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The Impact of Technology on Customer Service

'At Your Service' Spotlight: Simon Bradley, Virgin Atlantic Airways



Photo courtesy of Simon Bradley, VAA's North America President of Marketing

Virgin Atlantic Airways (VAA) is known worldwide for the vivacious and theatrical personality of its owner, Richard Branson. Because of his high profile media presence and well-documented interests in literally hundreds of eclectic and fashionable businesses, his products are imbued with a sense of fun and forward-thinking. And, according to VAA's North America President of Marketing, it is exactly this distinctive personality which Virgin exudes throughout its social media presence.

Simon Bradley, speaking at the Marcus Evans B2C Marketing Summit in Colorado in November 2011, said that businesses hoping to leverage social media marketing and customer service opportunities should understand the personality of their organizations

as well as their customers: 'Virgin Atlantic is about fun, energy, pioneering, and a love of flying. We try to live our brand when communicating with customers.' He believes that social media can enhance engagement with consumers if planned and executed in the correct way. 'Engagement must add value or else the customer will lose interest,' he says.

Bradley has been a pioneer of online marketing for over fifteen years. He is an innovator and risk-taker, intent on keeping the company up to speed with – and even ahead of – new developments in tourism marketing. First for Britain's South West Tourism, next for VisitBritain and now for VAA, he is a trailblazer for social media marketing and service. He showed his perspicacity when he espoused 'film tourism' marketing for VisitBritain, leveraging films such as *The Da Vinci Code*, *Casino Royale* and *Elizabeth* for their positive brand reinforcement. Recruited in 2010 by VAA to lead its North America marketing team, Bradley continues to explore new marketing opportunities across a range of online, social and mobile channels.

However, it is not all about advertising. 'Social media has been a game-changer not just for marketing strategies but for the way consumer brands operate,' says Bradley. 'We have certainly stepped up our advertising activity on social channels but only where it is appropriate and relevant to customers. But this really isn't about how budget is divided. It is more about how a brand thinks and the extent to which it moves from being campaign-centric to conversation-centric.'

With its commitment to honesty, value and caring, VAA is using social media to resolve issues, help customers and provide meaningful communication. Virgin's Facebook page includes travel tips from its 'vtravelled' blog – insider information which adds value for the consumer as well as appearing to be honest, informal and caring. The vtravelled site is dedicated to inspirational journeys with customers leading the conversation, exchanging information, stories and advice. Virgin launched it in order to address the extensive planning that consumers are faced with when going on a big trip. Although it does lead to some sales, this site is mainly intended as a brand reinforcement tool which also provides new customer insights.

But social media marketing and customer service cannot just be left to chance; it needs customer relationship management with an emphasis on keeping in character. Virgin Atlantic has a three-member team which monitors and responds to customer feedback from social media channels. 'These comments are captured by social media monitoring software which we also use to share real time customer response and sentiment with the business,' Bradley explains. 'For instance during the introduction of our new economy meal service in November, we encouraged customers on the first flights to share their feedback with us on Twitter which could be captured and reported back to the team managing our product enhancement.'

As keynote speaker at the B2C (Business-to-Consumer) conference, Bradley explained the importance of being genuine and credible on social media in order to create a trusting

relationship with the customer. Trust is mainly based on dependable service delivery but when things go wrong, communicating with customers can prevent trust from eroding. During the volcanic-ash crisis in 2010 when hundreds of flights were grounded all over Europe, Virgin had difficulty keeping pace with the rapidly-changing situation on its website, so it turned to Facebook and Twitter to communicate instant updates to its customers.

Bradley realizes that marketers have less control over consumers' brand perceptions on sites such as Twitter and Facebook but he maintains that the consumer is no longer content with traditional advertising messages. Using these more informal means of communication is both more immediate and friendly. 'Our social media strategy was born out of the opportunity social networks gave us in terms of customer service,' he says. 'We knew customers wanted to make contact with us and we see social media as another means to have a conversation with them. Social media is one area where we are able to assist people with questions in real time and that really empowers customers to engage fully with the brand.'

With consumers driving trends in communication, Bradley has noticed a fragmentation of media. 'Consumers are now in the driving seat. They choose where they want to get information from and which brands they want to engage with,' he says. 'This is particularly apparent online where a fundamental change in the engagement dynamic is taking place as customers move from visiting many brand-owned sites to engaging with a small number of platforms and receiving feeds from their favorite sources.'

In order to service this more fragmented arena he suggests a shift towards a conversational approach and away from campaign-driven, traditional advertising. He advocates keeping up with the constantly evolving social media landscape in order to stay relevant to customers and retain avenues for 'meaningful conversation' with them. Social media is giving VAA an opportunity to gather insights into changing consumer needs, allowing them to make timely service improvements. For example, in response to online-community suggestions, it launched a system to arrange taxi sharing for airport transfers with other passengers from the same flight. Fresh insights from social media also reinforce the innovation aspect of the brand as well as improving brand strength and durability.

Ultimately, Virgin Atlantic's social media strategy is not revenue-driven: 'For us, long haul air travel is a carefully considered purchase and the key strengths of social media are driving engagement, continued loyalty and brand preference,' says Bradley. 'We do know through surveying our frequent travelers that those who follow us on Facebook or Twitter are more likely to recommend us to a friend or colleague than those that don't. Alongside this we also have hard metrics such as traffic, revenue and conversion on virgin-atlantic.com.'

Sources: Personal Interview with Simon Bradley, April 2012; Barwise and Meehan (2010); Bradley (2011)