by: Catherine Constantinides

The Customer-Product Connection

Customer engagement strategies for social product development
Low levels of customer involvement and input throughout the product development process can lead to undesirable results, including lost opportunities to grow market share, product failures and unmet customer needs. Increasingly, savvy organizations are bringing more customer-centric products to market faster and more profitably, by:

1. Engaging social customers
2. Leveraging the social web as a customer service channel
3. Integrating customer feedback throughout the development process
4. Creating a "customer-product" connection

Engaging the social customer
With the emergence of a new breed of customers - the social customer - and the increasing availability of multitude of communication channels, organizations are becoming more customer-centric. Empowered, today's social customers actively initiate conversations on the social web, manage the flow of data and shape product related decisions. Recognizing that they no longer control the customer relationship and that customers are building their own conversations around products and services, organizations are realigning their strategies to focus on customer engagement.

Organizations of all types and across different verticals are changing their methods for engaging customers on various channels. Leading organizations are staying competitive in the delivery of products and services, by providing their customers multiple channels of engagement. They make it easy and convenient for customers to hold dialogue with key individuals in the organization, and promote interaction and discussion with online

customer communities. For instance, they provide customers with the option to share

their ideas and suggestions through several channels, whether it be through a corporate website portal, via social media networking sites, through email or through a customer service support channel.

The social web as a customer service channel
The social web has had a significant influence on the customer-organization relationship. It has changed the way in which customers communicate with organizations and how they in turn receive, manage and respond to customer service inquiries. Customers are increasingly using social networking sites like Twitter to reach out to organizations with their support inquiries. Let us take the example of a fictitious product, say an electronic tablet called the X-500, to illustrate this point. A customer is experiencing issues and is having trouble rebooting his device. Instead of waiting on the phone for a customer service representative, which may take several minutes, the customer sends a quick message on Twitter to get the attention of an online customer support agent.

Impatient with organizations that do not respond promptly or worse, that ignore a customer's clear cry for help, customers will seek the fastest method of communication to satisfy their immediate needs. According to a recent study conducted by Maritz Research, a customer experience research company, *"nearly half of consumers who tweeted a complaint directed toward a brand expected the company to respond, or at least, to read their tweet. However, only a third of those consumers received a tweeted response from the mentioned brand."* The need is therefore clear: The product and service innovation process must be enhanced to include the integration of an online customer service strategy that enables team members to locate issues and engage with customers so that responses are focused and timely.

Integrating customer feedback throughout the development process
Many organizations view feedback as an isolated static event, one that has a beginning and an end. Most do a decent job of collecting feedback, however, engagement levels are highest when customers feel they are an integral part of the product development process and a company's first priority. Successful, leading edge businesses view the feedback process as a dynamic vehicle for continuous improvement that builds loyalty. They incorporate customer feedback into every critical phase of the product design and delivery process.

The "customer-product" connection
A customer engagement process must position the social customer at the core of a product and service development strategy and create a strong relationship based on

continuous two-way dialogue. Cross-functional collaboration between departments will enhance customer engagement and help to produce high value products. In addition, the use of next-generation social technologies are necessary to bridge the gap between customers and organizations. Finally, a well designed customer engagement strategy must incorporate effective methods for obtaining and incorporating valuable customer insights and taking action.

Combined, these factors allow companies to engage and connect with customers, increase overall customer satisfaction, build brand loyalty and trust.