



Recalibrating Customer Reference Strategies to Embrace Social Media and Networking Tools and Trends

by Lisa Hoesel



The social media and networking trend that has exploded within the B2B marketplace over the last 12 to 18 months has made many companies rethink their customer reference strategy. White papers, case studies and a few customer interviews were the norm for customer reference activity several years ago. But, these days, social media tools provide so many other outlets to showcase your best assets---strong customer relationships and references. Blogs, RSS feeds, Tweets, LinkedIn profiles and Facebook pages are all easy ways to reach out to customers and leads in an informative and dynamic fashion.

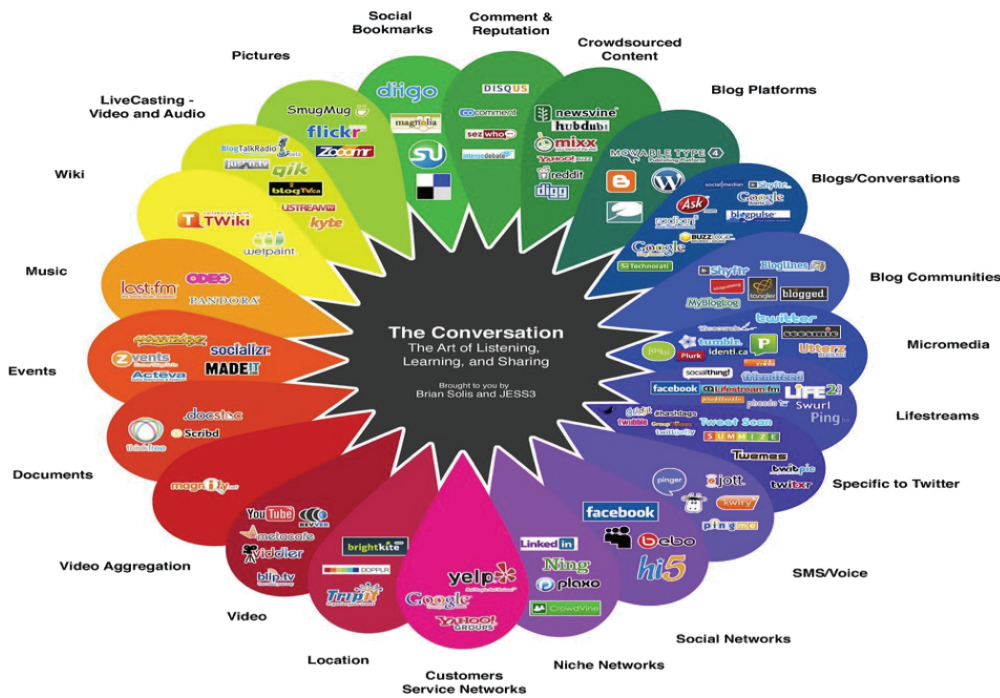
Inclusion of these tools in an overall customer relationship strategy provides your clients with exposure to more customer and prospect communities at a deep and compelling conversational level. Content included in Web 2.0 communities can be used to drive best practices dialogue among your key clients. Twitter accounts may be used to identify new reference prospects and support customer support strategies. LinkedIn and Facebook can include individual clips from audio and video interviews to generate new leads and sales.

The possibilities for enhancing your customer reference programs by adding these mechanisms are endless, yet taking the plunge may feel like an overwhelming task--after all, it requires a certain amount of time and commitment to make the inclusion of social media successful.

As you recalibrate and refine your customer reference strategy to integrate social media and networking, you may be asking yourself the following questions:

- Why should my organization participate in the social media and networking world?
- How is this space evolving and how can I use it to build/maintain customer relationships?
- How can I measure my success using these mechanisms across my marketing, reference, sales and customer relationship programs?

The Evolution/Explosion of Social Media and Its Impact on Customer Reference Programs



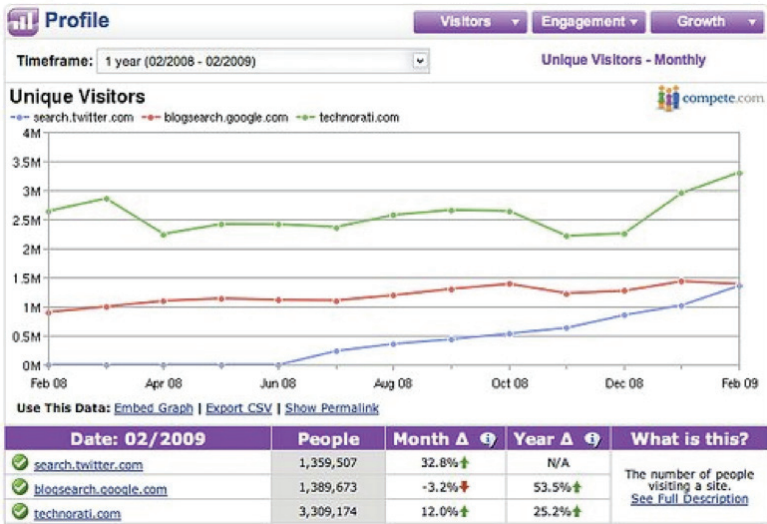
Brian Solis' "social prism" diagram is well-known as the map of the ever-growing list of tools and their relevance to different techniques for providing customer content and support in the social media/networking world. Customer reference programs are continually challenged in three basic areas:

1. Providing compelling and current content to support sales and marketing activities.
2. Recruiting and retaining credible and qualified customer references.
3. Establishing metrics around the impact of their content creation and positioning as it supports overall organizational goals.

The social media and networking (SMN) world enables reference managers to address all of these challenges.

SMN thought leaders consistently note that whether organizations become active using Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn, blogging or establishing Ning-like communities, customer conversations about solutions and companies are occurring. If only from a research and expectation-setting perspective, it is very clear that customer relationship and reference professionals need to listen to this dialogue.

I submit that, very quickly, our customers' expectations are such that all companies should participate in these mediums and establish some infrastructure to support their customers' engagement. Just as it would be virtually unthinkable for anyone in the B2B world to not have a website, I believe that the SMN world will rapidly engender the same expectations from our clients and prospects. The visit rates and use of search functionality available in just one of the SMN applications, Twitter, speak directly to the explosion of this medium in the technology world as well as implying its acceptance as a credible source of information.



Source: Steve Rubel, Micro Persuasion, <http://www.micropersuasion.com/2009/03/twittersearch-to-eclipse-google-blog-search.html>

From a marketing and information perspective, it has long been an accepted practice for technology companies to embrace non-moderated blog comments. The same companies are now establishing Twitter and LinkedIn accounts. The classic examples are those offered by Dell and Sun Microsystems. Moreover, most people are aware of the anecdotal Comcast/Twitter story that evolved into an important component of Comcast's formal customer support strategy.

A study by Forrester Research found that while half of marketers said they would boost budgets, the social media spend remains very small in proportion to other media --75% of respondents (who knew their budgets) said they were planning to spend \$100,000 or less over the next 12 months. Reported by Ben Bold, Brand Republic March 17, 2009-03-31

Let's examine real-world examples of how SMN tools can address the top three challenges of customer reference program, as reported by References-Online's clients and colleagues:

1. Content Provision

Pieces of customer reference content and collateral can be easily parsed and inserted into a number of SMN tools. An individual clip from an audio/video interview can be placed on a corporate website, with a "To Hear More" teaser that kicks-off an opportunity cycle in which sales can respond with a full interview invitation. The same clip can also be included on a corporate or executive Facebook or LinkedIn.

As an example, References-Online (RO) hosted a social media webinar in March 2009 and used Twitter as one of the primary marketing, feedback, and post-event tools. By using the Tiny URL

function, I was able to include links to the RO website for registration and information. Before, during and after the event, my Twitter address was included in promotional materials to facilitate questions, comments and follow-up requests. After the event, Twitter was used to post a link to the downloadable recording of the event. The use of SMN as both a marketing and prospect engagement tool was extremely successful in the following ways:

- Approximately 30% of the registrants and attendees for the event registered/attended via SMN tools.
- RO gained a number of new leads and interested parties by exposing this content outside of our traditional email lead, prospect, and client lists.
- The content provided through Twitter is repeatable exponentially, yet we are still able to embed tracking and information gathering tools.
- We did not have to recreate content for use in this tool, which saved valuable marketing, sales and event management time.
- The engagement and results are easily tracked and measured.

The use of Twitter for this event enabled me to provide refreshing content without completely reworking existing materials and to support sales, lead generation, and marketing needs. I was able to reach (and many people re-tweeted) new or previously inaccessible audiences. Additionally, since the post-event comments were overwhelmingly positive, I could potentially use this content in marketing efforts around future webinars.

Most importantly, I was able to successfully direct my followers and the general Twitterverse to additional content provided by RO now that I have an established relationship with certain segments.

LinkedIn also provides a number of intuitive applications to post a variety of content including audio and video interviews, case studies, press releases, etc. I posted the registration link for the webinar on my profile, as well as in the announcements, discussion threads, and event calendars of other communities to which I belong.

2. Reference Recruitment and Retention

Communities, forums, and blog support tools are some of the ways that customer reference managers can position existing rewards, information, and activities to their current reference clients and engage new reference prospects in their programs. Inclusion of audio/video reference interviews in a community built in Ning, for example, is an excellent way to not only highlight an organization's solutions, but also the satisfaction of reference activity participants. Special interest groups can be established and supported with specific information provided, "Ask the Experts" functionality can be embedded, special forums and chats can be facilitated by internal resources and support personnel. Again, using online community tools does not necessarily mean developing an entirely new infrastructure for your reference program.

One of RO's clients has integrated customer reference solutions with their customer portal, which provides information access to a general audience as well as a customer community for participants in their reference program and activities. Clients are able to adjust their own profile information and access special information available only to reference clients. They can review their rewards and can agree to participate in additional reference activities in a self-service fashion. Prospective reference clients can choose to become members of the community as well. Reference managers can follow-up with the self-nominated customers, qualify them, and provide introductory information and collateral.

Varied, in-depth, self-service content that is available 24/7 is crucial to the retention and continued engagement of interest of current clients. It follows that the available SMN tools are excellent ways to support a self-selection model of continued participation in your reference programs. Another References-Online client is repurposing existing audio and video interview content via various SMN tools to support ongoing best practices and information sharing dialogue amongst current customers. As part of their success story, they have been able to expand their customer interaction



using SMN tools without additional FTE or budget. The ability to easily repurpose content using these applications and their integration into your existing customer reference strategy are two of the most compelling features of SMN.

3. Metrics in Social Media

There are as many tools for measuring your impact using SMN as there are SMN applications themselves. I have been consistently climbing on this soapbox and saying, "SMN is a tool as opposed to a strategy."

My evangelism extends to the measurements that are used to determine success in the SMN space. If your objective is overall reach to new audiences and markets, the measurement tactics could be as simple as counting net new followers on Twitter, amount of re-tweets, number LinkedIn connections, blog visits, document downloads, etc.

If your objective includes converting prospects to qualified leads and closed sales deals, then you may need to examine CRM providers to integrate various SMN accounts with other relationship and sales support applications.

A recent report by Michael Stelzner identifies the key objectives of industry participants.



Source: Social Media Marketing industry Report, Michael Stelzner, http://twitter.com/mike_stelzner

Although measuring the achievement of some of these objectives will require integration with CRM applications, many of the metrics can be obtained within the SMN medium itself. For example, I can track my new followers on Twitter (exposure) by simply reading the top of my home screen. Hootsuite and TweetDeck and many others, provide adjunct applications that allow me to analyze responses to my specific Tweets, interest around particular topics or URL's I have posted, search for Tweets on specific names, solutions, content, etc. With very little effort, I can parse and analyze this data to/for the appropriate internal audiences.

New solutions providers, such as Tealium can further help monetize interaction with SMN alongside your traditional PR and marketing campaigns. References-Online has developed solutions that embed tracking and reporting mechanisms to facilitate measurement of collateral placement by the SMN tool used. Another key differentiator of References-Online's suite of solution is their knowledge and enthusiasm about best practices to repurpose customer collateral and reference assets. Their technology solutions are uniquely designed to collect, catalogue and represent customer reference assets in a searchable and trackable fashion.

As suggested earlier, from a sales and marketing perspective, the SMN mechanisms are becoming invaluable as we introduce our solutions to new audiences. Using the specific example of the social media webinar that RO recently hosted, the SMN world has afforded us answers to not only the three top challenges of customer reference and relationship programs but also enhanced our marketing and information strategy, our lead generation tactics, and our building of a sustainable and evolving pipeline. Analyzing the lead source information from the registration reports is an indicator that non-traditional marketing methods are an extremely effective ways of reaching audiences.

References-Online March 25, 2009 Social Media Webinar Summary

Lead Source	Total Hit	Total Reg.	% Registrant
Internal	10	5	3%
Formal Invitation	48	31	20%
CPC Ads	120	6	4%
Website	47	32	21%
"Teaser" Postcard Email	4	44	30%
Social Webinar Sites	53	34	22%
TOTAL	282	152	100%

Respected thought leader in the SMN space and Founder and CEO of Cubed Consulting, Umang Shah, answers, "Why wouldn't you?" to the question of whether or not a company should integrate social media and networking into their toolkit of customer relationship/reference/marketing and engagement. The rapid evolution of these conversation facilitators alone is worthy of your attention; the fact that they are respected platforms for seekers of information and demonstrably help you achieve your business objectives truly does beg the question: Why wouldn't customer reference and relationship programs maximize the benefits of existing content and infrastructure by proactively and quickly implementing these applications?

Additional information and collateral:

- References-Online, www.references-online.com
- Umang Shah, Founder, Cubed Consulting, www.cubedconsulting.com
- Interview of Lisa Hoesel, References-Online's Director of Customer Conversation on Social Media
- Follow Lisa Hoesel on Twitter: @lhoesel or her blog at <http://conversationalchaos.blogspot.com>



References-Online delivers flexible, cost-effective reference management solutions that improve sales effectiveness and enhance customer relationships. Serving a range of companies—from smaller, venture-funded companies to large, global enterprises—our solutions enable organizations to make the most of valuable customer relationships and effectively manage customer reference programs. References-Online is based in Denver, Colorado servicing clients on an international level.