On the basis of feedback from readers and participants in our workshops, I think that the time is now ripe to add an extra chapter to the book: *The Conversation Manager*.

This chapter is not included in the printed book, and is only available in digital form. Please feel free to share it with anyone who may be interested. I wish you enjoyable reading.

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The personality of the Conversation Manager

SIX MONTHS LATER...

This chapter is being written six months after the launch of my book: *The Conversation Manager*. In the intervening period I have received many comments from readers. During and after workshop sessions, I have been deluged with interesting questions. On the basis of all this useful feedback, I decided to add this extra chapter.
The chapter focuses in particular on the answers to two key questions, which crop up time after time:

1. Who should we appoint as our Conversation Manager?
2. What impact will Conversation Management have on our company structure?

In the last three chapters of the book, we read about the Conversation Manager's new way of thinking, and precisely what this involves. Brand identification is clearly at the heart of this new concept. In addition, it is also necessary to transform traditional advertising into modern activation. Advertisements are the starting point for a series of good conversations – and these conversations are managed and led by the Conversation Manager. These three chapters described a marketing philosophy which combines the best elements of the 'old' era with the latest trends in the field of social media.

The last six months have taught me that an understanding of this new vision – by itself – is not sufficient to ensure success. How is it possible that some people are able to put the vision into highly effective practice, whereas others – who have just as good a grasp of the basic principles – fail miserably?

The conclusion: understanding the vision is easy, but its implementation within the framework of an organisation is much more complex – and it is the personality of the Conversation Manager which makes the difference between success and failure.

MORE TWITTER THAN FACEBOOK

When people first hear the title *The Conversation Manager*, most of them immediately make a link with social media. This is, of course, correct – but it is only part of the total picture. The Conversation Manager is not someone who spends the whole day following Facebook and Twitter. Instead, the Conversation Manager seeks to integrate word-of-mouth marketing into all aspects of the company's thinking and actions. His is a strategic function, not a tactical one. In addition, he also has a very clear 'do'-mentality. He is not afraid (metaphorically speaking) to get his hands dirty and is always prepared to do his share of operational work.

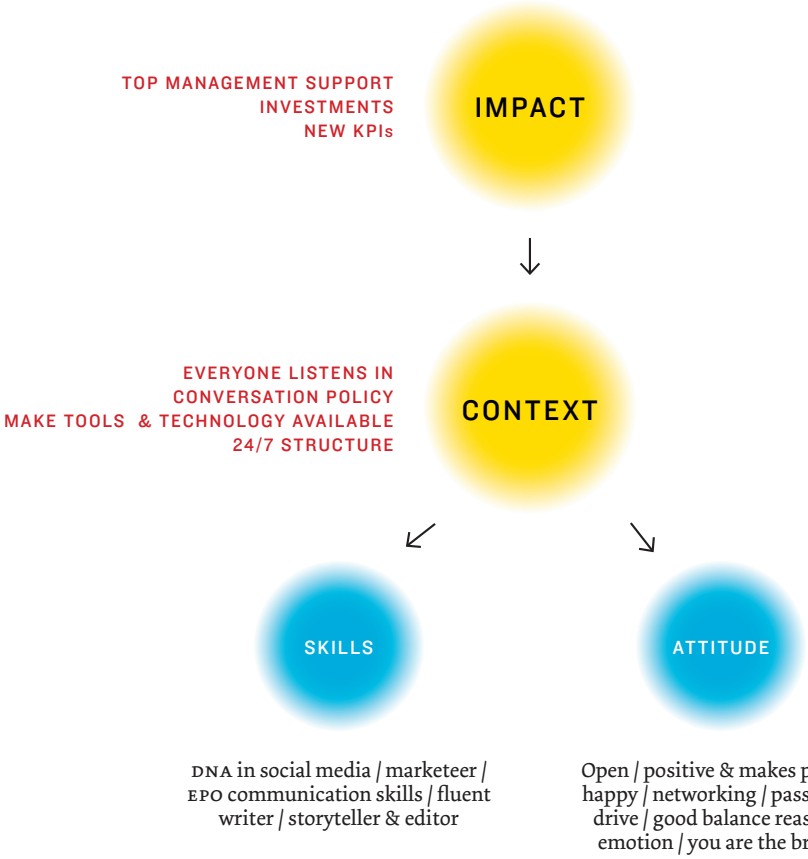
The main driver of consumers when making their purchasing decisions is word-of-mouth (see Chapter 1). Consumers who give each other positive feedback about a product are therefore the most important stimulus for the growth of a company. For example, the spectacular growth figures of Zappos.com[1] are the result of this way of thinking. Zappos.com sells shoes via the internet. Shoes are by no means a unique product and there is no question of exclusive deals with brands. No, they just sell ordinary shoes like you can find in any high street store – but they sell them very well. In just a few years' time, the company has developed into a major world player in the sector. In 2009 Zappos.com was sold to Amazon.com for an amazing 1.2 billion dollars. The company's philosophy is surprisingly simple: "We will do all that we can to make our customers happy. In fact, we are not selling shoes – we are selling top quality customer service." This outstanding customer service is the starting point for numerous conversations, tens of thousands of them. Joseph Jaffe's most recent book[2] also places the emphasis on word-of-mouth. He regards customer service as the most important differentiator for the future. The new form of customer acquisition is retention, according to Jaffe. Customer service which exceeds customer expectations is often a stimulus for positive conversations. If an existing customer is helped in a manner which he finds exceptional, he will be more inclined to pass this information

on to his friends, who may in turn become new customers. This is the word-of-mouth machine working at its best.
It is strange that while most company managers would readily agree that word-of-mouth is an important driver of growth, their marketing strategy takes little or no account of this key factory. This defies all logic!

A PERSONALITY WITH IMPACT ON THE ORGANISATION[3]

The Conversation Manager is someone with a vision, one might even say a mission. His dream is to change his company's way of thinking. The Conversation Manager is not a one-man show. He understands that the majority of people in the company will need to share his vision, if it is to make a real impact. He is sometimes impatient, because his mission does not seem to be making progress quickly enough, but he never loses the focus on his final goal: to make the customer central in all his company's thoughts, words and deeds. His challenge is to persuade his managers and his team to invest sufficiently in customer services and to adopt new KPI's which reflect this change of emphasis. Above all, he must win the full support of senior management and the board of directors. This is not something that he will be able to achieve overnight – which means that our Conversation Manager must be someone with a strong and reliable personality. He must be able to take knocks and cope with delays and setbacks.

Of course, the Conversation Manager must also possess a number of functional competencies. By using his talents to the full, he sets a good example. This is particularly important during a change process. His most important competencies are all closely related to communication. The ability to listen to people sympathetically and to respond in a fluent manner is a key skill for a Conversation Manager. In addition, he must be a marketer – after all, the core of our vision is the implementation of word-of-mouth in all aspects of marketing. He must also be able to successfully synthesise the many different stories of his consumer into a single, powerful story. In this way, he will be able to discover new trends and insights.
Experience has shown that these are not especially difficult skills to acquire and use. We are not talking about complex analyses or



Model co-developed through the input of my colleagues at InSites Consulting, my followers on Twitter, the editorial team and the community at Marketingfacts.nl and the fans of *The Conversation Manager* on Facebook

the management of detailed processes. All you need is the talent to deal comfortably with people and a basic knowledge of the possibilities offered by social media.

The real key to the success of the Conversation Manager is his personality. Some people are naturally gifted with the right type of qualities, but most people need to work hard at their character, polishing up the good points and smoothing off the rough edges. The new 'social' era in which we live has changed the attitude of many people. Managers must be able to recognise this fact and take advantage of it, by tapping in to the new spirit of the times. This can sometimes be difficult, but

it is by no means impossible. The ideal profile for a Conversation Manager is based on great openness towards change and feedback. He has the ability to transform negative criticism into positive opportunities. He is happiest when he is making other people happy. Good networking, both inside and outside the organisation, is one of his strengths. With his passion and drive, he succeeds in motivating those around him. Last but not least, he understands the importance of keeping a proper balance between emotional conversations and rational arguments.

There are few jobs in which the personality of the post-holder plays such a crucial role. A person with the right skills but the wrong temperament is doomed to fail as a Conversation Manager. On his blog, Seth Godin[4] describes it in the following terms: "It would help if that person understood technology, at least well enough to know what it could do. They would need to be able to write. But they also have to be able to seduce stragglers into joining the group in the first place, so they have to be able to understand a marketplace, do outbound selling and non-electronic communications. They have to be able to balance huge amounts of inbound correspondence without making people feel left out, and they have to be able to walk the fine line between rejecting trolls and alienating the good guys. Since there's no rule book, it would help to be willing to try new things, to be self-starting and obsessed with measurement as well. If you were great at this, I'd imagine you'd never ever have trouble finding good work."

Trying to implement Conversation Management as an individual or in an isolated team is a thankless task. In this manner, you will never have the impact you desire on the organisation as a whole. Many frustrated Conversation Managers – frustrated because they are not sufficiently listened to or because progress is being made too slowly for their liking – make the mistake of isolating themselves. If you do this, you will find yourself in a negative spiral from which it will be difficult to escape. It is by having the right attitude that you will create a context for success. Context supports the necessary change of your company culture. By encouraging your colleagues to listen to consumers, you will be able to launch a change process. Searching for fellow 'believers' will also help, as will cooperation with people who can

COMMUNITY MANAGER VERSUS CONVERSATION MANAGER

"What is the difference between a community manager and a Conversation Manager?" I have been asked this question on several occasions in recent months. A community manager is someone who acts as a moderator for the conversations between a specific group of people. This community can be a fan-club on Facebook, a group of likeminded followers on Twitter, a research group, etc. The focus is clearly on the community.[5] In this context, the techniques detailed in Chapter 6 for participation in social media conversations can be useful. The Conversation Manager has a more strategic function, which has an impact on every aspect of a company's marketing. It is perfectly possible that a community manager may be a member of the Conversation Manager's team, but the Conversation Manager's task is much wider. He coordinates the social media activities of several different departments. He facilitates the integration of these media into more traditional marketing initiatives. He is someone more senior in the organisation who acts as a link between the different departments and the top management in his area of expertise.

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raise the profile of the change process within the organisation. This process can be further strengthened through a policy statement which emphasises effective customer service and introduces procedures which allow tactical choices to be taken quickly. Finally, the Conversation Manager – on the foundations laid by his positive attitude – will be able to extend a hand to senior management. He will seek support from various people at senior management level and will persuade them to invest resources in his new philosophy. The icing on the cake will be the acceptance of a new range of indicators for assessing the company's performance. Once the top brass has agreed to quantify their success on the basis of new criteria, then – and only then – can you begin to talk about genuine change.

JEFFREY HAYZLETT, CMO, KODAC: SHARING EMOTIONS IS THE NAME OF THE GAME

For many people, the name 'Kodak' is a generic term for anything to do with photography. However, not so long ago it looked as though

the brand was losing the 'sexy' part of its image. Warehouses full of unsold rolls of film were the hard daily reality. Nobody was buying what Kodak was selling. Faced with this difficult situation, Jeffrey Hayzlett was appointed as the new marketing director – and also took on the role of Conversation Manager. Jeffrey is a remarkable figure.[6] It soon became clear that he possessed both the necessary skills and the right attitude to bring sexiness back to the Kodak brand. The key element in his strategy was his understanding that it is impossible to control what consumers say about your products and your company. To a large degree, it is therefore the consumers who determine brand perception in the market. As a company, you must follow this market closely, must be present where your consumers are present. In today's modern world, this means that you must be present in the social media. If a group of consumers is giving negative feedback about Kodak to a wide public audience, Kodak must be in a position to provide that wide public audience with answers to the criticisms. If you fail to do this, you will pay a heavy price: ROI. For Jeffrey Hayzlett, this acronym stands for 'Return on Ignoring'. If you fail to listen to your dissatisfied customers, you are simply storing up trouble for the future.

The results of Jeffrey's new approach were highly positive. Before Kodak started to take part in online conversations, roughly 40% of the comments about the company were negative. Following its participation on the web, this figure has now fallen to just 7%. A consumer who feels that the brand is interested in his complaints is more likely to moderate his comments. This is a simple (but o so important!) marketing law – and one which has a high degree of impact on all your activities. Jeffrey Hayzlett was able to persuade a major company like Kodak to adopt a radical change of course. His clear focus on sharing and experiencing the emotions of the company's consumers made it clear to his colleagues and staff in which direction they should be moving. And it was a vision which he was prepared to push through at all levels. For example, he decided to publicise the company's new internal policy on the use of social media via the internet. Many people could hardly believe what they were seeing. To publish an internal strategic document on the web? It was unheard of ! Nevertheless, Jeffrey convinced senior management that there was no need to treat the company's policy on social media as if it were some kind of state secret. They were talking about how to use the web, not about how to blow up the

world! And so it was that the policy made its appearance first on the internet – giving Kodak a mass of free publicity into the bargain. People began talking again about the Kodak brand, but in much more positive terms than in the recent past. Jeffrey had achieved his first success: by sharing with his consumers, he had managed to portray the company in a positive light.

Like all good Conversation Managers, Jeffrey succeeds in maintaining exactly the right balance between rationality and emotionality. His entire plan is based on hard facts. He keeps detailed statistics relating to Kodak's participation in social media. But in addition to these rational components, he understands that conversations with consumers are not only a question of facts, but also a question of feelings. For this reason, his motto is: "We don't need extra eyes and ears on the web; what we need is to connect with people. Not only with their minds, but also with their hearts."

The secrets of his success are speed and action. By responding rapidly, potential problems can be turned into potential advantages. Talking the talk is one thing, but you need to move on quickly to walking the walk. And what if things don't turn out exactly as planned? Even then, speed is of the essence. It is no coincidence that Kodak's social media trajectory is known by the acronym F.A.S.T. Or as Jeffrey himself has put it: "If we are going to do something wrong, then at least let's do it quickly!"

THE SKILLS? EASY!

The easiest task of a Conversation Manager is to acquire the necessary functional competencies. There are five key skills which he needs:

1. Develop EPO[7] communication techniques

The difference between success and failure is to be found in a fluent and fluid style of communication. My favourite communication model for Conversation Management is EPO. EPO is a Dutch acronym meaning 'empathy – positive – solution'. If a consumer complains about something, do not try to offer him an immediate solution. First try to empathise with him. Show him a little bit of sympathy and understanding. If you can do this, your consumer will feel more at his ease – and will be inclined to be more moderate. People with problems like to be heard. This is their most important concern. Once you have done this, you can then move on to the second stage: placing the problem

in a positive context. Assure them that you are grateful that they have told you about this important problem: you will be amazed how positively they react! A key sentence in this phase of the conversation is something like: "Thanks for letting us know; now we can do something about it." It is only during the third and final stage of the conversation that you should look more objectively at the nature of the problem and the steps which can be taken to reduce or eliminate it. Your two preparation phases will mean that the consumer should now be more receptive to this 'factual' approach. This would not have been the case earlier on in the conversation process – and so you would have missed your desired impact. EPO usually works well: it is only in very clear negative situations (such as a death, for example) that it is impossible to be positive. Moreover, you should also remember that EPO is harder to apply in social media than it is in person. This is certainly true of Twitter, where the limitation to 140 characters presents a real challenge. In this case, it is sometimes better to ask an extra question, which allows you to conduct the conversation further offline.
It almost goes without saying that the EPO technique also works well with consumers who have something positive to communicate about your brand. React enthusiastically and compliment them on the things they have to say. Comments such as "What a great idea" or "I'll pass that on to our R&D people" are useful in situations of this kind and help to further strengthen the bond between your brand and your consumers.

2. Make social media a part of your DNA
   If someone makes active use of social media during their free time, they will be better able to become quickly and easily involved in web conversations about their brand. It never ceases to amaze me how many managers make comments about Twitter, when they hardly ever use the medium themselves. This almost defies belief. It is like wanting to advertise on television before you have ever even seen a T.V. set! You can only take good decisions about 'something' when you are fully familiar with that 'something'. In the first instance, a fast-moving platform like Twitter scares away most non-users. Even so, you can learn to use it effectively – if you try. In fact, it's really quite simple. If you can just spend enough time twittering, you will pick up the necessary techniques as you go along.
3. Don't neglect your marketing skills!
   The function of a Conversation Manager involves more than just

social media skills. The purpose of Conversation Management is to drag the entire marketing philosophy of your company into the 21st century. To do this, however, also means that you will need a good working knowledge of the 'traditional' marketing techniques which you are hoping to change. In this way, you will be able to identify the opportunities which will allow you to guide the classic channels of marketing communication in the direction of conversations. Moreover, you should never forget that the final decisions relating to your strategy are commercial and marketing decisions – and will therefore be taken by commercial and marketing managers. You need to talk to these people in their own language, if you want to convince them that you are right. In this sense, the Conversation Manager is a kind of translator: he speaks the language of the consumers but he also speaks the language of the marketeers, and he transmits messages between these two groupings in a manner that both can understand.

4. Keep your pen sharp!
   Applying EPO techniques in a written medium of communication requires excellent writing skills. The Conversation Manager succeeds in getting his message across in a few short but pithy sentences. His language is the language of the consumer. He does not use copywriters or advertising agencies. He writes with feeling, but in a manner which merges easily with the brand personality of his company. The ability to work with Twitter and Facebook, the know-how to place reactions on relevant fora and blogs: these are important plus-points for a Conversation Manager.
5. Be a story-teller – and an editor
   The Conversation Manager tells stories about consumers within his own organisation. He makes people warm for the daily concerns and experiences of these consumers. In addition, he manages to edit or synthesise all the many different consumer stories into a single, coherent whole, with a powerful brand impact. In this manner, he is able to move beyond the merely anecdotal. The identification of new trends and insights, the anticipation of their likely effects, the organisation and adjustment of processes to reflect these factors – these are all core tasks of the Conversation Manager.

OPEN AND PRO-ACTIVE COMMUNICATION BY BETTERFOOD

Betterfood is a 'warm' brand: most of us were given it to eat as babies and we now give it to our own children and grandchildren. When a number of mothers told Kraft in August 2010 that several young children had nearly choked on their Betterfood biscuits, the company was naturally shocked. Apparently, the size of the biscuits is a potential danger for children between the ages of six and nine months. The packaging already mentioned clearly that the biscuits should be mixed with milk or fruit juice to make a pap for small babies, but this was no longer good enough for Kraft. They decided to act proactively and recalled all existing packaging from their retailers. This was destroyed and was immediately replaced by a new packaging design, on which the necessary warnings to parents were made even clearer. This cost Kraft their entire Betterfood turnover for the intervening six week period when the biscuits were out of the stores, but in the long-term this was unquestionably the right decision. Imagine the impact on the brand if a child actually died through eating a Betterfood biscuit! Open and pro-active communication is the sign of a good Conversation Manager. And if you can follow up the right words with the right deeds, you are well on the way to achieving Conversation Management perfection!

YOUR CHARACTER MAKES THE DIFFERENCE. DIFFICULT!

The real key to Conversation Management rests in the character of the Conversation Manager himself. There are five essential ingredients for success.

1. Be open

   Openness is one of the most important qualities of a successful Conversation Manager. And the word 'open' should be interpreted in the broadest possible sense: being open for change, being open to the opinions of others, being open to criticism, being open to new technologies, etc. It is equally important, however, to show a willingness to be open and honest about your failures and mistakes. If a consumer tells you about something that has gone wrong, do not be afraid to admit that he is right (providing, of course, that he is). There is nothing 'wrong' with making mistakes, as long as you deal with them

truthfully and promptly. "The people who are scared of making mistakes are usually the people who have trouble with learning," according to Erik Van Roekel of the ING webcare team.

2. Be positive and make people happy

   Putting the P in EPO into daily practice is also of crucial importance. Consumers like the positive approach. The Conversation Manager has a good sense of what people expect. He can detect what is bothering them or causing them problems. Making people happy is one of his greatest passions. Of course, he understands that it is impossible to please all of the people all of the time, and this realisation sometimes frustrates him. One of my favourite books is *The Power of Nice*.[8] It is a short, well-written book in which Linda Kaplan shows that you can make progress in your private life simply by being nice to other people. Much the same is true of brands: if you show genuine interest in the problems of your customers, this will strengthen their ties with your brand. Consider again the example of Zappos.com.: it was one of the first companies to show consumer interest of this kind and it was (and still is) universally praised for its efforts. The challenge for the Conversation Manager is to combine two very different roles: sometimes he must be the advocate of the consumer, and sometimes he must defend the policy of the company. This is a bit like being between the devil and the deep blue sea, but the good Conversation Manager knows exactly the right course to steer!

3. Don't forget to network

   It is not always easy to convince your colleagues of the need for (and the efficacy of) a new approach. In this respect, it can help if you already have a large network within your organisation. However, this kind of network does not just happen by chance. A smart Conversation Manager is constantly looking for new opportunities to extend his range of contacts. He knows that he cannot succeed in his ultimate goal – to push through fundamental structural change at senior management level – without having the right friends in the right places. In addition, the power of external networking should not be underestimated. A fresh view on matters by someone from another sector can often work wonders. Similarly, bringing outside experts into the company can often help to stimulate your Conversation Management message in a positive manner.

4. Show your passion and drive

These are admirable – and much admired – personal qualities. Having the drive and determination to convince others, having the will to carry on when things are not going well: these are characteristics typical of a good Conversation Manager. His philosophy is: "if at first you don't succeed, try, try again." Rome wasn't built in a day and (to continue mixing our metaphors) and he who laughs last, laughs longest. Structural change can only be achieved through constant perseverance over a long period. During a meeting with Seth Godin, I asked him to define his recipe for success. His answer was simple: "discipline!" He went on to tell me: "I used to write a new blog post every day and a new book every two years. To begin with, no one read my blogs and no one bought my books. However, I was convinced of my vision and my talent, and so I just kept on trying. Success takes discipline, lots of discipline."
I am sure that he is right. Start small; be happy with minor successes to begin with. Remember the old adage: "Mighty oaks from little acorns grow".

The passion of the Conversation Manager is reflected in his way of working. His is no '9-to-5' job. He is keen to respond to consumer comments as quickly as possible. This often means being online in the evenings and at weekends. It was in this manner that Dirk Dewulf, the Conversation Manager at Rabobank.be, was once able to prevent a crisis on New Year's Day. The boundary between professional life and private life is becoming ever more blurred. For example, you might be at a cocktail party when someone asks you about one of the decisions you recently took at work. This is something a Conversation Manager willingly accepts: he is 'on call' 24-hours-a-day, even if he is not actually 'at work'.

5. Keep a good balance between rationality and emotionality

This ability to blend rationality and emotionality in equal measure is one of the qualities which sets the good Conversation Manager apart from the rest. Communication with consumers is often emotional, but it remains important to collect relevant facts and figures. Keeping statistics, making predictions, preparing case studies: these are all part of the Conversation Manager's art. Hard facts are sometimes necessary to convince those within the organisation who might still have doubts about your vision. But a soft approach is necessary if you really want to connect with people.

THE CONVERSATION PRIEST![9]

Roderick Vanhögen (@fatherroderick) is a Dutch priest. He is well-known as 'the podcast preacher'. Believe it or not, this priest meets all the requirements of a Conversation Manager. Admittedly, his 'business' is not the coolest or sexiest in the world (at least, not in this world), but he has nonetheless achieved great success by using the conversation philosophy. Each morning he makes a new podcast, with the aim of inspiring those who see or hear it. His stories are concerned exclusively with matters of faith and the Roman Catholic Church. However, he tells these stories with such passion that he has been able to 'convert' numerous 'followers'. When he used to preach in church, his congregation numbered scarcely a dozen. Today, more than 4,000 people follow his daily messages of hope.

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6. You are the brand.

You must have a good feeling for and belief in the values of your brand. The closer the similarities between your own personality and the characteristics of the brand, the easier you will find it to manage consumer conversations. As we have already mentioned, the distinction between 'person' and 'brand' is becoming harder and harder to define. As a Conversation Manager, you must radiate the brand values of your company more than anyone else in the organisation.

A STREET FIGHT: NESTLÉ VERSUS THEIR FANS[12]

March 2010: Greenpeace attacks Nestlé for buying palm oil from a supplier who is partly responsible for the destruction of an eco-system. As a result, the continued existence of the orang-utan in the region is being threatened. In order to alert people to what was going on, Greenpeace made a high-impact film in which someone was shown eating the finger of an orang-utan instead of a chocolate finger of Kit-Kat. In less than a week, this situation had escalated into a major media crisis for Nestlé, with serious negative impact. And it was all the result of disastrous Conversation Management.

The first mistake that Nestlé made was to have the Greenpeace film removed from You Tube. Attempting to censure social media is simply 'not done'. It always has a boomerang effect. Almost immediately,

THE ORDER OF THE MARMARATI[10]

The Marmite brand team (part of the Unilever organisation) decided to use the Conversation Management approach for the launch of its new product variants. Marmite is a brand with as many detractors as fans. "You either love it or hate it" (to coin an old Marmite advertising phrase). Unilever decided to exploit this strength of feeling by setting up a 'secret' group of brand fans. They call themselves the Marmarati and they all dress in the same manner. They meet in a Victorian castle straight out of Sir Walter Scott, where they are welcomed by the Marmite brand team, who treat them like guests of honour. During these meetings, they have the opportunity to sample new Marmite flavours. On the basis of the feedback from these Marmarati, Unilever then decides which new variants will be put into production. Since adopting this new approach, the success of their new product launches has increased dramatically. The fans, of course, are happy to spread the good news with pleasure. The most interesting aspect of this story is the openness of the Marmite brand team. They are prepared to place decisions about new products in the hands of their loyal consumers. They are similarly prepared to let these same consumers perform a large part of their brand communication. It is this openness, this willingness to experiment, which forms the foundation for their improved results.

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the video began to appear on other websites – and now attracted the attention of even more curious viewers. Shortly thereafter, the Nestlé fan page on Facebook was buried under a avalanche of criticism. The company reacted to this criticism in an emotional and defensive manner. This was their second big mistake.

It seemed like some kind of street fight was going on. Nestlé consumers – both pro and contra – were soon hurling accusations and insults at each other through cyberspace. Nestlé tried to enter into these conversations, but it is clear that they did so without the right preparation. This is probably because the responsible manager within the organisation did not have the necessary skills and/or personality. When Nestlé communicated, it was obvious that the communication came from the brand, and not from a person. This made the whole discussion

seem distant and anonymous. For such a sensitive issue, people need to see the human face behind the official message. In these circumstances, defensive and negative reactions only make matters worse. *Never* do this.
What impact did this street fight have on the brand? Considerable, would seem to be the answer. During the media storm the value of Nestlé[13] shares dropped sharply. And the sales of Kit-Kat? Only time will tell if these have been seriously hit in the long-term.

ON A DESERT ISLAND IN THE MIDDLE OF THE OCEAN

A good Conversation Manager creates a context for himself and his team in which success can be supported and developed. Never isolate yourself or give your team the feeling that they are sitting on an island within the company. Remember, your main goal is to change the entire thinking of that company -and you can hardly do this if you are cut off from the mainstream. On the contrary, you need good contacts and good relations at all levels of the organisational structure. Creating the right context also means creating the right company culture. The first step is to make sure that everyone is able to listen to the consumers. The Conversation Manager's context will only improve when all his staff and colleagues realise that consumers talk about their brands. Install the necessary technology so that everyone is in a position to keep up to speed with the word-of-mouth about the company. A short daily newsletter or a tweetwall in the entrance lobby are just two easy examples of things you can do to keep your people informed about the public perception of your brand.
The second step is to build a structure which allows you to converse flexibly with your consumers. The Conversation Manager needs to draw up a policy statement which defines what is permissible and what is not permissible in terms of participation in the social media. Such a policy statement may (to a certain extent) limit your flexibility to react, but it also creates the structure which you need to do your work properly. In a stock-quoted company, this kind of policy statement is an absolute must. Financial institutions, for example, are notoriously wary about responding to comments on Twitter. Their legal people get involved, which makes any kind of fast reaction virtually impossible. Yet it is precisely the speed of the reaction that is so important. You can compare it to waiting at the counter in a bank.

If the consumer asks the cashier a question, he is given an immediate answer. The cashier doesn't need to seek legal advice before giving a reply! So why should it be any different for social media? All you need to do is to make sure that your staff are properly prepared to give their answers – and the best way to do this is with a general policy statement. This statement defines both the playing field and the rules of the game, and must (for preference) be applied throughout the organisation as a whole. In this manner, everybody knows exactly what they are allowed to do – and what not.

The third step is to ensure that the right tools and the right technology are made available. Not everyone possesses the ideal personality to become a Conversation Manager. For these people, the right technological aids can be a big help. If online comments are automatically analysed, it makes it easier to formulate the right answer. Tools already exist which can categorise online comments on the basis of the emotions contained in the conversation. This can be invaluable in helping to assess the true nature of a given situation, particularly if you are someone who is less good at being able to sense other people's feelings.

The final step is to develop a 24/7 structure. It is impossible for a Conversation Manager to be at the disposal of his consumers around the clock – but this is precisely what they expect! For this reason, it is important to use technology and staff support to ensure that the company has a continual presence in the key social media. In large organisations this means that Conversation Management is usually carried out by a team. Smaller organisations generally work with a stand-in (even Conversation Managers are allowed to sleep and go on holiday!). A 24/7 culture is even better than a 24/7 structure. If you succeed in creating a listening culture throughout your organisation, you will find that more and more of your colleagues will automatically start joining in conversations on the web. In this way, your 24/7 culture almost develops itself – and is self-perpetuating! This is the ideal context: everybody wants to keep the customers happy and everybody wants to play a part in achieving this goal.

SOCIAL MEDIA BELONG TO US ALL!

Who should manage social media within a company? It is a relevant and often emotional question. A survey carried out by Econsultancy[14] shows that 35% of companies manage social media through their digital

WHO IS CHARLOTTE?

The Flemish telecommunications company Telenet has developed its own 24/7 structure. In order to react promptly to the complaints of its customers, Telenet set up a webcare team. The team actively trawls social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook, looking for negative comments about the brand. These comments are then answered by 'Charlotte'. Charlotte is a fictitious person invented by Telenet. This allows the different members of the webcare team to talk to consumers, but always with the same face and the same voice. Charlotte is also used inside the Telenet organisation. For example, the intranet site has a function entitled 'Help Charlotte'. If members of staff other than the webcare team discover negative comments about Telenet, they are encouraged to pass these on to Charlotte. In this way, every member of staff can make a personal contribution towards improved customer service in a simple and consumer-friendly manner.

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marketing team. 21% allocate the task to the PR/communication team and 19% opt for a cross-functional team. In light of these figures, it is not surprising that there is still much discussion on this subject.
In my experience, it is usually the team with the most personal experience of social media which makes the loudest claim. It is often in these teams that the first organic, spontaneous efforts at Conversation Management develop. This is a good thing and will increase their chances of success. Moreover, these people are also likely to have personal qualities which are not dissimilar from those we seek in a Conversation Manager.
Yet having said this, the answer to our question is: 'Everyone!' If you wish to develop a true 24/7 culture, it is important that everyone in the organisation is involved. PR & communication teams use social media to spread their message. Customer service & care teams add a digital tailpiece to pre-existing offline initiatives. R&D teams approach consumers for information relevant to the development of new products. HR teams go in search of new recruits via LinkedIn and other online platforms. Every department has its own way of benefiting from social media. And every department doubles its winnings, if positive word-of-mouth can be generated.

In the previous chapter we looked at a three-step method for the managing of conversations: observe – facilitate – participate. Each of these three steps is closely linked to the social media. However, it is not necessary for every department to perform all the different steps. For example, the focus for the R&D teams will be on observation. This is logical: their task is to track down fresh insights and new trends. It is therefore equally logical that they should also 'manage' this aspect of the conversation process. "But wait a minute!" I hear you cry. "You just said that everyone should be involved and now you are saying that R&D should manage this aspect alone!" This is not as incompatible as it sounds. R&D should indeed do the actual management – keeping senior management informed of their findings, developing new online tools, etc. – but it is important that everyone continues to participate in the process – by listening and observing. When we move on to the facilitating of conversations, we are entering the domain of the marketing, communication and PR departments. They should be responsible for initiating conversations and guiding discussions in relevant fora. Once again, every member of staff can 'think along', but the actual management should be left to the specialised departmental teams. Participation in conversations is primarily the concern of the customer service and communication sections. Customer services play a more reactive role, dealing with negative consumer comments, whereas the role of the communication teams is more pro-active, being focused on the stimulation of positive conversations.



The conclusion is simple: social media must be integrated into every branch of the company organisation. It is also necessary to delegate management responsibility for the different aspects of these social media to particular departments. However, it is vital to remember that this does not mean that the use of social media is the exclusive preserve of any single department. Every member of staff must be able to take part in online conversations, if it is possible to help the consumer in this way. This is what a 24/7 culture really means.

In other words, the ideal context is the ideal culture, a culture in which everyone contributes to provide the company's consumers with top-quality service and brand experience. Companies must avoid internal battles for the 'sole possession' of social media – because this battle has already been won by somebody else: the consumer! The consumer is the only person who can really say that the social media belong to him. The companies and their employees can play along in the game, but their participation must not be restricted to the privileged 'right' of a single department or a few senior officials. This game can only be won if everyone is allowed to take part.

ALL THE WAY TO THE TOP

In order to have meaningful impact within your company, you need to have the support of senior management. You need to find someone who understands your vision and who is prepared to support it at board level. In addition, the smart Communication Manager also communicates pro-actively with the head of the commercial department about his plans and his progress. It is crucial to involve this person closely in the change process which you are planning to push through.
After the first tentative steps in Conversation Management have been taken, it is necessary to secure the structural investment which will allow you to take your change process a stage further. In order to implement your new philosophy throughout the organisational structure, you need resources – and plenty of them. In particular, you need substantial investment in people and technology – and this, as everyone knows, is not easy to achieve.
There is much to be said for the 'think big, act small' approach.[15] The Conversation Manager must seek to promote his vision in a manner which is compatible with the wider vision of the company. His own

aims and objectives must blend fluently with the long-term objectives of the current company strategy. Success stories which you can share with senior management help to underscore this compatibility. You should strengthen your position still further by proposing a number of short-term projects which will yield immediate results. State clearly the likely cost of your projects in terms of time and money, and also what you expect to achieve. In this manner, a manager at Alpro recently invested a paltry € 300 in a conversation programme with just 11 consumers. The results were clearly beneficial, which allowed a case to be made to senior management for the investment of further resources. "Slowly, slowly, catchy monkey". Don't try to convince your bosses overnight: a step-by-step approach will yield better results.

The ultimate goal is to change the criteria by which your company judges its own performance. Real structural change can only be achieved once the senior management has agreed to work with new success indicators. Thereafter, the performance of every member of staff should be assessed against these indicators. If the assessments make clear that the time has come to move in a new direction, the behaviour of the employees will adjust automatically. People behave in accordance with the expectations which the company has of them. New expectations will therefore result in new behaviour.

The new success indicators must be dominated by all aspects of the concept of the 'happy customer'. The extent to which people are willing to recommend your brand is another key criterion. In addition to the questioning of consumers, it also important to record and analyse the emotions expressed in online conversations about your company (for example, the number of positive comments against the number of negative comments). It is equally important to measure the level of your brand identity (see Chapter * on this subject earlier in the book). The greater the number of people who feel emotionally committed to your brand, the stronger will be the levers for both product sales and pro-active recommendations. Specifically in terms of communication, the activation pyramid (see Chapter * on this subject earlier in the book) should be used to set objectives. The emphasis should be placed on the stimulation of consumer commitment and participation, rather than on the straightforward extension of consumer reach.

CUSTOMERS: ASSET OR LIABILITY?

Do you want to check whether or not the Conversation Management philosophy has permeated all levels of your company structure? You do? If so, look closely at your company's attitude towards investment in its existing customers. Does your company regard customers as an asset or a liability? Are they merely a source of income or are they something on which money sometimes has to be spent? Consider the example of a call centre. Almost every company (apart from Zeppos) regards a call centre as a cost. As a result, they also use the wrong type of success indicators, such as the average length of conversations and the number of conversations per operator. This is false reasoning. If you tell the operators that the length of each call must be kept to a minimum, in order to keep costs down, you are effectively putting a short-term financial saving before the long-term interests of your customers. Recently, a well-known CEO was even heard to talk of the need for 'call avoidance'!

This is turning logic on its head. Companies spend millions of euros on advertising in order to attract the interest customers, but when customers voluntarily contact the company via a call centre, their interest needs to be restricted to an absolute minimum! Understand it if you can!

There is one golden rule in Conversation Management: if the customer seeks contact with your company (either directly or indirectly), this is always an opportunity to improve your relationship with that customer. A good relationship will result in more positive recommendations for your brand. This in turn will lead to more sales – and that is the ultimate object of the exercise. Cooperation and collaboration with customers is a central element in the new business culture. Rewarding loyal customers must be a key part of your strategy. New customers are frequently rewarded with all kinds of different gadgets, but how do you reward a customer who has been faithful to your brand over many years? If you have been a subscriber to a magazine for five years, what would you think if they suddenly sent you a present? You would probably be delighted – and much more likely to keep your subscription for another five years. Remember to take care of all your good customers, not just the new ones. In this respect, investment in existing customers is the best form of customer acquisition. Or to put it another way: treat your customers as if they were prospects and your prospects as

WINE LIBRARY TV: ANSWERING QUESTIONS IS THE KEY TO SUCCESS [16] [17]

Every day, Gary Vaynerchuck puts out a new blog about wine on the tv.winelibrary.com website. He gives his opinion about different wines and gives them a score out of ten. His style is different to what you would normally expect from a wine expert. In fact, his comments sometimes have nothing whatsoever to do with wine. For example, he may start talking about his favourite football team, the New York Jets. Even so, more than 80,000 viewers now tune in to his daily show, and he has already been a guest on several major talk programmes in the States. On Twitter he has no fewer than 800,000 followers. In short, Gary Vaynerchuck is an excellent Conversation Manager. Not that he is a brilliant speaker (if anything, rather the reverse). But he knows how to keep things simple, honest and to the point. In one of his recent speeches he spoke about the secret of his success. He was able to sum it up in just two words: customer service. If somebody asks him a question, he answers it. No nonsense, no gimmicks. People ask him for information and he gives it to them. This is something which people appreciate – and their appreciation makes them loyal. Someone once pointed out to him that it must take an awful lot of time to do this on such a large scale. To which he replied: "Then I simply make the necessary time. Of course, I can't always answer everybody on the same day, but I regularly set aside days when I do nothing but answer my mails and my tweets. People appreciate that enormously. Most companies underestimate the impact this can have." Let's be honest: if Gary Vaynerchuck can do this, then every company in the world must also be able to do it. After all, most of them have far fewer than 800,000 followers to deal with! It's all a state of mind.

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if they were customers. Try to think of new ways to exceed your customers' level of expectation. If a customer gets better service than he expected, this is often a springboard for positive conversations. If his problems can be solved with minimum bureaucratic fuss and delay, he will be more inclined to tell others about his experiences. Communicating expectations clearly and then exceeding them: that is the real challenge.

Once your company is willing and able to put this philosophy into practice, you will have achieved (with distinction!) your goal as a Conversation Manger. But don't forget: it will take blood, sweat, tears – and a whole heap of personality!



- The key to the Conversation Manager's success is to be found in his personality, not in his functional competencies. He looks beyond social media and understands that word-of-mouth is the most important driver of growth. His ultimate goal is to change the marketing philosophy of his company.
- The functional competencies of a Conversation Manager are all related to communication. His ideal communication strategy is the so-called EPO strategy, a Dutch acronym which stands for empathy – positive – solution. Follow this ordered approach in your conversations with consumers. It is easy to use and works brilliantly.
- The personality of a first-rate Conversation Manager can be described in the following terms: open, positive, enjoys making others happy, a networker, full of passion and drive, strikes the right balance between rationality and emotionality.
- A smart Conversation Manager does not isolate himself within the company. He creates a context for success. By allowing everyone to listen to consumers, he increases the importance of his own vision. The right policy choices will give him the necessary room for manoeuvre. Finally, he develops a 24/7 structure which ensures that consumer comments are answered quickly and effectively. To achieve this, he is supported by the right technology and tools. His dream is to create a 24/7 culture.
- The Conversation Manager's ultimate goal is to make the consumer the central element in the thinking and actions of his company. This will lead to a high level of customer satisfaction, thereby laying the foundations for long-term commercial success. Acceptance of (or participation in) his strategy by senior management is essential. One of his main objectives is to change the manner in which the company assesses its performance. The introduction of new KPIs will automatically result in the adjustment of employee behaviour to meet the company's new expectations.
- Do the investment test. If your company now regards money spent on consumers as an investment rather than a cost, then you have successfully completed your change process. Congratulations!!

1 Delivering Happiness, 2010, Tony Hseih, CEO Zappos.com
2 Flip the Funnel, 2010, Joseph Jaffe
3 With my thanks to everyone who responded to my appeal for insights and information about the personality of the Conversation Manager. Special thanks go to my followers who reacted spontaneously, to the editorial group and community of Marketingfacts.nl, to my colleagues at InSites Consulting and to the many fans of The Conversation Manager on Facebook. It was great to receive so much feedback!
4 This is Seth's Blog, Seth Godin, Jobs of the Future
5 Conversation manager versus community manager, John Bell blog, 23 March 2010.
6 Kodak's new mojo, CMO Jeffrey Hayzlett talks social media and sharing, Business Insider, May 2010; Kodak's focus for digital success: be willing to go for it. Imedia connection, May 2010
7 The EPO Factor: get more from your relationships, Marc Beulens & Ann Vermeiren, 2004
8 The Power of Nice, Linda Kaplan Thaler, 2007
9 With thanks to Dado Van Peteghem, a consultant at In Sites Consulting, @dadovpeteghem on Twitter: worth following.
10 Wearesocial campaign, a presentation given at the IAB European Congress, June 2010
11 With thanks to Polle De Maagt for this useful tip. Polle is @polledemaagt on Twitter and is super to follow.
12 techey.net, Nestlé fails at social media, March 2010
13 Minxymoggy.com, The first social media stock price bump, March 2010
14 Econsultency, November 2009, Report on Social Media and Online PR.
15 Think big, act small: column by Dr. Friederike Schröder-Pander, Vlerick Leuven Ghent Management School.
16 With thanks to my colleague Sam Berteloot for this example. Follow him on Twitter via @samberteloot: you won't be disappointed.
17 Tv.winelibrary.com, 'about' section.