WHY I.T. SUPPORT SHOULD EMBRACE SOCIAL MEDIA

By Chris Dancy, Director, Office of the CTO, BMC Software

A colleague of mine, a marketing professional, recently told me of an experience she had that really drove home the power of social media. She was on Twitter and noticed a complaint from a customer about a software product her company offered. She went to LinkedIn to find out more about the customer, including what company he worked for, as this information wasn't presented on the user's Twitter profile. She discovered that he was an administrator of the product at his current and previous employer and had seven years of experience with this product. She also saw that he had graduated from the same college that she attended. She was able to gather this wealth of information in a matter of minutes.

She quickly realized that this was not just a complaint voiced for cathartic reasons but rather a legitimate observation by a person with a high level of credibility. She immediately contacted her company's Tier-2 technical support staff and had them follow up with the customer. She also contacted the customer to let him know that her company was on the case. During the conversation, she mentioned that she had seen, while looking at his LinkedIn profile, that they were both alumni of the same university. It turned out, the customer's son was a current student at that same university. She received a warm response from the customer thanking her for her swift action. That day, a human connection was made over a technology issue. To this day, she and that customer still exchange messages on Twitter.

For quite some time, I have thought about harnessing the power of social media to provide a whole new communication channel for technical support. It makes possible levels of proactivity and interaction that are not feasible with the more traditional forms of communicating with technical support, such as telephone calls and email.

Support organizations should embrace social media. It enables innovation that will greatly increase the value of the support organization to the business. Many people prefer to use social media to get help. If IT does not tune in to this channel, then IT will miss out on this important and information-rich loop.

Technical support evolves

I remember the first support email I ever received as a support agent back in the 1990s. I didn't know the employee, and the email didn't give me much context or information about the user. In fact, emails never provided enough information, so I would usually have to dig for more. I would not call the sender initially. Instead, I would ping the user's

machine and save the results. I would then go into our server to see the last time that person had a successful login and also do a lot of forensic work on the backend. Finally, I would call the person and walk through a standard set of questions to get additional information.

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In early 2000, the Web brought a new communication channel to IT support. Now users could go to a Web portal to enter support requests using forms that solicited relevant information. But they felt like emails. So I proceeded in much the same way that I did with emails. I still didn't have much information about the user. I might refer to the company directory to see what department the user was in, but that was the extent of my actions. In any case, I did not interact with the user on a personal level.

Social media changes the game. It brings a whole new communication channel, extending the reach of IT support in three major areas: input, output, and especially, personalization. That's why I see the integration of social media as the next major step in the evolution of technical and customer support.

INPUT
Social media greatly extends the ears and eyes of the support staff. Consider the example of my colleague who was alerted to a customer complaint over Twitter. What if the service desk was also monitoring Twitter?

In many cases, users are crying out for help with problems, yet they are not directing those pleas to the company that provides the product or service with which they are having problems. Some have been turned off by previous experiences with service desks.

Others just prefer to use social media to get answers.

Users may pose their questions to a site such as LinkedIn Answers or Quora, or to an online user community (of which there are thousands). In any case, the more social media channels you monitor, the wider your visibility into who needs guidance, help, or support.

Social media also provides insight into answers that could be of value to IT support. I once purchased a tablet and wanted to upgrade the RAM. I Googled for help and came across several links to write-ups. None had sufficient clarity for me. I then came across a YouTube video demonstration of the process that gave me what I needed. This video was produced by another user just like me and was very helpful.

It's essential to gauge the reliability of answers. A major determinant is the credibility of the person providing the answer. Sites such as Klout and PeerIndex monitor and measure answer providers in terms of the quality of the information they give. These sites differ widely in the criteria they use, such as the number of people that act on the provider's answers or how other top influencers react to the provider's answers. Many of these sites allow users to add their own ratings. In any case, bringing reliable, proven answers to the IT support staff can be highly beneficial.

OUTPUT
Social media greatly extends the reach of IT support in getting information out to users, such as giving users a heads up about potential problems. This capability is already being used by companies to alert customers to problems with products or services. For example, I travel often, and I follow my airline of choice on Twitter. Recently, that airline tweeted that their network was down and causing significant impact to their logistics and customer travel. A follow-up tweet a few minutes later directed any customer with travel that day to contact the customer service department — and the tweet provided a phone number. That same capability could be used by the service desk.

It's important, however, that IT support consider creating a social media account unique to the support organization to ensure they are communicating with their target audience. That's because many companies use social media to announce product promotions, news, or financial information. That may cause users to tune out and thereby miss important alerts.

PERSONALIZATION

Finally, the social media channel enables IT support personnel to quickly gain an understanding of the user's persona, such as their educational background, their hobbies, and a photo of themselves. That permits interaction with users on a much more personal level than with other communication channels. The advantage of this approach is clearly demonstrated by my colleague's experience described earlier.

It is this capability to personalize that is, in my opinion, game changing and will radically modify the entire support model. Companies have already taken advantage of social media such as Facebook to connect on a more personal level with customers regarding brands. Support organizations should embrace social media to provide the people that use technology with a better, more personalized experience.

It's important that IT support staff look at personalization as a two-way street. The support staff should also make their personae available to users. A great way to do this is to make sure each support agent has filled out his or her user profile on your online user community, if your company offers one. This will further enhance the customer experience by enabling the customer to connect with the support agent more personally.

Integrating social media with the service desk

It's necessary to integrate social media channels with your IT service management (ITSM) solutions to enable the service desk to easily tap into the social media channels. In doing so, keep in mind that each channel is uniquely focused on a particular audience and message.

The enormous number of social media channels and their widely varying audiences and content create challenging architectural issues that must be addressed. Think about which social media platforms should be integrated and to what level they should be integrated with ITSM solutions. To determine this, you have to evaluate where your audience might be most comfortable. Are they more likely to communicate on Facebook or Twitter? As a result, integration will probably occur in incremental fashion as IT support organizations become more experienced with the capabilities of social media and learn how to best take advantage of them.

With respect to input, for example, the service desk application could be integrated with Twitter and display tweets right on the service desk console. In doing so, it's important that we don't overwhelm the service desk with thousands of tweets. Think about the evolution of event management systems. Early systems flooded the operations staff with events, many of which were due to the same issue. Today's event management systems filter, correlate, and prioritize events before passing them on to operations. In a similar manner, social media monitors could be developed that automatically filter, correlate, and prioritize inputs such as tweets.

With respect to output, integration with social media, such as Twitter or Facebook, allows the service desk to broadcast alerts to users. Many service desks already integrate with email systems, so adding social media means simply adding another broadcast channel.

Organizational impact

It's important to do more than just integrate social media channels with the ITSM solution. There is a fundamental difference in mindset between marketing people and support people. Marketing people are typically more interested in the personas of the people with whom they are dealing. They may be more likely than IT people to strive to develop tighter, more human relationships with customers. IT support people are likely to be more interested in the technology the people are using. When support people interact with users, it's usually to get more technical information.

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This support mindset has driven increased standardization, including standardization of request forms, incidents, and support processes. And standardization has depersonalized interaction.

Think about how personalization can help to improve support. This scenario encourages support people to develop new skills. They can learn to use a new vehicle for receiving support incidents. They will also understand the context around these incidents. This provides IT with a new way of engaging and staying in contact with users. In essence, they can take their approach from trouble-shooting to case management.

It's a good idea for your organization to have defined processes for monitoring and responding to social media input. This approach will enable a coordinated response to customers.

Embrace it

By embracing social media, IT support organizations can greatly extend and enhance their ability to respond to the needs of internal users and external customers. Interaction with users will be more proactive, more positive, more collaborative, and more personal.

Everyone benefits. Employees will have their problems addressed faster, increasing their productivity. External customers will have a more satisfying experience, increasing their loyalty. And the support organization will increase its contribution to business value.

For more information about IT Service Management technology that is integrated with social media (such as Twitter and Facebook), visit **www.bmc.com/products/footprints**.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chris Dancy, a director in the Office of the CTO for BMC Software, has been working in IT support for 20 years, with experience ranging from help desk level 1, service desk manager, ITSM process consultant, software product manager, corporate marketing executive, and entrepreneur. Most people know Chris as @servicesphere on Twitter and as the host of the U.S. edition of ITSM Weekly, the Podcast, syndicated to 30,000 listeners monthly. His name and avatar are synonymous with social media for IT, "edutainment," and his futuristic visions for IT.

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