



**INTERVIEW WITH:** Don Peppers, a publisher of several major reference works and research into engaging with consumers

By Colin Adamson, SOCAP Director – September 2007

## **Not the Usual Suspects: Never mind Kaiser Soeze – who is Adam Fuhrer? And what has that got to do with customer service people?**

The film *The Usual Suspects* (1995) was haunted by the spectre of a criminal mastermind named Kaiser Soeze cited as the hidden hand behind what happens. Did he cause the climactic bloodbath with 21 dead and was he the source of \$91 millions of drug money? Does he even exist? How can the police detectives reach him?

I don't suppose Don Peppers thinks of himself or come to that, customer service professionals as detectives but what he will share with us is a view of the new markets quite as fascinating as any thriller. Watch and listen to him as he tracks down and tags the sources of influence and the developmental processes of the new social markets.

### **Back to Adam Fuhrer**

It was *The Wall Street Journal* who tracked down Adam Fuhrer. Based on the number of people who read his posts he is one of the most influential contributors to the social network site [Reddit](http://reddit.com/) <http://reddit.com/> and wrote some highly influential reviews of Windows Vista soon after it appeared. Bear in mind that sites like [Reddit](http://digg.com/) and [Digg](http://digg.com/) <http://digg.com/> while they may have lots of registered users – [Digg](http://digg.com/) has 900,000 – the most popular entries are made by a handful of people – just 30 people are responsible for 1/3 of the postings popular enough to make it to [Digg's](http://digg.com/) home page, for instance. Those people are the key trusted influencers in the market place and their views impact the fortunes of the world's largest companies. Now guess what – [Reddit's](http://reddit.com/) Adam Fuhrer is only 12 years old and lives at home in Toronto.

### **The new complexities**

Don Peppers may have been an optimist when in 1993 he and Martha Rogers PhD wrote "The One to One Future – Building Relationships One Customer at a Time". It has not turned out to be quite like that. The new facts of customer to customer communication – the new social networks - would seem to suggest that you have to develop not just an understanding of one customer but an understanding of that customer's networks and how they develop. The product of failure is exclusion – your product or service is simply on that customer's radar. So what is needed is a view of how customers communicate with each other. The future may still be one to one but is either of those parties a supplier?

### **The Dynamics of Network Formation**

The new world to be described and discussed in Peppers' and Rogers' new book – Rules to Break, Laws to Follow (forthcoming from Wiley, January 2008) is one which addresses the rush of new topics such as social networking, customer review sites, networked employees and innovative technology. Peppers and Rogers contend that while these developments are each interesting in and of themselves, they also are very much linked. Too often they are discussed as separate phenomena associated with Web 2.0 technology but the successful company has to deal with all of them in an integrated way.

Don will be talking in particular about customer communication and the way networks are built – the keywords here are 'preferential attachment'. This is the aspect of life that we often think of as being desperately unfair whereby people who already have lots (of whatever it is – friends, money, power) get more. What this means in practice is that the minority who get in early on a customer network and say sensible things which others believe and are interested in, go on to dominate the way that network develops. Their ability to guide the behaviour of others will far outstrip the message both of those customers who come later (who may be smarter and have more to say – unfair, unfair) and certainly of any supplier trying to break into the magic circle to hawk their goods and services. Some suppliers think they can pretend to be customers and sneak inside the network that way. Aside from the questionable ethics, would this even work?

### **Managing Chaos**

If companies are to survive and prosper in this chaotic world where we cannot identify with any certainty any individual who is in charge and whom we can persuade, there has to be a person in a company who can lay the groundwork and prepare the company for both the good and the bad. The future undoubtedly will bring both. Those people will be customer service professionals.

They will be custodians of the key element of reputation – trustworthiness. This element will reassure and encourage not just purchase but also participation in any relationship. The customer service professional will nurture and protect it from harm to the best of their ability. We know the conventional rewards for that – longer and more profitable relationships – but there is now another factor.

The new market mood is one that has switched from passive to active participation – the new consumer confidence will be the basis for product and service development partnership between customer and supplier.

Don told me about a product, the Topfield TF5800 Personal Video Recorder (affectionately known as the “Toppo”), where the customers sustain and support other customers and seem to have taken over much of the after-sales operation. Not because the company is crap or has gone out of business but because they love the product it sells, and because they, like millions of other customers, consider the best customer service to be self-service. (You can check out this customer support site at <http://www.toppo.org.uk/>) This compelling customer combination of geek, fan and mechanic is not just confined to the shadows where sad men watch too much telly while playing with their PVRs.

These customers have power – when on 14 October 2005 their beloved machines started failing, they found out why and fought back. The BBC had released some new interactive software that was incompatible with the Toppo – the user community both developed temporary fixes and persuaded the BBC to shut down the software and delay its re-introduction until such time as the manufacturer could come up with a fix. Would the BBC have reacted the same way if confronted with some obscure Korean manufacturer's electronic woes?

As Don made clear, the constituent parts of the new social market processes are developing very fast and taking lots of different forms. How do we play detective and hunt down the stories and the facts that will help us make sense of what is going on and do our job? I have no idea but happily I do not have to come up with the answers. Don will have a go and based on his and Martha's track record of thoughtful analysis and creative prescriptions for action and change; he will do it better than anyone else I can think of.

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