



Six Steps for Social Media Complaints

Dealing with complainers and haters in social media can be tricky. What you need is a playbook for how to do it right.

Caught in a maelstrom of customer questions and real-time uncertainty, the Indianapolis Motor Speedway (IMS) could have used a social media playbook.

Back in 2015, torrential rains washed out the first day of driver qualifying for the Indianapolis 500, the largest and most famous automobile race in the United States. When the cancellation was announced (after just a few cars had tried to qualify in a pre-torrent mist) many ticket-holders went to social media to ask about refunds.

One fan asked on Twitter, “@IMS since qualifying is rained out can tickets purchased today be used as a rain check tomorrow.”

The racetrack replied with a startling lack of compassion and nuance: “Today’s tickets will not be honored tomorrow.”

The Speedway sent similar replies to many other customers on Twitter, and posted the same fundamental message on Facebook: No refunds. The outcry was

swift, both about the lack of refunds for an event that had not taken place and for the unsympathetic and abrupt social media replies from the track.

Eventually, the IMS yielded, and made tickets valid for the following day’s successful, rain-free qualifying event.

Here’s the playbook the IMS evidently didn’t have; the formula for handling social media complaints. In social media, the key lessons to remember are F-E-A-R-S:

Find All Mentions
Display **E**mpathy
AnsWER Publicly
RePLY Only Twice
Switch Channels

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By Jay Baer, President, Convince & Convert



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Note that “be fast” isn’t included as a specific component of this acronym. This is because it is a self-evident step. My research for “Hug Your Haters” showed that nearly 40% of all social media complainers who expect a response, expect that response to arrive within 60 minutes. Yet, the average length of time for businesses to actually respond is five hours. Closing that gap is critical, and should be a focus for any legitimate social media customer service program. I recently gave a presentation (in Indianapolis, ironically) and found an example of an accounting firm that habitually answers the phone on the first ring, and emails clients back within five minutes. They have mastered the “fast” part of customer service!

Once companies understand the importance of speed, they can shift gears to the F-E-A-R-S formula.

Find All Mentions

It's impossible to hug the haters you

never see. In the legacy, offstage channels of phone and telephone, this isn't an issue. If someone calls your business, you know they called. The phone was either answered or the caller left a message. The same is true for email; there's no detective work needed to find them, they just show up on your computer, phone or tablet.

But it's harder with social media and other online customer complaint venues.

Are you looking at your reviews on Yelp and other local discussion boards and forums where customers and clients may be discussing your work? You should be, and someone in your organization (maybe you) should be monitoring your reputation at least weekly.

At the basic level, all professionals should be using social media listening software. Buffer would be a terrific choice for small businesses.

Display Empathy

Though social media complainers

and haters may not expect a reply, they definitely desire an audience. That's why they raise the stakes and take grievances to a public forum. They want onlookers to chime in with variations of "I'm appalled!" and "How dare they treat you this way!" Their complaints are often filled with language that vacillates between colorful and outrageous. It creates the reaction they seek, from the audience and possibly from you. They are angry. They write something scathing and post it online. Now you're angry too.

When you read a highly negative comment about your business (or about yourself), you experience anger as a real, physical reaction as well as an emotion. This is especially true for small business owners — a customer complaint feels like someone is telling you your baby is ugly!

But engaging in a sequence of acrimonious accusations with customers in a public, online forum never works. The business is never the perceived victor, even if they were truly in the right. Yet back-and-forth "flame wars" are not rare. They happen a lot, and they happen because the person answering customer complaints is unable to put empathy for the customer ahead of their physiological desire to fight.

Inserting empathy into your interactions with social media haters doesn't mean that you give them all wet, sloppy kisses. It doesn't mean you bend over backwards. It doesn't mean the customer is always right. It does mean the customer is always heard, and you should acknowledge, instantly and often, that the person is having a problem that your business likely caused somehow. A short "I'm sorry" goes a long, long way.

Answer Publicly

Replying in public is an important part of the playbook for handling online complaints (and praise).

Online customer service is a spectator sport. Sure, you want to make the hater happy, but the opinions of the onlookers are the bigger prize. Whether you're in apology mode or responding to a positive comment, if your client is choosing to interact with you in public, respond in the same way, at least at first. If you respond in private, you are squandering the trust gained by being open and transparent in how you handle customer feedback.

You might think, "Well, who cares if they leave us a Yelp review of our firm, and we reply back to them with a private message? At least we're replying!" The

spectators on Yelp don't know you replied.

Even if they rant and rave and call you names, answer coolly and publicly. It probably won't change the behavior or attitude of that one person, as it's almost impossible to turn a crazy lemon into lemonade — the fruit is already rotten. But by replying in public, you show your temperament, your values and your belief that all customers deserve to be heard.

Reply Only Twice

This is the question I get most often about the Hug Your Haters system: "What if I respond to a hater, and he replies back with something even more negative?"

It happens all the time. Social media complainers see you respond and believe they have a foil, an opponent, a punching bag. But they do not. Because you and your customer service personnel know the key to effective onstage interactions: Jay Baer's Rule of Reply Twice.

My Rule of Reply Twice is simple, and developed and proven across my 22 years as an online marketing and customer experience consultant:

Never reply more than twice to any one person in any single online conversation.

Violating the Rule of Reply Twice can drag you down into a vortex of negativity and hostility, and it's also a waste of your time. Here's how it works in practice. We'll use a fictional hater called "Chad" (just a coincidence and not in any way related to the kid of the same name who tormented me in high school).

Chad: "You guys are the absolute worst. I can't believe you actually have the guts to accept American currency for your terrible tax preparation service!"

Business: "We seem to have fallen short in your eyes, Chad. Can you tell me more about what happened, and I'll do whatever I can to assist?"

Chad: "It won't matter. It's not like an idiot like you can fix all that's wrong with this ridiculous company."

Business: "I'm sorry you're unhappy, and would like to help if possible. Please contact me via private message if you'd like me to give it a try."

At this point, if Chad continues to complain, just let him do so. You've made two legitimate attempts to solve his problem. He has acknowledged this by replying back to you, and the spectators

will see the same. Now it's time to let it go and walk away.

Nothing will be gained by replying again and again. You've done your part. You're on record. Move on.

However, the Rule of Reply Twice does not dictate that you must answer twice, just that you never answer more than twice.

Switch Channels

The truncated nature of many social communications means it may be impossible to fully address a complex complaint in only two interactions. Further, you may need the client's account number or other sensitive details to assist them, and you should not ask them to expose that information in full view of the digital spectators.

So for nuanced customer interactions that require research to resolve, your goal should be to switch channels after your initial, public response.

More than 60% of businesses say they are not capable of handling customer issues in one contact in social media. Whenever you need to take a public, onstage customer interaction private, do so in the hidden chambers of the original contact channel. Fortunately, almost all onstage channels offer this functionality to businesses. Take advantage of it.

If a client reaches out to your business on Twitter and you need their account number to investigate, in your first reply apologize and ask them to send a direct message with their account number. Same thing with Facebook Messenger, Instagram, LinkedIn and beyond.

So there you have it, the playbook for handling social media complaints. Just remember F-E-A-R-S.

This article is drawn from best-selling author Jay Baer's book "Hug Your Haters: How to Embrace Complaints and Keep Your Customers." A founder of five multi-million dollar companies, he delivers highly customized, engaging keynote presentations on word of mouth, marketing, customer experience and customer service. His consulting firm, Convince & Convert, provides strategic counsel to the world's most iconic brands like Caterpillar, Oracle, 3M, Adidas and The United Nations. He was recently inducted into the Professional Speaker Hall of Fame and the Word of Mouth Marketing Hall of Fame. He also hosts the award-winning podcast "Social Pros."