Curbing Social Media Expressions: Fueling Antagonism Among Customers

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Abstract: *The customers are increasingly taking to social media to express their opinions, experiences, and expectations from product/service/brand/organizations. While organizations should see this as an opportunity for receiving unbiased opinions/experiences/expectations from the customers, they are also concerned about negative comments/expressions getting snowballed into major catastrophe for their products/services/brands.*

A significant number of organizations have started moderating content posted on pretext of expressing opinions/experiences/expectations of the customers. Essentially, this content moderation policy adopted by organizations entails removing negative expressions from their social media platforms before they become viral and reach wider audience damaging reputation. On the other hand, they promote positive expressions while acknowledging and thanking the customers for appreciating products/service/brand/organization. A customer who is essentially frustrated with experience of product/service/brand/organizations gets even more agitated when his/her expressions are removed on the pretext of content moderation policy adopted by the organizations. This aggrieved customer then starts searching for more social media platforms, which are unregulated or not controlled by the organizations and starts posting even more negative expressions tagging connections while requesting them to tag their connections as well. The customers understandingly demand to be heard, paid attention to and attended to. Absence of the acceptable grievance redressal mechanisms will further fuel antagonism among customers forcing them to brand negatively. At times, these activities have snowballed into major momentums or movements hitting the organizations very hard. Rather than focusing inward and looking at the problem from the perspective of solutions framework, organizations are doing more damage than good while removing negative expressions from the social media platforms.

This research paper attempts to understand the possible repercussions of removing negative expressions from social media on the pretext of content moderation policy.

Keywords: Social Media, Social Media Expressions, Customer Experience, Customer Relationship Management, Customer Expressions.

I. INTRODUCTION

Social media has provided a ubiquitous medium for connecting, engaging, and establishing trust with customers.

Out of the many potential benefits, listening to the customers and acting on the same is probably the most sought after feature of social media domain.

However, this interface has backfired on specific organizations, which have either failed to listen to the customers or have been unable to act on the opinions/experiences/expectations (collectively known as social media expressions) posted on the social media by the customers.

As a result, angry customers tend to flood the social media platforms of the organizations with negative expressions leading to image loss for the organizations. These negative expressions are enough to turn away the potential customers and to introduce skepticism among the existing customers.

The organizations in order to avoid collateral damage by such negative social media expressions tend to curb them using several approaches. Each of the adopted approach has advantages as well as disadvantages associated with it.

The organizations tend to ignore the negative comments due to the perceived lack of credibility in such comments. However, this approach does not address the problem. The problem can reach a critical magnitude if the negative comments are made viral through sharing and resharing.

The organizations also delete certain negative social media expressions from their social media platforms. This approach is worse than ignoring and may further antagonize the customers. This antagonized customer will start sharing the grievance in his/her social media connections, asking them to reshare further, snowballing into a major controversy. This would push the prospective customers away as they would like to steer clear of such organizations.

Also, a few organizations try to meet fire by fire and reciprocate the negative comments with anger while shifting the onus of the problem onto the customers. This approach, too, had backfired on several occasions as other existing/prospective customers form negative perceptions of the organization due to this angry exchange of comments. The customers also feel disappointed with lack of customer centricity in such exchanges.

A few organizations acknowledge the negative expressions with apologies and assurances of improvements in business processes. However, these apologies and assurances hardly see any action on the part of the organization leading to more frustration among the customers. The customers have also exhibited tendencies of countering these meaningless apologies and assurances by the past track record of the organizations causing more embarrassment to the organizations.

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A few organizations tend to genuinely address the issues raised through negative social media expressions by offering to create a parallel connect with the customers through personal calls/visits. Such organizations are often rendered helpless in addressing such issues because of the huge volumes of complaints. All such redirects to customer service helplines and technical support centers further augment the problem due to lack of visible and positive customer assistance.

II. NEGATIVE COMMENTS ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media offers many avenues for engaging with customers (existing and prospective). Generally, the page or the wall (as popularly known in social media) is used as a platform for two way communication between the organizations and their customers. The organizations using this wall post the following five types of entries to engage the customers in the discussion.

1. Posts regarding new product launches or achievements of existing products (A car manufacturer announcing a launch of hybrid car model or announcing sales of 1 million units of a current model)
2. Posts regarding events being sponsored (A stationary manufacturer announcing a charity event for distributing stationery items to underprivileged kids or a diabetes management company announcing free medical checkup camps)
3. Posts for collecting feedback or administering surveys (A toy manufacturer engaging new mothers for their experiences with soft toys or a political party seeking feedback on the success of public welfare programmes)
4. Posts for informal announcements (declaration of the employee of the month or commencement of a new facility)
5. Posts for stimulating interests of the customers in ongoing or upcoming events (inviting customers for meeting with the brand ambassador or announcement of special edition products or services for a selected few)

Social media has offered a remarkable opportunity to the organizations to learn from the experiences of their respective customers with products/services being offered. Both types of comments have the potential of guiding the organizations in the right direction towards a clear understanding of needs and preferences of the customers. Also, these comments have a significant influence on the quality perceptions of the existing and prospective customers [1] [2] [4].

A research study tried to examine the approach that top 10 organizations (as per Forbes 2000 for the year 2010) adopt while dealing with negative comments posted on their facebook pages. For this research, the number of negative comments posted was calculated and compared against the responses posted by the respective corporate entities. Interestingly, the research study concluded that big organizations do not construe negative comments as avenues to reach out to the masses. Instead, they try to curb these expressions by censoring or ignoring critical feedback [3].

The volume of interactions and levels of engagement with the customers are becoming increasingly crucial for organizations wherein social media expressions play a critical role. In pursuance, many comments on social media pages of the organizations should be treated as an indicator of the popularity of the organizations. The analysis of these negative and positive comments provides valuables insights into the product/service performance expectations of the customers prompting the new product development process. All this while, the customers will remain engaged with the organizations, and through their participation in critical activities like new product development, the trust will get reinforced to a greater extent [5] [6] [7].

The organizations would want to increase the number of positive comments and reduce the negative comments (ideally to zero). To achieve this, organizations tend to deploy many engagement strategies on social media for influencing the interactions with the customers. These strategies have the mandate to influence online comments and channel them to create positive value perceptions and subsequently to increase purchase intentions [8] [9] [10].

This approach becomes even more critical as prospective customers form opinions about the organization/product/service based on comments posted on social media. The prospective customers do online research about the organization/product/service before taking a final call regarding purchase. However, negative comments tend to push them away [11].

Prospective customers may see the marketing message of the organizations, but they are more likely to believe the recommendations of the existing customers [12]. The opinions and experiences will play a significant role in either encouraging or discouraging the usage of a product/service [13]. The customers (existing or prospective) enjoy the anonymity offered by the Internet while posting their comments. These comments are construed as honest comments since the person posting them is protected from possible social consequences [14].

Before introduction of social media, negative experiences were not able to get reported by dissatisfied customers as the perceived benefits were deemed lower than the cost of reporting negative experiences. Social media with its advent changed this scenario by making reporting negative experiences relatively easier and much effective [15].

Social media expressions offer multiple opportunities to the organizations for strengthening the innovation framework through rapid dissemination of experiences and expressions over the global networks. Unlike traditional mechanisms of capturing feedbacks, which used to consume an unprecedented amount of time, now millions (or even billions in a few cases) of expressions become readily available to the organizations for initiating the innovation framework. These expressions getting rapidly distributed over global networks referred to as "firestorms," which have the capability of causing irreparable damage to the organizations in a short time [16] [17] [18].

The influence of negative comments posted online has been examined for the following outcomes. The prospective customers screen the negative comments posted online to form perceptions about the validity of the negative comments and their ability to persuade prospective customers to purchase. These negative comments can contribute to reducing uncertainty while pushing decisively for a purchase decision [9] [19].

Prospective customers also tend to examine the credibility of the negative comments posted online. Many factors play their role in ascertaining the credibility of the sources such as ranking, number of review posts, etc. The sources with high credibility are likely to create profound impacts in the minds of prospective customers. Still, specific issues such as anonymity may create doubts in the minds of the prospective customers regarding the accuracy of these negative comments [20].

III. DEALING WITH NEGATIVE SOCIAL MEDIA COMMENTS

The organizations have dealt with negative social media comments in different ways, each having its own merits and demerits. A few organizations have tried to ignore the potential of such negative social media comments and have suffered massive damages due to this approach.

The organizations have tried to leverage the viral nature of social media expressions for strengthening their messages to their customers. Also, a few organizations have experienced huge damages due to mismanagement of negative social media expressions as these expressions spread worldwide in a short period. This trend also reflects in the intentions of social media users to spread the negative experiences rapidly to caution other social media users [21].

This section tries to examine some of the most common approaches (delay, respond, partner, legal, and censor) of dealing with negative comments.

Delay in responding to negative social media expressions prohibits an organization from responding to negative social comments while ignoring all such comments. This delay can help an organization with enough time to review the negative comments and prepare a comprehensive solution of the same. This strategy is also recommended due to the assumption that customers have short collective memory, which further gets in the background as soon as new interest items are floated in media. Thus, the organizations delay the response to allow the negative campaigns to die on their own [22].

However, this strategy has backfired severely on Domino's as it didn't respond immediately to videos related to unsanitary food handling at Domino's. The perception regarding the brand quality of Domino's changed to negative from positive in mere 48 hours causing considerable damages to its image.

In another case, Dell's approach to responding to negative social media campaign generated even more negative publicity for the brand.

A respond strategy listens, acknowledges, and addresses negative social media comments irrespective of the outcome. Through this strategy, an organization can engage with the customers on one-to-one basis or can fix problems based on mass reporting. Either way, the customer feels satisfied after having been heard by the organization.

The respond strategy offers a significant advantage through active participation and influencing the conversation centered around negative social media expressions. The respond strategy can effectively control the damage through quick reaction to negative social media comments, which allows this strategy to create loyal customers out of dissatisfied customers to have a long-lasting relationship with [23]. However, respond strategy fails to produce desired results when responses are required to deal with negative social media expressions based on incorrect information or misplaced perception, which may lead to war of words with an escalation possibility.

A partner strategy partners with the customers on online platforms while establishing a constructive relationship with them. Under this strategy, the partner or the customer acts as a brand ambassador of the organization for carrying forward the brand message. Coca Cola partnered with two of its fans when the Facebook page created by them had to be transferred to the Coca Cola organization due to legal issues. After this partnership was established, these fans were provided access to the resources of the organization for smoothly running the Facebook page [24]. This strategy, too, has specific challenges associated with it. Such as the partner shall be holding insider information in case of fallout between the partners and the organization, which would further diminish the control of the organization.

The legal strategy involves starting judicial proceedings and filing lawsuits against the customers explicitly involved in negative social media campaigns against aggrieved organizations. The lawsuits involve commonly defamation, harassment, intellectual property breaches, privacy breaches, etc. [25]. The legal strategy can negatively influence brand perception as the masses perceive the organizations initiating the legal action as bullies. This perception would sway the sentiments of the people towards the individuals against whom the legal action has been initiated.

A censor strategy is probably the most used social media control by the organizations dealing with barrage of negative social media comments. This approach forbids the users from posting directly on the social media pages maintained by the organizations. The comments posted by the users are first screened in light of the content moderation policy. The comments having offensive tones, derogatory messages, bad experiences, etc. are removed right there. In another approach of this strategy, the comments are not moderated initially but are removed as soon as they are posted to avoid damage to the organization. In addition, the organizations take help from aggregators like Google, YouTube, etc. for removing objectionable content from other sites and locations to prevent the same from being accessible to the people.

The Internet is the world's largest network which provides ubiquitous connectivities to the people around the world. The organizations will not able to control or censor entire Internet.

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The content pertaining to negative social media comments and other unpleasant experiences with products/services/organizations will continue to be available to the people despite best efforts put in by the organizations to regulate or control them.

The organizations have to start admitting that they cannot control the Internet. Their customers (prospective or existing) will always have something (good or bad) to say about the organizations.

What censor strategy tends to achieve is getting undone on two fronts. The first front is the universal access to the social media despite imposed regulations by the organizations and the second front is eruption of anger in many forms whenever the content is getting censored by the organizations in the name of content moderation policy.

IV. CONCLUSION

Having seen the approaches adopted by the organizations in curbing social media expressions, we can safely conclude that one approach will not be able to address this serious concern.

In contrast, there are more possibilities of going wrong by the organizations when social media expressions are likely to be curbed. Therefore, a mix of the approaches has to be distilled in light of the organization-customer ecosystem and its associated complications.

The organizations should accept the fact that they will not be able to silence the voice of the customers on social networks. The social network will continue to be a viral platform, which would enable the voice of the customers in getting heard globally. The universal access of the Internet and falling data prices will also ensure that these social media platforms remain within reach of every person (rich or poor).

So, rather than curbing the social media expressions, the organizations need to create a mutually beneficial ecosystem with the customers, where they both get benefited from each other.

Previous research studies have also reinforced this view as social media expressions have positively contributed towards innovation and new product development considering the organizations and the customers as the stakeholders.

Towards the conclusion, many approaches should be adopted by the organizations in dealing with social media expressions effectively.

The first approach should begin with admittance that there is a problem, which needs to be addressed. This will enable a customer in acknowledging the transparency on the part of the organizations. Also, the assurance that the organization is hearing its customers and is demonstrating intent to address the issues, rather than running away, will reinforce a positive image of the organization in the minds of its customers. When the customers see the intent of the organizations to address the problems, they feel satisfied reinforcing the brand image. They may or may not get a solution to their liking. But, the realization that the organization is hearing them while making an effort to address the problem will boost the image of the organization. This image reinforcement will go a long way in protecting the organization from the onslaught of future critics as the loyal customers will hold the fort for the organizations.

The second approach is to partner with the customer despite concerns of privacy and breaches of intellectual property. This approach is critical for the organizations which operate in the environment of rapid technological changes as partnering with customers will keep the organizations one step ahead of the competition. A few safeguards need to be built to protect the intellectual property of the organizations while retaining control of the operations.

The organizations need to understand that mistakes are bound to happen, and the customers will get angry as a result. These angry customers will voice their anger through traditional and social media channels. There is no need to curb these expressions from gaining entry into the public domain. Instead, the organizations need to take full advantage of this situation by first admitting the fault and second showing intent to resolve at the earliest.

In its course, partnering with the customers will be a tremendous opportunity for both to learn from each other and sustain an ecosystem where the organizations and the customers are participating in the exchange of ideas and knowledge for better products and services.

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