



How 20 top UK retailers handle social customer service

Author: Christopher Ratcliff - Econsultancy

Date: 22 September 2014



Last week I took to Twitter posing as an 'innocent' customer and asked 20 of the UK's top retail brands a variety of questions.

They were all pretty simple: “what time does my local branch shut?” “Can I return online purchased items to a high street branch?” “When will this item be back in stock?” Theoretically nothing any social media team couldn't easily answer.

The purpose of this was to test the speed, responsive and helpfulness of these brands' social customer service.

I also looked at whether each brand stated clearly that it was available for customer service, if it operated a separate customer service account from the main Twitter channel and whether it published its operating hours within its profile.

Before we get on with the ranking though, a little on the importance of social customer service...

Why you should be offering customer service on social?

In a report from last November it was claimed that [53% of customers who ask a brand a question on Twitter expect a response within one hour](#) (with that percentage rising to 72% if it's a complaint), therefore giving customer service over social is becoming a necessary part of any brand's social media strategy.

Even if your brand's Twitter channel wasn't originally set up for customer service, it won't stop someone from contacting you on it. Social channels have become the very public face of all brands and woe betide you if your channel ignores queries or complaints here.

At best you'll have one disgruntled customer who won't shop with you again, at worst an unholy Twitter storm that will trend even if there are more important things happening in the news that day.

If you need further convincing, there's plenty of persuasive stats here in [what social customer service is really worth](#).

Best practice tips



The key to delivering great customer service on social is to be personal, empathetic and speedy in response. Even if you have to take a customer onto a different channel (due to sensitivity of information or length of reply), or you can't answer the query without thorough investigation, it's important to at least state that you're looking into it as soon as you can.

This is also why it's important that if you can't operate a 24 hour customer service, your channel should state its operating hours clearly in the profile.

If your customer service channel is separate from the main account, this should also be clearly stated. However if a customer contacts you on your non-customer service channel you shouldn't just ignore them or fob them off with the right Twitter handle.

Tell them you've passed their query on to the customer service team, or better still... help the customer on that channel.

Top 20 social customer service brands

Let's see how our test subjects did. I have ranked them according to a mixture of response time and helpfulness. If a brand contacted me in under a minute, but gave me an automatic, unpersonalised and information free response then they won't automatically be number one. Similarly if the reply came 30 minutes later but was cheery, personal and answered my question perfectly, then that brand will be pretty near the top.

This is largely based on my own opinions, so the usual caveats apply. These results are based on a single tweet, however I have also taken each retailer's general commitment to customer care into account.

I conducted this test on Friday 19 September between 12:42pm and 1:05pm.

1. B&Q

Response time: 3 minutes

A personalised reply, containing the information I required and a personal sign-off delivered in three minutes, coupled with a devoted customer service channel, which is linked to on the main B&Q channel, with its lengthy operating hours (7am - 11pm) clearly stated in the profile means B&Q goes straight to the top of the chart.



christopher ratcliff @ChristopherRCLF

19 Sep

@bandq_help Hi B&Q, could you tell me what time your Tottenham branch is open to on Sunday please? Thanks!



B&Q Help
@bandq_help



@ChristopherRCLF Hi Christopher, our Tottenham branch is open 10-4 on Sunday. Thanks, Clare

12:52 PM - 19 Sep 2014



2. New Look

Response time: 22 minutes

New Look links to its customer care channel from the main account and its lengthy hours are clearly stated. Most impressive was the level of personalised customer service offered to me...



christopher ratcliff @ChristopherRCLF 19 Sep
@NewLookHelp Hi, is this t-shirt available in Small size?
newlook.com/shop/mens/t-sh... Thank you



NewLookHelp @NewLookHelp [Follow](#)

@ChristopherRCLF Hiya Christopher. No online stock in a small. I can check your local store though. Let me know which stores? #NLBecky

2:09 PM - 19 Sep 2014

← ↻ ★



christopher ratcliff @ChristopherRCLF 19 Sep
@NewLookHelp Fantastic thank you... it's Oxford Street.



NewLookHelp @NewLookHelp [Follow](#)

@ChristopherRCLF Hiya Christopher sadly it's very low on stock. Keep checking the website as it's updated daily. Fingers crossed. #NLBecky

4:01 PM - 19 Sep 2014



3. Next

Response time: 35 minutes

Next replied accurately, personally and in just over half an hour. Next also links to its separate customer service channel from the main Twitter account and impressively it operates 24 hours, seven days a week.

The screenshot shows a tweet from **christopher ratcliff** (@ChristopherRCLF) dated 19 Sep. The tweet asks: "@NextHelp Hi Next, can you tell me what time your Oxford St branch closes tonight please?". Below it is a reply from **Next** (@NextHelp) with a "Follow" button. The reply says: "@ChristopherRCLF Hi Christopher, the store is open until 9pm today." The timestamp for the reply is "1:08 PM - 19 Sep 2014".

4. Tesco

Response time: 49 minutes

Tesco replied in just under 50 mins, which is just cutting under that 60 minute optimum, but the friendliness and thorough helpfulness of its tweets more than makes up for it. These also come from the main Twitter account which it uses for 24 hour customer service, although it doesn't state as such.

The screenshot shows a tweet from **christopher ratcliff** (@ChristopherRCLF) dated 19 Sep. The tweet asks: "@Tesco Hi Tesco - could you tell me what time your Leytonstone branch is open till tonight please?". Below it is a reply from **Tesco** (@Tesco) with a "Follow" button. The reply says: "@ChristopherRCLF Hi Christopher, our Leytonstone store is open 24 hours today :-). It will next be closed at midnight tomorrow. Regards, Joe." The timestamp for the reply is "1:16 PM - 19 Sep 2014".

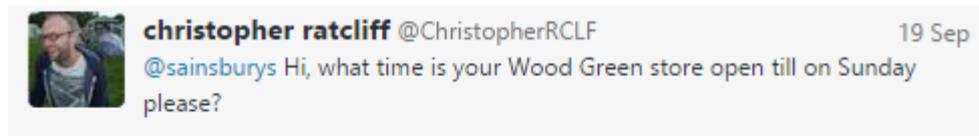
Below this is a second tweet from **christopher ratcliff** (@ChristopherRCLF) dated 19 Sep. The tweet says: "@Tesco Thanks, that's really helpful!". Below it is a reply from **Tesco** (@Tesco) with a "Follow" button. The reply says: "@ChristopherRCLF You're welcome Christopher. Let us know if you have any further queries and we'll be happy to help :-). Regards, Joe." The timestamp for the reply is "1:53 PM - 19 Sep 2014".



5. Sainsbury's

Response time: 42 minutes

Sainsbury's get maximum points for friendliness, helpfulness and personalisation. It doesn't operate a separate customer service channel but it does state its main account is available for customer care. It also replies 24 hours a day. Perhaps Sainsbury's could mention this in its profile.



6. ASOS

Response time: 18 minutes

Fairly quick response but perhaps not the news I wanted to hear. ASOS does link to its separate customer service channel on its main account page however and on checking back through its previous responses, it seems to operate 24 hours a day. Generally these tweets are pretty helpful. The follow up tweet said 'crossed' just in case you were wondering.



The follow up tweet said 'crossed' just in case you were wondering.



7. Topshop

Response time: 33 minutes

Topshop offered a reply in just over half an hour and answered my question accurately and mentioned me by name. Unfortunately the separate customer service channel isn't mentioned on the main Twitter page nor are there operating hours listed.

The screenshot shows a tweet from **christopher ratcliff** (@ChristopherRCLF) dated 19 Sep. The tweet asks: "@Topshop Hi, can you tell me what time your branch on Oxford St is open till tonight please? Thanks!". Below it is a reply from **TopshopHelp** (@TopshopHelp) with a verified account icon, dated 1:28 PM - 19 Sep 2014. The reply says: "@ChristopherRCLF Hi Christopher, Oxford Circus is open until 21:00. Thanks!". A "Follow" button is visible next to the TopshopHelp profile.

8. House of Fraser

Response time: 6 minutes

House of Fraser doesn't operate a separate customer service channel nor does it state that it's there to help, but it did reply quickly and positively, with added T&Cs for my convenience.

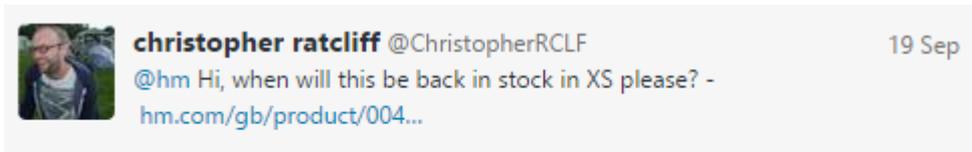
The screenshot shows a tweet from **christopher ratcliff** (@ChristopherRCLF) dated 19 Sep. The tweet asks: "@houseoffraser Hi, can I return something I bought online back to one of your stores near me?". Below it is a reply from **House of Fraser** (@houseoffraser) with a verified account icon, dated 1:08 PM - 19 Sep 2014. The reply says: "@ChristopherRCLF Yes you can return items to store. Please check full T&C for further information. goo.gl/Wlcagg - Louise". A "Follow" button is visible next to the House of Fraser profile.



9. H&M

Response time: 37 minutes

It took H&M 40 minutes to deliver this disappointing blow (although it can't really help it). The customer service channel is linked to from the main Twitter account, it operates 24 hours, seven days a week and is multilingual.



@ChristopherRCLF Hi there,we do not have any plans to restock this item at the moment,but keep an eye online for any future changes.

1:49 PM - 19 Sep 2014

10. Argos

Response time: 41 minutes

Argos replied in a friendly, concise, helpful manner. Unfortunately there is no link to the customer service channel on the main Twitter account. The channel does operate 24 hours a day though.



@ChristopherRCLF Hi Christopher, yes you can :) Chris

1:10 PM - 19 Sep 2014



11. Debenhams

Response time: 43 minutes

Debenhams replied helpfully and with an enquiry such as this, fairly quickly. Debenhams doesn't offer a separate customer service channel, but it does reply 24 hours a day.

The screenshot shows a tweet from Christopher Ratcliff (@ChristopherRCLF) dated 19 Sep, asking Debenhams (@Debenhams) for the opening hours of the Oxford St branch on Saturday. Debenhams replies with the store opening at 9.30 AM and thanks him. The reply is timestamped 1:25 PM - 19 Sep 2014.

12. River Island

Response time: 1 hour 21 mins

River Island came back to me with a disappointing tweet after 81 minutes. The separate customer service channel is linked on the main Twitter page, although there are no hours of service, and being as there aren't many tweets here it's difficult to gauge if it operates 24 hours.

The screenshot shows a tweet from Christopher Ratcliff (@ChristopherRCLF) dated 19 Sep, asking River Island Help (@riverislandhelp) about the stock status of a 28-inch long item. River Island Help replies that the item is out of stock and suggests checking online. The reply is timestamped 2:14 PM - 19 Sep 2014.



13. John Lewis

Response time: 2 hours 24 mins

John Lewis was the slowest to reply but at least I got my answer. There's no link to the separate customer service channel on the main Twitter page, and although the operating times are listed, they are rather limited.



@ChristopherRCLF It's possible to spend JL vouchers online, they have no expiry date. Click this link for info: bit.ly/1p3loNK

3:10 PM - 19 Sep 2014

14. Marks and Spencer

Response time: 2 hours 4 mins

Although it took more than two hours to reply, at least it was helpful, if not terribly personal. There is no separate customer service channel and the hours of service aren't listed on the main Twitter account. It also looks as though it's not 24 hours.



@ChristopherRCLF Yes, unless it's a Simply Food or Outlet store. Here's the link for more info: bit.ly/OvSxY3

2:41 PM - 19 Sep 2014



15. ASDA

Response time: 16 minutes

Asda runs a separate customer service channel, however it doesn't mention it on its main Twitter profile. It also didn't come up in a search on Twitter, I had to find it via Google.

Although the reply from its service team came fairly quickly, it was a fairly generic reply that asked me to contact them by phone. My request was fairly basic so this is a disappointing response.

christopher ratcliff @ChristopherRCLF 19 Sep
@asda Hi Asda, if I bought something online, can I bring it back to my local shop for a refund?

Asda Service Team ✓ @AsdaServiceTeam [Follow](#)

@ChristopherRCLF Hi Christoper, our team on 0800 952 3003 will be able to discuss this and best advise you :)
Beth

1:06 PM - 19 Sep 2014

16. Currys

Response time: 54 minutes

In just under one hour came this thoroughly unimpressive reply. It didn't answer my simple question, it just linked to a product page. Which is fine, if it had answered my question in the first place. In this case I just think "well I'm not buying from here now". Bizarrely I'm also encouraged to check out The Carphone Warehouse Twitter account. Currys does operate separate customer service channel linked from the main account.

christopher ratcliff @ChristopherRCLF 19 Sep
@curryspcworld Hi Currys. How much does the iPhone 6 16GB cost please?

Currys & PC World ✓ @curryspcworld [Follow](#)

@ChristopherRCLF Hi, full price list below, also try @cpwtweets - Ian

bit.ly/1qiq7LS

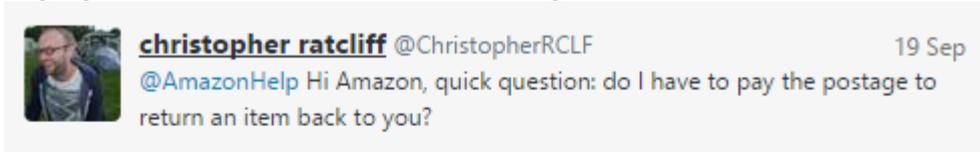
1:47 PM - 19 Sep 2014



17. Amazon

Response time: 26 minutes

Amazon replied quickly but it was a fairly ambiguous response and not at all personal. It could've done better by asking me for more details instead of directing me elsewhere. To its credit Amazon's main channel does link to the help team who are able to help in a whole range of different languages. It doesn't list hours of service though.



Amazon Help ✓
@AmazonHelp



@christopherrclf depends on the reason for return, see more here: amzn.to/1kTmTji ^HG

12:53 PM - 19 Sep 2014

18, 19, 20

As I write this on Saturday afternoon, more than 24 hours after I tweeted them, I have still yet to hear from **Halfords**, **Toys R US** and **Boots**...

In fact Boots is currently offering this rather bleak looking Twitter page...



Boots
let's feel good

TWEETS 394 FOLLOWING 2 FOLLOWERS 7,265 FAVORITES 1 More ▾

Boots Official UK
@BootsOfficialUK

Boots Customer Care aren't tweeting but call 0845 070 8090 Mon -Fri 8.30am to 7pm, w/e 8.45am to 5pm & B/H 9am to 4pm or email boots.customercare@boots.co.uk

boots.com
Joined April 2012

[Tweet to Boots Official UK](#)

Tweets Tweets & replies

Boots Official UK @BootsOfficialUK · 27 Sep 2012
Hi Envy159 Thank you for the mention.bit.ly/Pa6q7J Boots are not tweeting at the moment but you can post on...
on.fb.me/PY7L66

Boots Official UK @BootsOfficialUK · 27 Sep 2012
JonieDraeger Hi, Thanks for following Boots. Customer Care aren't tweeting but call 0845 070 8090 Mon -Fri 8.30am to 7pm, w/e 8.45am to 5...

Boots Official UK @BootsOfficialUK · 27 Sep 2012
kassmarii Hi, Thanks for following Boots. Customer Care aren't tweeting but call 0845 070 8090 Mon -Fri 8.30am to 7pm, w/e 8.45am to 5pm ...

Boots Official UK @BootsOfficialUK · 27 Sep 2012
Hi kassmarii Thank you for the mention.bit.ly/UMGXrL Boots are not tweeting at the moment but you can post ...
on.fb.me/PY7L66

Before we get too negative about this last handful of tweets, let's remember that I actually did receive responses from 17 out of 20 brands within a few hours. This an encouraging sign for the current state of social customer service.

Let's total up some more statistics...



Statistics:

- Brands that responded: 85% (17/20)
- Brands that responded within 30 minutes: 25% (5/20)
- Brands that responded within one hour: 70% (14/20)
- Brands with a separate customer service Twitter account or states that it will help on its main Twitter account: 70% (14/20)
- Hours of customer service clearly labelled: 45% (9/20)
- Responses with a personalised reply: 50% (10/20)
- Responses that satisfied this particular customer: 65% (13/20)

What have we learnt?

- B&Q rules.
- If you run a separate customer service channel, you must link to it from the main channel.
- If you don't run a separate customer service channel, but do offer it via the main Twitter account than say so in your profile and tell people what time you operate.
- If you don't offer social customer service, it's about time you did.
- Fobbing people off by just directing them to the 'correct channel' is really annoying.
- It pays to be friendly. Even the comparatively slow responses were a pleasure to receive if the tone was personal and helpful.
- An hour feels like the maximum amount of time you can get away with. Reply under 15 minutes though and you're on to an absolute winner.
- Remember that although there is a character limit, customers won't mind replies being delivered to them over multiple tweets. This is a much better practice than removing all personality and friendliness in order to get down to a 140 character limit.
- If any of these brands had clicked on my profile and looked at my 'tweets and replies' they would've seen through my ruse...



christopher ratcliff @ChristopherRCLF · Sep 19

@hm Hi, when will this be back in stock in XS please? - hm.com/gb/product/004...



christopher ratcliff @ChristopherRCLF · Sep 19

@Halfords_uk Hi, if I've bought something online, can I return it to my local branch?



christopher ratcliff @ChristopherRCLF · Sep 19

@sainsburys Hi, what time is your Wood Green store open till on Sunday please?



christopher ratcliff @ChristopherRCLF · Sep 19

@BootsOfficialUK Hi, can I use High Street Vouchers in your stores?



christopher ratcliff @ChristopherRCLF · Sep 19

@houseoffraser Hi, can I return something I bought online back to one of your stores near me?



christopher ratcliff @ChristopherRCLF · Sep 19

@toysrusuk Hi how much is the Marvel Infinity 2.0 Starter Pack for Xbox One please?

Link: <https://econsultancy.com/blog/65478-how-20-top-uk-retailers-handle-social-customer-service>