TREAT SOCIAL MEDIA LIKE A CHATROOM, NOT A BULLHORN. "Really listening to the question, and then when you respond, really giving them the answer builds engagement and strengthens relationships," said Trost. Do not respond with a generic answer, do not point people to a web page, and do not ask them to comb through a long document. Instead, put the detailed information in the first response, demonstrating the organization’s empathy. “People really appreciate thoughtful, human responses.”

ENGAGE PEOPLE WHERE THEY ARE AT. Even though public transit is a very physical service, there are few physical places to really engage in a conversation. “People don’t have time to stop and talk to us in a station because they’re on their way somewhere. When people are riding our trains they’re usually plugged into their headphones,” said Alicia Trost, Communications Director at BART. “But by using technology to engage with people over social, I can have that one-on-one conversation.” Whether its social media, email, or other methods, taking the time to understand how your customers can engage will help you prioritize relevant communication channels.

BE AS TRANSPARENT AS POSSIBLE. “The big ‘a-ha’ moment for us was ‘We have really good answers to [rider] questions. Why aren’t we letting our riders know what the real answers are?’” said Trost. “Don’t have all these conversation in direct messages, offline, or post canned responses. It’s flat, it’s boring, and it makes it look like you’re hiding something. You just have to give your teams the tools so that they’re not so scared to do it. “People are so scared to be honest, so scared to be transparent, so scared to share data that they’ve never shared before. But it’s extremely rewarding when you do it because the public will trust you more.” For BART, public trust translates into public investment.
The Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) is a rapid transit, public transportation system serving the San Francisco Bay Area.

To be more transparent about topics of interest without sacrificing its ability to make key messages known, BART built a user-generated engagement platform using Salesforce Service Cloud and Salesforce Marketing Cloud's Social Studio. It enables traditional outreach and engagement capabilities, such as social monitoring or post scheduling. Moreover, it was then deployed using a set of criteria that fosters a true customer-centric communications strategy.

Here are four best practices from BART’s experience:

1. **Do not be afraid to engage users (even combative ones) in a discussion.**
   “Our social media guidelines used to say ‘Don’t feed the troll – don’t get into a back-and-forth.’ But we changed that,” said Trost. Now, BART encourages employees to address the tough questions directly, provided that they have the knowledge base before they engage. To assist and enable staff with this ask, BART deployed its cloud platform as the cornerstone of its larger strategy, unifying communications, media, and social efforts. Trost outlines that strategy in a playbook.