New study shows how personal profiles transform social media customer service

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In an age when so much of customer service plays out on social media, a small change in how companies present their customer service agents can go a long way toward creating more positive, human-centered interactions.

A new study from a researcher at Tulane University's Freeman School of Business finds that adding a human face and personal profile to social media customer service can significantly boost customer satisfaction and reduce complaints.

The study, which is forthcoming in *Production and Operations Management*, examined over 100,000 customer service interactions on X (formerly known as Twitter) between T-Mobile and its customers. The authors discovered that when customer service agents used personal profiles featuring their own photos and names instead of generic corporate accounts, customer sentiment improved dramatically.



Yang Pan, assistant professor of management science

“The move to personal profiles produced measurable improvements across multiple dimensions,” said lead author Yang Pan, assistant professor of management science,

who conducted the study with Huai-Tzu Cheng and Rudy Hirschheim. “Customer sentiment scores, which measure the positivity of tweets, increased by 4.8%, and even more importantly, complaint tweets decreased by 1.1%, which translates to seven or eight fewer complaints directed at T-Mobile Help each week. The change also generated an additional 23 tweets per week expressing gratitude or receiving likes, a 3.4% increase in positive engagement.”

The research team employed a sophisticated quasi-experimental approach known as difference-in-differences (DID), analyzing X conversations before and after T-Mobile transitioned from standardized corporate profiles to personalized agent profiles. This natural experiment allowed the researchers to isolate the causal effect of the profile change on customer behavior while controlling for other factors that might influence satisfaction.

The study also incorporated advanced text analysis techniques commonly used in computer science to analyze user-generated content. The team examined multiple dimensions of customer response, including sentiment scores of customer tweets, the likelihood of complaints, expressions of gratitude and typical engagement metrics such as “likes.”

The researchers also conducted a randomized online experiment on Prolific.com to test how personal agent profiles versus standardized profiles affect customer reactions in a social media service setting. Participants exposed to personal profiles reported significantly higher satisfaction and a greater likelihood of expressing gratitude, confirming the study’s hypotheses. Through causal mediation analysis, the authors found that these effects were partly explained by perceived warmth and competence. Personal profiles increased perceptions of warmth and competence, which in turn enhanced satisfaction and gratitude. Interestingly, humanization only mediated the effect on gratitude, not satisfaction, suggesting that customers feel more grateful when interactions seem more human.

Pan says the findings have significant strategic implications.

“In light of the public visibility and rapid information dissemination on social media, brands and firms should seriously investigate the benefits of employing personal profiles,” Pan says.

For business leaders, Pan says the takeaway is clear: Humanizing consumer interactions can be a smart and cost-effective strategy. The simple act of attaching

a face and name to customer service yields measurable improvements in customer satisfaction while reducing the volume of complaints that can damage brand reputation.

Pan cautions that personalization is no panacea. It also heightens customer expectations for timely and attentive responses, and if those expectations aren’t met, dissatisfaction can increase. To take full advantage of the benefits, Pan says firms need to manage their response times carefully.

The study contributes to a growing body of work examining how the “human touch” influences customer service outcomes. By adding personal elements to digital interactions, Pan says companies can create what researchers call “social presence,” making customers feel they’re interacting with a real person rather than an AI-powered chatbot.

The study also opens doors for future research in operations management, especially e-service design strategies.

As social media continues to evolve as a primary channel for customer service, understanding what makes these interactions successful becomes increasingly important for businesses. Pan says her study shows that even in an age of computer-mediated interactions, nothing can replace the human touch.