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Lessons from British Airways:
How to Prevent and Manage Negative Online Reviews

"Don't fly with @BritishAirways. They can't keep track of your luggage." So read the tweet from Hasan Syed, frustrated with how the airline handled his father's lost luggage. Syed was so upset that he spent $1,000 to promote his complaints on Twitter. That form of paid advertising put his tweets in front of an expanded audience, which rapidly generated a whirlwind of negative online publicity for the airline. And while British Airways ultimately found the luggage and apologized, the damage was done. The complaint had gone viral. For British Air, the only recourse was damage control.

It's a new age of customer service in the age of social media, one where online reviews can help or hurt revenues. Here are some valuable customer service lessons from the British Airways experience.

- **Monitor your brand's online reputation**. Set up Google or Yahoo! alerts to get notices on mentions of your brand/business in blog posts, news articles and videos. Explore free tools like BoardReader, which monitors discussion forums, or Social Mention. There are plenty of free online reputation management tools available.

- **Take complaints seriously.** Help your customer service staff understand every complaint is important. Let your customers know you appreciate their business through the amount of time and attention you provide to them. Follow the principles of customer care for a successful interaction every time.

- **Resolve problems quickly.** A couple of hours can be a long time in the social media universe. Think of how quickly posts can escalate. It's important to reach out to your disgruntled customer as soon as possible. Let customers know what to expect and when. Keep them informed every step of the way. Contact them even when there is no update to assure them you are working on the problem.

- **Offer up a value-added product or service.** Give your customer a discount on future service, or another acknowledgement of appreciation, showing you value his/her business and encouraging them to return.

- **Address the trend behind the complaint.** If one customer is complaining about a bad experience, chances are it's a trend. Determine whether the complaint is a symptom of a larger problem. Resolve that issue and you've just accomplished the ultimate in customer service: preventing issues before customers become

upset. It takes a lot less time and money to prevent problems than it does to handle them once a customer is ticked off.

- **Promote the positive.** Ask now-satisfied customers to post follow-up reports online in the same forum as the original complaint. Encourage positive reviews from all of your customers, including those who did not register complaints. Ask for customer feedback at the point of sale and provide a place online for them to share it. You can further encourage reviews by entering customers in a monthly giveaway or providing other incentives.

Remember that negative online reviews happen. By putting the customer first, and concentrating on customer service satisfaction, you'll be able to emerge with an impeccable online reputation.

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