

How Big Data Can Solve Marketers' Social Engagement Challenges

by **Carol Wolicki** | January 7, 2014



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Despite advances in cross-channel marketing automation, the majority of today's marketers still approach customer engagement with a campaign-based mentality. The blast approach – rooted in mass marketing print and online ads, email and direct mail – is marketing comfort food: familiar, cost-contained, and easy to digest. But it's also easily dismissed by consumers who,

in today's digital world, are squarely in control of message and information consumption.

To more successfully engage, many companies try to take advantage of consumers' digital participation by setting up social media programs or inbound marketing programs. The approach relies on listening tools, social messaging platforms, and content management programs that often require teams of staffers or outsourcers to monitor consumers' activities, create relevant content and provide timely responses. Are they successful? It depends on how you define success.

Marketers can point to a growing roster of Twitter followers, an ever-increasing number of Facebook "likes" and the feedback their organizations receive in a variety of social channels as proof. But true engagement only happens episodically, and often depends on how alert the team is. The classic example is the social media pundit who commented in his Twitter feed about a desire for a steak from his favorite restaurant. And there, when he arrived at his destination, was Morton's with a steak dinner. But it doesn't happen to everyone because the process of responding reactively to each person individually isn't scalable, and even if it was, how would companies decide who to respond to and who to ignore?

As a means of engagement, these systems fail. Why? Because the effort – like other discrete marketing initiatives – is siloed. Not just in practice but – more importantly – in the way the approach deals with customer data which is often trapped in separate systems, different types of file formats and managed using different types of rules. Consequently, social engagement efforts are people-based, expensive and sporadic.

To facilitate true customer engagement requires a different approach: one that relies on the ability to capture both big and small customer data, combine and analyze it, and derive insights from it to automatically drive the correct action – action that's timely and relevant to the individual and appropriate for the channel they're using.

Attention Marketers: Big Data Is Your Friend

In the past, creative marketers often were accused of being 'data-shy.' But they're not, really. They use data and numbers all the time: SIC codes, address data, socio-economic data, CPM (cost per thousand) and CTR (click through rates), and other information that helps them determine reach, response and ROI. They look to business intelligence tools for information on customer trends. They rely on web analytics and transactional data for purchasing patterns.

Yet, nine out of ten marketers will say the same thing: "My customer data is a mess." Fixing this "mess" is the first step to true engagement. Big data solutions that are now emerging can help marketers take solid steps towards resolving data disconnects and lead to better customer experiences, such as this one:

Fran Flyer is on a two-segment flight from Boston through Chicago to LA. Her flight out of Logan Airport is delayed because of mechanical difficulty. Attempting a re-route, Fran asks the desk agent about alternative flights. The busy agent

pushes her off to Customer Service in another part of the airport. Loathe to leave her seat in case the existing flight boards, Fran logs into her airline's website from her iPad and finds an alternative flight leaving in half an hour. She books the flight, pays the additional fee, and goes immediately to the gate. When she gets there she finds out the flight is overbooked. Fran expresses her frustration on the airline's Twitter feed. All of a sudden she's engaged with a social media representative who is alerted because Fran's Twitter ID, which is part of her master data profile, identifies her as a Super-Elite Flyer with over 350,000 miles on his airline. He immediately puts her back on her original flight, refunds her fee, and directs her to her original gate. The flight leaves 20 minutes later. The social media rep also calls the agent at the arrival desk in Chicago to make arrangements so that Fran doesn't miss her connection to LA.

An impossible scenario? No. Not if the big data (from the social media feed) is monitored effectively and connected to the little data (Fran's frequent flier status and her customer data profile with all of her assignable address information) and appropriate alerts are set up so that agents can proactively respond.

But who does this? Marketers who recognize that big data is an asset but an even bigger asset when it's tied to existing customer data. These marketers know that doing so can improve their companies' ability to acquire and retain customers.

Three Tips for Marketers Who Want to Use Big Data to Improve Customer Experiences

1. A Little Knowledge Can Go A Long Way. To empower yourself and your organization to take advantage of big data you need passing knowledge of what big data is and what technologies are available to help you manage it. To get a sense of what big data is you might want to read up on experts such as Doug Laney, an analyst at Gartner who first characterized big data as having three Vs: volume (lots of data), velocity (the speed with which it's produced), and variety (different types of data). Others have added "veracity" and "value." You should also familiarize yourself with Hadoop, an open-source distributed filing system that is designed to index large amounts of data – regardless of its structure – cheaply. You don't have to become a Hadoop programmer to understand that cutting the costs of managing large amounts of data – including social media data – could be beneficial for your company. Acquaint yourself with the latest news about Hadoop 2.0 or YARN. It's probably the most significant development in this area so far, since it will enable application

developers to deliver solutions that won't require deep knowledge of Hadoop to gain its benefit.

2. Start Small and Capture Everything. New technologies make it possible for you to capture and store both structured and unstructured data cost-effectively on inexpensive hardware running Hadoop. So, go ahead and capture what best fits your needs: Twitter feeds, social graph scans, Facebook comments, blogs, geo coordinates, mobile app activity – whatever is important (or might be important) to helping you improve your customer's experience and ongoing engagement with your company. With new data management tools your database and business analysts won't need specialized programming skills to gain access to – and manipulate – data directly within the Hadoop cluster. They'll be able to sift through data "riches" easily to find – possibly unexpected – insights of value to your marketing efforts. And, if you start small, gain confidence as you go, you'll be able to share your initial successes and move on to bigger wins.

3. Big Benefits from Small Data. One real payback from big data is how you use it to enhance your "little data." Tying insights from social media streams to information in your core customer data base will enable you to gain greater insights about your customers' real-time behaviors, their attitudes about your company or your competitors, and take actions to enhance their experiences with your organization. Data, insight, and action: it's a Marketers' Trifecta. But you only win here if you are able to effectively resolve customer identities – from uncommon and diverse sources – so you can respond *to the right person* correctly.

If, in the frequent flier example above, the airline hadn't taken steps to match up Fran Flyer's frequent flyer ID with her Twitter profile, the social media rep would not have had the insight to know if he was responding to a "frequent" or a "not-so-frequent" flyer. And, as social media becomes a more prevalent form of interaction for customer support issues, knowing exactly which customers are the most valuable – and deserve faster response or different types of responses – could be an important and expense-saving business decision.

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