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Managing social media crises with your customers: The good, the bad, and the ugly

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Abstract Social media (SM) are transforming the ways in which customers communicate with firms following service failures. While there is a positive side to this phenomenon, there is also a negative side, which can lead to serious social media crises. In light of this duality, the current article addresses the good, the bad, and the ugly uses of SM in the customer complaining process. Herein, we identify six different types of SM complaining situations. The good represent opportunities: (1) when customers complain to the company online immediately after a first-service failure, or (2) when consumers publicize extraordinary recoveries. The bad involve risks: (3) when customers discuss a failure without complaining to the firm, or (4) when consumers reach out to online third-party complaint intercessors. The truly ugly represent the peak of online threats and public crises: (5) when customers spread negative publicity through user-generated content SM following a double deviation, or (6) when competitors respond to this content to steal customers. As a takeaway for managers, we formulate specific recommendations to deal with each type of online complaining.
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1. Revenge via social media

Many customers now turn to social media (SM) to vent their frustrations and seek retribution after being slighted or ignored by a company (Tripp & Grégoire, 2011). This can cause major public crises that need to be carefully managed by the company (Laufer, 2010; Laufer & Coombs, 2006). Social media have empowered consumers to complain online. Given the importance of this new outlet, customers value companies' reactions; indeed, a cross-industry study revealed that 88% of consumers are less likely to buy from a company that ignores online customer complaints (Drennan, 2011). Once negative word-of-mouth is spread online, users build on each other's comments and the involved

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company may lose control over the conversation. Yet, many executives fail to see the source of a crisis in the jungle of SM. In light of the problem, this article will help managers identify and respond to such threats, specifically to the six types of SM complaints outlined in Figure 1.

Consider the following: In January 2012, a group of young people in France made a song listing all the reasons why they were switching from cell phone provider Orange to Free, the new industry cost leader. The cohort posted on YouTube its 3-minute video of singing inside a Paris Orange store, but before the company could respond, the video went viral. The clip, We Leave You For Free, was viewed more than 1.5 million times almost overnight. From a firm's perspective, this is one of the ugliest ways customers can complain.

Before the rise of SM, the vast majority of dissatisfied customers failed to complain after a bad experience because the costs of complaining were perceived as exceeding any potential benefits (Chebat, Davidow, & Codjovi, 2005). This situation has drastically changed due to SM. Online venues now make complaining much easier and more effective than ever before: no more calling the company, navigating an automated telephone system featuring multiple and confusing options, and spending hours on hold while being passed from representative to representative. Within minutes, customers can compose a complaint online. If they do not receive a quick response, they at least get their 'pound of flesh' by spreading the word about bad service. Such reactions are not uncommon. According to a recent survey sponsored by Five9 (Grant, 2013), a whopping 85% of consumers say they will retaliate if their needs are not met, and 21% of 18 to 34 year-olds say they will do so using SM outlets—a disturbingly large amount. Clearly, customers are becoming less silent than before.

FedEx learned this lesson well during the 2011 Christmas holidays, when a home surveillance video was posted to YouTube showing a FedEx delivery driver throwing a package containing a fragile computer monitor. Even though FedEx created an adequate response within 3 days via the company blog, it was too late: the video had already been viewed over half a million times. Three years later, the video is still viral, with over 9 million views.

Figure 1. The place of social media in the customer complaining process

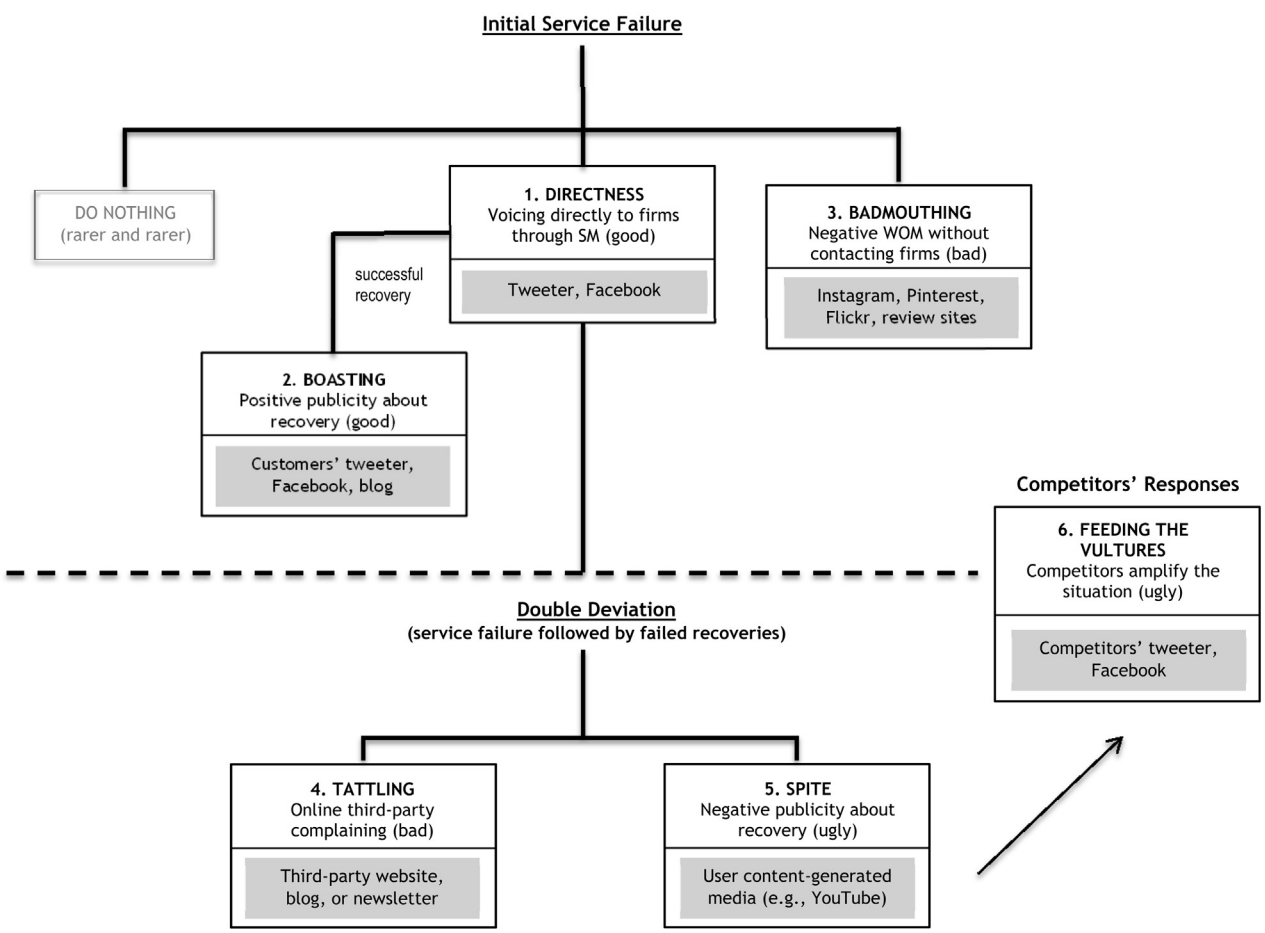
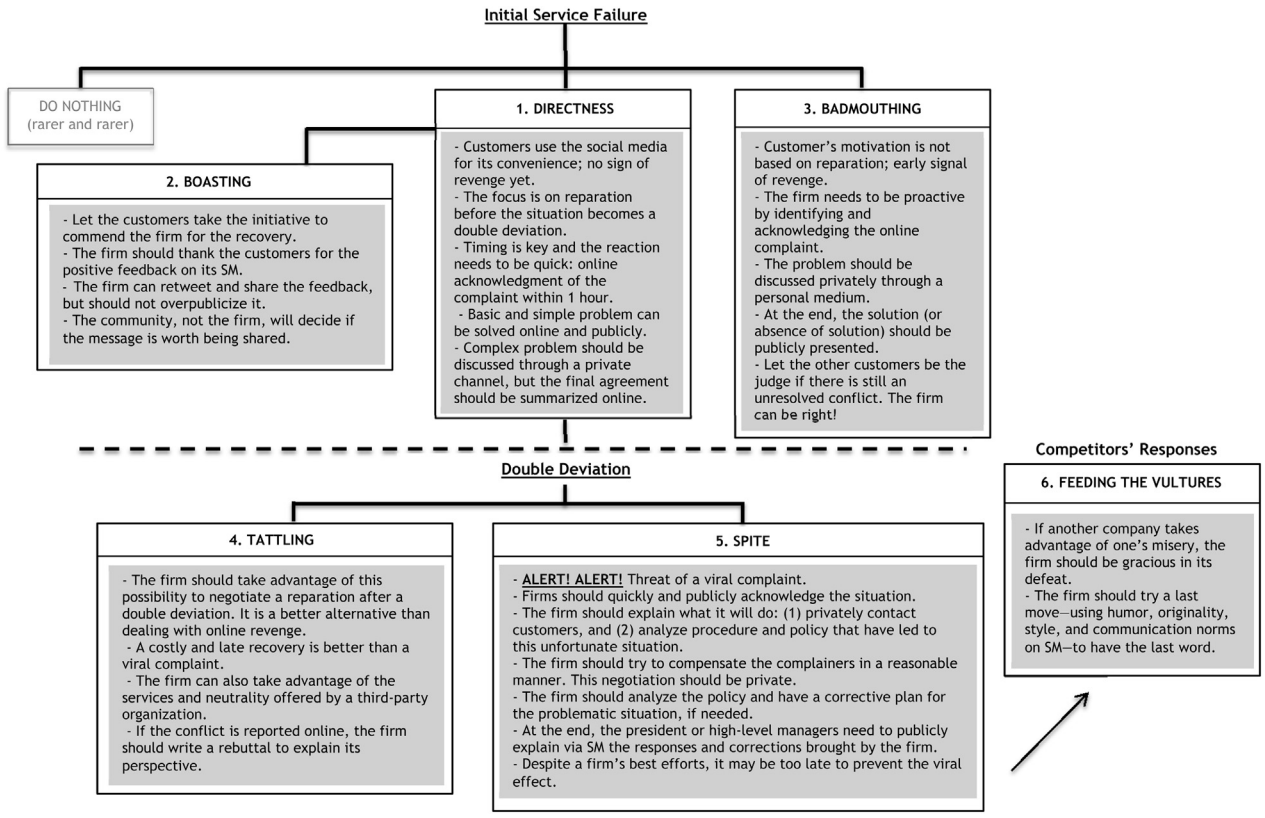


Figure 2. How managers should address the different types of complaints



How do customer service encounters like this get so out of hand? Our article answers this question. Employing anecdotes and academic research, we distill down the variety of SM complaints into six different types (see Figure 1). Based on this typology, we offer firms advice about the management of these six situations (see Figure 2) that could lead to major crises.

2. The six types of social media complaints

To begin, we describe six different ways in which consumers use SM to broadcast their negative experiences: some good, some bad, and some downright ugly (see Table 1). Before illustrating them, it helps to note that the occurrence of each of the six types of complaining is neither random nor unrelated; rather, one can lead to another—or not—depending on which action the firm takes. As illustrated in Figure 1, some types—especially the good forms of directness and boasting—should occur after an initial service failure. In turn, the most dangerous types—tattling, spite, and feeding the vultures—typically occur after both a service failure and a failed recovery: a situation known as a *double deviation* (Grégoire, Tripp, & Legoux, 2009). Here, the firm doubles the damage by twice deviating from norms of acceptable firm-customer interaction. Not only does the firm create an initial service failure, but it also fails to redress the situation by ignoring or mishandling the initial complaint. Overall, executives should be aware of the origination of the SM threats from within the complaining process, and should extend their resources toward specific targets to manage the various forms of SM complaints and crises.

2.1. Directness: Directly contacting the company online

A common response to a service failure entails contacting the firm directly and privately in order to achieve resolution/satisfaction (e.g., product replacement, refund). This private form of complaining has always existed, and it is typically viewed as the first level of customer complaint (Singh, 1988). What is new is that now many customers use SM, such as Twitter and Facebook, to gain direct access to customer service. Instead of physically going back to a store or spending time on the telephone receiving the corporate run-around, complainers capitalize on the convenience of SM to

Table 1. A typology of social media complaining

The Good: The SM complaining that represents opportunities for firms
1. DIRECTNESS: Directly contacting the company online, through tweets or the company Facebook page, to constructively request resolution of a service failure.
2. BOASTING: Spreading good word and positive publicity via Facebook or Twitter about how well the firm resolved the complaint.
The Bad: The SM complaining that represents risks for firms
3. BADMOUTHING: After the first service failure, spreading negative word-of-mouth through one's Facebook network, tweets, blog, or YouTube account—all without ever contacting the firm.
4. TATTLING: Complaining to a third-party website (e.g., bbb.com, consumeraffairs.com), blog, or newsletter.
The Ugly: The SM complaining that represents the highest threats for firms
5. SPITE: After the firm botches its response to the initial service failure and complaint, thus failing the customer *twice*, the customer spreads negative word-of-mouth with a heated vengeance via user content-generated media (e.g., YouTube).
6. FEEDING THE VULTURES: A competitor not only takes joy in the firm's mishandling of the complaint, but uses SM to amplify the mistake to steal more of the firm's customers.

directly reach a firm for a solution. In many instances, it is more convenient for customers to write on a firm's wall or send a tweet as opposed to using traditional communication channels. At this point, the firm should be primarily concerned about redressing the situation, but it cannot overlook the fact that everybody is watching. What should have been a private complaint is, via SM, a public complaint with important public repercussions.

Some well-known companies have implemented best practices in response to this new form of private/public complaining. For example, Discount Car Rental has greatly expanded its presence on Twitter to directly address customer complaints. Consumers can now tweet on-site about their negative experiences with the service, and the company does its utmost to answer within an hour. Discount always responds by apologizing and offering its help: "We are sorry to hear that. Please send us your contact info and we'll contact you shortly." Similarly, in 2009 BestBuy instituted Twelpforce, a Twitter community composed of 3,000 employees that quickly answered tweets and complaints about technologies. Between 2009 and 2013, Twelpforce responded to 68,000 tweets; however, in spring 2013, BestBuy moved out its Twelpforce into the BestBuy Unboxed online community. Now, not only BestBuy employees but also the company's customers can answer the online queries, leading to even better service.

The Children's Place, a New Jersey-based children's apparel and accessories chain, demonstrated in August 2013 the importance of addressing both the private and public nature of SM complaints. After her daughter received as a gift a t-shirt that she found offensive, Rebecca Kenton decided to share her opinion on The Children's Place Facebook page, which has approximately 1.7 million followers. The t-shirt displayed checkboxes underneath the heading 'My Best Subjects.' While the joke subject boxes—shopping, music, and dancing—were all checked, the 'math' box was not, with the disclaimer 'Nobody's perfect.' Kenton complained about the stereotype-reinforcing message this t-shirt sent to young girls by writing: "Not cute, Children's Place. This is not 1953. Stop making it fashionable for girls to be dumb. Parents are sick of this garbage." This post was shared over 60 times on Facebook and initiated more than a hundred comments; in addition, the news quickly hit Twitter. That same day, The Children's Place tweeted its apologies and guaranteed customers that it was taking their feedback seriously. In response to the problem, the company first took care of the private complaint by sending Kenton a new, different t-shirt, along with a box full of goodies. Then, The Children's Place addressed the public concern by announcing that the controversial t-shirt had been pulled from its stores.

2.2. Boasting: Positive publicity about extraordinary service recovery

If customers see their problems addressed satisfactorily following a service failure, they may then forgive and continue doing business with the firm (Joireman, Grégoire, Devezer, & Tripp, 2013), and furthermore even share their positive experiences. A good service recovery can be the perfect opportunity to generate positive publicity about the company on SM. This is most likely the best part of SM. For instance, when Ian Golding went to the British supermarket Morrison's, he had to wait to get his bread sliced—even though he could see, though the bakery department bread racking, that multiple employees were available to help him. Angry about his wait, Golding aggressively tweeted Morrison's regarding the poor service he received. Within 18 hours, the company not only contacted Golding to apologize, but also rearranged the bread racking so that employees could better view waiting customers. Mr. Golding was amazed by Morrison's responsiveness and ability to solve this problem. As a sign of appreciation, he shared his good experience on his blogs and via Twitter, which attracted many favorable comments and generated many retweets. Clearly, SM can also be very beneficial for firms after an excellent recovery.

2.3. Badmouthing: Negative word-of-mouth without contacting the firm

Unfortunately, not all complaints found on SM are directly addressed to the firm; rather, another common tactic used by consumers entails reporting unsatisfactory experiences across their social networks without prior warning to the company. Because SM makes the reporting of bad experiences much more efficient and less prone to mutation than occurs among stories shared orally, this form of negative word-of-mouth is more dangerous than ever. In short, intact stories of bad experiences reach far more extant and potential customers than they used to. What may be most frustrating about this form of SM complaint is that the customer can badmouth the firm after a single service failure, without giving it an opportunity to fix the issue; in this case, firms totally lack control over the situation and message (Grégoire, Laufer, & Tripp, 2010).

Social media channels such as Instagram, Pinterest, Flickr, and online review sites like Yelp! may be especially effective in spreading this form of negative word-of-mouth. For example, customers can easily post pictures of dirty cutlery in a restaurant. In one case, a customer complained about the way Delta Airlines handled her luggage by posting a picture of her suitcase's broken handle on Instagram. Now that many online review sites have smartphone apps that are location-sensitive, a customer searching for a nearby business (e.g., a restaurant) will see any negative online reviews and avoid that business.

Sometimes this form of online badmouthing goes viral. In September 2013, an angry British Airways customer bought a promoted tweet to complain about his lost luggage, spending his own money to make sure his complaint was seen by a large audience. The tweet simply stated: "Don't fly @BritishAirways." In 6 hours the post garnered over 25,000 impressions on Twitter (i.e., over 25,000 likely saw and read the tweet), yet the company never had the chance to make things right for this customer.

2.4. Tattling: Complaining to a third party for help

Much more explosive and risky for firms is a double deviation: the combination of a service failure and a failed recovery (Grégoire et al., 2009; see Figure 1). After experiencing a severe double deviation, some customers persist in obtaining reparation. To achieve this end, they seek help from an online third-party organization. For example, customers may complain to the Better Business Bureau (bbb.org) or to consumer agencies (e.g., consumer-affairs.com) when they feel they are not able to resolve the situation by themselves. Although some online organizations may expose the firm and its misbehavior online (see ripoffreport.com), most aim to provide resources to the complainers toward reasonable settlements with firms (Grégoire & Fisher, 2008). Fortunately, this type of complaint is still motivated by reparation rather than revenge (Grégoire, Legoux, & Sarker, 2012).

New service websites have emerged that, for modest fees, will handle customers' complaints or help customers negotiate with firms. PeopleClaim is one of these novel online third-party agencies with a strong SM presence; a customer can file an initial complaint for free or pay $7.95 to have his/her complaint exposed online. A separate company, Scambook, assigns a personal investigator to the case for only $5. The latest online party complaint agency is Gripevine, a website launched in collaboration with Dave Carroll, creator of the United Breaks Guitars viral video sensation. According to its website, Gripevine's mission is to "provide a neutral, fair, and level playing field where consumers and companies can come together to work out their differences and arrive at successful resolutions to common consumer complaints" (www.gripevine.com).

2.5. Spite: Spreading negative publicity to get revenge

After a double—or more—deviation, a customer may seek revenge against the firm by sharing his/her terrible experience on a consumer-generated platform such as YouTube (Grégoire et al., 2012). The focus of this dangerous form of complaint is clearly to punish and cause inconvenience to the firm. These specific complainers try to create an attention-grabbing message—via humorous, original, or clever material—and to spread it widely by using the most effective content-generated SM. The ultimate achievement of this type of complaint is the creation of a viral video, a textbook example being Dave Carroll's United Breaks Guitars music video.

In October 2013, a French humorist posted a YouTube video denouncing what he felt were abusive charges for his having an overdrawn bank account. In this 5-minute video, viewed over a million times, Kenny Martineau virulently criticized Credit Mutual Bank for charging him additional fees despite his already poor financial situation. Within 48 hours the bank responded to the public by posting a message on its Facebook page, stating that the situation was being handled privately. The damage has been done to the firm, however.

Spite-driven complaints are the most likely to go viral, in part because customers will do whatever it takes to tarnish the firm's reputation and credibility in order to fulfill their desire for revenge. Indeed, researchers tested posts on Weibo, a Chinese social network with more than 500 million users, and found that after classifying comments by emotions such as anger, sadness, and joy, anger was the most likely sentiment to spread among users (Fan, Zhao, Chen, & Xu, 2013). The degree of virality and desire of revenge of the customers classify this complaint as one of the ugliest types. Firms should try to avoid and prevent this at any cost, as the repercussions may be devastating and uncontrollable.

Because of its potential for going viral, this type of social media complaint creates a dangerous crisis for a firm, and a company cannot do much to fully redress the situation. Even if a firm does all the right things after a viral complaint, the online community will continue to doubt the company's good intentions (Joireman et al., 2013). The company failed its customers at least twice and waited for a public crisis to fix the problem, it would seem; the online community will probably infer that the firm did not really mean to make things right and that it reacted simply to save face in front of the viral movement. This would be too little, too late.

2.6. Feeding the vultures: How competitors take advantage of your SM disaster

Once a customer's SM complaint goes viral, competitors can take advantage of the firm's misery, resulting in the ugliest possible consequence for a firm and the worst form of public crisis. Consider American chef and popular television host Anthony Bourdain, who experienced flight delays traveling from Miami to the Grand Canyon on American Airlines. When Bourdain tweeted to his 1.5 million followers: "What does 'special situation' mean in airlines speak? Ain't nothing special about late departure," American never answered his message. Within 2 more hours, Bourdain posted numerous additional tweets. Fellow chef and television personality Andrew Zimmern responded, thus sharing the complaint with another 616,000 followers. Then, things got much worse for American Airlines. The next morning, Virgin Atlantic joined the conversation and killed two birds with one stone by pointing out American Airlines' poor service and inviting Bourdain to travel with Virgin Atlantic for free. This generous offer was of course displayed on Bourdain's Twitter feed. Because American Airlines failed to address Bourdain's initial tweets, it provided a nice PR opportunity to one of its competitors.

3. How to manage the six SM complaints

Once a complaint is identified, firms need to respond in a manner appropriate to the situation and type of crisis. In Figure 2, we provide a summary of the response that corresponds to each of the six types of complaints. Before discussing these specific responses, we first offer some general recommendations.

To identify which of the six types of complaints they face, firms must carefully monitor SM. Fortunately, many monitoring tools now exist. For example, Google Alerts allows managers to know when their firms are mentioned on a social medium. TweetDeck is another useful tool: it tracks the trending hashtags, interactions, and mentions on Twitter. In order to monitor mentions that are broadcast on blogs, firms can use tools such as Social Mention and Mention, which can classify the posts based on the valence of the comments into negative, positive, or neutral categories. These are just a few examples of the tools available to firms. The selection of one or many of them represents a critical decision.

Companies must also devote the proper human and financial resources to monitor and properly address the complaints. For instance, the excellent online service of JetBlue on Twitter is supported by 11 full-time employees. A good online service necessarily involves a sufficient number of employees who can devote their time and attention to the online activities. These employees have to be familiar with the culture and the communication norms of the SM, which rely on informality, humor, a sense of irony, derision, and a specific vocabulary. Next, we describe the specific sets of actions that firms should consider when they face each of the six complaint types (see Figure 2).

3.1. Recommendations for handling directness

With direct complaints, the customer is not primarily concerned about revenge or warning other customers: he/she mainly seeks effective recovery for an initial service failure. Therefore, firms should quickly acknowledge online any problem encountered by the customer. Firms should focus on fixing the problem and making things right such that a double deviation and its nasty consequences can be avoided. No real damage has occurred yet, so this complaint can be viewed as an opportunity to provide superior service.

The notion of timing becomes especially crucial in this first instance. The firm is under more pressure in the case of a public versus a private complaint; people are watching for the firm's initial response. Here, the best social teams (e.g., JetBlue) usually provide an answer within 15 minutes. The first answer minimally acknowledges the situation and difficulties encountered by the customer. One hour could be viewed as a reasonable rule of thumb regarding timeframe delay for acknowledging a concern. At this stage, not answering or deleting a comment could be a recipe for disaster, potentially creating an automatic double deviation.

After acknowledging a problem publicly, whether the firm continues to address the matter privately or publicly should depend on the complexity and severity of the problem. When the customer is facing a simple and clear problem, the company should directly and publicly answer the complaint on the social medium where it was raised. Case in point: Consider the Silberbergs, a family that was about to miss its connection for a trip abroad. American Airlines answered the Silberbergs via the airline's Twitter account, to let them know the gate number of the family's next flight. Everyone following the tweet could see how quickly and effectively American Airlines addressed the problem.

When a problem is complex or severe, however, the company should for the most part communicate privately. For example, when a customer angrily criticizes an experience he/she had with the company, customer service should contact the customer by phone or private email, even arrange a face-to-face meeting when possible, but acknowledge the post publicly (e.g., "We apologize for the inconvenience. Please send us a private message so we can solve the problem."). If the situation is complex, there is probably no real advantage to debate this publicly. Complex resolutions lead to many back-and-forth replies, with the early replies often being heated and defensive. This can irritate those forced to follow the conversation and make both parties look bad. After the situation is resolved, though, a firm can easily follow back on Twitter or Facebook and let the community know the problem has been resolved.

3.2. Recommendations for handling boasting

After a truly extraordinary recovery whereby their problem is fully and quickly resolved, many customers feel inclined to share the story online. This form of positive publicity can be very effective for firms. Obviously, brands and corporations can greatly benefit from these unexpected communication efforts.

Ritz-Carlton resorts took advantage of this form of positive publicity after a little boy—who spent a few days at the Amelia Island, Florida, location—realized he left behind Joshie, his beloved stuffed giraffe. To decrease the boy's distress upon going to bed his first night back home, the boy's father told him that Joshie decided to stay a few more days at the resort, making friends and enjoying the sun. The father shared this white lie with the Ritz-Carlton staff, who in the meantime found Joshie. So that the white lie would seem more believable, Ritz employees took a series of photos with Joshie lounging by the pool, enjoying a massage, and making friends with other stuffed animals. This excellent customer service truly saved the day for the little boy and his family.

The best part of this story for Ritz-Carlton was that the boy's father, Chris Hurn, was a successful CEO and an influential blogger for The Huffington Post. After Chris' blog post ran, this story became extremely popular on SM and in the business press. The Adventures of Joshie was probably one of the best PR efforts for Ritz-Carlton resorts in recent years in terms of cost versus returns.

Organizations obviously need to capitalize on such excellent publicity. Therefore, we recommend

that firms share customer-driven complimentary articles and posts via SM (Facebook, Twitter, corporate blog), and thank contributors for the acknowledgment. Some basic rules should be followed, however, such that the online community does not feel stories are artificially orchestrated. As a rule, after a firm has been complimented online, it should thank the customer but not overpublicize the story; it is important that firms let the community decide what news is worth being shared. Any perceived effort by a firm to control the impact of this positive publicity could backfire on the firm. In general, for the community to believe that the viral effect is real, a story must come from customers and not the firm.

3.3. Recommendations for handling badmouthing

Some customers may immediately turn to SM after an initial service failure without contacting the firm directly for a resolution, thus spreading negative word-of-mouth on Facebook or Twitter. The fact that these customers do not provide the firm an opportunity to fix the problem is probably revealing of their state of mind: they may have little interest in reparation and be motivated mainly by revenge.

Because these customers do not make contact with firms, it is upon the aggrieved firm to make contact with the disgruntled customer (van Noort & Willemsem, 2012), and this begins with identification of the latter. A firm's monitoring system plays a critical role in this situation. By identifying unhappy individuals relatively quickly, the firm can communicate its proactive competency and sense of caring, and thereby nip potential crises in the bud.

The remaining steps to follow are similar to those presented in the case of a complex service failure for a direct complaint. In brief, the firm should publicly contact the individual to acknowledge the situation and invite him/her to engage in a private discussion about the matter. In its acknowledgment post, the firm could politely communicate that it was not aware of this situation, which would relay good faith and intention; this may be necessary to counteract customers' and third-parties' tendency to assume bad intentions when communication is lacking (Joireman et al., 2013). After engaging in a reasonable round of negotiation to solve the problem, the firm should close the cycle by communicating the outcomes on SM, regardless of whether they are positive or negative.

Note that the firm does not always have to give in, especially if a customer's request is unreasonable and if his/her tone is abusive. The online community can serve as a sort of jury, and there have been occasions when public opinion has settled in favor of the firm. Consider the case of the Alamo Drafthouse, an Austin, Texas-based movie theater that received a scathing and verbally abusive customer feedback voicemail from a patron that was kicked out for repeatedly using her smartphone during a show. In response, management of the Alamo Drafthouse created a humorous YouTube video which used portions of the expletive-filled phone rant to highlight the fact that cell phones are expressly and strictly forbidden in the theater, and that any violation of this policy will be immediately punished. Management used this situation to its advantage: it showed that it cares so much about regular customers that it refuses to let their viewing experience be disturbed by rule-breaking others. The Alamo Drafthouse's response became viral, received national coverage in the business press, and was strongly supported by the online community.

3.4. Recommendations for handling tattling

After experiencing a double deviation or a series of failures, some customers persist in obtaining reparation by enlisting the help of an online third-party organization. Although this type of online complaint may inconvenience firms as third parties meddle—and possibly expose company mistakes on a website, newsletter, or blog—it represents an opportunity to constructively resolve the issue. This is better than the alternative: a viral complaint.

There are many reasons for firms to cooperate with customers through third-party online organizations. First, the firm will eventually have to deal with these customers, regardless. The customers are not going away until they get resolution; they already went through a first round of unsuccessful recovery attempts and despite continued failures, keep persevering. These customers are unlikely to give up; they cannot afford to, due to the severity of the problem (Tripp & Grégoire, 2011). Second, if these customers were purely opportunistic individuals, the third-party organization most likely would have refused to represent them in the first place; in other words, these customers probably have a case. Third, third-party organizations are not necessarily 'anti-corporation' because many of them also provide a platform for firms to write a rebuttal and present their side of the story. Finally, involved firms could also benefit from the relative neutrality of a credible third-party organization and may even consider seeking their own third-party help or legal counsel. For all these reasons, we recommend

that firms seriously consider the possibilities offered by a third-party website. Even an imperfect deal is better than facing a serious case of online revenge.

3.5. Recommendations for handling spite

After a double deviation, a customer can feel exasperated by the situation and rationalize that online revenge is the only remaining means of restoring justice (Grégoire & Fisher, 2008). This was the mindset of Dave Carroll in the creation of his video sensation, United Breaks Guitars. Only after exhausting United Airlines' internal channels did Carroll finally take his troubles to YouTube. In our own research on online posting, we found that some 96% of all those who posted online tried first to resolve their problems through internal channels (Tripp & Grégoire, 2011). Although not all vengeful online complaints become popular, it is certainly this type of complaint that is the most likely to turn viral, creating a serious crisis. When a complaint becomes viral, it becomes very difficult for firms to control, and almost impossible to turn around. Clearly, the best strategy is prevention. Firms should ensure that a double deviation never occurs.

If a firm is not able to prevent this dangerous form of complaint, it can still respond to the threat, but its actions become very reactive and focused on damage control (van Noort & Willemsem, 2012). The firm will not win this confrontation, so what can be done? As always, the firm needs to quickly identify the threat through its monitoring systems and to publicly acknowledge the situation. For example, a few hours after the United Breaks Guitars video was posted, United Airlines responded on Twitter and Facebook. It also tried to reach Dave Carroll directly. As a crisis unfolds, the firm needs to stay active on SM in order to control damages as much as possible.

The firm then has to take two different types of action. First, it needs to privately contact the complainer in order to find a reasonable solution. Note that even though firms often become very willing to generously compensate a complainer when his/her complaint goes viral, the complainer is not always willing to accept compensation at this late stage. For instance, Dave Carroll always made a point to decline any offer from United. We can easily understand why: the benefits of a viral video for an artist in terms of popularity, sales of albums, and requests for shows are much more lucrative than the few thousand dollar compensation usually offered. The customer may also simply perceive the firm's action as too little, too late.

Nonetheless, when a complaint goes viral, it becomes a public concern (e.g., The Children's Place case). As such, the firm must say something publicly, lest it appear that the firm does not care at all. Therefore, as a second measure—after compensating the complainant, analyzing the flaws that caused the double deviation, and fixing the flaws so they do not happen again—the firm needs to directly address the public at large, describing all the actions it took. It is not sufficient just to fix the problem; the firm must also tell people it fixed the problem or the public will assume it did not. Note that these actions should be communicated by high-level management.

Domino's Pizza successfully managed such a public crisis in 2009, when two of its employees filmed a prank YouTube video of themselves pulling cheese out of their pants and spitting mucus on pizza and sandwiches, which were being made for customer delivery. The pizza chain's president took this very seriously. In a matter of hours, he created a YouTube video in which he indicated all the measures that were taken to make sure the chain's food was safe for consumption. In addition, he stated that the two employees were fired and that the whole store was to be closed and entirely sanitized.

As a final point, even if a firm takes all the proper actions to deal with a viral complaint, the viral nature of a post is almost impossible to stop by a single constituent (i.e., the firm). For example, United Breaks Guitars is still viewed by millions of individuals every year: between 2011 and 2014, it was seen by about 5 million individuals even though the incident took place in July 2009. When a complaint is viral, it is very difficult to shut down.

3.6. Recommendations for handling 'feeding the vultures'

One of the worst consequences of a viral complaint is a competitor's taking advantage of and capitalizing on it. In early 2012, French online clothing company La Redoute experienced a public crisis when a snapshot of its online fashion magazine was posted on Twitter. The picture displayed four children playing on a beach, but in the background was a small naked man walking the shoreline. The picture quickly went viral, becoming the second-most tweeted topic in the world. Many other brands took advantage of the situation; for instance, La Redoute's main competitor used the same picture, but 'dressed' the man in trunks and added the caption 'Obviously not everyone knows we have swimsuits from €9.99.'

Even in desperate situations, however, one may see opportunities. Indeed, La Redoute decided to capitalize on its SM knowledge and to answer using wit and humor. To counterattack the bad buzz, La Redoute launched a contest whereby it invited customers to search for other problems or failures among its website pictures. The e-retailer director explained in a short video clip that other mistakes were found, and invited consumers to help the firm by identifying the gaffes. Individuals who could find the other mistakes received a substantial promotion. In the end, this was viewed as a winning strategy on the part of the firm: La Redoute increased traffic on its website by 70% during the contest, gained more than 100,000 Facebook fans, and profited over $1 million. The moral of this story? There is always a way on SM to have the last word.

4. Conclusion

Social media has created a new version of the Wild West for firms, replete with frontier justice, where angry citizens and customers take the law into their own hands. Consequently, firms need to defend themselves. Perhaps the best defense is not to commit a crime in the first place; that is, do not create service failures, and especially don't commit double deviations. However, mistakes happen; customer policies often have unintended side effects and sometimes inattentive employees disappoint customers. Therefore, firms need both a good system for spotting such service failures before they become public crises and a communication plan to address online complaints.

In this article, we have provided such a plan. Our plan tailors the response to the type of complaint and type of social media. While SM evolves rapidly, we currently see patterns emerging that could be stable for at least the near future. After all, even though technology changes, mistreated, angry, and loud customers have been and always will be a constant fact of life for firms. While customers may have louder megaphones now, what they seek from the firms that let them down really has not changed all that much.

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