

Use Forums To Improve Customer Relationship Management

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Sample of Content:

Forums are not only useful for sharing ideas and web-networking - they can also be used as part of your customer relationship management strategy. This first article covers the positive impact forums can have on your customer relationship management initiatives.

Content:

Forums are great for learning, sharing of ideas, and generally masterminding with peers, but give some thought to the impact they can have on your lead generation efforts, as well as on your customer relationship management activities.

Joining an active forum can significantly accelerate your rate of learning – whether you are a newbie or an experienced practitioner.

For newbies - even if you merely “lurk” in the shadows and don’t post on your forums - you will learn a lot by reading questions by others, and the helpful replies by experienced forum members.

The benefit for the experienced members can be thought of as a web version of masterminding - ideas can be shared and validated, and various techniques can be discussed with peers – often on different continents and in different time zones – something not nearly as feasible in the physical world.

Apart from the information sharing and networking that forums offer, they have the potential to both positively and negatively impact your marketing efforts, levels of customer satisfaction, and the overall sentiments towards your customer relationship management.

The remainder of this article will give you some ideas as to how you can use forums in a positive way to improve your marketing initiatives. A follow-up article (Forum Perils for Customer Relationship Management) will cover how to avoid the negative impact forums can have on your business.

Forums can positively impact your marketing strategy and initiatives in the following way:

* Conduct Market Research / Investigate Market Reputation

Search engines make it so easy to research what is being said about both your products, as well as those of your competitors.

Simply type in the name of the product of service you want to research, followed by “comments”, “review”, “scam”, or any other relevant term. Within seconds you will have a list of website reviews, blog postings, and forum comments.

Ignore the first two (many are by affiliates just punting the product hoping to earn a fee) – the ones to read are the forum conversations, where you will invariably get some pretty honest feedback – good or bad – about the product.

If you get some glowing comments in public/membership forums for your products, contact the individuals to see if you can post these as testimonials. Negative comments should also be reacted to – once again, contact the individuals and see if you can rectify the situation. Often a “fixed” bad experience can convert a vocal detractor into a fan – most people can tolerate a mistake, what makes them irate is when you ignore them, or pretend that no problem or grievance exists.

* Customer Relationship Management – use for Satisfaction Tracking

If your business markets a product to quite a large user base, it makes marketing sense to set up a product-specific forum, and actively promote the forum to your customer base.

Once active, the postings by your customers will give you a good indication of the overall sentiment towards your product, as well as your service levels. Prospects can also use the forums as a gauge of product popularity and level of active support.

Your forum will also provide you with a communication channel to your customer base. You can use it to conduct quick polls – essentially a free customer relationship management alternative to paid-for satisfaction audits by market research firms.

* New Product Ideas / Launches

Whether your website has a forum or not, it is worthwhile to join a couple of the more active forums related to your market. By monitoring questions, complaints, and cries for help, you can possibly identify the need for new products or services. A forum can also be a no-cost way to launch a pilot for a new product or service. You can get some early sign-ups/purchases without a major investment in marketing, and at the same time use the opportunity to get some quick testimonials.

* Positioning As An Expert / Attracting Traffic

Beyond merely identifying needs, you can use these forum questions as an opportunity to position yourself as a helpful expert. To do this, you need to monitor the most active threads (gets the most readership), and where you have the expertise, provide quality responses to posed questions. This will help grow your reputation over time.

If you ensure that your signature includes your website address – preferably with a short tagline indicating your USP – this can prove to be a very useful method for lead generation, and importantly, one that delivers qualified prospects.

If you notice frequently repeated newbie questions, consider setting up a FAQ section on your site, and then direct the enquirer to the page, rather than providing a comprehensive answer in the forum.

* Finding JV partners

Monitoring active forums has another positive marketing spin off - it will help you identify potential JV partners. In the same way you are being assessed as to your expert know-how, you can use the postings by your peers to identify those with whom it would make sense to explore setting up joint ventures. This could get you access to mailing lists that you currently do not have, and in so doing, significantly broaden your marketing reach.

If you are adding an online component to your offline business, or starting to investigate an online business opportunity, consider how you can incorporate the points listed above. For those suggestions that have a nice fit with your market, make a decision to take action and include them in your marketing activities. By actively and consistently applying these forum tactics you will find that both your lead generation and customer relationship management initiatives will be far more productive.

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