

Perspectives | Customer Experience by John Birrer

## Charter's Social Commitment to Customers

Charter Communications uses social media to move from a culture of compliance to one with a commitment to customers. *by Elizabeth Glagowski*



John Birrer is senior vice president of customer experience at Charter Communications

*Social media is growing as a critical part of any company's strategy, regardless of industry. The personal and direct connections offered by social media can enhance the customer relationship, if done properly. It requires thinking of social media not as a channel, but a critical part of the overall business.*

*One company adopting this new way of thinking is Charter Communications. As a "lifestyle provider," Charter has a distinct responsibility to deliver its brand promise through its customer experience. The provider of phone, Internet, and cable services is judged by how well it serves its customers. Therefore, the company considers every customer interaction to be an opportunity to build trust and strengthen its relationship. John Birrer, senior vice president of customer experience at Charter, discusses how social media permeates the entire organization to achieve that goal.*

**Customer Strategist:** What is Charter's overall customer strategy?

**John Birrer:** It's about Charter being a customer-focused company, not just a few executives talking about customer centricity. We want to put the customer in front of everything we do. We need to think about how we create products and services that bring the customer closer to the brand. How do we create moments of truth with the customer to move our company to a place where customers really love us?

In the past we haven't focused on customers. So, a short-term goal for us is to create a culture that puts our customers front and center. The short term then feeds into the long term. We're moving from a culture of compliance to one with a commitment to customers. It needs DNA within the organization to drive transformation and buy-in. It can't come from the top down. It needs to go from the frontline up.

We want to discover what the customer perspective is and execute against it. That requires us to create structure around the experiences customers have with us.

**CS:** How do you personally define the customer experience?

**JB:** It's evolving to be everything we do: products, what the call center screen looks like, how fast the Internet speed is, how our technicians are dressed, how quickly we respond to questions, how we collect money and do billing, etc. It's all these points where we touch the customer.

Customer experience isn't only what happens when something goes wrong. It's making it so that things don't go wrong. It needs to be a companywide effort. It touches every part of the company. We're breaking down organizational silos to develop a consistent strategy across the company. The customer experience is the connective tissue that allows us to do that. We want to be one Charter, one seamless face to our customers.



### Lessons Learned:

- Charter provides Internet and social media to its customers, so the company needs to interact with customers there because customers expect it.
- Social media is the heart of the customer experience; consequently, social media strategy must be a senior-level priority.
- Feedback in social media is like a virtual focus group, but you have to respond immediately. This holds you accountable to customers.
- Customers don't expect perfection, but social media puts the spotlight on your cultural integrity based on how you react when unintended things do happen.

In addition, here at Charter we have an interesting relationship with consumers. We keep them connected to the word via cable television, Internet, and phone service. We provide the infrastructure for consumers to access the larger connected world. We realize that the Internet isn't just about delivering a pipe. As the interconnected world becomes more important, we need to figure out how to provide fantastic service, but also not get in the way. And as a service provider we have to think differently. We provide Internet and social media to people, so we need to interact with customers there. They expect it.

All the technology we provide to customers doesn't mean anything if you don't take care of them. We aspire to become a lifestyle provider for them. We want to be that trusted advisor to the customer.

**CS: How should social media tie into an organization's customer experience?**

**JB:** It's the heartbeat of the customer experience. The social media space *is* your company. It's the connective tissue to your customers. It's your brand, your products and services, and your relationship with customers all rolled into one.

It's not an IT issue; it's not marketing or PR. You can't pigeonhole it into one part of the organization. It doesn't fit into previous channel constraints. It doesn't fit easily into any box that's been created before. It must be a holistic, companywide approach. That requires executives to think differently.

If you treat social media as a channel, not the hugely important enterprise asset that represents what your brand stands for, you're missing out...on the value social media can bring. Pigeonhole it into one space, and you lose out on the potential it offers you [to develop the relationship across the enterprise].

Social media strategy must be a senior-level priority if you are to take advantage of the opportunities it has for your company. There is tremendous opportunity, but also tremendous risk [of investing time, effort, and money in something without a sure ROI]. That's why it needs to be the responsibility of the C-level. Executives need to have a clear vision of how it fits into their business and the decisions they make. It's the face of your company 24/7.

"Customer experience isn't only what happens when something goes wrong."

**CS: What is Charter's approach to social media?**

**JB:** Social media represents an exponential growth area of the business. It's causing the business community to evolve to a place where the customer is front and center. There is nowhere to hide in social media.

Social media has required us to break down the paradigm of how we serve customers. We have a social media team that is talented and connects many different areas of the company. It's called U\_Matter2Charter. The team interacts in a number of ways: via Twitter (@Charter) and an internal Charter Community message board, as well as on Facebook and third-party sites DSL Reports and AVS Forum. Each team member has their own account and provides expertise in different areas of the business, from field service and tech support to product expertise, pricing, and billing issues.

On Twitter, for instance, we solve issues and educate many customers at once. Instead of one-to-one, we're now one-to-one-to-many. Other customers may see the answers we provide individual customers, which builds the available knowledgebase. We can reach many customers with a single communication. However, while the search capabilities of Twitter are fantastic and answers to many questions are a quick click, not a lot of folks use Twitter as a troubleshooting resource.

Feedback is immediate in social media. It's like a virtual focus group for what you do and what your competitors do. You have to respond immediately, which holds you accountable to customers. If you turn a deaf ear to that, you're going to pay the price. The transparency of social media is a blessing and a curse, especially if your organization is not aligned to a customer focus.

**CS: How is Charter making the transition to a social organization?**

**JB:** Social media reinforces and validates how we want to interact with customers. We focus on understanding how and where customers use social media to interact with our brand, not try to shoehorn them into our social media constraints. It allows us to create cross-functional activities that rally around the customer. It involves IT, product teams, marketing, call center, field services, and other groups that don't normally work together.

The challenge is creating a commonality of purpose

within the organization. Social media strategy requires alignment, and puts everyone on the same page of where the journey needs to go. Social media can be the catalyst for breaking down barriers like internal silos and contradictory goals that get in the way of customers.

Once the journey begins, it becomes about execution. How do you execute on that customer experience vision in the social media space? There's no playbook on how exactly to do that.

Marketing still plays a huge role. The brand makes promises, and how you execute on those promises is where you succeed or fail. You have to have the brand and message aligned with how you execute. Whether you're a low-cost provider whose brand touts the best price or a

premium, high-touch brand that promises stellar service, social media will expose any disconnects between the brand promise and the execution. It's a way for consumers to hold businesses accountable, which ultimately is healthy for the business.

The real winner in the social media world is the consumer. They have the power now. And businesses like ours must be held accountable. It's not about being perfect, but about how you react when unintended things do happen. Social media puts the spotlight on your cultural integrity.

It all comes back to our original goal of putting the customer front and center. A strong culture is necessary to do that, and social media will only make the internal culture more obvious, good or bad. ■

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