

that if you choose not to respond to customer feedback, that doesn't turn this back into a one-way street—it simply means that your customers will continue in the loop with only their own feedback to respond to. In that scenario, the feedback has a tendency to get increasingly negative and speculative until you inject some positive feedback to change the flow. Silence in the Feedback Loop on the part of your company or personal brand could lead to negative perceptions about you and your brand. By providing feedback, you acknowledge that your community exists and has a valid opinion, and that you value them as more than just customers; you value them enough to empower them with a voice. Once empowered, your community member is far more likely to become a brand loyalist than the one who feels she has been slighted, even if the original feedback was negative. Just ask Sarah Lacy.

## FEEDBACK, SOCIAL INTELLIGENCE, AND LEADERSHIP

A recently published article in the *Harvard Business Review* discusses the social and emotional intelligence wielded by effective leaders. Unsurprisingly, they discovered that the best leaders are the ones who exhibit not only influence and inspiration, but also empathy, attunement, and a genuine desire to help develop others. In conjunction with the Hay Group, the article presented a battery of questions aimed at assessing, “Are You a Socially Intelligent Leader?.” Many of the questions listed proved to be a far cry from typical leadership surveys:

- ▶ Are you sensitive to others' needs?
- ▶ Are you attuned to others' moods?
- ▶ Do you provide feedback that people find helpful for their professional development?
- ▶ Do you understand social networks and know their unspoken norms?

While traditional understanding of leadership structures stressed the need for power and stern guidance, new measures of leadership are increasingly reliant on empathy and understanding. The unspoken message is clear: Be real and be compassionate. To be a truly effective leader, you need to have a team that supports you and is willing to work hard not only on your behalf, but on their own as well.

The same principles apply online. Microcelebrities like Gary Vaynerchuk and Sarah Lacy are the equivalent of socially intelligent organizational leaders. They are tuned in to their audience and keep the channels of feedback wide open, demonstrating their compassion and sincerity. Their audience trusts them and understands that even if they do make mistakes, they will own up to them through their honest feedback and reactions. That trust translates to loyalty, and loyalty builds a dedicated community.

Being accessible to your audience is only difficult when you're trying to hide something. The Feedback Loop provides you with an open and direct channel of communication with your community, and that represents a never-before-

available opportunity. Remember, the same open channel that allows you to communicate directly with your increasingly participatory audience also allows them to easily see through and challenge a skill. In other words, it means that, both online and off, honesty really is the best policy.