

2015 | THE SOCIAL CUSTOMER SERVICE INDEX: RESULTS, ANALYSIS, AND PERSPECTIVES

MEASURING USE AND EFFECTIVENESS OF SOCIAL MEDIA TOOLS FOR CUSTOMER SERVICE



SocialMediaToday



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Analysis By Brent Leary, Managing Partner, CRM Essentials LLC

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INTRODUCTION

SOCIAL CUSTOMER SERVICE INDEX 2015

This is the fifth consecutive year that we are releasing the “Social Customer Service Index.” As in previous years, we have surveyed the *Social Media Today* community to better understand how their companies are integrating social media tools and strategies into their customer service/experience efforts.

While we’re releasing the results in the third quarter of 2015, the survey was fielded in the second quarter of this year, with 942 respondents. By comparison, in 2010, the inaugural year of the survey, we had just 123 participants.

This year we decided to get back to our roots and take a deeper dive into the social aspect of customer care. To that end, we jettisoned questions around mobile, and added a series of questions to try to get a better understanding of companies’ organizational structures and which teams or departments are responsible for social customer care.

As in previous years, in addition to sharing the detailed survey results, we are pleased to include several case studies of companies and their approach to social customer service. This year, executives from Intercontinental Hotels Group, UPS, and Starwood Hotels and Resorts Worldwide, Inc. share their insights about how their companies have integrated social into customer service, and how their strategies and goals have evolved over time.

Whether you’re studying the data, reading stories from the profiled brands, or discovering new trends, we hope that our report will help guide your social service efforts going forward.

We’d like to thank you, the Social Media Today community, for your support—we couldn’t produce this report without your help. We’d also like to extend a special thank you to SAP for their continued support in sponsoring the Index since its inception.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Rani Mani, Adobe's Director of Customer Success, says in a short Q&A below something that reinforces one of the main themes coming out of this year's survey:

"We expect our agents to gather insights from customers about what they want to achieve and where they are struggling, and feed it back to the business so we can improve our offerings accordingly."

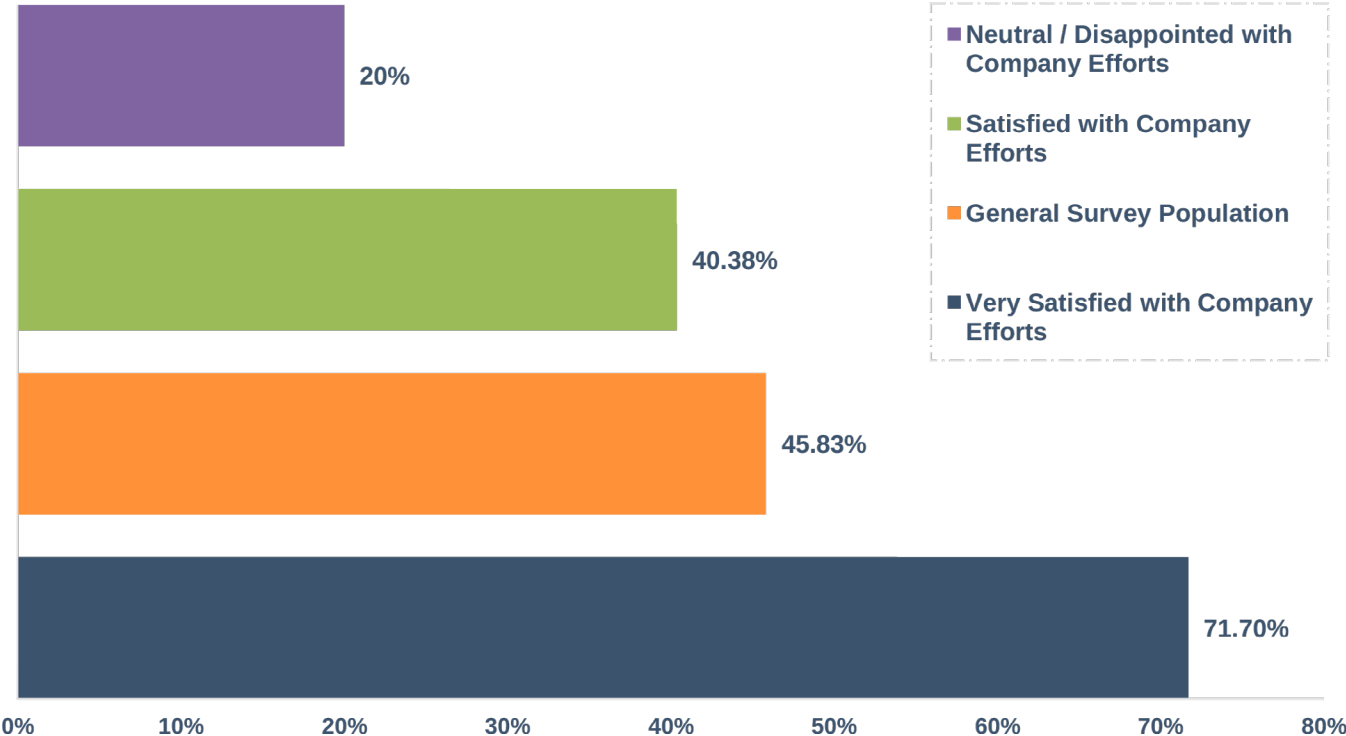
The respondents who took this year's survey, and reported that their organizations had a structured process for sharing service insights with different parts of the business, say that they saw a dramatic positive difference in impact from their efforts. They were also much more likely to be very satisfied with those efforts. And they were also more likely to respond in less time while also handling a higher load of requests coming in from social channels.

If you're at a company that's not seeing the kind of impact you'd like from your social service efforts, you're not alone -- 60% of the respondents reported the same thing. Even more telling is the approximately 82% who are still not very satisfied with their company's efforts in this area. But getting the right people together using formal processes is a big step in the right direction, as the findings below illustrate.

EMPLOYEE SATISFACTION'S IMPORTANCE IN FINDING SUCCESS WITH SOCIAL SERVICE EFFORTS

Positive impact on service goals and objectives is key in determining whether the actions an organization is taking are creating better experiences for customers. And, according to our survey results, there appears to be a correlation between impact on goals and objectives, and how employees view their organization's effort in integrating social tools and strategies into customer service efforts. This finding is illustrated in the chart on the next page.

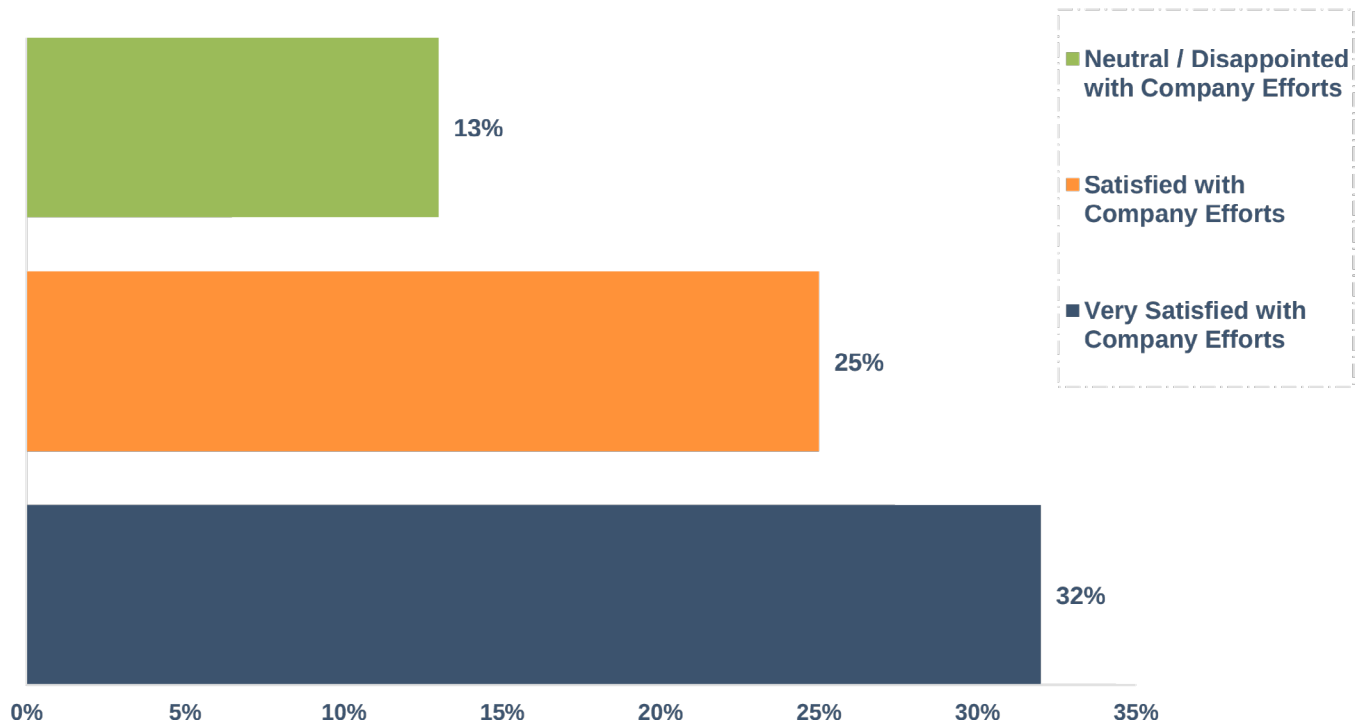
VERY POSITIVE IMPACT OF SOCIAL EFFORTS ON CUSTOMER SERVICE GOALS / OBJECTIVES



The chart easily illustrates that those reporting a neutral/disappointing effort on behalf of their organization to integrate social into service were only half as likely to see very positive impact on service goals and objectives. But the number doubles when people are at least satisfied with efforts. But the big payoff comes when employees are very satisfied with company efforts, as 71% of them say they see very positive impact from these efforts; substantially higher than the general population of respondents (40.4%).

While we can't say there are specific causal relationships to why those very satisfied with company efforts are more likely to report very positive impact from them, we are able to identify some interesting comparisons.

MORE EMPLOYEE INVOLVEMENT, HIGHER SATISFACTION



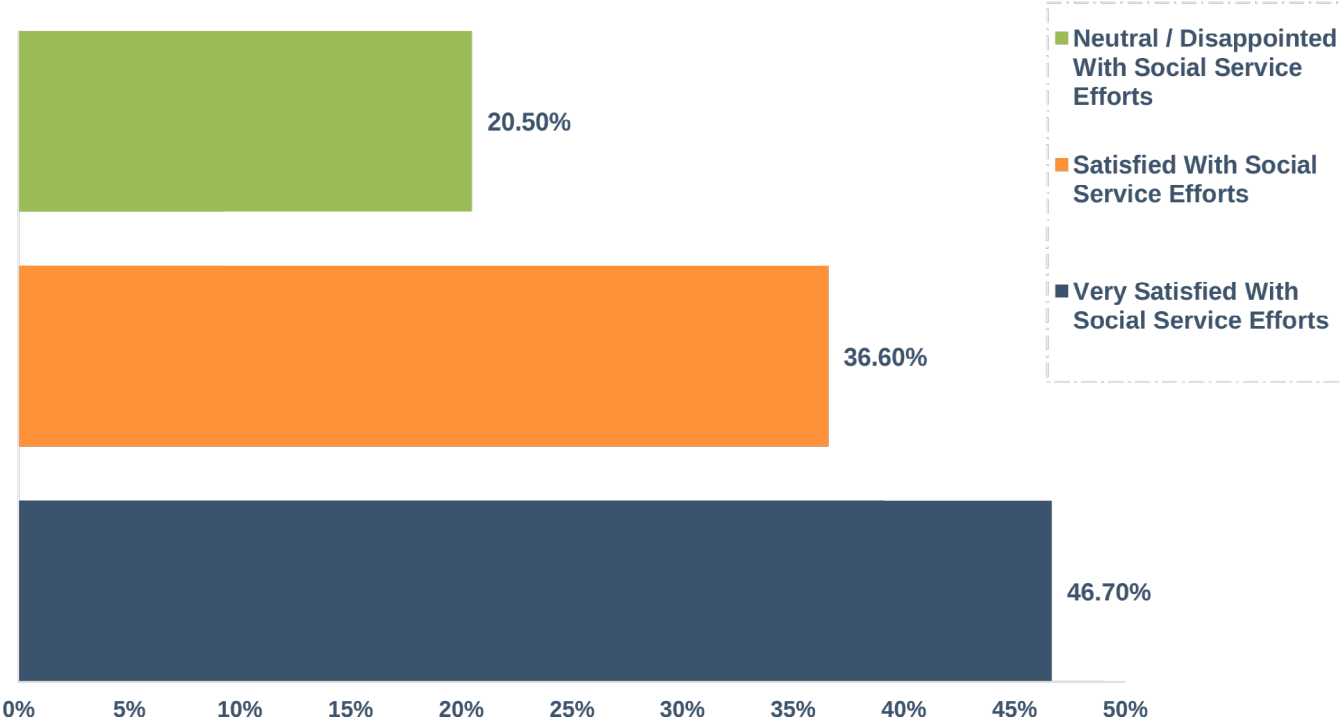
Those satisfied with company efforts to integrate social into service were twice as likely (25.5% vs. 12.7%) to have at least a quarter of the employee base involved in implementing social support strategy. And those very satisfied were almost 2.5 times (31.5% vs 12.7%) more likely than those not satisfied to report that higher level of employee involvement.

FASTER RESPONSE TIMES COME WITH HIGHER EMPLOYEE SATISFACTION

We all know customers who need assistance want to receive it as soon as possible. And we already know that the sooner you can respond to them, the happier they'll be. But, according to the survey results, employees are also happier if they are able to provide faster responses.

Companies with employees who are very satisfied with company efforts in social service are more than twice as likely to respond to service requests coming from social channels in 60 minutes or less (46.7% vs. 20.5%) than those who are not satisfied. This is not only substantially higher than those that are just satisfied with company efforts, but it's also higher than the general population results (46.7% vs. 31.8%).

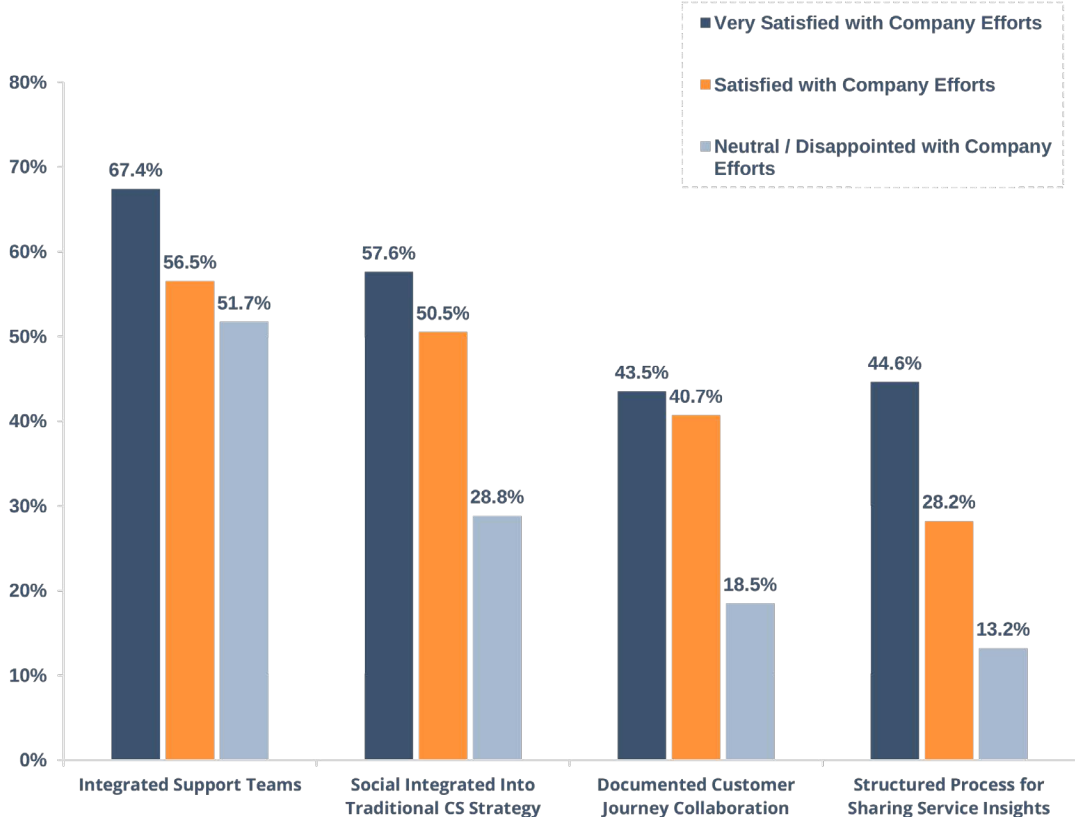
RESPOND TO SERVICE REQUESTS ON SOCIAL IN 60 MINUTES OR LESS



The differences in response times are impressive on their own standing, but even more so when adding the context of how many more interactions are being handled by those very satisfied with company efforts – as they are almost five times more likely to report handling at least twenty-five percent of their service interactions via social channels (28.3% vs. 5.9%).

INTEGRATION AT PEOPLE, STRATEGY AND PROCESS LEVELS EFFECT EMPLOYEE SATISFACTION

It's not just that higher percentages of involvement seem to play a role in employee satisfaction levels for company efforts integrating social with service, but also that integration at all levels seems to drive up satisfaction.



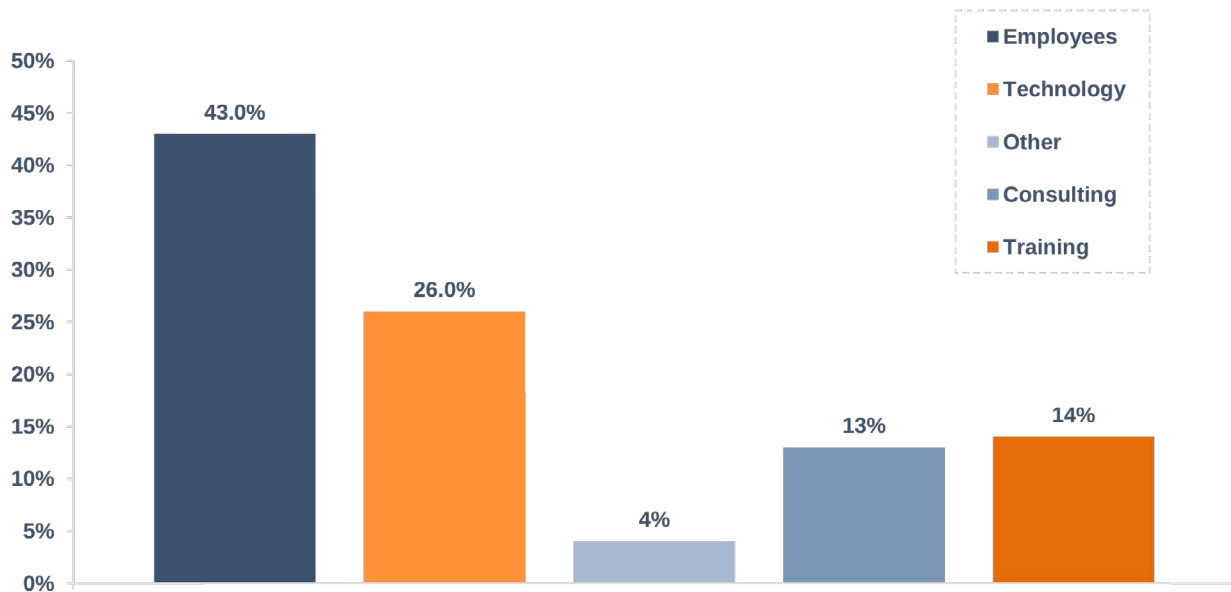
The trends are very easy to see in the chart above. Those very satisfied with efforts are more likely to be at companies with integrated support teams, social tools and strategies integrated into customer support strategy, and a documented customer journey outlined with interdepartmental participation. While the differences between neutral/disappointed employees and very satisfied employees are pronounced, that is not entirely the case between those who are very satisfied and those who are merely satisfied. However, when looking at those saying that their organizations have a structured process in place for sharing customer insights coming from support with other departments, there is a substantial difference between being very satisfied and just being satisfied (44.6% vs. 28.2%).

We'll take a deeper look at the impact that integration at the process level has on service goals and objectives shortly.

MORE EXPERIENCE, MORE INVESTMENT

Those very satisfied with company efforts were more than twice as likely as those not satisfied to be working at organizations with at least two years of experience providing social customer service (55.4% vs 25.4%); they were also almost three times as likely to have invested at least \$100,000 the past twelve months on these initiatives (15.2% vs. 5.4%) as those not satisfied with company efforts.





The chart below breaks down where companies with very satisfied employees are investing their money with respect to social customer service.



While looking at the breakdown of those very satisfied with company efforts, they are close to 50% more likely to spend on technology than those not satisfied (26.4% vs. 17.8%). Alternately, those not satisfied are 23.7% more likely to spend on employees (56.7% vs. 43.3%).

FINAL THOUGHTS




While only 17.9% of the survey population said they are very satisfied with their company efforts in social service, they make up a significantly higher percentage of the total number of people responding in this manner (28.5%); making this group one worth taking a deeper look at. And the profile of this group show that they are:

-  More experienced
-  More integrated in their approach at various levels (people, process, strategy)
-  Faster to respond while handling a higher load of service activity coming from social channels
-  Higher percentage of company employees involved in social support strategy

Given these findings, it pays to look for ways to improve company efforts to get more employees on board with these initiatives; providing tools and strategies that help them respond quicker and work in a more integrated/holistic way seems to get you on the right path.

WHO OWNS WHAT?

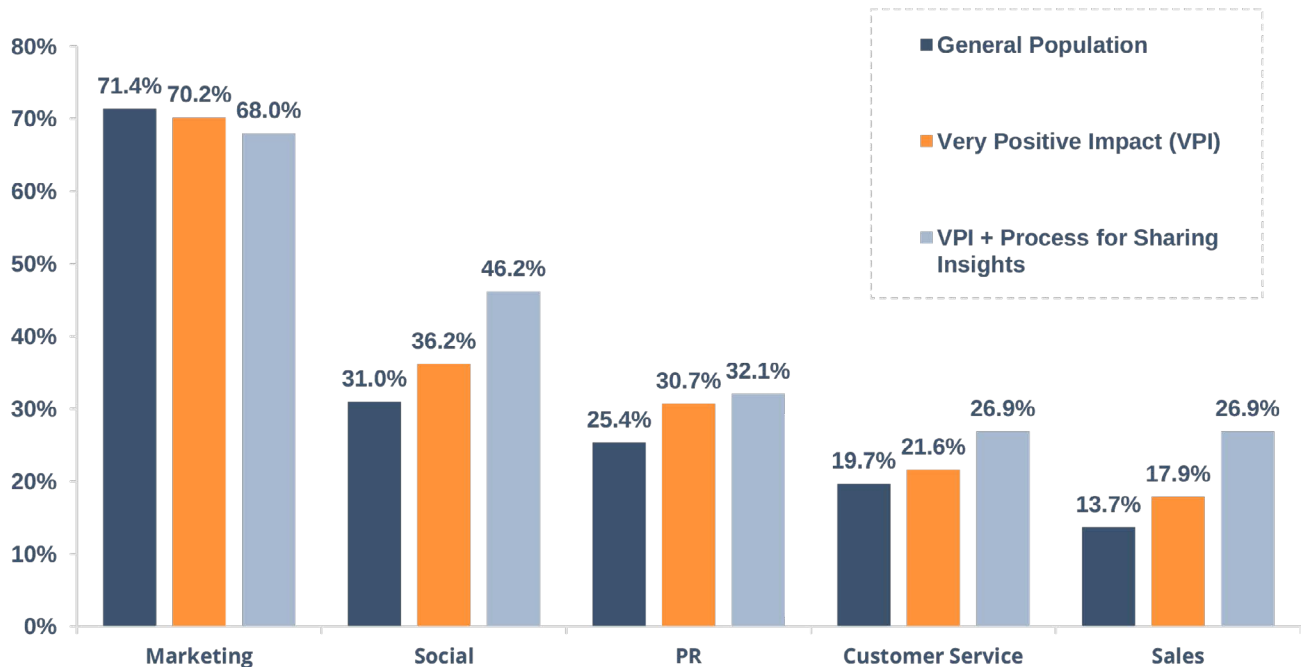
In this year's survey, we added new questions to get a better understanding of how companies have structured themselves in terms of which department(s) own:

-  Overall social strategy
-  Social customer service strategy
-  Traditional customer service strategy

We also added a question to find out which executive the customer service department directly reports to. A closer look into these areas sheds interesting light on who is involved in developing social support strategy, the role it plays in customer engagement, and the importance of structure and participation when it comes to success.

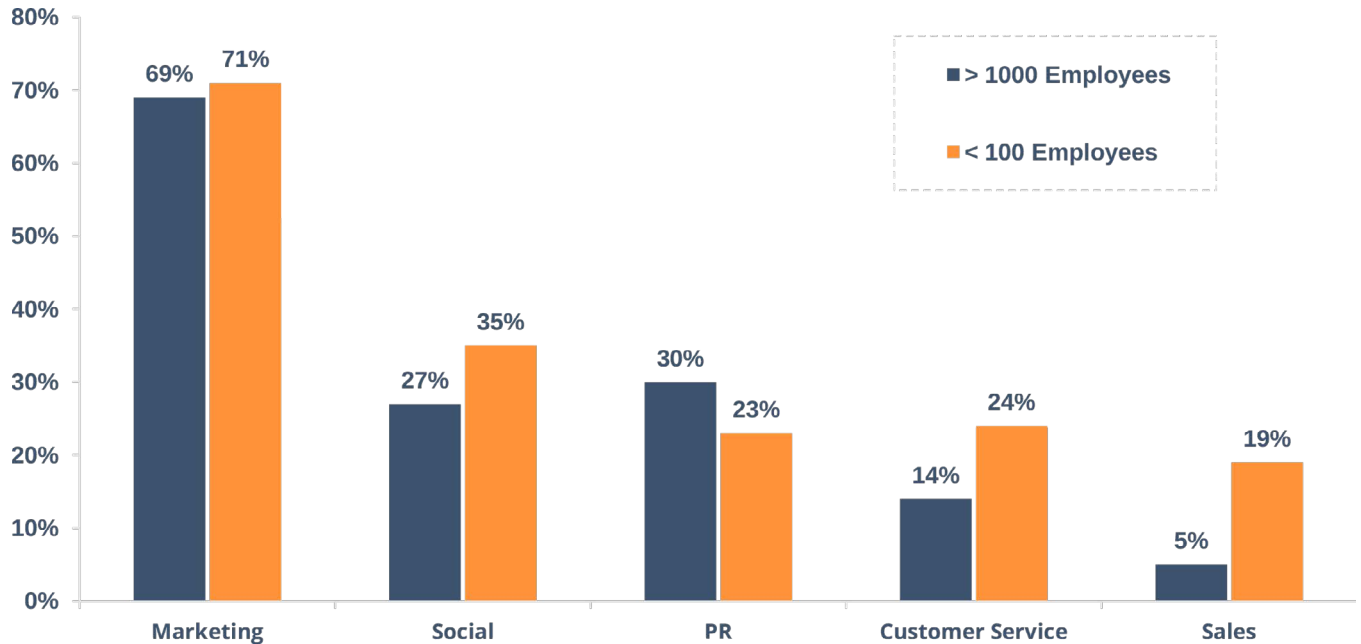
OWNERSHIP OF OVERALL SOCIAL STRATEGY

Marketing was by far the most-selected department when it came to which areas share ownership of the organization's overall social strategy, chosen by 71.4% of the survey population.



The illustration above shows that marketing, even when looking beyond the general survey population – specifically at companies seeing very positive impact from their efforts, and those with structured processes for sharing service insights across departments – is highly likely to share ownership in developing social strategy. But a deeper dive into the segment of respondents who say that they are seeing very positive impact from their efforts, reveals noticeably higher participation rates from social, PR, customer service, and sales.

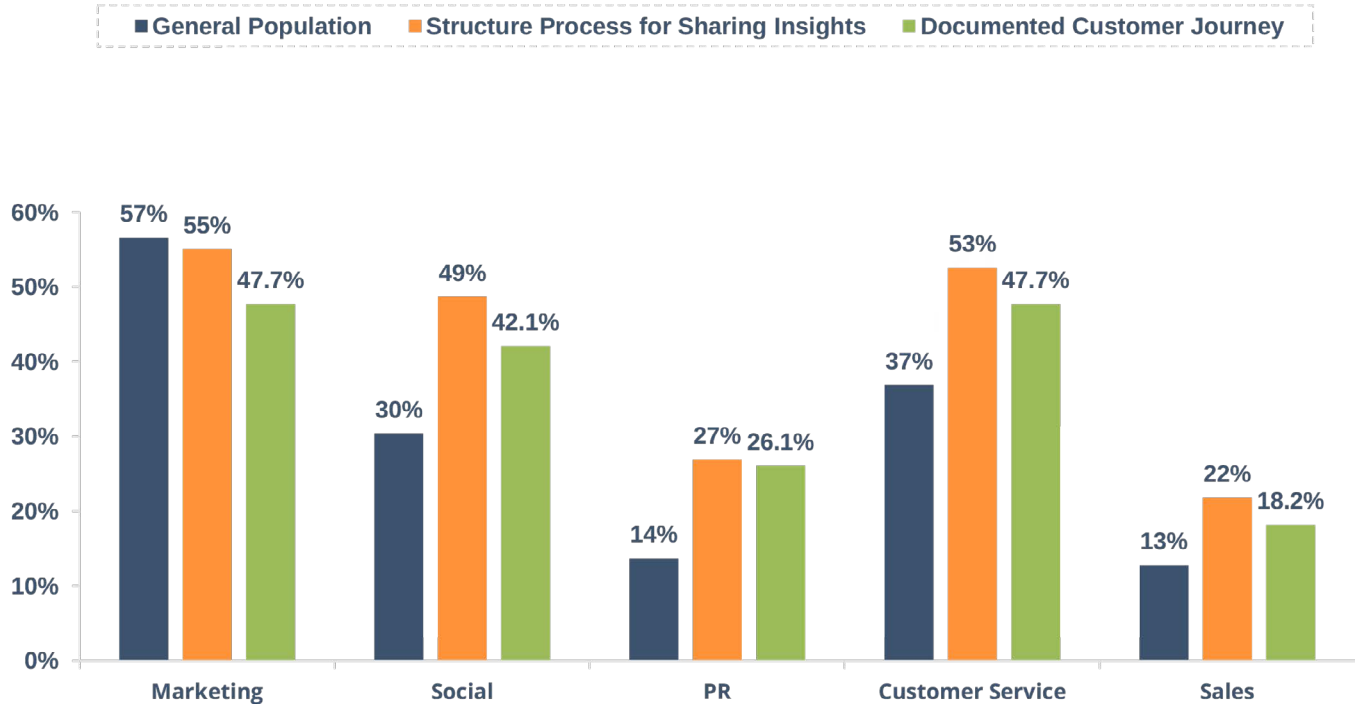
An interesting dichotomy is revealed when comparing how large and small companies address social strategy ownership:



Customer service and sales participate at noticeably higher rates at smaller organizations, with sales at smaller companies being close to four times more likely to be involved than their counterparts at larger organizations (19% vs. 5%).

SOCIAL CUSTOMER SERVICE STRATEGY

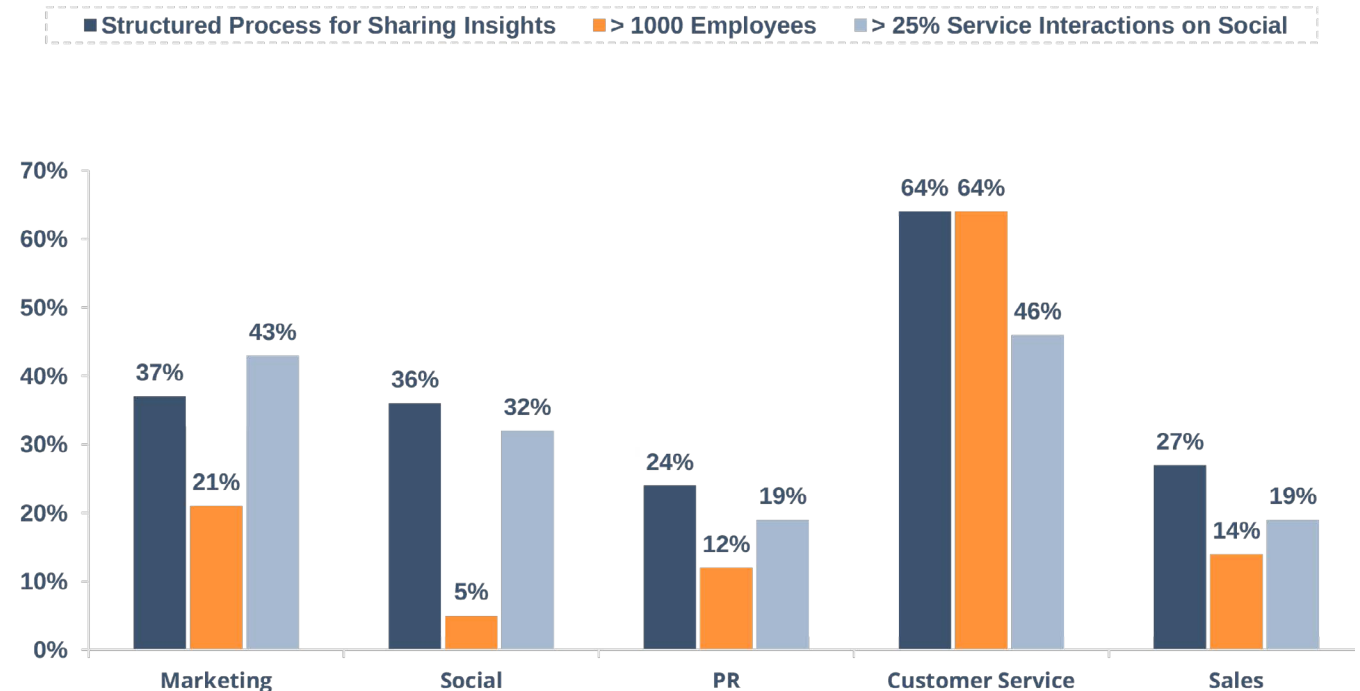
Compared to the overall social strategy, where marketing is significantly more likely to be at least a part of the ownership group, social customer service strategy is much more of a group effort.



There is definitely a more equal sense of ownership in social customer service strategy ownership, with customer service and marketing being equally represented in companies with documented customer journeys, as well as with companies using formal processes to share service insights across the organization.

OWNERSHIP OF CUSTOMER SERVICE STRATEGY

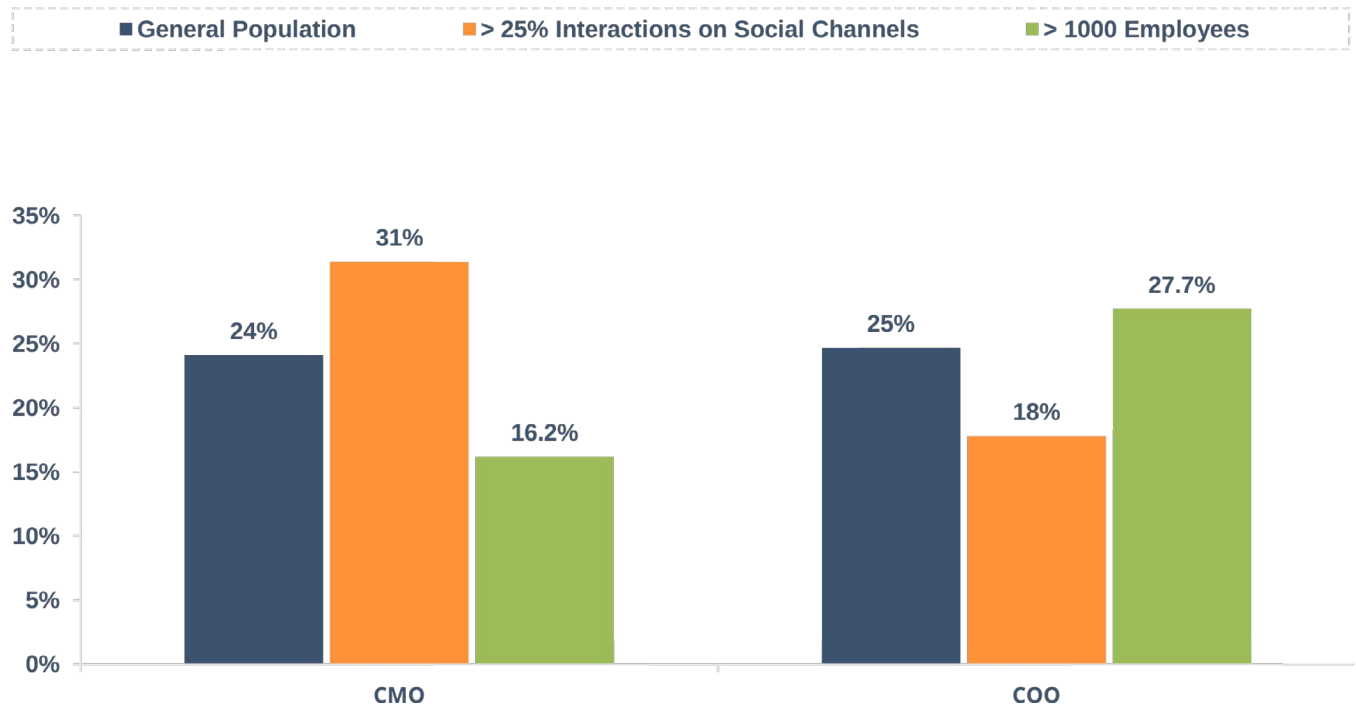
While you'd expect customer service to have significant participation in developing customer service strategy, in companies where at least 25% of service interactions take place on social channels, marketing is almost as likely to be a part of the strategy mix.



With higher percentages of service interactions taking place on social channels, marketing and social departments were significantly more represented in customer service strategy than the general population. And when looking at those with structured processes for sharing insights, sales was more likely to be a part of the strategy ownership mix.

WHO CUSTOMER SERVICE REPORTS TO

In general, customer service is as likely to report to the chief marketing officer as they are to the chief operating officer (24.1% vs. 24.7%) -- a mix of other titles are less represented. But when looking at certain segments, there are certain situations when service reports to the CMO, and others when the COO is clearly the leader.



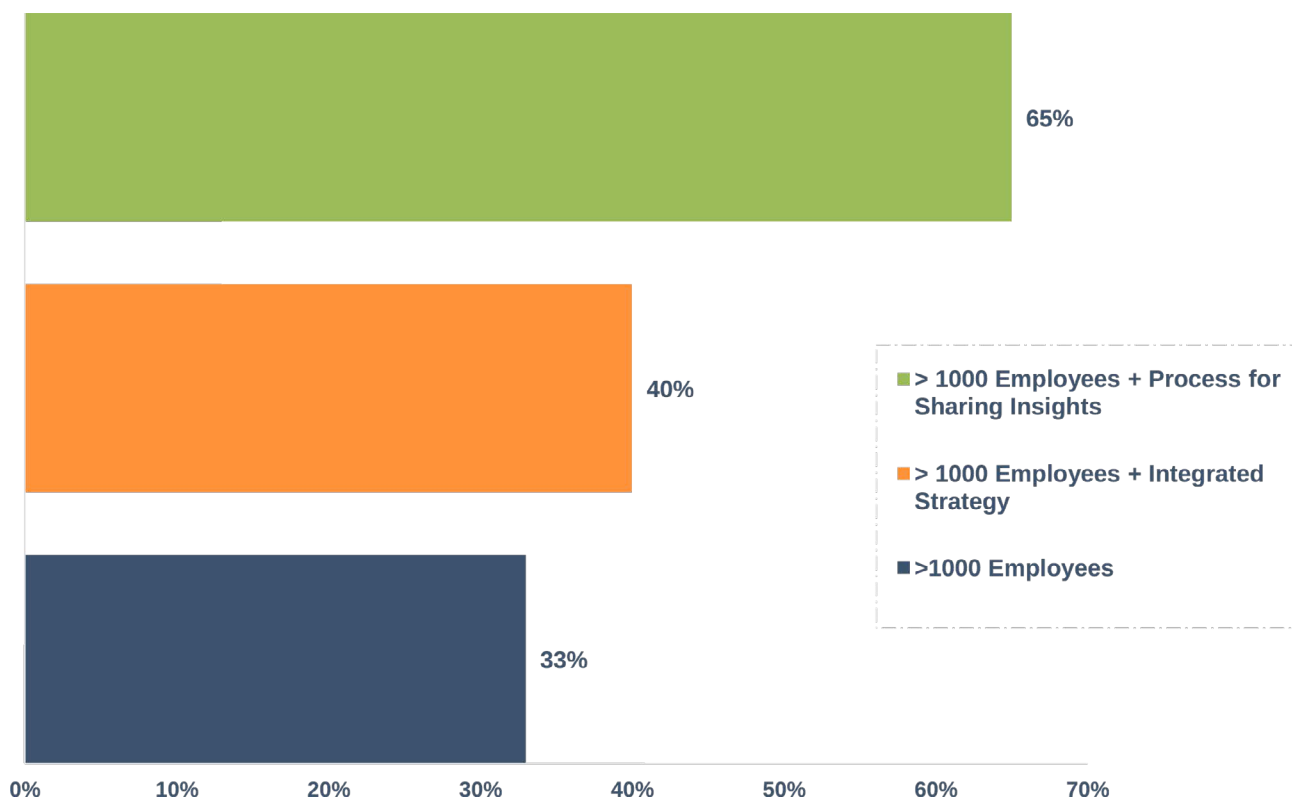
While those handling at least a quarter of their service interactions over social channels make up a small percentage of the overall survey population (11.5%), 68.8% of those respondents said their company is seeing very positive impact from their social efforts. Thus, this group accounts for approximately 28% of those seeing very positive impact on service goals and objectives.

Additionally, generally speaking, those CS departments reporting to CMOs were slightly more likely to report very positive impact than those reporting to COOs (45% vs. 41%). And when looking at employees very satisfied with company efforts, there's a more significant difference in favor of CMOs over COOs (24% vs. 15%).

INTEGRATION PAYS OFF AT ALL LEVELS

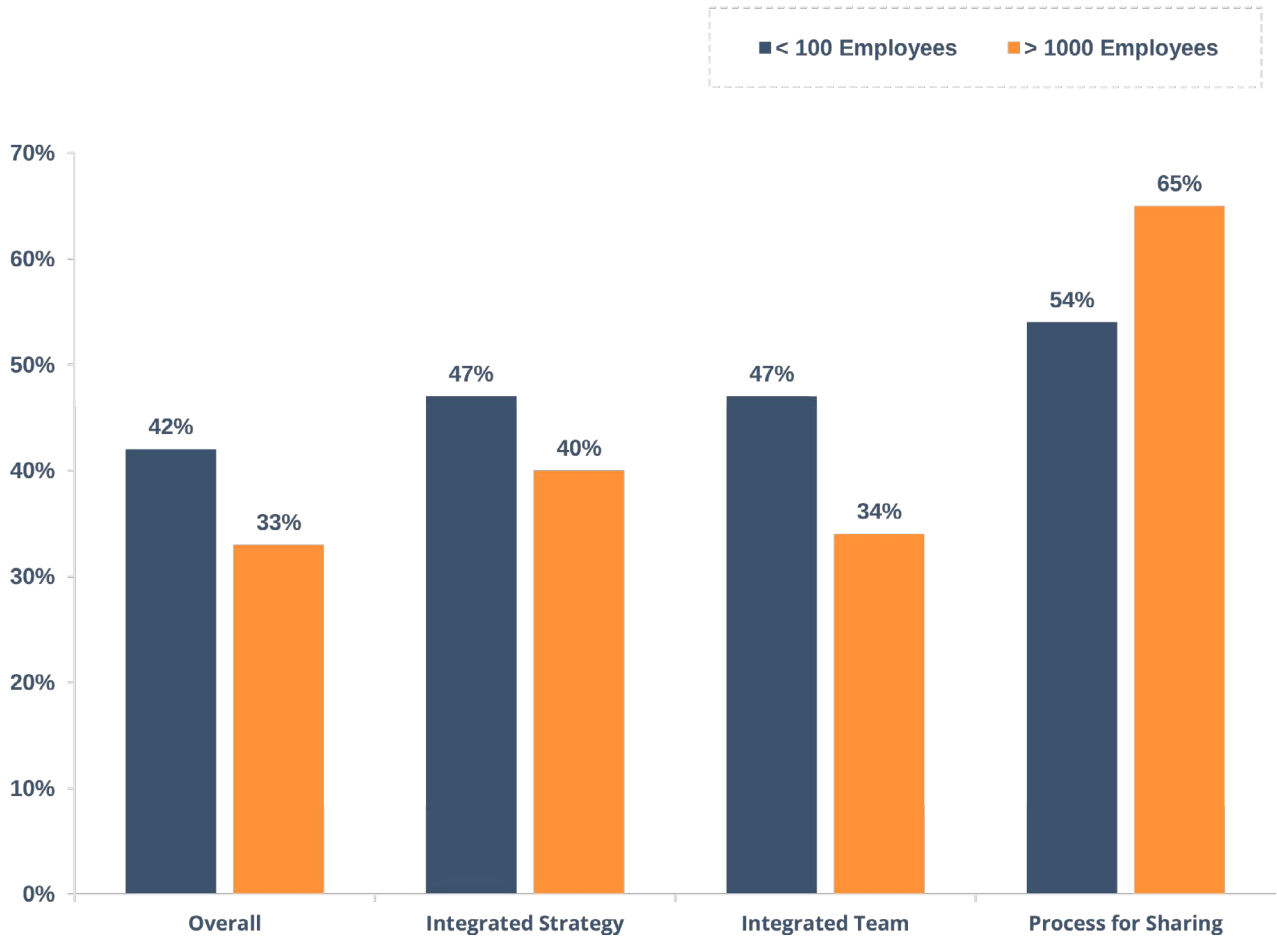
Overall, 40% of survey respondents say that their companies are seeing very positive benefits from their efforts to leverage social tools and strategies into customer support. But this percentage increases when looking specifically at those citing integration at strategy and team levels. And there is a substantial increase when companies have a process in place to share service insights with other departments within the organization.

When looking at those surveyed working at companies with over 1,000 employees, only 33% say they are seeing very positive impact from their efforts. But, as the chart below shows, that number increases to 40% if their company has integrated customer service efforts to use social channels with the overall social strategy.



While the integrated strategy provides a noticeable increase over the general population of those at larger enterprises, the number citing very positive impact almost doubles, to 65%, when a company has implemented a structured process for sharing insights gained from customer service interactions with other areas of the business.

The chart below looks at the how integration affects the impact level of company efforts from a different perspective:



When looking at those working at companies with fewer than 100 employees, you also see a significant increase in those citing a very positive impact when there is a process in place for sharing service insights across the company (54% vs. 42%). But the impact of this kind of process integration seems to be much more significant on larger companies, as illustrated by a larger percentage seeing positive impact than in the smaller organizations (65% vs. 54%).

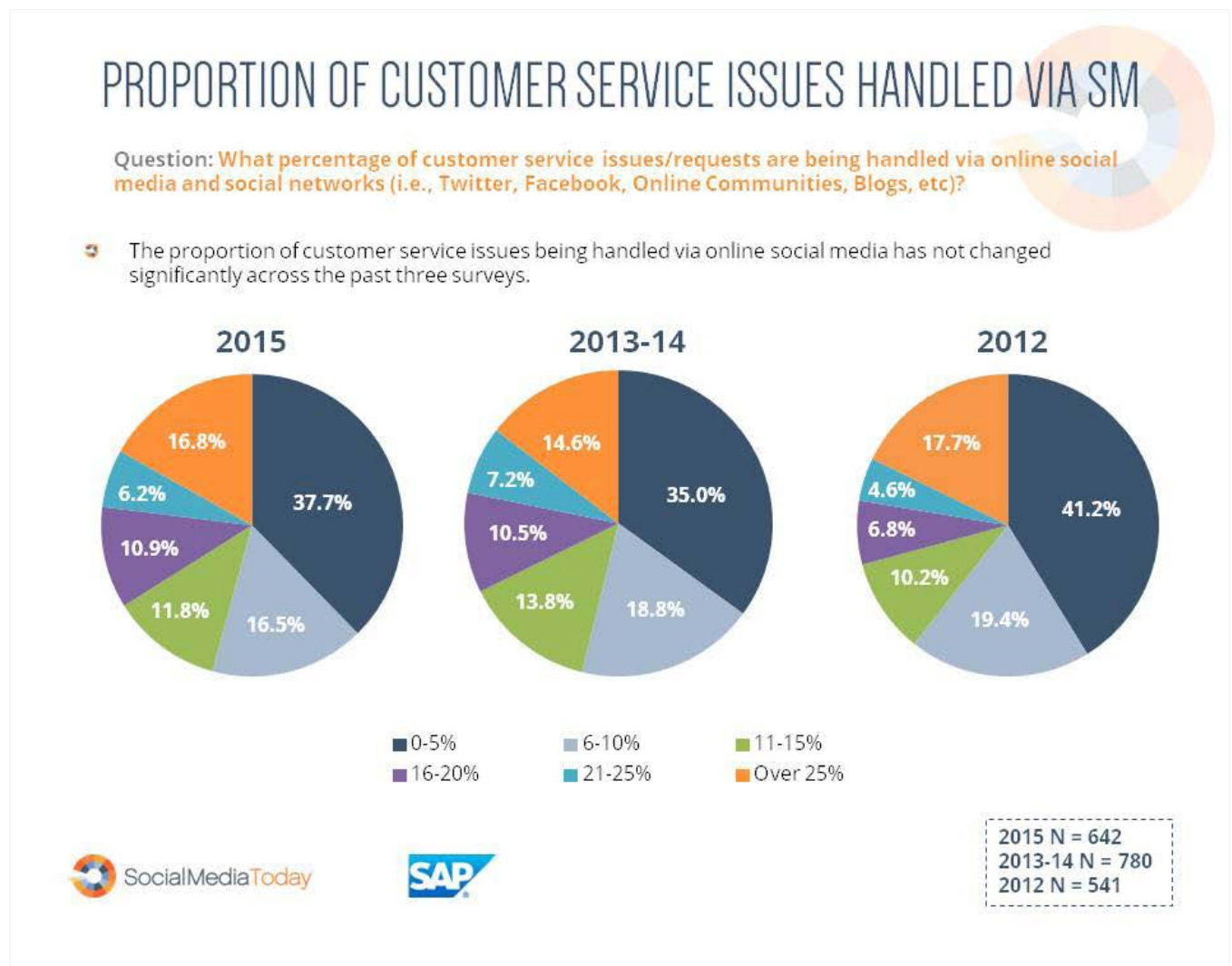
Another thing to note when looking at companies with over 1,000 employees: 21% of those with a process in place for sharing insights say they handle at least a quarter of their service interactions on social channels, up from 14% for the overall population of these companies. Couple this with a slight increase in those responding in less than a minute (29% vs. 27%), and a bigger jump in satisfaction with company efforts (30% vs. 17%), and you see the overall positive benefits enjoyed by larger enterprises integrating social at the process level for sharing insights.

YEAR OVER YEAR COMPARISONS

At least 890 people have participated in the survey for the last three years, providing us with an opportunity to spot trends that may help us understand where things are going. While the biggest trend may be a lack of dramatic movements over those years – which you will see outlined in the detailed analysis section - below are a few key, high-level topics for discussion.

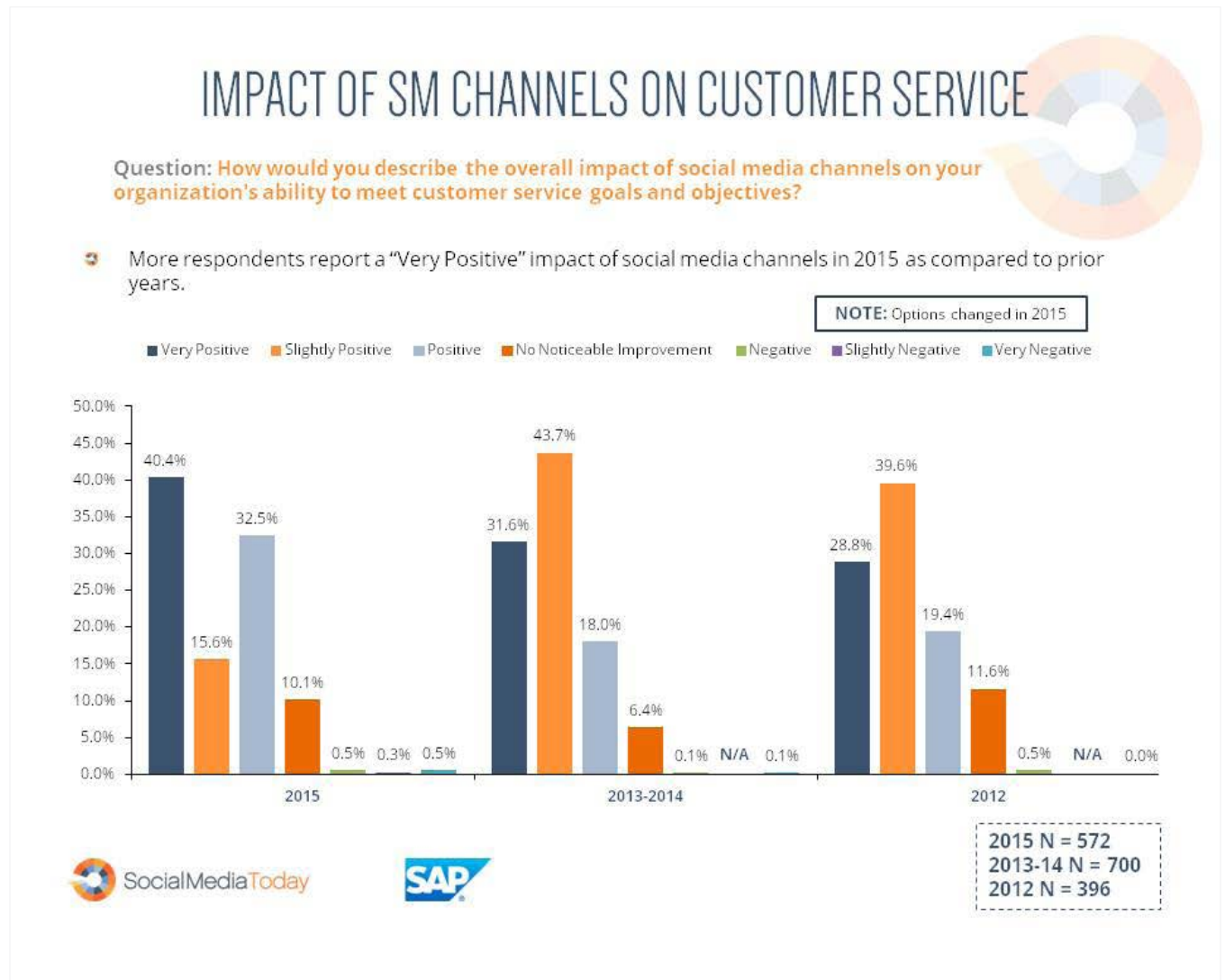
FEW DRAMATIC CHANGES IN THE GENERAL POPULATIONS

The chart below illustrates a small, upward move with respect to the percentage of service interactions being handled on social channels over the past three years.



The number of respondents who say that their organizations handle less than five percent of their service interactions on social channels decreased by less than ten percent over the past three years. However, the number of people saying their company is handling more than twenty-five percent of service issues via social decreased slightly as well. But the trend overall is a slight increase in the number of service requests being handled on social.

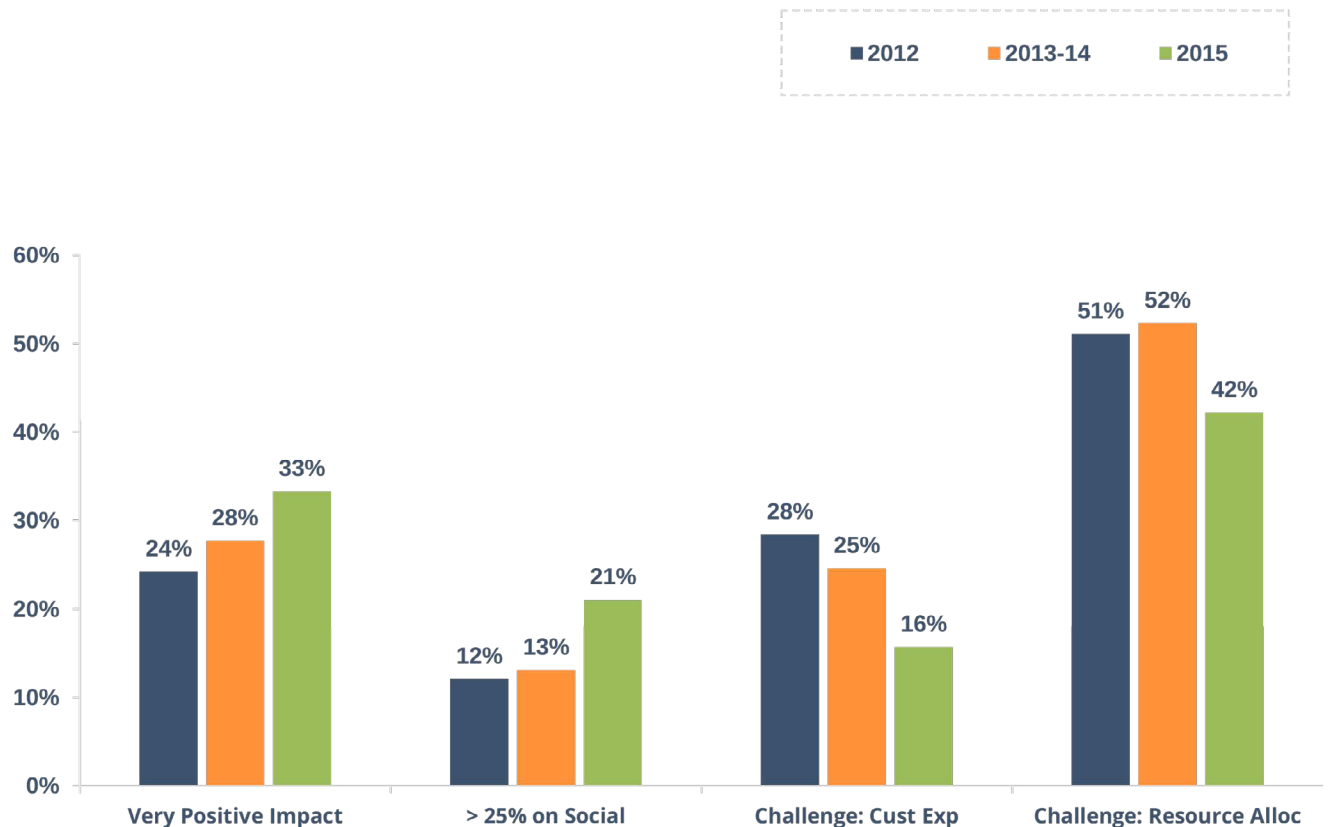
While, as in the case of the chart above, many high level areas saw no dramatic changes year over year, the following chart, focused on how company efforts to leverage social impacts support goals and objectives, shows a few interesting points:



There is a noticeable upward trend in those seeing a “very positive” impact of efforts on service goals and objectives, but there was also a significant drop in the number of people citing a “slightly positive” impact. And while a significant portion of that decrease seem to have moved over to the “very positive” category, the majority of it moved down to people being “slightly positive” – with some even moving into the “neutral” category. Overall, there was an impressive jump in those seeing a very positive impact, but those seeing at least a slightly positive impact on their efforts decreased from the previous year (88.5% vs. 93.3%). If the positive trend for a very positive impact is to continue, a higher percentage will have to come up from the slightly positive group than in previous years. And, as the data has shown, those reporting a very positive impact tend to have social service strategy more aligned and integrated with their organization’s social strategy, and have structured processes for sharing service insights throughout the business.

DEEPER LOOK AT LARGER ENTERPRISES

While overall there may be a lack of dramatic moves in either direction over the past three years, a closer look at those working at enterprises with at least 1,000 employees reveals some strong trends.



As the number of interactions increased year over year, the number of respondents seeing a very positive impact on service goals and objectives also increased. Additionally, respondents citing major challenges like resource allocation and understanding customer expectations decreased. And those stating they were very satisfied with company efforts saw an uptick from 15.9 % in 2012 to 17.4% this year.

More People Involved in Social Support Implementation

Last year we added a question to see what percentage of employee populations at organizations are involved in implementing social support strategy. In 2014, only 4.4% of companies said that 25% or more of the 1,000 plus employees were involved. In 2015 that number almost tripled, to 11.4%.

Facebook Emerges Over Twitter as the Most Effective Social Support Channel

In 2012 Twitter barely eked out Facebook as the most effective social channel for customer support (33.3% vs. 31.4%, respectively) for larger enterprises. However, that was the high-water mark for Twitter, as that number dropped to 28.5% in 2015. Facebook, on the other hand, saw a dramatic increase to 52% in 2014 before settling down at 47% in 2015.

SOCIAL SERVICE AND THE SUBSCRIPTION BUSINESS MODEL

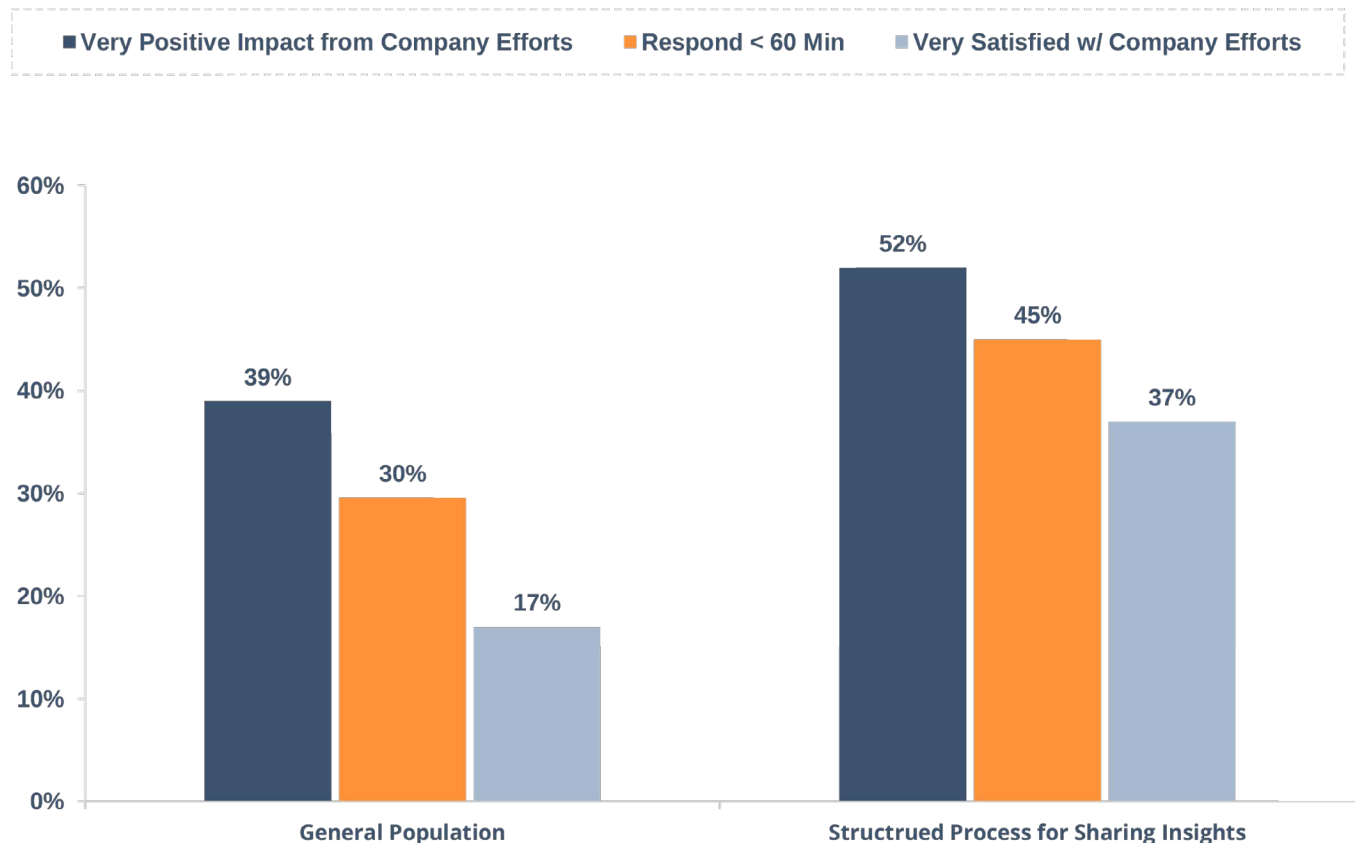
With the rise in popularity of the subscription business model, we added a new question to find out how these companies compare to traditional business models with respect to implementing social service. Even though the model is relatively new, 48% of those surveyed said that their organizations offer, or will offer in the next twelve months, subscription services to their customer base. And even though the businesses offering subscriptions are made up of a higher percentage of companies with 1,000 employees than the general population (29% vs. 23%), they are still on par with the overall group when looking at those seeing very positive impact from social efforts – 39% vs. 40%. This is important because smaller organizations are more likely to report seeing a very positive impact than their larger counterparts (45% vs. 33%).

Other key points to consider when looking at subscription businesses and how they compare to those with traditional business models are:

- Those with subscriptions are more likely to indicate that customer service owns social customer service)
- Those who plan to offer subscriptions (but do not yet) are more likely to have social media integrated into their traditional customer support
- Those with no plans to offer subscriptions are less likely to use social media for customer service issues

STRUCTURED PROCESS FOR SHARING INSIGHTS

As with the general population, subscription companies with a structured process for sharing service insights with other parts of the business saw dramatically better results than those not offering them:



Across the board, the correlation between having structured processes for sharing service insights and higher impact and satisfaction rates is hard to ignore. But here in particular, as larger companies make up a higher percentage of the subscription business population, the results are even more impressive.

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL SERVICE IN ADOBE'S BOLD MOVE INTO SUBSCRIPTIONS

As our numbers illustrate, subscription business models are becoming commonplace in today's customer-driven economy. But when Adobe made the move two and a half years ago, to shift from selling their Creative Suite software to offering subscriptions to their Creative Cloud service, it was a much different environment. And, being a company with a huge customer base, making such a fundamental change to how their products would be delivered and paid for came with tremendous risks – including the interaction/support model with customers. But with approximately four million subscribers to the Creative Cloud, it's now apparent Adobe made the right move.

Rani Mani, Director of Customer Success for Adobe, provides us with some insight into the role customer support plays in the Creative Cloud subscription model, and how social support fits into that role.

Q: How central was customer service to the new subscription business model that was being undertaken with the Creative Cloud? How important was customer service to the success of Creative Cloud in general?

A: Customer Service is an inherent part of the product and experience. Customers are voting with their wallet on a daily basis, and retaining their loyalty is of paramount importance to us. Bad customer service translates into a negative impact on the bottom line. Given that we are delivering value to our customers in a regular and ongoing way, it's no longer about courting customers once a year or every 18 months as the case may be in the world of perpetual licenses. Our goal is to stay alongside the customer throughout the entire lifecycle and to advance the relationship with every connection. Our mantra, "Every connection with Adobe Customer Care needs to be as exceptional as our products themselves," is fundamental to maintaining a positive customer relationship.

Q: From a customer service perspective, what early challenges were faced during the transition to the Creative Cloud?

A: Transforming from a boxed product company to one delivering software as a service was no small feat. When Creative Cloud was first launched, there was a lot of consumer skepticism because it occurred during a flurry of data security breaches at major retailers. The SaaS model at that time was still pretty foreign to most consumers, and there was a lot of confusion about Internet connectivity and where files lived.

In the beginning, we focused on dispelling misconceptions. A lot of the value proposition of Creative Cloud was still untested and philosophical, and we didn't want to try to sell customers. Instead, we worked with influencers, advocates, and our own customer support team to educate and correct. We focused on diffusing emotion with facts. Eventually, as more customers came on board, evidence of the value became clear – the swing and understanding just took time.

The other challenge, from an organizational standpoint, was that our support has to be one continuous, fluid experience where we aren't exposing our organizational boundaries to our customers. With one Creative Cloud solution, there was no division of product to the consumer. Our customer support had to mirror that approach and be a seamless experience for customers across the board.

We are still learning and honing the process of how we can make doing business with Adobe as frictionless as possible. We have to view our offering more holistically, with service a key part of that offering.

Q: How did the philosophy of customer service change - if at all - during the transition away from selling Creative Suite to offering Creative Cloud?

A: In the past, customers had one transactional experience every 18 to 24 months, depending on the product release cycle. With Creative Cloud, it's a monthly investment. The frequent billing cadence makes customers more aware of and interested in finding value from their subscription. In the Creative Suite days, customer service typically revolved around a break-fix model. Today, it's more focused on exploring the tools and learning to maximize their subscription. It's more about a journey, and this changed mindset results in us putting more focus on the overall experience.

In order to provide a great experience you have to sweat the small stuff. Small items like a sign-in error, billing issue, or a download have to work perfectly or be immediately addressed. The expectation of the 21st-century consumer is that those things always work, and these seemingly small issues can bring you to your knees. To that end, we're working with our colleagues to ensure that any rough spots in our experience are resolved as quickly as possible.

Q: What role did social play in developing the customer service philosophy for the Creative Cloud?

A: Social plays an important role in that it allows Adobe to meet our customers where they are at versus insisting they come to us. One of the unique support options we've been able to provide through social media is facilitating customers to help other customers.

For many years, Adobe has had a strong fan base of vocal customers who want to be seen as experts in their field. As social media evolved to a platform where customers voiced questions and concerns, we worked with this community of experts to empower them to continue to support others with their knowledge and expertise.

We do offer a points system, allowing us to recognize and thank highly active customers with inside access to pre-releases, discounted tickets to MAX (user conference), and visibility with product managers as a way to influence product roadmaps. However, most customers do it because they crave the social validation and visibility with the product managers more than anything.

Q. How were social tools and strategies used to implement the new service philosophy?

A: Knowing that our Creative Cloud value proposition is to enable our customers to work from anywhere at any time across any device, we also had to provide around-the-sun social coverage. We also know that, in many instances, our customers are the best teachers, so we are implementing programs to reward and incentivize our community experts to share their knowledge. We're building on top of the expertise our customers share on social media by developing some new solutions that will make it easier for new Creative Cloud members to learn from more tenured community leaders.

Q: Were customer service teams organized and trained differently to support the subscription model?

A: We organized ourselves around the commerce side of things versus being focused on technical support. Our agents need to be well-versed in matching specific plans to specific customer needs and walking customers through that migration path. We also expect our agents to gather insights from customers about what they want to achieve and where they are struggling, and feed it back to the business so that we can improve our offerings accordingly.

Q: Were there new metrics used to measure the success of customer service agents?

A: No, the same metrics apply: Average Handle Time, Customer Satisfaction Scores (based on surveys), and Average Speed of Answer, just to name a few.

Q: Lessons learned? The Good, the Bad, the Ugly?

A: One of the things that worked really well, and was referenced above, is the way we integrated our customers in helping other customers. But the truth is that we are still learning. We are evolving from a customer care to a customer success mindset. Our job is to ensure that our customers are expending minimal effort to reach their goals, and we view our role as helping the organization understand where we still have work to do. This isn't something that's ever complete--it's an ongoing commitment to understanding our customers and shaping our programs and products accordingly.

CASE STUDIES



CASE STUDY: UPS

Q: What's the size of social customer service team?

A: Our current social customer service program is a part of our Global Business Services (GBS) division. Customer Support is currently focused on the U.S. for the GBS group (our customer support department), and features 24x7 coverage. We are currently looking at expanding the GBS model to several additional countries, so the size of our social customer service team is growing rapidly. Within the Customer Communications function, we have a team of six that are focused on daily content and managing brand communications and reputation.

Q: How is this team structured? Are members part of the existing social media team, the existing customer service team, or are they on their own?

A: Our social representatives were not newly hired. All were existing Customer Service Representatives (CSRs) from other skill groups. Each Social CSR receives comprehensive training that is developed based on benchmarking and researching the role of social media and its different channels. Additionally, Social CSRs are co-located within two sites. This allows them easy access to one another when questions or issues arise, and is beneficial in cases that require immediate response. There is a complementary and coordinated relationship between our CSRs and the Customer Communications social media team, with established protocols governing which team handles various social media responsibilities, efficiently and coordinately.

Q: How has it scaled since the initiative started? How integrated is social in your current customer service call centers? What tools are you using?

A: Our social service is fully integrated, meaning social CSRs use all of the existing systems and tools available to our representatives that work in other channels. Since the group's inception, our social tools and processes have progressed significantly.

Q: How does the social customer service team interact with the rest of the social media team at the company?

A: If a CSR receives a mention that could potentially affect the UPS brand, negatively or positively, a process is in place where the CSRs alert (via email) the Social/Digital and Public Relations teams. Overall, the direction of UPS® social communications strategy comes from the UPS Social/Digital team. GBS owns the Social CSR processes in place and the training that CSRs are given. The GBS Social Customer Service Process owner works directly with the UPS Social Media team to understand any changes, launches, etc., and then conveys these modifications to the Social CSRs. Social CSRs protect the UPS brand by resolving customer issues as quickly and as efficiently as possible, while also moving the conversations offline to ensure customer privacy. In the event of a crisis, an integrated team is formed so that responsibilities, talking points, timing and actions are coordinated.

Q: How has social changed the relationship between customer service and other departments in the company, i.e., marketing or sales?

A: The growth and development of our Social CS function have definitely resulted in improved communication between UPS groups like Social/Digital, Customer Communications, and PR. They have benefitted us in terms of improved calibration on the answers we give our customers. Social conversation can also serve as barometer for customer concerns or business opportunities, so we are listening regularly for a variety of subjects that can inform the business.

Q: What social channels do most inquiries come in on?

A: Twitter gives us our highest volume of social customer service inquiries. Facebook follows. Rarely do we see anything on other primary channels where the brand has a presence.

Q: What percentage of customer inquiries comes in via traditional channels vs. social? Has social allowed for call/email deflection?

A: We have not seen an obvious change in any additional channels.

Q: What unique challenges have you faced, specific to your industry?

A: Because social media is such a public venue, we view many of the postings as an opportunity to share information about correct shipping processes, procedures, and practices. Additionally, our CSRs are focused on protecting and maintaining the privacy of customers, regardless of channel, but especially on social because of its public nature. We consider the privacy of their information paramount. When necessary, our Social CSRs will request that customers take the conversation offline, and to send details via a separate email. With that process in place, I believe our biggest challenge has been “changing channels” on customers because it can sometimes be interpreted negatively.

Additionally, social customer contacts are typically individuals receiving shipments (not the shipper/customer who purchased UPS® services). While those individuals did not directly contact UPS to ship their package, their satisfaction remains our top priority.

Q: Discuss any challenges or obstacles involved with implementing your social customer service strategy. How did you convince upper management to get on board?

A: Perhaps the most challenging obstacle for implementing our social customer service strategy was showing leadership just how big a role social media would ultimately play. Additionally, establishing credibility for social as an “accepted” (and vital) service channel, like chat, phone, or email, took time, but leadership quickly understood its ramifications and took steps to implement a robust program.

Q: What metrics are you tracking?

A: From the customer service side, we primarily are measuring call center metrics, i.e., CSR performance, handle time, Service Level Agreement, etc. The UPS Social team measures social as a whole. Key metrics include conversation sentiment, engagement, organic audience growth and pull-through on CTAs.

Q: The good, the bad, the ugly: what lessons has your brand learned by implementing social customer service?

A: The good: Having a CSR team dedicated and trained to respond instantly to social media comments, whether positive or negative, has provided another level of customer service that had not been available before.

The bad: Like anything else, missing a bad tweet, post, or comment can have bad ramifications.

The ugly: The unknowns of social are a challenge; because it can be dependent on so many external factors such as weather, etc., forecasting correct staffing needs can be challenging.

Q: What direction is your organization looking to go in over the next 1-2 years with social, mobile and cloud technologies to improve customer support/experience?

A: Social Customer Service will be expanding to additional countries, bolstering our international and regional in the months and years to come.



CASE STUDY: STARWOOD HOTELS & RESORTS

Q: What's the size of social customer service team?

A: We have approximately 30 Social Care Associates.

Q: How is this team structured? Are members part of the existing social media team, the existing customer service team, or are they on their own?

A: The team is its own Customer Service team (working with the Social Center of Excellence).

Q: How has it scaled since the initiative started?

A: Since 2010, the team has grown from a team of one to a team of 30+ to support customer service requests in 15 languages, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Q: How integrated is social in your current customer service call centers? What tools are you using?

A: Our customer service teams "live" in our various call centers. They are fully integrated into our call center operations, and they utilize call center tools in addition to the social media management and monitoring tools available.

SM monitoring is integrated with the customer contact center, where experienced staff with access to databases, records, and booking systems can quickly solve a complaint and create positive experiences for our guests.

Q: How does the social customer service team interact with the rest of the social media team at the company?

A: Our social media team is comprised of many different stakeholders across the company: from the general managers on the property, to the hotel property social champions, to the division digital teams and global brand social strategists and coordinators.

The Social Customer Care team works hand in hand with these “social teams,” as well as key stakeholders at Starwood outside of social (if that’s even possible to say in this day), in coordinating support for significant initiatives and opportunities to engage with our guests.

Q: How has social changed the relationship between customer service and other departments in the company, i.e., marketing or sales?

A: Within the hospitality industry, but particularly within our company, customer service is everyone’s job. Consumer behavior pushes us to constantly re-evaluate our approach to social media and move to more strategic integration between marketing, branding, and customer service.

We have established processes to ensure a consistent customer experience, a blend of metrics to incorporate service and brand, and a deeper integration of social content into other digital properties.

Q: What social channels do most inquiries come in on?

A: Facebook and Twitter (mostly Twitter).

Q: What percentage of customer inquiries comes in via traditional channels vs. social? Has social allowed for call/email deflection?

A: Absolutely. Instead of emailing or calling, customers are reaching out through social media channels. In 2014, approximately 1.1 million messages came through our brand channels alone.

Q: What unique challenges have you faced, specific to your industry?

A: While social networking can help strengthen guest loyalty and satisfaction, it can also lead to unfair negativity, inaccurate information, and undue criticism.

Travelers are using social media as a customer service tool 24 hours a day, 7 days a week in dozens of languages, with a higher volume of chatter than with phone or email, and all of it takes place in the public eye. Handling social media messages requires a different skill set from addressing customer issues on the property.

Finally, a lot of user-generated content is created, and that needs to be monitored.

Q: Discuss any challenges or obstacles involved with implementing your social customer service strategy.

A: Having enough resources (people and time) is a challenge, as are staff knowledge, training, and compliance.

Q: How did you convince upper management to get on board?

A: There is a high price (revenue-wise) to pay for poor customer service. Poor customer service leads to negative feedback in public forums such as Flyer Talk, Facebook, and Twitter. If ignored entirely, our guests turn elsewhere for support, giving our competitors an opportunity to swoop in.

For us, it was a matter of one situation on a property that quickly escalated, and was made worse as a result of conversations on social channels.

Social media for our company is deeply tied to our Marketing and Branding, Customer Outreach, Collaboration and Info Sharing, and Organizational Risk.

Q: What metrics are you tracking?

A: Average response time (average time elapsed between all customer messages and agent replies); first response time (average time elapsed between initial customer messages and initial agent replies); inbound volume; response volume; volume by reason category/language.

Q: What is the role of mobile in your social customer service strategy?

A: We recognize that our customer support and engagement efforts need to run alongside each other to give our business a competitive edge. We're constantly working to advance our mobile offerings and integrate social media experiences with our mobile presence. Examples of that include personalized mobile messaging with the help of key customer intelligence; including in-app feedback forms to personalize the exchange of feedback (to an extent) between us and our guests; and the ability to push real-time notifications to our customers' mobile devices.

Q: The good, the bad, the ugly: what lessons has your brand learned by implementing social customer service?

A: Customer service, both good and bad, impacts revenue. It's not enough to be friendly; we want to make our guests feel like valued friends.

Customer service experiences have a long-lasting impact; people respond to people. When we're engaging with customers, it is important to connect with them on a personal level. Sending out a press release in response to a crisis situation can quickly worsen the crisis, and we quickly lose credibility when our communication appears to be coming from a robot.

Social media is real-time, and speed matters, but you still need to take the time to understand the concern and think through a response to provide a working solution. The problem doesn't need to be fixed instantly, but the customer does need to know you are working on a solution.

Having a centralized customer service handle to address customer service issues ensures success and prevents confusion within our company and with guests. Prior to 2014, we handled customer service requests across 10 brand channels. This resulted in a mix of marketing and customer messages going back and forth on the same channels, with different stakeholders handling different issues, often overlapping.

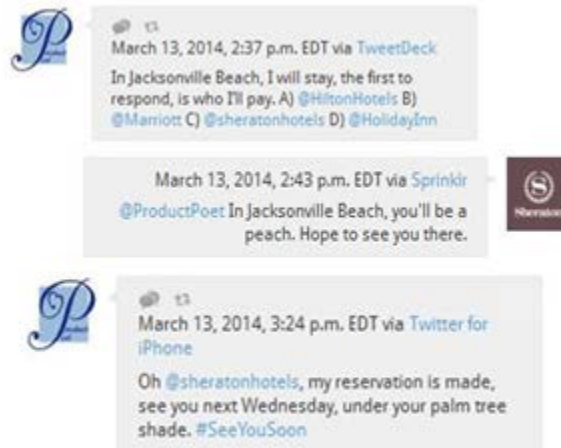
By creating the @spgassist handle, we were able to move the negative chatter over to one channel, so that fans following brand handles were not being bombarded with negative feedback and could focus on the brand's value.

Q: Share any general facts about the effects social customer service has had on business, as well as any customer stories you'd like to relate.

A: Our team manages our social channels 24 hours a day, 7 days a week through Sprinklr. We engage with our customers and seek out opportunities to build stronger relationships, not only when we read complaints, but also when we see pivotal moments and opportunities to make great moments even better with Surprise and Delights.

An agent's daily routine includes monitoring channels, listening, engaging across legal, PR, brands, and hotel properties in order to ensure we're delivering the right messages. Big data (to us) is all about the small moments that mean so much to our guests.

Examples:



Product Poet seeking out a place to stay



Loyal guest and Fresh Prince of Bel-Air's "Carlton" experience



Cold room: sending guest an alpaca throw to make up for the inconvenience



CASE STUDY: INTERCONTINENTAL HOTELS GROUP FEATURING NICK AYRES, GLOBAL DIRECTOR, SOCIAL MARKETING

Q: What's the size of social customer service team?

A: We have approximately 20 agents who work in several different locations around the world to keep 24/7 coverage.

Q: How is this team structured? Are members part of the existing social media team, the existing customer service team, or are they on their own? How has it scaled since the initiative started? How integrated is social in your current customer service call centers? What tools are you using?

A: Our social customer care team is part of our larger Reservations and Customer Care organization. We started with a small operation in our Salt Lake City location and have since scaled it to include Baguio City and Hangzhou with team of 20 agents. We began as a limited hour operation, but now operate on a 24/7/365 cycle.

From the beginning, we wanted to make sure the team was integrated into our existing customer support infrastructure as much as possible. Having a knowledge of and a loyalty to the IHG brand that could cross channels strengthened their overall ability to navigate on behalf of our hotels across social tools. And it's worked well for us.

With that in mind, we've also taken steps to ensure that our agents have access to any history we may have with a guest - either on that current stay or a previous one.

Q: How does the social customer service team interact with the rest of the social media team at the company?

A: Our social customer care team works closely with our brand community managers to evaluate and triage social activity as necessary.

In our early stages, we built very detailed workflows to help both community managers and social customer care team members understand their respective roles. A strong collaborative rapport reduces any confusion, and they work together pretty seamlessly. We've also been able to leverage technology to help all contact points work from a single workflow rather than have multiple, parallel systems.

Q: How has social changed the relationship between customer service and other departments in the company, i.e., marketing or sales?

A: We recognize customers expect that, no matter whom they talk to at IHG, we should know them and their history with us at every touch point. In that sense, "customer service" really is an extension of, or an opportunity for, another marketing and sales channel, as it is a direct experience our customers have with our brands. While on the surface, customer care has traditionally been thought of as a cost more than as a chance for profit, we have worked to turn it into an opportunity. We can leverage social customer care to deepen our connection and relationship with guests.

Q: What social channels do most inquiries come in on? What percentage of customer inquiries comes in via traditional channels vs. social? Has social allowed for call/email deflection?

A: We certainly get a good mix of questions on Twitter and Facebook, with Twitter probably leading from a volume perspective. However, we also see a fair number of questions come via FlyerTalk, which is a travel community dedicated to loyalty programs. For IHG, we've found it incredibly valuable to be active in that conversation and to have both a customer service and brand presence in the community.

In terms of call/email deflection, the reality is that we still see the bulk of our customer contacts come in via traditional channels. However, while social used to be more of a last resort for customers (they would only go to social if they couldn't get answers elsewhere), we continue to see the number of first-touch inquiries via social rising, and we expect that trend to continue. We are also seeing more customers take advantage of our live and virtual chat options, continuing the trend of call volume inching down. Ultimately, we're working hard to answer our customers' queries as quickly and efficiently as possible, whichever channel they may reach out to us on.

Q: What unique challenges have you faced, specific to your industry?

A: For IHG hotels, online guest reviews via TripAdvisor and Booking.com, as well as our own website, can be as important (if not more important) as more “general” social media sites like Twitter and Facebook. These travel-specific online destinations are powerful voices that shape guest opinions of our hotels and ultimately influence stay decisions.

IHG certainly spends a lot of time engaging on Facebook and Twitter, but we also work hard to make sure we focus on where our guests are already talking about us, which more often than not includes these less “well known” social sites as well as travel forums like FlyerTalk.

Because feedback from our guests is distributed across so many sites, we lean in to technology to help make listening and engagement as easy and efficient as possible for our hoteliers, our brands, and our social engagement managers.

Q: Discuss any challenges or obstacles involved with implementing your social customer service strategy, and how you convinced upper management to get on board.

A: We have been fortunate, because our senior management were early to buy in to the value and need for an active social program. They clearly understand the role social plays in managing the guest experience and have been fully supportive from early on. Our challenges really came around operationally executing, given our global scale. Deciding how to design and staff appropriately, for example: what times do we operate, what languages do we cover, etc. Thankfully, we’ve had supportive business partners, and we’ve been able to quickly work through concerns and challenges.

Q: What metrics are you tracking?

A: We track a host of different metrics, from response time to how closely customer care team members follow their processes (acknowledging concern, documenting issues, etc.). At a macro level, we’re also tracking sentiment of conversation around our brands over time, and also looking for qualitative “wins” that can demonstrate the impact our interactions can have.

Q: Can you share anything regarding costs?

A: With our integrated approach, we've been able to keep costs well managed. We're also pleased that our effective management and relationship development have helped to keep our guest remediation lower than we initially forecasted.

Q: How is community involved? Do customers in the community tend to be more engaged, buy more, last longer?

A: Because so many of our questions are ones that involve a specific property or hotel stay, it's more difficult for our communities to act as our advocates on a massive scale. However, we've certainly found the travel community willing and able to help answer questions about our loyalty program (IHG Rewards Club) and this has been a tremendous asset. In addition, we've recently been testing a new feature called "Questions & Answers" on our branded websites that gives guests the opportunity to ask short, simple questions for hotels and other guests to answer. The results so far have been outstanding, and we have seen good interaction with both hotels and guests. We are looking to expand it further in 2015.

Q: The good, the bad, the ugly: what lessons has your brand learned by implementing social customer service?

A: Don't forget that your customers don't understand your internal silos...and frankly, they shouldn't have to. Your brand is your brand is your brand - so act like it.

Also, you would be surprised how far a simple "Thank you" or "We hear you" will go. Most customers just want to know that their concerns are being heard and, where appropriate, actions are being taken. While there are certainly some cases that will take more time and energy to handle effectively, it's amazing how often a simple "We're sorry" will not only change the tone of the conversation, but turn a negative situation into a positive one.

Q: In what direction is your organization looking to go over the next 1-2 years with social, mobile, and cloud technologies to improve customer support/experience?

A: Ultimately we want to be able to meet our customers wherever they are, and we know that is increasingly on their mobile devices. So, we'll be there even more in the future. Also, we want to get to the point where we can start to pre-empt potential challenges and fix them before they even become issues. There's certainly some secret sauce there, but we feel strongly that there is an opportunity for us to do so.



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Brent Leary is cofounder and managing partner of CRM Essentials, a CRM consultancy focused on small and midsize enterprises. In 2009 he coauthored *Barack 2.0: Social Media Lessons for Business*. He is in the process of writing his next book, *The Amazon Effect: How a New Customer Culture is Creating Crazy New Business Opportunities and Killing Companies That Won't Adapt*, due out in 2016. Leary writes regularly for America Express OPEN, CRM magazine, Small Business Trends, and serves on the advisory board for Social Media Today. He is the host and executive producer of the upcoming Atlanta-based television program *Technology for Business Sake*. You can email him at bleary@crm-essentials.com or send him a tweet at [@brentleary](https://twitter.com/brentleary).

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