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Offline vs. Online, Service Is Game of Telephone

While Many Marketers Are Adept at Using Social Media, Consumers Are Experiencing a 'Conversational Divide' With Traditional Interactions

By [Matthew Creamer](#)

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NEW YORK (AdAge.com) -- Somewhere, deep in Time Warner Cable's vast computer records, in a file that tracks my account, I wouldn't be surprised to find words like "angry," "belligerent" or "drunk and rageful." There would be few other ways to describe the final anguished phone conversation I had with a few unhelpful company representatives following a prolonged internet outage in August that upset my delicate domestic rhythms. A call that started in a state of medium dudgeon ended in fury, when the rep -- the third I talked to, as I recall -- rushed through a script that seemed devised as a way to get the embittered and self-aggrandizing off the line and then hung up. Which is probably what should happen when you go around saying things like "You do realize that I'm kind of a big deal on Twitter?"



After a helpful interaction with "BH," a human behind Time Warner

me on the status of the outage. But after a woeful phone unaround, I fired off a direct message that described the situation

Good thing I had an ally within the company, known only to me as BH. BH, one of the humans behind the company's Twitter account, had already reached out to me after an earlier complaining tweet. After I sent over my account information, BH quickly updated

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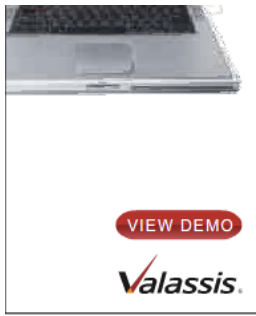
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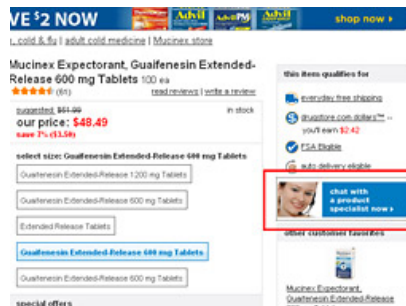
background, I fired off a direct message that described the situation and my demands: mainly, a technician at my apartment within two days, not the following week as was being offered. The response was exhilarating:

"We have escalated this. You should receive a call from client relations today. Sorry for the aggravation. BH"

Escalation! A glitchy modem in New York's East Village had suddenly taken on all the urgency of a Cold War-era brush fire. But instead of it being me vs. them, it was me vs. them vs. them. And in the end, I, I mean we -- me and the Twitter people -- won. After I described the situation to Pete Blackshaw, CMO at Nielsen-McKinsey Incite and an expert in customer service, he echoed my sense of a company being at war with itself: "You experienced two different companies."

Why should I, or any consumer, have one kind of experience on the phone and an entirely different kind online? Why does a customer willing to deal with his complaint in private end up being compelled to take it public? Are companies, as they are drawn to exciting new mediums giving short shrift to the old ones, like phones, where a lot of consumer experiences are still made or broken?

Over the past few years, companies have invested heavily in human and technological resources that allow them to better listen to what people are saying about them online. And many have gotten quite good at using social channels like Twitter or Facebook to quell complaints or, on the flip side, amplify the nice things that people have to say about their brands. But savvy as many brands have gotten online, offline customer service remains a different story, as my experience with my cable provider attests.



Drugstore.com has been successful in moving people from Twitter to individualized chats.

Mr. Blackshaw calls this the "conversational divide." Marketers have jumped headlong into social media, while consumer-affairs departments -- which manage things like call centers that field phoned-in complaints -- are "having trouble keeping up." He added: "I frankly think

the most important social media task for today's CMO is to bridge the divide. It's not as exciting as only hanging out on Twitter or Facebook, but urgent for maintaining credibility with consumers."

Perversely, an interaction with a live human sitting somewhere in a phone bank feels more dehumanizing than communicating with a faceless person known only, if at all, through some digital avatar. That effect has something to do with the corporate expectations of call centers and the people who man them. Consider this excerpt from a white paper from a consultancy called Inova Solutions offering advice on how call centers could survive the downturn:

"Many call-center agents cite a reason for poor morale is the relatively low level of independence granted to them and a high level of monitoring by managers. In response to this problem, one international bank I worked with decided to minimize the micromanagement effect by giving agents access to real-time queue metrics on a wallboard. This eliminated much of the 'aisle patrolling' done by managers and allowed agents to make their own tactical judgments based on queue statistics. Agents felt less



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like managers were always looking over their shoulder and managers had more free time to focus on strategic initiatives. It was a win-win."

Evident here is a bit of vestigial Fordism you're unlikely to see elsewhere in a marketing universe that, relative to an almost penal-sounding environment where patrolling is still a management technique, is generally less process-obsessed and prizes independence and creativity (again, relatively speaking). Assembly-line workers don't exist to talk to consumers; call-center reps do. In my Time Warner experience, the reps I dealt with seemed like slaves to schedules and policies and processes they had no control over and no desire to impact. The social-media experience, on the other hand, was all about fixing the problem I was facing -- making things happen.

"Companies have looked at call centers as cost centers," said David Alston, CMO of Radian6, a popular platform that allows companies to monitor social-media chatter. "How can I get people on and off the phone? But social media and listening and engaging is about building an asset of customer that love you and will stay with you."

Companies that are finding ways to bridge the two are seeing positive results. John Kembel, VP-social experience at Right Now, a consumer-experience company, told me about client Drugstore.com's success in moving people from Twitter to individualized chats. In those scenarios, shopping-cart sizes are up 10% to 20%, conversion increases from 6% to 24%, phone-handle time has dropped 15% and email volume is down 30%.

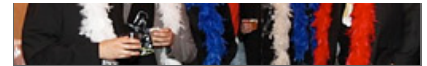
While neither Mr. Kembel nor Mr. Alston would say that the goal is to drive customers online, both said that empowering consumers is key. "There's a trend of equipping consumers to help themselves and to help each other," said Mr. Kembel. "That spreads across interaction touchpoints, whether it's web or chat on Twitter or phone. The mix depends on the company and the consumer."

Last week, I phoned up Alex Dudley, VP-public relations at Time Warner Cable, in order to understand how the company views my experience. In addition to being immediately responsive, Mr. Dudley was helpful and forthcoming -- not what I expected given some of the hell that cable companies have been put through by journalists writing about personal frustrations with cable companies, chief among them former Ad Age critic Bob Garfield, in his "Comcast Must Die" piece.

Turns out that my friend BH is one of four people working on an online customer-care team out of an office in Buffalo that, among other duties, manages the company's various Twitter feeds. It wasn't always this way. Initially, Twitter was seen as a PR tool, used by Mr. Dudley and other company executives for distributing high-level information about the company. They quickly saw, however, that customers were using Twitter as a means of looking for help.

It's important that the team isn't part of PR, as I thought it might be. The sheer volume of online feedback that companies are struggling to manage has blurred the roles of PR, marketing and customer service. In an e-mail exchange, Frank Eliason, famous in marketing circles for handling the fallout of "Comcast Must Die" and who recently moved to Citigroup, said that running service from PR or marketing is a no-no.

"Many companies think they are integrating social media and customer service, but from my perspective this is not as strong as



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it should be," he wrote. "First, many are running the service portion from PR or marketing and not directly from customer service. You will not be able to integrate what you learn if you do not fully understand the operations aspect of customer service. Companies are struggling with means to take what they learn and create real-time, actionable intelligence."

Time Warner Cable isn't guilty of this mistake. The online customer-care team has access to customer account information; Mr. Dudley, for example, doesn't. So when I asked him if the size of my Twitter following or the fact that I'm a journalist affected my position in line, he said it didn't. "A customer is a customer." As I've watched the team interact with other customers, I've found that to be totally believable. And, as he praised the online team, Mr. Dudley defended the phone reps. "It's hard to hold them to the same deliverables, because the job is different. When they pick up the phone, there's an incredible variety of issues they face."

Most consumers, however, won't make that distinction or give one company representative the benefit of the doubt over another based on the medium he or she works in. I asked Mr. Dudley if he could see a day where there's enough synchronization between the call centers and the online monitors that my angry tweet, the moment when a private annoyance threatens to become very public, wouldn't be necessary. Or, I asked, are you just going to have to take your hits and then react?

He paused for a beat and then explained that what he hopes to see is roughly the kind of treatment I got online, when I was engaged through Twitter. "We don't pretend there aren't service issues," he said. "We're comfortable with that."

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