Next Time You Want to :) a Customer, Think Twice

This may seem like a ridiculous question, but it's one many businesspeople should ask as popular communication tools such as Slack and WhatsApp blur the line between messaging and social media.

Both apps' annoying habit of making it difficult to opt out of group-chat notifications seems like a minor complaint – or what *Quartz* recently referred to as a "design flaw." But it's a symptom of a greater problem plaguing the digital age: the problem of messaging etiquette.

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Certainly, thorny questions such as whether to turn on "read receipts" or deciding which emoji to use can cause plenty of trouble in the personal realm. But etiquette has become an issue as well for startups and entrepreneurs that want to use digital communication platforms to elevate their customer service.

In fact, messaging mistakes can be more than a little awkward – causing fraught service, a bad marketplace reputation and, ultimately, damage to customer relations.

The ecstasy of messaging for startups

Messaging presents a huge opportunity for customer-facing startups. Traditional voice or video solutions require real-time interactions and are limited to only one mode of communication. Messaging, on the other hand, appears to allow businesses to assist customers on a lower-pressure scale, where immediate responses are not required and customers don't

have to sit and wait for a response.

In addition, messaging presents a variety of multimedia possibilities. Text, voice, video and pictures all become options, enhancing the ways startups can interact with and respond to customers in a single platform. With customers seeking deeper experiences these days, this dynamic interaction is essential to a startup's viability and growth.

And the problem is that despite the advantages these vehicles offer for communication, messaging comes with a variety of logistical and etiquette complications that many people – and startups – don't know how to handle.

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To :) or not to :)

Because messaging as a business tool is still a relatively new medium, there is little agreement on what tools to use and how people should properly use them. But this problem of protocol isn't new. In the early days of early instant messaging platforms like AOL's and MSN's, every application was its own silo, with little collaboration and no universal communication standards.

Now, instead of AIM and MSN, we have WhatsApp and iMessage, or Slack and HipChat. These messaging platforms create more streamlined and mobile forms of communication, and trafficking in writing is no longer a niche market – it's ubiquitous. Still, startups and entrepreneurs who embrace this shift are forced to navigate these diverse platforms and the potential miscommunication pitfalls inherent to each.

Even using something as standard and simple as emojis can be controversial (just witness the debate about where the cheese belongs on a burger). Not only can emojis look different

depending on the platform, but they connote different things to different people. According to a study from the University of Amsterdam, for example, a person who uses emojis in a business context may inadvertently signal to others that he's less competent than his non-emoji-using colleagues (though I personally doubt that :)).

How to navigate messaging's etiquette minefield

Ideally, businesses and customers would unify and standardize messaging protocols, but this has yet to happen, leaving open interpretation and increasing the potential for digital faux pas. But startups can implement a few strategies when interacting with customers to sidestep the most egregious etiquette mistakes while capitalizing on everything messaging has to offer.

1. Don't stick to the script.

While it's important to make sure team members have a guide for handling customer service calls, that shouldn't mean distributing a thick binder dictating what to say for various scenarios.

Customers can easily differentiate between someone robotically regurgitating a script and someone being genuine. And it's not surprising to learn that, according to a survey from Software Advice, 69 percent of customers polled preferred customer-service experiences that don't come with a script. Essentially, the age-old fluid approach that governs in-person contact should carry over to the digital realm, where messaging is tailored to the individual and his or her needs.

2. Actually listen and engage.

Listening to your customers may seem like an obvious step, but messaging requires a type of active listening that many people aren’t seasoned in. Because messaging is inherently less personal than a phone call or in-person interaction, startups need to make more of an effort to highlight listening and to engage with their customers.

At my company, I’ve noticed that our customers tend to fall into one of two categories: One is “I just want to be heard,” and the other is “I need a collaborative and creative brainstorming session to help solve my problem.” In both cases, active listening helps my employees understand our customers and their stories and better accommodate their needs.

Beyond the act of listening, startups need to figure out how to funnel customers to the right listeners. Messaging often gives people the impression that they’re communicating “informally” with the whole business, while in reality they may be interacting with a company (even a newer one) that has many layers and densities.

This tendency creates expectations for how businesses should listen, as customers expect a more human approach. Thus, startups need to deploy a sophisticated back-end messaging service that connects each session to the right person within the company while simultaneously maintaining customer continuity.

3. Watch that tone.

One of the biggest challenges of text-based communications is using the proper tone. According to a famous study on nonverbal communication, by Albert Mehrabian and Susan Ferris, the actual words spoken during a conversation are often the

least important factor when it comes to communicating. The factors that carry more weight? Body language and vocal tone.

Because text strips out both of these factors and leaves only words, writers must carefully monitor their diction to minimize misinterpretation. Coca-Cola, for instance, approaches every work email like a professional letter, 1) using proper punctuation; 2) not overemphasizing statements or words via all caps or unnecessary exclamations; and 3) implementing a proper greeting and signature.

Startups and entrepreneurs should encourage their people to take a similar approach to messaging, because while the medium is imbued with an inherent degree of informality, a conversation with a colleague, customer or client should still be treated as a professional interaction.

At its heart, a successful messaging strategy embodies attention and meticulousness. Between strangers – the situation in many customer-business interactions – messaging is best used for coordination, reporting, exchange of information and simple interactions. And, when a challenging situation does arise during a messaging session, the lead participant must recognize when it's time to try something else.

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In such cases, switching to voice or videoconferencing in order to really listen to the customer can provide service with a more human touch. In short, good messaging can be a highly effective form of communication, so long as startups learn not to shrug off – ¯_(?)_/¯ – strong etiquette practices.