Best Practices for Contact and Call Centers

Six solutions to improve the effectiveness of your call center

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Today's Environment

Running an operationally efficient contact or call center that delivers a high quality customer experience can be a difficult objective to achieve. Consumers are becoming increasingly savvy and their expectations for quality customer service and support is steadily growing. According to a recent Avaya Consumer Preference Report[1], only 26 percent of consumers surveyed believe contact centers provide great support compared to 49 percent who do not.

So how do you balance the need to keep call center costs under control while at the same time meet your customers' expectations for a quality customer support experience?

Point B's Perspective

Running a call center that is both efficient and provides a high quality customer experience is a challenging, yet not impossible, task. Point B has developed several key strategies to achieve these outcomes and we have successfully applied them to many of our clients' call center engagements. If you want to improve the performance of your call center, consider implementing the following six operational best practices.

1. Define your business objectives. This may sound elementary, but in our haste to solve problems, we too often act without a plan to guide the decisions we make and the actions we take. Like any other business-critical endeavor, it is important to think through and articulate the specific outcomes you want to achieve *before*

acting. For example, if your call center is also a sales center, you may want to *increase* the volume and length of calls to drive an uplift in sales; whereas if your call center is exclusively designed to resolve customer issues, you may want to *decrease* your volume of calls to reduce your costs of service. These two quite different objectives will drive a different set of strategies and actions. In order to achieve the right outcomes, you must start with clear end goals in mind and work your plan backwards from there.

2. Know thy customer. Understanding the demographics of your customers is a key first step toward determining which tools and approaches will best help you achieve your business objectives. For example, tech-savvy customers will likely expect to connect with you through more technical channels, such as online forms, chat sessions, or social media-driven community-based solutions. Less tech-savvy customers, on the other hand, may require more traditional, higher-touch solutions, such as phone, fax, or email.

Keep in mind that rapidly changing contact channel adoption rates can quickly alter your customers' profiles, so it's often best to provide service through a variety of channels to give your customers the freedom to select the technology that works best for them at the time of contact.

3. Design and implement a performance measurement strategy. A strong focus on metrics must become a core competency of your organization and its culture. Collecting accurate data and bringing the appropriate level of visibility to it is core to your

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[1] 2011 Consumer Preference Report – Contact Centers, Forrester Consulting commissioned by Avaya,

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ability to understand where the real problems are and to be able to address them properly.

It may sound obvious, but start by counting the number of contacts you receive and the reason for each contact. One of the biggest mistakes made in developing call center solutions is spending too much time developing services for issues that rarely occur. Each customer contact gives you the opportunity to either reduce or reinforce your customer's loyalty to your brand; so focus first on discerning and resolving the issues that have the biggest impact on your customer base.

There are several industry standard quantitative and qualitative metrics that apply to many call center operations, including average wait times, call abandonment and transfer rates, first contact resolution rates, contact category codes, and customer feedback and satisfaction surveys. However, the specific set of metrics you track should be thoughtfully chosen based on your individual business objectives. Start with a set of metrics you know are relevant and which you can accurately capture; then add to them as you learn more about what you need to know and how to measure it.

Always gather baseline data before applying changes to your contact center's tools and practices. This practice will enable you to measure the impact of any downstream changes you make.

4. Empower your staff. Your team needs to have the right skillset, tools, and information to thrive in a fast-paced, ever changing call center environment. An effective ongoing training program is critical to their ability to understand and adapt to the changes in tools and processes that you will be deploying over time. The most effective training programs employ different types of teaching techniques, such as in-class training sessions, documentation, job shadowing, on-the-job mentoring, and periodic quality reviews and spot checks.

One of the greatest challenges facing your call center team is quickly providing your customers with correct information that accurately and completely addresses the reason for their contact. To be successful, your team members must be able to quickly navigate a very

large amount of information, such as documentation, templated responses to common questions, alerts and incident reports, contact codes, and other metrics. To make this manageable, your team needs an effective knowledge management system. This can be as simple as a collection of web pages together with a search feature, or as sophisticated as a third-party tool specifically designed to manage information for call centers. You'll most likely live with your choice for quite some time, so take the time to evaluate the options and select the best tool based upon criteria defined by the needs of your business.

5. Teach your customers to fish. Train your team to teach your customers how to help themselves whenever possible. A customer who learns how to use your online tools to look up the status of her order feels empowered and can do so again in the future without initiating yet another contact to your call center and waiting for a response. Developing and maintaining an active list of frequently asked questions (FAQs) as part of the help documentation on your website is also useful for avoiding unnecessary customer contacts.

6. Wash, rinse, repeat. Don't try to address everything at once. Start by tackling the low hanging fruit and move on to more complex challenges as you make headway. Continue to track and measure your progress against your performance metrics over time. And when successful, remember to celebrate those wins with your call center team to show your appreciation for their hard work!

The Bottom Line

It is possible to run a contact or call center that is both efficient and effective for your customers. The key is to develop a strategy for the outcomes you want to achieve and the changes you intend to make to achieve those outcomes, learn from the mistakes and successes of others, and adopt best practices that work. Then measure: measure your current state, measure the impact of the changes you make, and continue to make iterative improvements over time.