

# Love the Customers Who Hate You

## **Their online gripes—and don't fool yourself, they have them—will help you reinvent your business**

By Jeff Jarvis

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Here's some free advice: Go to Google, enter any of your company's brands followed by the word "sucks," and you will see the true consumers' reports. Brace yourself: It won't be pretty. Wal-Mart's unofficial Google Sucks Index turns up 165,000 results; Disney's 530,000; Google's 767,000. What's your number?

Now don't get mad at these people. Instead, help them get even with you. These angry customers are doing you a great favor. They care enough about your product or service to tell you exactly what went wrong. Other customers may just desert you and head to the competition. But these are telling you what to fix. Listen to them. Help them. Respond to them. Ask their advice—and they'll give it to you.

You should require everyone in your C-suite to read the missives of unhappy customers who rise up in Google—and to fix every problem they can. It's O.K. to ignore the people who hate you for sport or seem to be operating out of a need for attention. But don't make the mistake of dismissing the rest. Learn from them and you'll earn many dividends. You'll satisfy dissatisfied customers. These customers may turn around and tell their online friends that you don't suck after all. That's free PR that can save you lost sales or even earn you new ones. You will learn about your products and their problems and how to make them better—without the expense of focus groups.

### **Joining the Ranks of the Used to Suck**

This online feedback is so valuable—and so dangerous if left untended—that you shouldn't wait for customers to register their complaints on Google. You should help them tell you what to do. That is what Dell has done by enabling customers to rate and review its products on its own Web site; by soliciting and organizing customers' solutions to problems; by blogging; and by reaching out and interacting with bloggers on their own turf, even dispatching technicians to solve their problems. Dell also started IdeaStorm, where customers give Dell suggestions and then vote and comment on them. In a year, there have been 8,600 suggestions with 600,000 votes and 64,000 comments, and Dell has implemented a dozen or more of the ideas.

Last October in *BusinessWeek*, I told the saga of my own confrontation with Dell on my blog, Buzzmachine, where I announced my frustration with a lemony laptop under the headline, "Dell sucks." The company's many subsequent moves to connect with bloggers and customers online constitute a happy ending to my tale. And today,

searches for 'Dell sucks' or 'Dell hell' on Google or in blog search engine Technorati reveal now-satisfied customers updating their tales (one is headlined, "My Dell used to suck"). But you'll still find fresh complaints, for Dell has work to do to improve its products and services.

As I see it, though, if Dell can turn around like this, any company in any industry can. Yes, even the dreaded cable guy can. The University of Michigan's 2007 American Customer Satisfaction Index said that cable and satellite TV suffered "the lowest level of customer satisfaction among all industries covered." Its customers are ganging up with demands for congressional hearings on Net neutrality and with revenge sites like Bob Garfield's ComcastMustDie.com.

## **Customer Service: The New Marketing?**

In response to Garfield's battle cry, I tried to act constructively and get my fellow frustrated cable customers, who now can be heard via blogs and Google, to reinvent the industry in their image. When I started a conversation about this on my blog, as research for a book I'm writing about Googlethink, cable customers came in with their issues and ideas (many wanted TV shows on demand). I've received scores of suggestions—all for desperately needed changes—for reinventing newspapers (some urged that they get out of the printing business).

My readers and I are trying to rethink airlines (I proposed using Internet connectivity to make a flight into a social experience). Next I'll tackle retail and restaurants (where I say customers should vote on what is sold). I've even talked with a company whose product development has always been top secret about letting their ideas out and letting customers into their design process.

## **Staying a Step Ahead**

You see, this is about more than putting out blog fires or quieting complaining customers. It's about more than customer service; indeed some say customer service is the new marketing (that was the title of a conference this month in San Francisco). No, this is about collaboration with your customers in every aspect of your business. If you enable them, they will provide customer service for each other. They will help design your products. They will sell your products. They will create your marketing message—they always did control your brand.

So when you reach out to that kvetching blogger you found online, you're engaged in customer service as well as PR, market research, marketing, sales, and product development. You are reinventing your company—and, if you get there before your competitors, your industry. That is why you shouldn't relegate this vital task to one department or some interns or consultants. You should reorganize the company around this new relationship with your customer, finally putting that customer at the center of everything you do because—thanks to the Web—you can. If you don't, well, someone will say you "suck."

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