

4 Ways Social Media Improves the Sales Process

Organizations are using social information to listen to, understand, and reach out to prospects, turn them into customers, and turn customers into advocates.

By [Cynthia Clark](#) | Published 01/23/2012 in [1to1 Magazine](#)



The first thing many customers do when they consider a purchase is go online to do research. As soon as curiosity strikes, they explore possible options by visiting product sites and search engines, querying their social connections, and perusing comments and reviews.

As a result, organizations are increasingly integrating social into their sales cycle. From the moment prospects show interest, to lead nurturing, to purchase, and beyond, companies are using social media to build relationships, turn prospects into customers, and turn customers into evangelists for the brand.

"Social media does a great job of helping companies identify new sales opportunities by monitoring social channels," says Jim Dickie, managing partner at [CSO Insights](#). He says companies are also using social media to learn what customers and prospects are saying about their experience with a brand. In fact, research carried out by CSO Insights last year found that almost a third of companies consider social media as an "exponentially important" ingredient in monitoring customer relationships.

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According to Christine Crandell, president of [New Business Strategies](#), the most advanced companies are using social media as a tool to map the customer's buying journey. "Companies are trying to understand the sequence of events that customers go through," she says. This, Crandell explains, helps companies not only understand and tailor strategies to individual customers, but also uncover information those businesses can use to tweak their online content and address any erroneous information on social media.

Here are four other ways to use social media to improve the sales process:

- **Capturing prospects** — Social media has added a prequel to the sales cycle: Instead of starting on the first contact between a prospect and a company, often the sales process now commences when customers embark on online research. According to Melissa Madian, senior director for worldwide field enablement at [Eloqua](#), social media has added a "friend and follower" stage at the very start of the cycle, even before prospects have been identified.

"Social media offers ways for prospective customers to find more about a product," adds Dickie of CSO Insights. Social channels bring customers and prospects together and facilitate interactions, providing an additional source of information about products and services before the first contact with a company. When companies make information available in social or help facilitate those discussions it can whet prospects' appetite to learn more.

Additionally, if a prospect shows interest, but isn't ready to purchase, social can help nurture the relationship. Madian suggests connecting with prospects over social channels and staying in touch even if a sale falls through. "Remaining connected will also open doors to [customers'] networks," she says.

"Whether you win or lose a deal, keep following them [over social channels] because it can help you understand their experience and recognize any indications of something you're not doing right." It can also reveal new opportunities to engage those prospects.

- **Establishing trust**— Trust is a crucial element in the company-customer relationship. Social information can do more than help buyers become aware of businesses early on in the sales process. By being honest and transparent, companies can establish themselves as trustworthy in customers' eyes. New Business Strategies' Crandell says establishing trust early on in the sales process can impact the speed of the sales cycle since customers are more inclined to do business with a trustable company. "Customers are looking for trusted sources," she emphasizes.

An essential element of building trust is how companies react when customers share both positive and negative experiences on social media. Swift responses, taking ownership of issues, and proactive outreach can positively impact the image customers and prospects have of a brand; the opposite is also true. This image can also affect customers and prospects' intention to do business with a company.

- **Assessing customers' needs**—Customers' use of social channels to talk about their experience with products and brands gives companies important insight into what they're doing well and what they need to change. "Listening is key," Eloqua's Madian says. Dickie explains that companies are increasingly using social media to learn what customers and prospects are saying about their experiences with them and their competitors; for example, when someone posts a comment on Facebook or Twitter, or blogs about an experience. "This can affect [prospective customers] without even knowing it," Dickie says. "It's therefore important to identify these people, speak with them, and [resolve] the problem."

Whether an issue is raised by a customer or a prospect, it's essential to address it promptly, Crandell says. She highlights the importance of following both customers and prospects on social media, assessing what they're saying, taking note of their comments, responding to them, and offering relevant information and solutions.

- **Follow-up**—Twitter has become the agony aunt for disgruntled customers, who take to the medium to complain about negative experiences. Unhappy clients are also blogging and using other social sites to share negative reviews, meaning that one customer's pain will be available to anyone who's interested in listening.

While this might worry some organizations, they have no choice but to embrace it and make the most of it. Instead of resisting the impact and reach of social media, companies have to proactively reach out to concerned or unhappy customers with an apology and a solution.

Additionally, Dickie says it's imperative that companies manage expectations and set the right perception in customers' minds. For example, if a company doesn't have the resources to immediately respond to tweets, it should make sure that customers know to use alternative means of contact when they have an urgent matter.

If used properly, social media can help spur current and future sales. Since companies cannot control what customers say about them on social networks, they should embrace social media as part of the sales process by providing relevant information, responding quickly to inquiries and issues, and staying in touch with both prospects and customers.

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