

# How Brands Enrich Their Customer Relationships Using Real-Time Data

*Now's the ideal time to listen closely to your customers and utilize the social media platforms that can help you break through digital noise and push you a step ahead of your competition.*

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That well-known philosophical riddle poses a simple but polarizing question: If a tree falls in a forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?

Now imagine that forest is the internet. Trees fall. Birds tweet. Flowers bloom. And when it's not storming, the sun shines on your brand. But if you're not present to observe and respond, is any of this happening at all? Of course it is: There are no empty digital forests. We've gathered a few anecdotes from brands that might inspire you to camp out, listen closely, and make moves as needed to share the good and manage the bad emerging from those woods.

## Heartwarming Holiday Goodwill by Tonka

In late November 2017, Cassie Gretschel asked the internet for help in sourcing a specific Christmas gift for her 25-year-old mentally and physically challenged brother, Max. In a [Reddit post](#) titled "Mission Impossible," she detailed specs for the discontinued truck from Tonka's toy archives and why it would be such an important gift.

"Soon, Reddit users started sending messages to Tonka asking if they could help, and the toy truck company responded," [BuzzFeed reports](#). After an international search, Tonka unearthed the truck and shipped it to Max. In doing so, the company made Christmas bright not just for the two siblings, but for everyone invested in following the story's developments online.

By simply paying attention in real time and responding generously to a vocal brand advocate, Tonka generated a massive tide of goodwill during the holiday shopping season.

“Dude, Tonka just earned a new fan,” reports BuzzFeed, quoting a Redditor engaged in the thread. “Gonna buy the kids some Tonka toys this Xmas. How could I not support such a cool company after this.”

## Marriott Listens for Surprise-and-Delight Opportunities

Like Tonka, Marriott’s antennae are attuned to online mentions of its brand in real time. From its social media command center—also known as the M Live facility in Bethesda, Maryland—Marriott’s team listens to people within and around its international properties through a technology called [geo-fencing](#).

If guests share how excited they are about arriving at a Marriott hotel, they might enter to find a treat and a note welcoming them to the room.

“M Live will also reach out to people talking about travel and engage with them,” reports CNBC. “The company said that the simple one-on-one engagement translates directly into hotel bookings.”

While this kind of special treatment is proactive, the combined success of Marriott’s steady dialogue and Tonka’s reactive generosity proves that all brands should participate in this ethos. Especially online, where news can spread like

wildfire, it pays to respond to customers on social media strategically and with a human touch.

## Creating Space for People and Trust

While Tonka and Marriott have been praised for capitalizing on positive cues from their customers, it’s also important for brands to understand what makes people unhappy and solve for those variables.

In April 2017, CNN [reported](#) on this announcement by Southwest Airlines CEO Gary Kelly: “Southwest will no longer overbook its flights, ending a practice that sometimes leaves paying passengers without a seat.”

Kelly made this statement in direct response to United Airlines’ customer service and public relations crisis that [went viral](#) earlier that month. Who didn’t hear about the Kentucky doctor dragged off a United plane upon refusing to give up his seat?

Of course, United faced intense online criticism after the violent incident. Observing the massive swell of anger directed at its competitor in real time, Southwest responded as quickly as possible with its own proposed solution to overbooking. Southwest ended the practice—thereby dignifying and satisfying its customer base—by May 8.

Whether it’s a Twitter bird or a plane flying through the sky, news moves at warp speed. The tangible and intangible value earned by Tonka, Marriott, and Southwest in these scenarios proves that attuned and nimble online responses by

brands are now expected and celebrated.

With our digital forest growing only more crowded with devices, now’s the ideal time to listen closely to your customers and utilize the social media platforms that can help you break through digital noise and push you a step ahead of your competition. By employing today’s dynamic technology to enrich your customer relationships, brands will be better equipped to prepare and protect their most valuable resources.

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