thinkJar

Research Report

A Five Step Plan for Transforming Into a Social and Customer Centric Business

Esteban Kolsky
Principal and Founder, thinkJar
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Executive Summary

With the advent of the Social Web, communications patterns between businesses and their customers have undergone a fundamental shift. The old world order—an "inside out" model of information flow from corporation to customer—is quickly being replaced by an "outside in" model where customers are in control and are communicating among each other faster than businesses can communicate internally.

Across a variety of business functions, people have changed existing business processes and even created a few new ones because of social media. The affected functions include public relations, customer service, marketing and advertising, market research, product innovation, and sales. These changes have spawned individual initiatives delivering significant benefits to people in those business functions. However, a new operating model is emerging that promises to reshape the playing field: customer-to-business (C2B).

C2B is about:

- Assimilating information in a systematic way about customers and markets from the outside in
- Operationalizing that information enterprise-wide so that everyone can take action from the same set of data and engage with customers in the most effective way
- Partnering with customers and giving them a say in how business gets done

The results are faster innovation, greater business agility, and significant competitive advantage.

As I prepared to write this paper, I talked to practitioners from the largest brands in the world, consultants working with them, and vendors servicing their needs. Interviewees included Coca-Cola, Daymon Worldwide, HP, Kraft Foods Company, Pandora, and Taco Bell Corp. Unfortunately, the legal departments for these brands don't allow me to refer to them by name, but I will try to convey their stories in the best way possible.

Universally, these thought leaders believe that the *velocity, volume, validity, and value* of the social voice make it almost unthinkable not to progress down the C2B path. Studying their insights and collective lessons learned led me to formulate five steps that organizations need to take in order to operationalize social media and integrate C2B into their corporate DNA.

1. Establish clear ownership and governance for social media
2. Cross-pollinate as quickly as possible across business functions, and bring in key corporate functions such as business intelligence
3. Create a single source of social media truth that spans the entire organization
4. Build a social media P&L and use it to manage your business
5. Engage with your customers to co-innovate and co-market virally

The Big Shift

The Social Web has created a fundamental shift in how consumers and business buyers develop their attitudes and perceptions about products, services, companies, and brands. The old world order—an "inside out" model of information flow from corporation to customer—is quickly being replaced by an "outside in" model where customers are in control and are communicating among each other faster than businesses can communicate internally.

The "Inside Out" Model Was Quite Simple

In the past, interactions between customers and organizations were quite simple: organizations talked to customers when they wanted to communicate a point about their products. The message was controlled and presented under managed conditions through a limited number of channels: advertising, public relations, direct marketing, retail outlets, and direct sales. Responses were planned and followed per design.

In other words, when the organization had something to say, it said it and made sure it was heard and customers never amounted to more than recipients of that message.

For years we managed interactions between customers and organizations this way with some degree of success: actions that were forecast and planned for before the interaction was created were tracked, measured, and monitored and they became the expected result of the plan. Events and reactions occurring outside of those planned were a problem: most organizations had no way to find them or react to them until they had already become an issue.

Crisis teams were created and deployed to handle these issues; defusing them was not easy. Public relations became quite adept at handling "hairy situations" once they were identified. Still, few of these incidents occurred in a given year and most could be easily contained because word-of-mouth didn't reach far in most markets. Furthermore, good relationships with the press, government, traditional media outlets and other communication channels allowed some level of influence and messaging "governance."

Customers Now Have a Direct Voice to Each Other

Then something began to change. Internet technologies dramatically altered communication patterns. Online communities made their way into everyday lives of consumers and business people. Social networks emerged. Soon, customers realized that they had a way to share their ideas, perceptions, and experience globally. And they trusted the information they got.[1] New peer-to-peer communication models appeared, almost like mushrooms after a downpour; soon they were everywhere. And customers are in control.

[1] http://generatedbyusers.wordpress.com/2011/04/01/results-do-you-like-or-trust-ugc-when-used-in-your-news/

The Speed of Change Has Been Astonishing

Astute observers trace the start of new communications channels to the mid- to late 1990s, when email and bulletin boards first experienced widespread use. But no one imagined the speed and scale at which the shift has happened. Think about these facts:

- The number of "tweets" grows 10+% each month; almost 300 million messages per day in December 2011, triple the number at the beginning of the year[2]
- It took Google+ two weeks to reach 10 million customers[3] – with a product that was still in beta

The Social Customer Is Your Customer

As social media has reached critical mass across the globe, the demographics are becoming representative of a broad range of customer segments. For example, one CPG company that keeps close watch on these adoption trends told me it sees significant month-to-month growth in social commentary posted by its older customers. In the United States, Pew Research reports that fully 65% of adults use social media[4]; Forrester Research, Inc. reports that at least 93% of online users in India, China, Mexico, and Brazil use social tools at least monthly.[5] Three-quarters of Facebook's users live outside the United States.

Social Affects Both B2C and B2B

While some people think of social media as a consumer phenomenon, its impact has been felt by both business-to-consumer (B2C) and business-to-business (B2B) companies. On the B2C front, consumers are sharing unsolicited, unfiltered information about their experiences with products and companies and perceptions about how products affect their lives.

In B2B, social media is becoming ingrained in how customers make many of their buying decisions. One company said, "Among our buyers, it has gotten to the point where social media is second nature; it's just part of how they do business with their vendors." In fact, studies in high tech product categories have shown that 75% of the selling cycle now happens before a potential customer even talk to a sales rep.

In both of these cases, customers, not the company, control the message. Customers choose the content and the style of the interaction; they don't care about orchestrated messages and scripted interactions. They are in charge.

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[2] http://www.quora.com/Twitter-1/How-many-tweets-per-day-are-there-on-Twitter

[3] https://plus.google.com/117388252776312694644/posts/ZcPA5ztMZaj

[4] Mary Madden and Kathryn Zickuhr, "65% of Online Adults Use Social Networking Sites," Pew Internet & American Life Project, 8/26/11, http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2011/Social-Networking-Sites.aspx?src=prc-headline, accessed 1/26/12

[5] Gina Sverdlov and Nate Elliott, "Global Social Media Adoption in 2011," Forrester Research, Inc., January 4, 2012

The Big Shift Is Starting to Change How Business Gets Done

As the new reality of social media has started to sink in, people across a variety of business functions have changed their existing business processes and even created a few new ones.

Public Relations Listens and Acts More Proactively

For most organizations, public relations and marketing professionals have been the first to push for change because they saw that while good news travels fast, bad news travels even faster in social media. One B2C company describes this phenomenon with the following example: "Ten years ago, news of a product recall would disseminate in a couple of weeks. Now, the world knows about it right away."

The biggest challenge they found was not the speed of dissemination for the news, rather that they could not control the message to assuage damages.

PR teams began listening to social channels, monitoring for signs of trouble. They began engaging with their passionate fans and dissatisfied critics – with the dual aims of creating more positive word-of-mouth and avoiding unpleasant surprises. In addition, they began to look at social media not just reactively but also proactively, as an input that could guide strategy.

Social Engagement Drives Better Customer Service

As social media started to become a two-way channel for organizations and their customers, the benefits to customer service became clear: resolving issues faster, reaching more customers, and fostering customer loyalty through communities. "Few people will call an 800 number to complain, but they are more likely to voice their opinions on social media," one B2C company says. Another adds, "We want to have a one-to-one conversation with all of our consumers, wherever they try to reach us."

"Customer relations used to be a defensive necessity. Now it's an offensive weapon."

Social media not only offers ways to increase customer satisfaction, but also it empowers customer service teams as change agents in their organizations. A customer relations professional reports, "All of a sudden, we were able to relay meaningful stories and take them back to the business teams in ways we never could before. Our actions then created more actions."

Emerging Usage in Campaign Tracking and Launch Tracking

Seeing the results of these early initiatives, smart marketing professionals began to see that something more was going on. The carefully crafted messaging from the brand was not being used in social media; customers were talking among themselves in their own language. According to one of my interviewees, "You may launch a product or talk about an idea one way, and the consumers may talk about it totally differently. Knowing how they are talking gives you the opportunity to do something different."

In a few instances, they noticed, the customer message was better, and more powerful, than the one carefully crafted by the organization.

These observations have led to the emergence of social media as a way to track campaigns and product launches. One forward-looking company notes, "As we roll out an initiative or pre-launch activity, we are able to see how that initiative is being received by consumers. When we launch nationally, we have that information to help us structure our program better." According to this company, social media tells them the effectiveness of *how* they are communicating as well as the strength of *what* they're communicating.

Social Media Represents a Deep Source of Consumer Insights

Market research and consumer insight teams have recognized that social media represents a deep and speedy source of potential insights. Forward-looking organizations have conducted netnographies and other forms of social media market research both to complement existing studies (surveys and focus groups, among others) and to answer questions that they previously did not have the time or resources to answer. "If we have a situation where we need to make a quick decision, it's very valuable to have this new data source," one consumer insights executive tells me.

Companies that now have experience using social media research see the Internet's culture of openness and honesty as a key advantage for researchers. "With focus groups, you're always asking, 'Are they telling the truth or are they saying what they think we want to hear?'" an executive with a global brand remarks. "Social media is more honest and human." Social media data also benefits from its immediacy. "When you ask someone to take a survey two to 30 days after an event, you may not capture what was really in their minds at the time of the event," another executive comments.

The example concerning high fructose corn syrup, demonstrates the surprising depth of insights available in social media – not just likes and dislikes but insights into how products and brands fit into people's lives. These insights represent potential business opportunities. A tweet or "Like" have become buying signals that must be addressed.

"I see so many commercials that show happy corn producers but then I hear bad things about high fructose corn syrup. I just don't get it."

"I can't find a good high fructose corn syrup free granola bar. Does anyone know of one?"

In contrast, another B2C service provider is able to glean insights about how its service interacts with customers' lives. This information helps to inform business decisions and also helps it to sell advertising space more effectively. A third B2C organization is able to use social media as a way to gauge consumer

attitudes about their economic security—an important driver of purchase decisions—and improves demand forecasting.

Social Data Can Foster Product Innovation

Similar to its use in market research, social media is helping smart product innovation teams find novel product uses and potential product innovations. "The sheer volume of commentary means that there are needles in haystacks, as long as you can find them."

These "needles" generate insights for marketing teams that, if used properly, can be the starting point to turning the relationship from a company-initiated to a customer-initiated, C2B relationship that will drive redesigned and new products and services.

Social Media Offers Opportunities for Lead Generation

Finally, pioneering organizations are beginning to use social media for lead generation, beyond the direct contact with customers that they have through engagement initiatives. Whether in B2B or B2C, they have created systems to discover potential customers who are expressing behaviors that signal purchase intent or who are actively soliciting opinions about products or services. While this type of lead generation requires a great deal of context and careful management of interactions, organizations have seen some early successes.

The Next Step: Breaking Down Silos to Become "Outside In"

To date, most of these business processes have operated independently of one another in functional silos. PR, customer service, consumer insights, and other departments reap significant benefits, but the organization as a whole still operates using the traditional "inside out" model: that is, information flows out from individual departments to customers in a linear way. However, a new operating model has reached its infancy, one where organizations assimilate information about customers and markets from the outside in and simultaneously operationalize that information enterprise-wide so that everyone can take action from the same set of data and engage with customers in the most effective way.

The world of C2B has emerged.

In the C2B world, customers are no longer unwilling recipients of the corporate message; now they are partners with the organization. Organizations must respect the power that customers wield, and customers appreciate having a say in how business gets done. In spite of this clear bias towards customers in these new relationships, the C2B model brings significant business benefits Customers become partners (both for praise and criticism as expected from a partner) of the organization.

C2B Drives True Competitive Advantage

First, organizations that run C2B are much more responsive to customer needs because the people making decisions have an accurate picture of what those needs are. A B2B executive explains, "When we

know what matters to our customers, we can meet their needs more effectively. We can serve them better and innovate faster. The result is higher customer loyalty."

In addition, C2B organizations are more agile because they get inputs in real time and have to respond, in many instances, in real time. Consider the example of Taco Bell and the Beefy Crunch Burrito[6]. In December 2010, Taco Bell introduced the Beefy Crunch Burrito for a limited time, retiring it in May 2011. Shortly afterwards, fans of the burrito created a Facebook page with the goal of getting three million people together to convince Taco Bell to bring back the burrito. The company heard the fans and brought the burrito back, again for a limited time, in December 2011.

"The companies that have conversations with their consumers are the ones that will make dents in their industries."

Would this have happened without Facebook? Unlikely.

Adopted to the fullest, the C2B model drives innovation because organizations actually co-create with their customers.

Five Steps to Succeed With C2B

As explained by the early adopters that are now getting ready to launch second- and third-generation social intelligence solutions in their organizations (mostly used for competitive advantage, the reason we cannot use their names), the *velocity, volume, validity, and value* of the social voice makes it almost unthinkable not to progress down the C2B path.

The organizations with whom I spoke estimate that social data represents approximately 10% of the total information set (structured and unstructured) that they have available for decision support. However, they expect this to grow significantly over the next five or so years.

These organizations have moved from early experimentation to focus on specific use cases across their businesses. As they operationalize their approaches around these use cases, the processes—and the underlying social data—have begun to touch even more parts of their businesses. The five steps I present below represent some collective lessons learned – what the leaders are driving towards as they integrate C2B into their corporate DNA.

1. *Establish clear ownership and governance.*

[6] http://www.qsrweb.com/article/188203/Facebook-fans-demand-prompts-Taco-Bell-s-Beefy-Crunch-Burrito-return

While it is likely that social intelligence projects start at the departmental level, they don't take shape as C2B until they are operating in an intertwined fashion throughout the organization. This type of strategic approach—with the major culture change required to operationalize it—necessitates clear executive ownership, strong governance, and education and buy-in at all levels of the enterprise.

For one B2C company, bottom-up success has led to investment in a variety of social intelligence initiatives; but the arrival of a social-savvy CMO has elevated the importance of social media. For a B2B company, executives became committed to a C2B enterprise when studies clearly demonstrated the true impact of social media on their customers' buying cycles. For a third company, customer service was the evangelist group whose social media engagements proved the predictive capabilities that social intelligence offered to multiple parts of the business.

Regardless of whether the C2B mindset evolves top-down or bottom-up, a single owner is best able to orchestrate the process of connecting social metrics to operational processes and building confidence in the accuracy of social data. So far, no patterns have emerged in where ownership sits organizationally. In many companies, IT will be the eventual owner because of its existing ownership of business-critical data. Marketing is also a likely candidate because of its involvement with the highest number of individual use cases. Another candidate is the social media function now emerging in many enterprises, which may play a pivotal role in driving the social enterprise to maturity. Social media ownership may even fall into the realm of Chief Customer Officers.

2. *Cross-pollinate as quickly as possible.*

Because C2B focuses on optimizing the end-to-end customer experience, it must cross business functions and integrate deeply with corporate functions.

First, it requires business units to communicate differently than they did in the past. For example, one CPG company reorganized to place its customer relations group within the consumer insights function. Several companies have seen alignment and a global approach to using social data come together on a brand-by-brand basis, through individual business decisions at the director level. Interestingly, it is often the brands with smaller budgets that end up leading the charge. "Those brands are willing to do more experimenting, and they have great results to show for it," an executive says.

Individual business functions may also take the lead in breaking down silos. For example, another B2C company described how its PR team has expressed interest in having access to the technologies that the consumer insights team uses for social media market research. "It's becoming clear that some of the use cases are beginning to converge on each other. Our PR team has recognized the value of not just listening but in understanding issues in depth."

Furthermore, cross-pollination means bringing in new business functions such as the business intelligence team in order to correlate forward-looking social data with backward-looking business data.

Take the example of a company that produces a line of Greek yogurt. The company wanted to find out what its top-selling flavor was, so they researched that question using their BI system and found out the answer was vanilla. However, when the company looked to see if social media data confirmed that answer, it discovered that, in fact, consumers were buzzing most about pineapple. At the time of this analysis, pineapple had a much smaller production run and limited distribution. As a result, when people heard about the pineapple flavor and went to purchase it, they often left the store with vanilla. Or they purchased a competitor's pineapple yogurt. Only by looking side-by-side at what was happening now (social media) and what has happened (sales data) was the company able to put together the full story.

This example also demonstrates the implications to the whole organization. Meeting customer demand for pineapple yogurt might mean increasing production, finding new pineapple suppliers, dealing with more distributors, developing new advertising creative, and even creating coupons that the contact center can distribute to customers inquiring about the availability of pineapple yogurt in areas where stores are not yet stocked. Social intelligence is even providing signals about future demand and sales results.

3. *Create a single source of social media truth.*

With millions of potential sources that are changing constantly, no one can stay on top of social media without the right supporting technology. People across the enterprise will need access to different "slices" of the data to solve business problems, but the data itself should not change. As the use of social intelligence grows, maintaining multiple social data repositories will create significant unnecessary costs and potential inconsistencies.

What's needed is an enterprise social intelligence platform: a social data platform that aggregates everything that's happening in the social media universe, structures the data for analysis by people in different business functions, and delivers the data via existing or new workflows. This enterprise social intelligence platform must:

- Scale to the high volume and velocity requirements of the ever-growing Social Web
- Intelligently filter out the massive quantities of irrelevant data (spam and junk) that exists there
- Be able to focus in on brands and topics, no matter how ambiguous they are (for example, Suave shampoo rather than suave gentlemen)
- Automatically structure social data to answer the types of business questions posed by different decision-makers

Many IT departments will look upon their enterprise social intelligence platform as the vanguard of a broader effort to capitalize on all types of unstructured information – which represents as much as 85%

of all corporate data. "Social is the first car on the unstructured data train," one of my interviewees remarks.

While social data has unique characteristics—in particular its rate of change—the fact that it is primarily text means technologists can overcome the biggest barrier to using unstructured information: finding a way to normalize it and structure it for analysis. Recent advances in natural language processing have brought technologies to market that have the accuracy and scalability required for an enterprise social intelligence platform. Nevertheless, few technologies today can truly understand language at scale. Several interviewees noted that there are hundreds of technology providers marketing solutions for social intelligence. One says, "You have companies that are just looking at the words, but they don't always get the context or the essence of what the customer is trying to say. Natural language processing is coming into its own, and we'll get richer datasets going forward because of it."

4. *Build a social media P&L and use it to manage your business.*

Of the leading-edge companies I interviewed for this report, fully 70% are building a social media P&L: a real-time snapshot of their brand health, measured in social media. Just like a financial P&L, a social media P&L is a way to create a common understanding about the health of the brand in order to drive action. While its name may vary, the social media P&L measures social activity at an aggregate level and includes a set of key performance indicators (KPIs) as well as a methodology that is specific to the organization.

> "Social media will become 'white noise' if you don't have the ability to get actionable results out of it."

The social media P&L typically augments traditional brand health studies, but it may also replace them. Traditional brand health studies cost tens of thousands of dollars and can be done only once a year; in contrast, the organizations I spoke to distribute social media P&L's on a monthly or even weekly basis. According to these organizations, one of the biggest values of the social media P&L is around "shrinking the cycle" – getting data more and more frequently and using that data to tune their marketing activities. Over time, organizations go from reacting faster to changes in the business to "proacting." Leading companies are actively working to take the social media P&L one step further – to predict the success of the business.

The social metrics that organizations are including in the social media P&L include:

- Changes in buzz
- Share of voice or conversation
- Net sentiment

They are measuring these components for the brand as a whole and also individually for key brand attributes (the qualities for which the organization wants its brand to stand) as well as for key buying

criteria. For example, a coffee producer might look at taste and grind, while a clothing manufacturer looks at style and fit. Price might be a common attribute tracked across both of their P&L's.

The social media P&L includes individual data points, trending over time, and trending compared to the competition. In fact, the social media P&L gives you the opportunity to do competitive benchmarking faster, more thoroughly, and less expensively than has ever been possible before.

In addition, organizations are beginning to look at how to weigh these social metrics based on the influence of the person posting and/or his or her reach (for example, number of Twitter followers or Klout score). This weighting will be particularly important in B2B markets, where influencers play a significant role in shaping purchase decisions. "An industry expert's tweet matters a lot more than that of a 17-year-old kid," one executive reminds me.

Finally, the social media P&L includes a section that maps social metrics to business metrics. Indeed, the correlation between social metrics and the bottom line for the organization is the sine-qua-non element for enterprise expansion. Several organizations are connecting social metrics to sales. One organization is tying them to stock price, while another is looking at "share of traffic" in physical store locations. For example, looking at the ratio of social media buzz to share of traffic indicates how well the word is getting out about new or existing products. The common thread is that these organizations are building the foundation needed to make social metrics predictive of business success. "It's important to start climbing this next hill – developing predictive analytics that we can use to shape strategy," says one of the companies building a social media P&L.

In order for the social media P&L to be actionable, it needs to be distributed to and used by all the organization's key stakeholders. Some organizations are distributing their P&L's to brand leaders; another one is distributing it to the whole executive team, including brand leaders, function heads, and even the CFO. Given the potentially wide distribution, social media P&L owners are focusing on presenting information in the most visual, intuitive ways, such as NetBase's Brand Passion Index charts.

5. *Engage with your customers to co-create and co-market virally.*

The ultimate goal of any social intelligence initiative is to develop the intelligence needed to build better products, services, and experiences. There is no better way to do this than by involving willing customers. For example, Coca-Cola, the brand that has been named the number one global brand for 11 years, uses its Facebook fan page, with more than 37 million fans, to proactively ask questions of its customers. The company has found that passionate fans are more than happy to provide answers.

Coca-Cola has taken co-creation a big step forward with what it calls dynamic storytelling. Through a series of two-way conversations, customers now have a direct voice in the way the brand works. Coca-Cola's initiatives—and others like it—proactively enhance brand health while simultaneously offering customers value based on their outside-in inputs.

It's important to note that the first four steps are important precursors to this fifth step. While engagement and co-creation can certainly occur without enterprise-wide involvement and consistency, it takes a full commitment from all business functions before this step can become truly ingrained in how a company does business.

Summary

Becoming a C2B business is a long journey that requires commitment and culture change. But the organizations that have already embarked down the path have recognized that it offers big opportunities to those who get there first. "We're trying to get up a steep learning curve really fast," one executive tells me.

The "outside in" approach of C2B makes organizations more responsive, more agile, and better able to create delighted customers who come back again and again. These are organizational qualities that have driven the long-term success of the world's best organizations. So, how do you get there?

- Help all your stakeholders to embrace the Big Shift by integrating social intelligence with business intelligence, broadcasting and sharing function-specific successes, and fostering cross-pollination throughout the organization
- Focus on culture change, but make sure you have the right platform in place to support enterprise-wide social intelligence
- Use a social media P&L as a way to validate the business mandate for predictive, actionable metrics and to mature your enterprise social intelligence platform
- Recognize the role of social media as a tool for both 'listening' to your customers (typically of interest to brand, product, and other marketing roles), and 'engaging' with your customers (especially important to sales, service, and support roles.)

"We're past the point of convincing people that social media is critical to our business. If you're going to be C2B, there's no way not to be an expert in social intelligence."

About the Author

Esteban Kolsky is the Principal and Founder of ThinkJar, an advisory and research think-tank focused on Customer Strategies.

He has over 25 years of experience in customer service and CRM consulting, research, and advisory services. Most recently he spent eight years at Gartner, focused on Customer Service and CRM research. While there he coined the terms for EFM (enterprise feedback management) and CIH (customer interaction hub). In addition, he wrote on the social networking topics that led to today's revolution and assisted Fortune 500 and Global 2,000 organizations in all aspects of their CRM deployments.

Mr. Kolsky is currently researching and advising vendors and organizations on how to extend customer interactions from the CRM niche to the entire organization in their efforts to become Social Businesses.

He attended California Polytechnic University at Pomona, where he graduated with a degree in Business Administration and minors in Computer Information Systems, Telecommunications, and Economics.

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