

Plow & Hearth: A Lesson in Exemplary Customer Service



By **Liz Fickenscher**

I recently had the opportunity to sit down with Sandra Auer and Becky Owings, Online Customer Experience Specialists at **Plow & Hearth**, a US-based retailer with a corporate office in Madison, Virginia. They have the monumental job of monitoring and assessing the customer shopping experience, resolving issues and making recommendations for improvement to internal stakeholders. I got to learn about their day-to-day activities as the front line of customer service specialists who manage every aspect of the online reputation of the company.

And that's saying a lot, since Plow & Hearth is just one of the brands the company holds. Other main brand names include **HearthSong**, **Wind & Weather**, **Magic Cabin**, **Problem Solvers**, and more.

Brand Origin

Plow & Hearth was built as a company that offered hearth and fireplace accessories, as well as lawn and garden accessories and home furnishings. Peter and Peggy Rice started the company in 1980 and launched the first catalog mailing (100,000 to start). From 1986 to 1989, Plow & Hearth was named one of **Inc. Magazine's** fastest-growing private companies. Plow & Hearth acquired the other brands along the way, and today has more than 400 employees in their Madison, VA corporate office and distribution center.

A Day in the Life

As you might imagine, Sandra and Becky's jobs are pretty hectic. In addition to selling on the Amazon **marketplace**, Plow & Hearth sells on Wayfair, Zulily, Jet, Walmart and Google Merch. If that isn't enough, each brand has a Facebook page and Twitter account, and each website has its own Q&A feature for each product.

So, to sum up, every day, this dynamic team of two has the following online spaces to check for product-related questions, feedback, reviews and more:

- Amazon Seller Central
- Wayfair
- Zulily
- Walmart
- Jet
- Google Merch
- Facebook
- Instagram
- Twitter
- Plus every brand website!

As I sat there with my eyes wide, I asked, "So, what does an average day look like?"

Wayfair, Sandra tells me, has a 4-hour window for responding to customer questions. So she checks that first to answer questions about products and provide order status information. Then, she logs into the Seller Central **dashboard**, because there are always questions there, and you only have a 24-hour window to answer them. That's also where the cancellation requests reside, so you have to take care of those every day. It would be easy to spend all day in Seller Central addressing just those issues.

That's where **FeedbackFive** comes in handy for Sandra and Becky. A company that sells at a volume like Plow & Hearth can get hundreds of product reviews and feedbacks in one day. Seller Central shows reviews with the most recent first, but it's hard to suss out the reasons for negative feedback while you're dealing with product reviews too. They love that they can easily access their negative feedback with FeedbackFive and that they can toggle back and forth between brands. It saves a ton of time. Now, they don't get a lot of negative feedback, but lots of times buyers will leave product reviews as feedback, will leave feedback on items not actually sold by Plow & Hearth, and other things that need attention. It's a real time saver.

Because that's not all. After Wayfair, Seller Central and FeedbackFive, then it's time to tackle social media and their brand websites. On Facebook, they answer questions and complaints on the different brand pages and respond to private messages. They can address any Instagram messages, hashtags or posts via the Facebook interface. On Twitter, they reply to tweets, direct messages and hashtags. On the brand websites and all their other marketplaces, they answer question after question about products and orders.

If there is a place where someone can ask a question or leave a message about any of their brands online, Sandra and Becky are on top of it. Every day.

The FeedbackFive Difference

Obviously, I was very interested in how FeedbackFive helps them, when they have so many plates to juggle.

Sandra said, "Feedback, on Amazon in particular, is important because they impact our seller reputation. Sifting through them on Amazon Seller Central isn't time-efficient for me. You can't always find the feedback that needs a response. FeedbackFive makes that easy, and we're able to provide the best customer service to Amazon buyers because of it."

Sandra also said that she'd noticed an uptick in product reviews and feedbacks overall since implementing FeedbackFive. That, in addition to the ease of addressing negative feedbacks and negative and neutral product reviews, makes our tool a very efficient part of their day.

Tips on Managing Negative Feedback

I was curious, so I asked what happens when they receive negative Amazon ratings. Sandra said, "Negative feedback is not a panic moment. It's an opportunity to improve service. People appreciate the follow up and follow-through." So, the process is easy:

1. Get negative feedback
2. Research the order
3. Reach out and apologize
4. Make it right

Staying Competitive

There was a sign in the room where these busy ladies took time out of their day to meet with me (and fed me, as well!) that said, "The customer experience is the next competitive battlefield." Plow & Hearth's approach to exemplary customer service shows that in that battle, they will always be the winner.

This post spotlights a satisfied user of FeedbackFive. This article is part of our series highlighting merchant success stories. As a thank-you for participating in this article, the customer received one free month of FeedbackFive. If you're currently using FeedbackFive and would like to participate in this program.