

Tweet and tell: turning Twitter into complaints megaphone

Companies from rail operators to superstores are being caught up in Twitter storms but there is a good way - and a bad way – to deal with angry customers



Did Virgin Trains deliver a first-class response to a tweeted complaint about sexism? Probably not.
Photograph: Bloomberg/Bloomberg via Getty Images

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There was plenty for rail passengers to be #angry about on Tuesday, with social media channels buzzing with complaints as the biggest rise in rail fares since 2013 kicked in.

But come the end of the day Virgin Trains was apologising not for cancelled trains, overcrowded carriages or rocketing fares - but for [being sexist on Twitter](#) after a customer complaint went viral.

Angry customers used to vent their fury with a letter to the company or an argument with an anonymous call centre worker, but [Twitter](#) is now a customer service megaphone where a careless word or tweet can generate a consumer backlash with the potential to inflict real damage on sales.

“Social media is a minefield for brands,” says Allyson Stewart-Allen, chief executive of brand consultancy International Marketing Partners. “But they have to be on it because they are being talked about. They have to be part of the conversation.”

This week’s squall blew up after Virgin Rail East Coast passenger Emily Cole contacted the rail operator via Twitter to relate an exchange with one of its train managers who she felt had been

patronising and sexist, calling her “honey” after she complained. Rather than offer a straight apology, the firm’s official feed offered: “Sorry for the mess up Emily, would you prefer ‘pet’ or ‘love’ next time?”

With Twitter and Facebook being used for both marketing and customer service these days it can be an uncomfortable ride for companies when the two worlds collide. Cole, who now has 255 followers on Twitter, was able to share her bad experience with Virgin Rail EC’s 149,000 other followers – and they then shared it with many, many more.

With close to 40 million Britons using social media, many as their primary news source, the need to manage a company’s digital presence is creating thousands of jobs. There are currently more than 20,000 social media vacancies, according to UK job ad aggregator Adzuna, with more than 2,000 added this week.

The advertised social media jobs attract an average advertised salary of £30,428. By comparison, there are 142,510 traditional customer service roles up for grabs – but they pay a lot less, with an average advertised salary of £25,961.

As the pay levels indicate social media account managers need to be able to do more than speak emoji. Businesses want marketing and social media graduates who can multitask, managing multiple social channels, develop campaigns and manage nuts and bolts stuff such as web analytics.

Doug Monro, co-founder of Adzuna, explains: “Social media managers need to be something of a jack of all trades: part marketer and public relations professional as well as a customer services expert with an overarching role as ambassadors of the brands they represent.”



The Newcastle baker Greggs has become a surprise social media sensation with 135,000 followers thanks to its lively feed of quirky news that marries popular culture with pasties. One popular hit turned the golden fur cape Rihanna golden wore to the Met Gala into a steak bake. It even had enough wit to turnaround a PR disaster in 2014 when the Google algorithm replaced the company’s logo with a fake one advising it had been [“providing shit to scum for over 70 years”](#).

The account is the work of just one individual based at its Newcastle head office. Greggs tweeter-in-chief prefers to remain anonymous, but said it required no specific training although being a “people person” helped: “My job is all about managing our social communities. Which is great as I love talking to customers. We work as a team to come up with the brand posts we share on social

media. My favourite tweets are when we find funny things customers are saying about Greggs. Generally speaking, only enquiries that relate to a corporate issue require a sign off.”

In the summer embattled Southern Rail also struck social media gold when it handed over its Twitter account to [15-year-old Eddie Smith](#) who was on a fortnight’s work experience. Given it had already been labelled [Britain’s worst performing train operator](#) it had nothing to lose and weary passengers delighted in the schoolboy’s banter, which included batting away the suggestion he was a bot. “I’m a person, I’m 15 years old, I’m here, and I don’t think a Russian hackbot would like Doritos,” was his deft reply.

Virgin declined to give the Guardian any details of its social media operation or the kind of training they receive. There is evidence, however, that businesses have begun to recognise the pitfalls of hiring inexperienced staff: according to website Totaljobs there was a 45% reduction in the number of social media internships listed in 2017.

“Understanding the nuances of how to deal with dissatisfied customers is a skill,” explains David Clift, human resources director at Totaljobs. “Hence why we are seeing a rise in demand for candidates with experience of handling traditional customer complaints in the social media era.”

Stewart-Allen says brands should make apologies the priority when things go wrong. She is critical, for example, of Dove’s response to the recent controversy about a Facebook [advert that showed a black woman turning into a white woman](#). “I don’t think they made a sufficient apology for the mishap,” she says. “Social media is all about context, you have to get the tone right.”

Striking the right tone (#sweet-tweets)

***Virgin Trains** once delighted its followers when it came to the rescue of a passenger who tweeted to say: “I’ve just had a reasonably large poo and there is no toilet roll left on the [@virgintrains](#) 19.30 train from Euston to Glasgow pls send help.” The train operator’s reply was swift: “Which coach? We’ll send someone down to you.”

***Argos** showed its street-speak credentials when a customer called Immy Badman tweeted to say he was having trouble getting a new games consol from a store in Manchester and was not entirely satisfied with the level of service being offered in store: “Yo. Wen u gettin da ps4 tings in moss side? Ain’t waitin no more. Plus da Asian guy whu works dere got bare attitude”, tweeted Immy.

The Argos tweeters shot back: “Safe badman, we getting sum more PS4 tings in wivin da next week y’get me. Soz bout da attitude, probz avin a bad day yo”.

***Dominos** pizza received a plaintiff tweet from an unhappy customer: “Yoooo. I ordered a pizza and came with no toppings on it or anything. Its just bread. Dominos were immediately on the case, asking for details so they could fix the problem, when the customer tweeted a second time: “Never mind. I opened the pizza upside down”.

***Sainsbury’s** tweeters got into a long and fishy conversation when a shopper tweeted to say: “I tried to buy some battered fish from @sainsburys but it didn’t have a bar cod!”

The supermarket replied: “Were there no other packs in the plaice, or was that the sole one on the shelf? Floundering for an explanation!”

Not to be outdone the shopper responded: “I tried dropping you a line, but this whole situation is giving me a haddock. What are you going to do about it? Let minnow”.

Sainsburys carried on: “If I am herring you right, you’re looking to eel our relationship. I’ll tell the store to find the shelf and fillet”

And that wasn’t even the end of the conversation ...

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