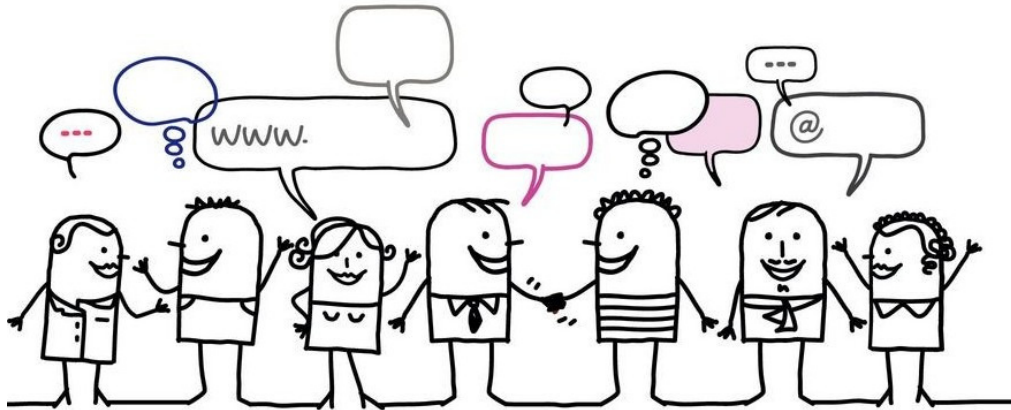


Social retail – the art of conversation



As a 16-year-old shop assistant, **Peter Doyle**, founder *SocialNetit.com Ltd* learned the fundamentals of what makes a retailer successful. Twenty-five years later, he says it's good to talk – and turn conversations into sales. Jonathan Doyle reports.



"The truth is, I am finding it more frustrating as a customer to have a human conversation when I want to buy things or have a query with something I have just bought," says Peter Doyle, founder and Director of social media consultancy SocialRetail.co.uk.

Successful retailers will only remain successful if they can turn conversations into commerce, he thinks: "Self-service has been dehumanising."

Thirteen years ago retail invested in e-commerce and used technology to reduce costs and encourage self-service online – customers could choose from a wide variety of searchable products on a database. "We thought that if we allowed the customer to buy online then this would help reduce our operating costs and enable us to compete with other retailers without an online presence," Peter Doyle says.

He explains that, back then, "We could open up the whole shop assortment online

for customers to search and choose anything they wanted."

Delivering the goods to the customer was always challenging, and retailers didn't get it right all of the time: "We weren't really prepared for the volume of emails from customers and we didn't really join up the online part of the business with the offline seamlessly for the customer," he says. The in-store promotions didn't flow through to the website smoothly enough. And, he stressed, "We found it challenging to brief all shop staff on the latest offers and the



people managing the online store were on a different floor in head office and a bit secluded."

Despite initial efforts to present a joined-up external image, he says: "We were not very cohesive internally and some departments just didn't talk to each other."

Nowadays many customers have more knowledge about the products than some shop assistants. They are less tolerant of poor customer service and they vary how they shop. "Sometimes they are looking for deals, sometimes they are looking for treats or gifts for their loved ones, sometimes they prefer to visit a shop and sometimes they prefer to buy online."

We are all human, he adds, and we are all customers too. We like to talk to people when we are shopping but we have no patience with people who don't care or, worse still, don't even know about the products in their shops. "We will always come back and buy from people we trust."

He continues: "As customers, we understand advertising better than ever before and we don't like to be taken for a fool on a click-through or a 'hard sell', time-sensitive offer on email sent to our inbox." The bottom line is: "If you let us down, you've blown it."

We like to shop, but the experience could be so much more enjoyable. "The information age is over – we are now entering the conversation age," he says. "Let's make sure that when our customers want a conversation with us, whether it's online, via email, telephone,

fax, or better still in person, that we are there waiting for them – ready, willing and able to serve them."

He thinks that we must also make sure that we encourage open conversations in the workplace. "This will help us to spot the good ideas, reward and retain the innovative, hardworking people, and let's try and nurture people who wish to develop their own skills within our organisations."

Simple things matter most, thinks Peter Doyle. His social retail manifesto (see box) guides us on how to regain that conversation with the customer. ■

BRC training

SocialRetail.co.uk has teamed up with the BRC to offer social media training programmes to retailers. For further information, contact Peter Doyle direct on pete.doyle@socialretail.co.uk or visit www.socialretail.co.uk

Social retail manifesto

- 1 The customer is king or queen.
- 2 If you can't find what you are looking for, tell us and we will find it for you.
- 3 If you are not satisfied, tell us and we will put it right for you.
- 4 We want to hear what you have to say about us – good or bad. Please talk to us.
- 5 Tell us when we make mistakes and we will try not to repeat them.
- 6 We encourage you to share your views, good or bad, on our service and our products with other shoppers. We will provide you with a place to share your views with us and with other customers online and in our shops.
- 7 We sometimes rely on other companies to support our service to you. Please tell us if they let you down and we will find other companies who won't.
- 8 Customer service is not a department; it is everyone's job.
- 9 We don't try to persuade you to buy things you don't need; it doesn't help anyone in the long run.
- 10 Every member of staff has the power to help you. Please ask them questions and don't let them push you to other departments when you have a query. It's our job to communicate with every department, not yours. We won't waste your valuable time.

