Chapter 8.4
Managing Customer Knowledge with Social Software

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INTRODUCTION

The development of Internet technologies and Web 2.0 has created tremendous opportunities for Knowledge Management (KM) (Johnston 2008). Among the new directions of KM, customer knowledge management and social software have gained growing interests from both business practitioners and academic researchers.

Customer Knowledge Management (CKM) refers to the management of organizational knowledge residing on the customer side. Different from Customer Relationship Management (CRM) and general KM, CKM assumes the five basic styles: prosumerism, team-based co-learning, mutual innovation, communities of creation, and joint intellectual property (Gibbert, et al. 2002). Approaches in marketing and CRM cannot successfully capture knowledge from customers, so appropriate methods of CKM have to be employed to retrieve and manage customer knowledge (García-Murillo & Annabi, 2002).

Social software can be defined as "software which supports, extends, or derives added value from human social behavior, message-boards, musical taste-sharing, photo-sharing, instant messaging, mailing lists, and social networking" (Coates, 2005). Social software provides essential support for conversational interaction between people or groups, for social feedback, and for social networks (Boyd, 2006). The typical types of social software are weblogs, wikis, and other kinds of social network services such as online forums and bookmark sharing. In business contexts, social software is normally referred as social and networking software used by companies to organize internal and external communications.

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Companies have recently started to employ social software in exploiting and managing customer knowledge. Applying social software on their electronic storefronts, firms can create virtual communities of interests for current and potential customers to interact with each other and share information and knowledge about their products and services. For instance, Circuit City launched its online forum to provide better customer experiences and is currently collaborating with IBM to explore the application of virtual worlds to business (CNN Money, 2006). The available social software technologies enable firms to implement different types of social software, from the very basic one such as electronic bulletin board to those with advanced features including tags, weblogs, wikis, etc.

Despite the growing interests in CKM and the important role of social software in KM, the fundamental relationship between CKM and social software is not well understood. In particular, how social software can be used in managing customer knowledge has not been explicitly studied yet. Our article addresses the gap. Specifically, we would like to answer the following research questions.

First, *how can CKM be integrated into organizational KM*? Prior studies have identified the relationship between CKM and organizational KM (e.g., Gibbert, et al. 2002). We view CKM as a component of organizational KM and would like to investigate the necessity and prerequisites to incorporate CKM into organizational KM processes.

Second, *what kinds of support does social software provide for CKM*? Social software assumes an important role in the new generation of KM (Avram, 2006). In this article, we focus on the special type of KM, the CKM, and categorize different types of social software with respect to their supports to CKM.

Finally, *how should firms apply different types of social software to integrate CKM with organizational KM*? We view CKM as a component of organizational KM and would like to investigate how social software contributes to transforming customer knowledge into organizational knowledge, incorporating CKM into organizational KM processes.

The article proceeds as follows. Next section presents the background of the research by reviewing related literature. The third section is the focus of the paper, detailing the categorization of CKM and support of social software for CKM. The fourth section discusses the future trend for this research and the last section concludes the entire article.

BACKGROUND

In this section, we present the background of our research by briefly reviewing prior literature with the focus on three related streams of research: (1) role of social software in knowledge management; (2) customer knowledge management (CKM); and (3) customer capital.

Recent studies have begun to investigate the relationships between social software and knowledge management, exploring the role of social software in creating and transmitting knowledge. For instance, Efimova (2005) analyzes the role of weblogs in personal knowledge management. Avram (2006) studies the support of social software for the five core knowledge management activities. Greenfield (2007) argues that social bookmarking services provide a very effective knowledge management platform. Chai, et al. (2007) categorize the revenue models of social software used in advertising, premium memberships, affiliate programs, donations, and merchandize sale.

CKM recently emerged as the other important research stream for knowledge management. Gibbert, et al. (2002) conceptualize the definition of CKM and suggest the five styles of CKM. Bueren, et al. (2004) specify the role of IT in CRM that integrates CKM. Rollins and Halinen (2005) propose a theoretical framework of CKM