AMPLIFYING PERCEPTIONS: HOW JETBLUE USES TWITTER TO DRIVE ENGAGEMENT AND SATISFACTION

THE GOAL

JetBlue created its first Twitter account in May 2007 (twitter.com/JetBlue). The company’s goal was to target its frequent flyers, the loyal TrueBlue users. What was surprising, however, was the rapid progress the company made from zero Twitter followers to more followers than the White House, JetBlue’s targeted benchmark, could claim (August 2009).

BUILDING A RELATIONSHIP WITH TWITTER

Realizing the power of Twitter, JetBlue created a cross-departmental working group from marketing, corporate communications, and customer commitment to focus on Twitter. JetBlue’s first tweets were marketing-driven. Though, from the company’s point of view, people have become more accepting of sales and promotional activities on Twitter, at that point JetBlue’s followers were turned off by the idea of using Twitter as a vehicle for sales or promotions. Instead, Morgan Johnston, corporate communications manager, explained, JetBlue had to “earn the right to market to the community. You earn that right through engagement.” Thus, the company concentrated on developing a relationship with its customers and potential customers as the first step towards engaging them.

JetBlue also got a big boost when Twitter made JetBlue a suggested feed in February 2009. Anyone who signed up for Twitter during that time was prompted with information on

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1 Adapted from an interview with David Clark, chief people officer at JetBlue.
2 By April 2010, JetBlue had 1.6 million followers and the White House had 1.7 million followers.

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approximately 20 notable Twitter users. This led to many new followers and expanded the company’s following from about 100,000 to 1 million by August 2009. By June 2010, approximately 1 percent of these had ceased to tune in to JetBlue on Twitter.

Building the Brand Through Engagement

While many JetBlue enthusiasts originally followed the company’s tweets because they had admiration for the brand, the company also wanted to reach those people who were not yet customers. Johnston commented that, “Twitter gives this audience a chance to experience us before they’re even on one of our planes.” For both the loyal customers and the potential customers, Twitter was a medium for engagement and making the brand familiar, as Johnston explained:

We are humanizing the brand which is very appealing to our customers. We acknowledge that we love their feedback and we love hearing from them, because, together, we can build a better experience for everybody. Our tweeting is about being honest and transparent and accepting of people’s differences and senses of humor. That’s what turns somebody who doesn’t know the brand into an advocate.

It was with this voice that JetBlue and the entire social media team spoke to the public. Managing JetBlue’s voice was tantamount to managing the brand. “JetBlue,” Johnston said, “wanted to show empathy and make sure that humanity is always expressed and is always present.”

Twitter vs. Facebook

JetBlue began with Twitter before becoming active on Facebook because Twitter was more mobile-friendly. While Facebook’s mobility applications had improved, Twitter gave JetBlue the opportunity to directly engage with users. Customers on Twitter were likely to be talking about a product while in the process of utilizing that product. As Johnston explained, “Our customers are in the airport talking about JetBlue. You don’t necessarily see that on Facebook.” Further, JetBlue felt that content creation was easier on Twitter because the company could come up with content just by responding to others’ comments. Johnston made the analogy that using Facebook was like keeping a blog, while Twitter allowed you to jump into conversations rather than direct or host a conversation.

Twitter as a Vehicle for Promotions

By 2009, the company started to see several of its followers specifically request information on sales and special deals. Conscious of the value of having a place to converse with customers who “don’t want to be sold, don’t want to be marketed to, and don’t want to hear promotional lingo,” Johnston and his team opened a second Twitter account, “JetBlue Cheeps,” devoted to last-minute fare sales.
“All You Can Jet” Buffet

Though JetBlue Cheaps was a new Twitter account, the company’s promotion in the summer of 2009 gave it the ability to take advantage of an asset base that the company owned but was unable to capitalize on before. For one week, JetBlue ran a promotion known as the “All You Can Jet” (AYCJ). It was a 30-day offer which allowed customers to buy one ticket for $599 and fly as many routes as they wanted for 30 days (Sept 8 to Oct 8, 2009).

**Spend**

Rather than advertising this promotion in traditional media, JetBlue used its Twitter account to spread the word. The cost for advertising through this medium was essentially free.

**Reach**

JetBlue had allocated a limited number of tickets for the promotion. The pass was on sale for almost a week and sold out 48 hours earlier than the company had allotted for the purchase period. The company had to shut down the promotion one week early. Everyone at the company was elated; JetBlue spokesman Sebastian White said, “Sales of the pass have really exceeded all our expectations.”

Beyond selling tickets, however, within 7 hours of the AYCJ announcement, the JetBlue scheme had prompted an estimated 10 million blog references and received 31 million search engine queries. JetBlue’s web site also sustained a 700 percent increase in traffic in the days following the announcement.

While the announcement of AYCJ was originally made on Twitter, JetBlue got the attention of traditional media without having to spend any money in these channels. As MSNBC said, “If you haven’t heard about JetBlue’s $599 AYCJ pass … you haven’t been paying attention.”

Even one week after the promotion was tweeted, it was still grabbing headlines and mentions on local television stations, travel websites, newspapers and blogs, including NBC’s *Today Show* and celebrity blogger Perez Hilton’s blog.

**Impact**

Even prior to the AYCJ announcement, JetBlue had a strong connection with its customers. Its million-plus followers had made it one of the most widely followed non-media corporation on Twitter. Those followers shared the news of JetBlue’s fire sale with their social networks. Even though the promotion had many positive aspects for JetBlue, customers felt like they were “getting the better end of a massively lopsided deal,” and shared the news of their good fortune with others.

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5 Barkin, op. cit.
6 Mutzabaugh, op. cit.
7 Barkin, op. cit.
Further, since JetBlue launched AYCJ right after announcing four new destinations, the excitement brought JetBlue flyers to the company’s site where they learned about these new services. JetBlue was able to influence a much larger group than simply those customers who bought the AYCJ promotion. While the company experienced a burst of initial traffic to its site, most visitors never ended up buying an AYCJ pass.  

The speed at which customers opted in to AYCJ took JetBlue by surprise, but even more astonishing were the responses the company received. Customers were ecstatic. People who were not yet on Twitter when they purchased an “All You Can Jet” pass soon signed up for the service. They started tweeting about where they went and what they did, sharing their experiences as they were flying from destination to destination.

A few of the AYCJ customers even became local celebrities. When these flyers arrived at a new city, the local news media would welcome them as rock stars. Furthermore, these flyers started to connect with each other on Twitter.

David Barger, JetBlue’s chief executive officer, called AYCJ the airline’s most successful promotion in the company’s history. The company did not offer details about the profits from AYCJ due to the competitive nature of the airline industry. However, JetBlue posted profits of $15 million in the third quarter (ending 9/30/09) after losing $4 million during the same quarter in the previous year. Further, JetBlue estimated that, prior to the promotion, up to 50 percent of the AYCJ users had not been members of its frequent flyer program. After the promotion ended, TrueBlue hit the 8 million member mark.

**ANNIVERSARY PRESENTS**

Following on the heels of the successful AYCJ promotion, in March 2010, JetBlue gave away 1,000 free roundtrip tickets as part of the airline’s ongoing 10th anniversary celebrations during that year. The airline announced this on Twitter, together with the three locations where people could pick up tickets, and what they needed to bring (e.g., at one location, they needed to bring a birthday card). All tickets were given away within 20 minutes. The promotion created a frenzy of excitement and garnered even more positive publicity for the airline.

(See [http://www.youtube.com/user/JetBlueCorpComm#p/u/1/D_Xmkb_QULY](http://www.youtube.com/user/JetBlueCorpComm#p/u/1/D_Xmkb_QULY) for footage of free ticket recipients.)

**IMPROVING CUSTOMER SERVICE**

While Twitter enhanced the high level of customer service that JetBlue provided (JetBlue had won JD Powers and Associates’ award for customer service for five years in a row), Johnston stressed that winning the award had “nothing to do with the 10 people on our Twitter team. It has everything to do with the crew members who are on the front lines all across the company.

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8 Ibid.
9 Barkin, op. cit.
10 Barkin, op. cit.
and the representatives who are sitting at phones.” The role of the Twitter team was not to address customer service issues directly but, instead, connect customers with people who could spend time addressing specific concerns and make sure customers’ issues were solved. As Johnston explained, “Our role is not a billboard or a customer service desk but an information booth.”

Preemptive Customer Service

The JetBlue Twitter team was able to serve as the “canary in a coal mine” by instantly addressing customer service issues and resolving them. As Johnston explained, “Generally, the customer service model is one of recovery. It’s not until a week later that you get an angry e-mail from a customer that you try to work to recover them. If you’re watching what’s going on in a real time medium, you have the opportunity to step in and effect change while they’re having issues, while they’re sitting at a gate. That is powerful for us.”

For instance, through monitoring blogs and Twitter, JetBlue found out about the community’s frustration with a company policy that required passengers to pay a bike handling fee even for folding bikes that could be sent in suitcases (the airline allowed customers to check one bag free of charge). JetBlue witnessed community buildup around this issue—the customers claimed the policy made no sense and suggested different ways to get around paying the fee. JetBlue was able to prevent further customer complaints by finding a solution almost immediately. Within 24 hours, the communications team had contacted the flight check-in department and suggested a solution. This avoided the bike complaint building to a larger issue. This swift resolution actually garnered accolades for JetBlue that personified the company. The person who originally complained about the bike handling fee even went back to his online community and told his story, explaining: “JetBlue is different. You don’t need to come up with [bogus] excuses to get out of the bike fee. You just need to talk to them. And if it’s [bogus], then they can fix it. So why try to hide the problem rather than just address it?”

Twitter highlighted JetBlue’s extraordinary customer service. In early 2010, a JetBlue customer went through the airport security and left his sunglasses at one of the stations. He tweeted a message about his mislaid sunglasses. JetBlue, which monitors mentions of its name on the web and Twitter, e-mailed an employee at the customer’s departure gate, who went back to security and to try to find the glasses—all before the passenger had embarked. JetBlue then tweeted back to the individual and told him they were looking for his glasses. Although JetBlue did not recover the glasses, social media enabled this personal connection between a consumer and JetBlue.

Flying in the Age of Twitter

Engagement

The company also searched for mentions of JetBlue and airports where JetBlue flew in order to keep a pulse on the company and customer sentiment. While this was alarming at first to people who tweeted and then got a mention on JetBlue’s Twitter page, customers did not see JetBlue as stepping out of bounds. Instead, they appreciated that the company was paying attention to them. As Johnston explained:
We were one of the first companies to follow customers following us. Most users now feel that if they tweet about a company, the company should be paying attention. This is especially gratifying to us because it means that our theory of being engaged and listening to customers is something that our customers appreciate. Now, they’re waiting for us to follow them, so they can have a conversation.

Twitter has changed how JetBlue thinks about corporate communication. Twitter enables JetBlue to connect with customers in new ways, but more importantly, this new media allows a more casual conversation with immediate interaction. JetBlue also understands that relying on Twitter carries risks. Twitter amplifies all messages, not just the positive ones. Casual conversations build an expectation of immediate response from the company. JetBlue has also discovered that not all passengers accept immediate, authentic interactions. As Johnston observed, “We’ve learned to be careful when determining when to approach a conversation we see occurring. There’s a very thin line between being helpful as a company—and being overbearing.”

12 http://www.jonathanfields.com/blog/jetblue-twitter-customer-service-or-to-spy/