fact that 47% of marketers believe Twitter is the preferred site for consumer engagement, Facebook is in fact the preferred site across Millennials, Baby Boomers, and GenXers.

Another interesting finding is that, while response times continued to decrease in 2017, the drop was not as significant as it was in prior years. In fact, it appears that response times may be flattening; as the gap is still quite wide between consumer expectations and actual response time, this may signal a potential issue in the future if brands do not continue to make progress in decreasing the response time.

Indirect contact is one facet of social customer service that is well behind the curve, and one that brands are likely not yet ready for. While improvements were made, with a very small percentage of brands responding to indirect contacts made on Twitter, the vast majority are not yet implementing social media listening and monitoring services to their full potential as of yet. However, social customer service has overwhelmed companies and many are still building an effective framework for strong service levels in this new channel. Ann Michaels & Associates works with clients through social media monitoring services to assist them in monitoring effectively and engaging in problem resolution to such indirect communication.

Customer expectations and satisfaction have become more difficult to adhere to over the last several years. The consumer is definitely in the driver's seat and it has been interesting to watch brands acclimate to the new demand. Social moves fast, and as it changes, consumer expectations continue to change as well. However, it appears that the majority of brands are realizing the need to be flexible and be able to change and adjust strategies as the consumer demands. What is important today may be long forgotten in six months or a year; however, it is clear that social media as a form of customer service communication will remain a stronghold for many years to come.

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