

Call Center Times

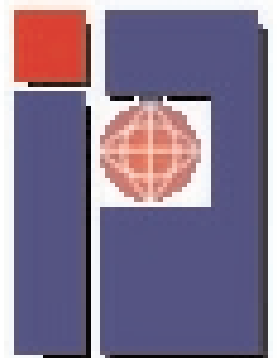
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TOP 64 QUALITIES OF A WELL RUN CALL CENTER

Recently, we conducted a survey of call center employees about the top qualities of their 'ideal call/contact center'. Here are the most common responses:

- Ability of operator
- Level of service
- Facility
- Extensive recruitment process
- Competitive salary
- Ease of call handling
- Queue monitoring
- Training
- Morale, morale, morale!
- All customer data in one interface
- Web self-service deflecting calls
- Text talk or web chat with agents handling 2 or 3 customers at a time
- Enthusiasm
- Punctuality
- Diversified
- Customer centricity
- Quality management
- Problem resolution
- Effective, fast and reliable
- Responsive
- Quality conscious
- Technically empowered
- Superior customer service
- Engaged well trained reps
- Properly staffed center
- Teamwork
- Positive performance enhancement (feedback)
- Open communications
- Management commitment
- Dependability
- Cordiality
- Helps people who call for information
- Provide jobs
- Connecting the different countries
- Good management
- Good English command
- Good communication skills
- Good listening skill
- Multi-channels of contact
- Multi-skilled agent
- Understand the information they deliver
- Merge help desk and call center into a knowledge center
- Lower the cost of support by implementing e-Support alternatives
- Employee growth
- Company growth
- Good database Integrity
- Front line have a clear understand of their role in contributing to the overall success of the center
- Management and staff understand and agree upon their service level goals
- Moral values
- Customer priority
- Happy employees
- Good employer/employee relations
- Raving fans service
- High client retention
- No queue wait
- Interpersonal skill
- Computer knowledge
- Telephone skills
- Technology
- Manpower management
- Sufficient money flow
- Ergonomics
- Base rewards in schedules and bonuses on performance rather than tenure

How does your call center compare? Please send your thoughts to me at neke@callcentertimes.com.



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Call Center Times

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Time for a Monitoring Makeover

By Matthew Hoffman

The traditional model of call center monitoring needs a major overhaul. While call centers want to ensure that customer requests are handled politely, knowledgeably, and to the customer's satisfaction, too often call center managers use an inadequate system to measure the reps' performance. Realize that you can't measure all aspects of a call simply by checking off a box or assigning a number value. Other factors that are just as important exist. So, it's time to make a few changes.

A quality monitoring program allows supervisors to measure the performance of their customer service representatives (CSRs), ensuring they are providing service according to the standards established for your company. It will also confirm that your CSRs have the necessary skills to perform their jobs and will identify any areas where additional training is needed. It also evaluates the overall quality of the customer service provided, but importantly, it also helps identify customer expectations and where your policies and procedures can change

Why Traditional Systems Fall Short

Many contact centers use a "tick box" sheet listing specific criteria, checking off whether the CSR performed the various functions correctly and adding up their points. While "tick boxes" can measure the quality of interactions to some degree, many factors go overlooked.

This type of monitoring does not

accurately measure quality or complete the goals of an interactive, "think outside the box" monitoring program. Tick box mentality only looks at the specific criteria listed and does not always allow your quality team to really *listen* to the entire interaction between your CSR and your customer. Such a system has a number of shortfalls. For example, you cannot predict every scenario on the evaluation form. Also, not all questions will apply to the various departments within the call center. While an appropriate evaluation question for sales may be "Did the CSR offer additional merchandise?" it will not apply to someone in the tech support or billing department.

It is easy to isolate the observations from the interaction into a limited perspective while losing sight of the big picture. The CSR might exhibit some nuances – both positive and negative – that you cannot accurately measure with a number value or a "yes/no" question. Monitoring in this fashion does not provide a springboard for the CSR to understand and improve his or her behaviors, which is the ultimate goal of monitoring.

The New Method Yields Better Results

When assessing the CSR's tone of voice, the normal choices on a tick sheet would be either "Yes, No, N/A," or a number 1-5. But just how would you assess whether the CSR is speaking too slowly? Or too rapidly? Was curt with the caller? Or whether the CSR just seems disinterested? You can't measure such qualities on a numerical scale.

A better way to monitor involves evaluating the CSR's behavior and

skill set. Rather than isolating single actions, you take the entire interaction into account and focus on high-level behaviors, such as overall rapport with the caller or whether the CSR did what they said they were going to do. Such an approach coaches to specific areas rather than relying on specific point values. Ultimately, it is a method that encourages CSRs and their supervisors to think outside the "check" box. This new philosophy involves three distinct elements:

New evaluation categories:
Program Knowledge, Systems Knowledge, Connection with the Caller, and Accountability.

New scoring values.
Incorporating customer sentiment.

Let's examine these various elements and the part they play in the overall success of this new monitoring system.

New Evaluation Categories

1. Program knowledge: This means that the CSR understands the company's various offerings, policies, and procedures, and is capable of conveying them to the caller. It also indicates that the CSR demonstrates appropriate decision-making skills to best aid customers.

2. Systems knowledge: This refers to the CSR's knowledge of when and how to effectively use various system tools, how to navigate within the system, and how to use help resources.

3. Connection with the caller: This is one of the most important categories and involves treating the caller with care, sincerity,

compassion, and empathy. It also means conveying information, at the right time, in easy-to-understand terms without a language barrier.

4. Accountability: This involves displaying ownership by actions and word choice when resolving the customer's issues. Additionally, it means ensuring that the customer is left with a complete understanding of what happened during the call and the next steps to be taken, if any.

When employees are monitored in these four categories, CSRs and their supervisors will have a comprehensive picture of how well CSRs are interacting with customers and in what areas they can improve.

New Scoring Values

Just as call center managers need a new way to monitor CSR performance, they also need a new way to grade that performance. Rather than using numbers to assess a CSR's worth, a more subjective scale will be far more revealing. A rating system like the following would be ideal:

Excellent – The CSR did everything possible to assist and went "above and beyond" in assisting the caller.

Satisfactory – The CSR exhibited most of the desired attributes and handled the caller's inquiry well.

Development Opportunity – The CSR exhibited only some of the desired category attributes and didn't handle the caller's inquiry to a satisfactory level.

Unacceptable – The CSR failed to meet the basic behavior



attributes and the caller's needs.

These ratings will give CSRs a clear picture of how well they handle customer calls. This is something that can't be conveyed as well using a number score.

Incorporating Customer Sentiment

While monitoring your CSRs is a valuable exercise, is it really enough? To complete the monitoring picture, you need to add customer sentiment. While you should not use this information as part of your overall assessment of your CSRs performance, it is very useful in making certain that customers receive the best possible service. Monitoring your callers' attitudes identifies how they responded and if they enjoyed interacting with your organization. It also serves to confirm that your CSRs are resolving issues and utilizing the correct tools while conveying sincerity, empathy, and a positive attitude.

In evaluating the caller's sentiment, be sure to answer questions such as:

How did the caller respond?

What was his or her attitude at the beginning and close of the call?

What key comments did the caller emphasize?

What did the caller not say but subtly express in his or her interaction with the CSR?

In the end, was the caller happy to interact with your company?

Customer loyalty is a big predictor of a company's success. Make sure that your customers are having satisfying interactions with your CSRs so they have another reason to stay loyal to your company.

Time for a Change

Monitoring the customer by this new method provides contact center supervisors with a wealth of information on many levels. On the CSR level, it provides feedback that is more individualized and specific to each CSR. On the customer level, you will find out what they are really saying. And on a company level, you will gain feedback that will allow you to determine whether you are truly providing customers with what they really want or need.

So while you may think your current system is doing an adequate job of monitoring your employees' calls, adequate isn't enough anymore. Competition is tough today. You need to have every edge you can. Helping your CSRs better satisfy your customers is the ultimate goal of monitoring and the lifeline of your company's future success.

About the Author:

Matthew Hoffman is a Consultant and Quality Assurance Manager at Kowal Associates, Inc. a customer service consulting firm located in Boston, MA. Working with Fortune 500 companies, they focus on customer service strategy, quality monitoring, IVR, security, and speech recognition technology implementation. For more information visit www.kowalassociates.com or call 617-892-9000 ■

AN INNOVATIVE WAY TO IMPROVE PERFORMANCE IN A LARGE CALL CENTER: A CASE STUDY

By Dr. Brooks Mitchell

AN INNOVATIVE WAY TO IMPROVE PERFORMANCE IN A LARGE CALL CENTER USING GAMING BASED EMPLOYEE INCENTIVE PROGRAMS

By Dr. Brooks Mitchell Snowfly Inc.

Introduction

The power and allure of gaming is being used in a large call center to improve employee performance. Yes, gaming! Think about it, people pay money to sit in a casino in front of a slot machine and perform a very boring task. Why? Because it creates excitement and there is always the chance that something very exciting could occur with any particular pull of the slot machine lever. So why not use that same excitement and attraction in a call center environment? This is precisely what is being done by a large call center where the results have been spectacular and sustainable.

Background

The call center using the gaming incentive program recognized there was significant opportunity for improvement in three critical areas, average handle time, average customer talk time, and employee compliance scores. Several incentive approaches had been tried in the past. Although these programs would usually produce short-term results, it was almost always impossible to sustain interest in the program. Furthermore, these programs were often left uncoordinated and consistent administration was

almost non-existent. Consequently, supervisors and employees would quickly lose interest in the program and initial improvements would revert back to their previous levels.

The Solution

Dr. Brooks Mitchell, creator of an innovative employee incentive program approached the call center with a solution. Dr. Mitchell, a behavioral scientist, presented the call center with a long-term plan for performance improvement that integrated the fun and excitement of gaming into the everyday work-flow of the agents. Dr. Mitchell and center managers identified several key behaviors they wanted to improve. The three most important behaviors were customer compliance, average handle time, and average call time. The call center had good historical data on these three critical measures and recognized that small improvements would yield very significant financial returns.

Center employees were enrolled in individual Internet accounts and assigned appropriate passwords. When they achieved improvements and met goals in the three critical areas, they were given options. They could either accept a predetermined number of points or, they could immediately pull a slot machine lever on their website and win 2 to 5,000 points. Think about it, immediate reward and positive reinforcement for achieving reasonable performance measures.

The response was overwhelmingly positive. Excitement was generated



Case Study Con't

and all of the three key productivity measures immediately improved. In many instances operators would yell with excitement when they won a big pay off. It was almost like Las Vegas in a call center. Point winnings were accumulated in the employees' Internet accounts. Also in their accounts was a shopping center where employees could redeem their points. Items in the point redemption account included both tangible and intangible awards. Tangible items included gift certificates to local stores and restaurants, prepaid gasoline cards, and company logo merchandise. There were also larger and more expensive items such as televisions and digital cameras auctioned (similar to Ebay) to the highest point better. This created even more excitement in the already popular incentive program. Intangible redemption opportunities included time off with and without pay, parking spaces, and certain work privileges.

One Year Later

In addition to the productivity measures, the call center wanted to determine if the program would sustain itself and if employees had been receptive to the gaming concept. According to Dr. Mitchell, if the concept of slot machines can be sustained in a casino environment, it should be sustainable in a call center operation. He was correct! After one year, the level of employee participation actually increased from 80% to 95%. This statistic removed the traditional skepticism that incentive programs are short-lived. Most remarkable was the percentage of employees who

chose to play the slot machine as opposed to those who elected to take the predetermined number of points. In the first 12 months of the incentive program, there were over 6,200,000 slot machine pulls and less than 20,000 instances of employees who accepted the predetermined point value. Thus, Dr. Mitchell's prediction was true. Gambling is exciting and a sustainable in Las Vegas and it is exciting and sustainable in a call center as well.

Results

As evidenced in the following graphs, significant productivity improvements were achieved in each of the three areas.

Customer Compliance

Average Handle Time

Summary

The call center has been highly pleased with the results of the gaming incentive program. It is now available to 1,500 agents and plans are to implement the program in other call centers. The ROI has exceeded original expectations. Additionally, new features are being added to the program to increase the level of effectiveness. For example, a new feature allows the employee to convert their points to PayPal, an Ebay currency medium. This will allow employees to redeem their points at over 42,000 merchants. Think about it, not only are redemption possibilities virtually unlimited, they are redeemable at the best possible value. This is in contrast to traditional company,

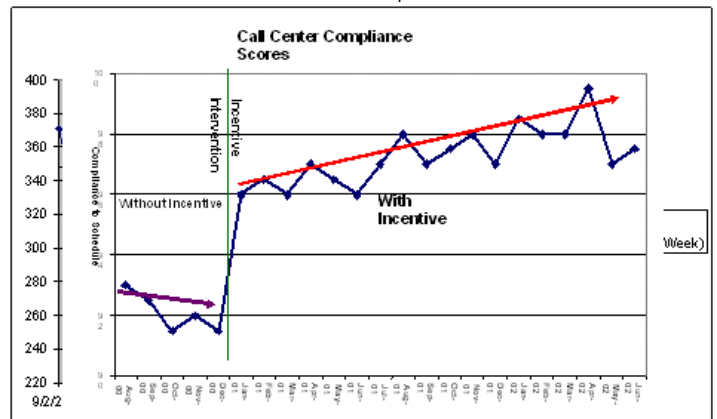
which require redemption in a specific catalog that is frequently overpriced by as much as 75%. Furthermore, it is now possible for employees to convert their points to a Visa debit card.

Footnote: Although the system embodies most of the concepts of gambling, it does not allow employees to use their point winnings to continue to play the game. So, points can only be accumulated and once they are won, they cannot be lost. Therefore, from a legal perspective, Snowfly is not gambling because nothing is at risk to the employee.

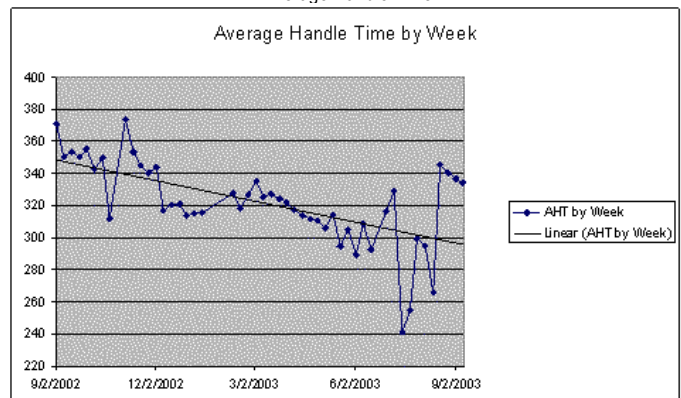
About the Author

Dr Brooks Mitchell is a behavioral scientist and professor with extensive experience in employee behavior. He founded Snowfly Inc. with the specific purpose of offering labor-intensive industries an exciting and well-administered employee incentive program that improves performance while creating fun in the work place. To learn more about Snowfly incentive programs visit the web site at www.snowfly.com. You may also send inquiries to Tyler Mitchell (t.Mitchell@snowfly.com).

Customer Compliance



Average Handle Time





Inbound Call Centers Turn Into Profit Centers with Predictive Analytics

By Marcel Holsheimer

Inbound call centers are now enjoying a newfound respect within their organizations. Long considered a profit drain and necessary evil, inbound call centers are now seen as a critical link between an organization and its customers. The backlash against unsolicited telemarketing and e-mails coupled with increasing competition has forced more precise methods of selling and marketing to customers. Customers are – as they should have always been – in the driver's seat and are forcing organizations to work harder to win and keep their business. Companies that have relied strongly on a carpet-bombing approach to marketing are now using their inbound call centers to better target customers at the right time with the right offers.

CRM not the complete answer

Somewhere along the line many organizations lost sight of a basic business principle – know your customer and keep them happy. Organizations have invested heavily in operational CRM systems believing that the investment would pay off in happy customers and increased ROI. Although CRM systems increased operational efficiencies, these initiatives have failed to deliver significant value

to customers and, as a result, have not generated high returns. Operational CRM systems improve connections to customers, but they don't do much to improve customer understanding, and without good customer understanding, organizations can't be sure of the best thing to say to each customer at a given point in time. These systems generate a huge amount of customer data, but have not been designed to transform that data into information that organizations can effectively act on. Raw data has no real value until it is turned into information.

In other words, CRM systems are great at facilitating communication and at illuminating what customers have done in the past; but by themselves, they do not tell an organization *what* to communicate. They cannot predict what the customer phoning into a call center, at this moment, would like to do but isn't telling you — and that is the information that every customer-facing channel, like a call center, needs in order to sell more efficiently and improve bottom line profitability.

Predictive analytics the missing link

What is missing from many CRM and call center operational systems is predictive analytics. Many analytical CRM products, such as online analytical processing (OLAP), provide historical analysis, summarizing what has happened in the past. In other words, historical analysis can reveal who the best customers were last month and who they are this month. This kind of traditional analysis is important, but it doesn't anticipate what will happen in the future. Predictive analytics are needed to provide a clear picture of what is going to happen in order to take the most effective action. The predictive analytic process discovers the meaningful patterns and relationships in data and provides decision-making information about the future. Predictive analytics applications properly deployed and seamlessly integrated with a call center system, enable organizations to:

Analyze all of its customer data and identify patterns that predict customer behavior. Understand that certain kinds of customers behave in ways that return a higher value to the organization - and not necessarily because they have purchased the most expensive product or service (but

because, for instance, they are likely to repay a loan over a longer term, or are more likely to maintain a balance due on a credit card).

Understand which types of customers pose the greatest risk to the organization or stand to decrease their value to the organization through default, high claims, or fraud.

Because a solid predictive analytics application can be integrated within a CRM or call center system for real-time use of in-session data, such an application can enable call center agents to act - in real time - in ways that hold the greatest potential for increasing the value of the call center to the organization. Not only does this predictive information enable customer facing agents to make up-sell and cross-sell offers that are likely to be accepted by the customer and that return the highest value to the organization, but it also enables them to avoid pursuing offers with customers whose behavior suggests significant risk.

One such predictive analytics application is PredictiveCallCenter from SPSS Inc., a leading predictive analytics provider. Using a proven combination of real-time predictive analytics and business rules,



PredictiveCallCenter automatically provides a recommendation or suggested action on the agent's screen, along with sales arguments and other information the agent needs to close the sale. Each recommendation balances the likelihood of customer acceptance with the potential value the offer holds for the company. The application takes into account campaigns that run across channels, so callers aren't overloaded with offers. If an offer is made to a customer through the call center, PredictiveCallCenter will remove that customer from a similar campaign generated for a different channel. In order to ensure that the most qualified agent handles each call, the application determines whether individual customers are defection risks or cross-sell candidates and routes the calls to the agents most qualified to manage each situation.

Predictive analytics applied - real-world examples

Consider the case of a major financial services provider. This firm has moved from a product-focused to a customer-focused sales model and relies heavily on its knowledge of customer behavior to facilitate up sell and cross-sell efforts. Once

they integrated a predictive analytical solution with their CRM system, they were able to mine their data, develop an understanding of different kinds of customer behaviors, and use those models in real time to present in-calling customers with highly targeted offers. As a result, the firm increased its conversion rate by 50%, even as it decreased its marketing costs by 40%. Another financial services provider, an 80-year old firm with an established reputation for excellence in high-return savings and investment products, wanted to find a way to turn a service center that supported more than 2 million customer calls each year - into a profit center, — one that could facilitate the conversion of incoming customer calls to sales opportunities. Through the use of predictive analytics, service center operators were able to increase conversion rates by a factor of 100. This contributed as much as \$40 million to the firm's revenues in the first year, even as it enabled the firm to decrease the amount it was spending on other marketing endeavors. The net result was an increase in bottom line profits on the order of several million dollars each year.

Other companies have had similar, some even more

dramatic, successes. Organizations are increasing conversion rates for direct mail, Web, direct sales, and other channels - and they are doing it by enabling their customer-facing agents to work, in real time, with customer behavioral models discovered through the integration of predictive analytics.

The Call Center's Day Has Come

The call center business model has historically been based on reducing the amount of time spent on each call in order to reduce costs and personnel. The quantity and not the quality of each call was the driver. Operational efficiency, in this model, was the over-riding goal; not customer satisfaction, customer retention, nor cross selling or up selling for more revenue. Rarely was a call center's operation tied in with an organization's business goals or strategies.

As organizations realize that their marketing strategy of casting a wide net and hoping for a decent catch are over. Marketers must now transfer their time and resources from getting the best call list to truly understanding their customers and prospects and making them the right offer. Much of this begins at the customer's

main point of contact – the call center. Organizations are aligning call center operations with business goals and seeing call center staff as a viable sales channel. With this new respect and responsibilities, and armed with predictive analytics, call center agents will rise to the challenge of making the right offer, to the right customer at the right time.





THE RETENTION HIERARCHY (OR, HOW TO KEEP YOUR STAFF FROM LEAVING!)

By Evan Burks, Senior Vice President, Comforce Corporation

In a previous article (Call Center Times, March, 2004), we talked about how to identify good candidates for your call center. Basically, we told you about "The Five Habits of Highly Successful Staffing Managers." Now that you've spent all that time and money bringing in the best candidates, wouldn't it be nice if, for a change, you could retain them...so you don't have to go through the same thing again a few months down the line?

So, now that you've – hopefully – found 'em, we'll talk about how you can keep 'em. After all, why use all of those great hiring techniques to bring the best through your front door, if all you're going to do is lose them out the back door in a short period of time? Having a great retention plan is no longer something you should get around to "when I have the time." Let's face it...one of the reasons you're always short of time is because you're continually addressing the problem of high turnover. A retention plan that works is now a necessity...and, very definitely, something you should get around to *now*.

I guess we could begin by practicing a little common-sense armchair psychology. What makes people tick? What makes you tick? In other words, what things motivate, or de-motivate. If you think back to your Psych 101 class, you may remember that old discussion about Abraham Maslow's "Hierarchy of Needs." Let's forget the psychological stuff; we're not

going to turn this into a thesis. Nonetheless, Maslow's work does provide some helpful hints regarding employee retention. Maslow said that human beings are motivated by unsatisfied needs, and that certain "lower" needs need to be satisfied before higher needs can be. So, if Mr. Maslow had been a call center manager, he may have called the following tips, "The Retention Hierarchy for Improved Staff Retention".

First of all, base salary is usually not a motivator...but it can be a substantial de-motivator. Studies show that a raise lasts as a motivator for about two weeks, and then it fades into the background. Why? Because most people believe they're still underpaid, even after a raise. So here's where the de-motivation factor comes in. Not paying your employees a good wage (subject to the marketplace and their skill levels) will result in de-motivation and a higher turnover rate.

Accordingly, the lowest level of the hierarchy is to make sure you're paying your employees a solid market rate...certainly not too high, but also not too low. This is where attention to ongoing salary surveys is a must. You can accomplish this by "pricing your competition," looking at governmental salary surveys (most states or counties provide them), or subscribing to a publication that makes annual surveys, such as those of the Gartner Group, etc.

By now, you might be thinking, "Oh, oh, here we go; let's just raise my costs and break my

budget!" And, let's face it, it's very tempting to walk down that familiar path. But, in reality, that's a path to nowhere (or else you wouldn't be reading this article!). Not having a balanced, market-driven pay program will actually end up *raising* your costs, through reduced productivity, lost training dollars and, ultimately, poor customer service. This is one instance where the lowest price definitely does not translate into the lowest cost.

Take it from a CPA - you get what you pay for! If you're going to bring in the best (which, hopefully, you are!), you're going to need to pay a reasonable wage to keep them.

One Comforce client was previously paying its Customer Service Reps a standard rate of \$8.00 per hour. The problem is that the going wage for the area was closer to \$10.00 per hour. Funny....their turnover rate was approaching 60%. The rationale for their pay structure was based on the theory that the 20% savings exceeded the costs associated with the hassles and headaches of higher turnover. In reality, the "savings" not only evaporated into thin air, but actually ended up costing the company more, in a variety of ways. What value do you place on the costs of training, management-focus lost to continual turnover (instead of managing the call center), and, most importantly, customer dissatisfaction due to inexperienced and nonproductive CSRs? We recommended to this new client that they simply increase their pay rates to market rates. The result? It allowed them to attract better candidates, and to retain them. And it cut their turnover rate in half. But that's not

the ending of this story...not by a long shot. In fact, the implementation of a variety of other retention measures actually cut the turnover rate by an additional 60%! (We'll talk about some of these later.)

After you address the salary issue, you can start getting into the more creative stuff...things that can motivate people in ways transcending mere money, ways that make them feel valued and appreciated. Things that will make them want to stay.

The second level of the "hierarchy" is to establish realistic goals, and then track actual results to goal. How can you expect people to be productive if they don't know what is expected of them? Most call centers do a decent job of establishing goals, and there are plenty of studies out there that talk about such things as number of calls completed, average length of calls, etc., etc. If you don't currently have goals established, do it now!

These should be clearly communicated when you hire new people. However, most call centers fall down on the job when it comes to effective follow-up. They don't take the times to measure actual results against goals. And that could be a fatal mistake.

You have to do a budget for your call center, right? I'll bet you periodically review your budget to actual expenses. Setting productivity goals for your people isn't any different. I recommend that these be communicated on a weekly basis, by posting your key performance indicators (KPI's) in the office for all to see.

There are two ways you can do this. The first is the most traditional, but no less important. Have a graph that compares your KPI actual results to goals over a



period of time, perhaps a quarter. Everyone will begin to identify with these goals and (if you have the right people) will work hard to help meet them. The second is less traditional, but it works in ways that will give your people extra incentive. Provide a weekly report that shows the top three in every KPI category. This can be tied to weekly prizes of some sort, whether movie tickets, an extra bonus or maybe that special covered parking place! It doesn't take much here; it's the recognition that is the key.

Each of these steps can make your people feel more "invested" in your company. And invested people tend to stay. The third level of the hierarchy follows somewhat along the lines of the second - only more so. If you didn't notice, the hierarchy is based on recognition in the middle levels. People - and this is hardly rocket science - like to be recognized for their accomplishments. Quarterly, or every six months, you should consider holding employee gatherings (by shift) with quarterly or semi-annual awards based on KPI's, attendance and/or other areas important to your particular call center environment.

I know of one call center that inserts a little training here by playing the best recorded customer call for the quarter. It is usually something that exemplifies "going above and beyond" and can be raised up as an example of the type of service your center strives to provide. Of course, one of the rewards was simply being recognized and being used as a training example (along with an award - certificate, monetary, additional paid time off, or a combination of the above). It's kind of like the Oscars, when you get to see your film clip as an admiring audience watches, too!

At the top of the hierarchy (the "self actualization" level - per Maslow) is career paths. Call centers that get out of the "putting-out-the-fires" method of management can begin to look at long-term planning. That includes providing career paths for your employees. After all, if your employees are good at what they do, they may want to progress to a higher level - and they're probably not going anywhere. Not everyone, of course, can be a line supervisor or a manager. But these people should still feel valued for what they do. Consider putting levels in place to recognize longevity and productivity. For example, a call center may want to establish various Customer Service Representative levels; i.e., I, II, III. After all, someone who consistently exceeds goals and exhibits a winning attitude is worth more, and should be recognized both monetarily and with a "title."

The title is, in many ways, more important than the money, because it recognizes that the employee has progressed to a higher level within the company. As an armchair psychologist, I would say this breeds pride of accomplishment.

One cautionary note, however. Be sure to have a more than one person decide on "promotions." And do not make the mistake of promoting - especially to management or supervisory roles - based on longevity. Some people are quite content where they are, and satisfied to produce without the pressures of managing others.

Lastly - and this falls outside the "hierarchy" - is that the style of your line managers can have a major impact on whether employees stay or not. Nothing moves an employee out the door

sooner than to perceive inequity in how rules are interpreted and applied. Fairness to all, whether the employee is the "favorite" or not, builds trust and respect. We spend as much time with our co-workers as we do our families. And you overlook this intangible at your peril.

One final point: There's one other option to find and retain good people - have an expert do it for you. A good staffing partner can help you to find quality candidates - and save you tremendous costs by employing these individuals as their own W-2 employees. When these companies do their job well, they can contribute greatly to the attraction and retention of quality workers for your call center.

How?

First, use a staffing services firm as the "probationary hiring agent". In other words, for a period of from 90 to 180 days, let your staffing vendor be the actual employer for the worker (regardless of whether you found the candidate or they did). At some predetermined time, you have the opportunity to offer direct employment to the employee, usually for no charge (especially if you found the candidate!).

How does this help in keeping good workers? Because it gives the employee another goal! If they do well, they'll be offered a job with your company.

Along the way, the staffing company should utilize some of the same retention techniques, as discussed herein, to retain the employee. If you maintain a large contractor workforce through your staffing services vendor, see if that vendor can have an on-site

representative. An on-site representative can help you deal with issues before they get to the point where an employee must be terminated. You'd be surprised to see how often contractor-employees search out the rep to discuss problematic issues...whether related to a supervisor problem, shift or other issue.

It's generally much easier for a new employee to bring an issue to the attention of her "advocate," rather than directly to a supervisor. This gives the on-site representative an opportunity to nip a problem in the bud...and can be a very important key to retaining good people.

So now you know. You *can* keep good employees. And staff turnover does not have to be an inescapable part of life. If you follow the basics outlined here, you can then start to have a little more fun, by being creative with the details. And then, rather than dealing with constant turnover, you'll be able to focus on what you do best...running a Call Center!

Evan Burks is Senior Vice President of Comforce Corporation www.comforce.com, a \$400 million public company involved in consulting and staffing for the call center industry. Based in Mesa, AZ, he works closely with major call centers all over the country. Evan Burks can be reached at (480) 897-2479, or at eburks@comforce.com.





Support Center Site Certification

Is it for you?

By Greg Coleman
Principal / Vice President
Certification Programs
Service Strategies Corporation

If you are considering site certification for your support center(s) you are probably deluged by the sheer amount of information, facts, and myths about the benefits of earning certification, what being “certified” means, how to go about it, and why.

In this article we'll sort all this out and take a broad look at some of the benefits of certification along with some of the things to look for when selecting a certification program for your support center. Certification methodology and quality of results can fluctuate widely between the various programs, and the more information you have now, the better off you'll be when selecting the program that will best help you achieve your desired results.

Who Should Consider Certification and Why?

Here are some of the reasons organizations choose to become certified, along with what to look for when selecting a certification program.

A Roadmap to World Class Support

The program should provide a framework for the development

of your support organization. The certification criteria should provide guidance for ensuring that best practices are developed and implemented and should focus the organization on delivering the highest quality support possible.

Address Specific Support Related Issues

The certification program should cover virtually every aspect of support center operations. It should provide a focus on key operational areas that need attention. By gaining this focus, support organizations will have the momentum necessary to address long-standing issues, and improve overall operations in the process.

Validate their Current Practices

Those companies that feel they are already delivering top quality support can use a certification program as a means of validation. Inevitably, areas for improvement will be identified through the certification process that will drive even higher levels of performance. The certification process should validate the practices in place within the organization and allow for attainment of industry recognition for the quality of support being delivered.

Market Support as a Competitive Differentiator

The certification program should provide the type of external validation required to help communicate the quality of support being delivered to your customers. Certified support organizations should have the rights to use the certification logo in marketing materials - enabling the company to better promote support as a competitive differentiator.

Drive Consistency in Support Delivery

Many support organizations deliver support through multiple support centers both regionally and across the globe. Consistent service delivery is a key component in maintaining and driving higher customer satisfaction levels. The certification program must provide a common framework through the program criteria and define the practices necessary to deliver consistent service levels across multiple support centers. The program should then measure the degree of consistency through the certification audit process.

Benefits of Certification

The benefits associated with earning site certification for your support organization are numerous. Among them...

Increase Customer Satisfaction

Increased customer satisfaction and loyalty through improvements in operational effectiveness and staff productivity

Benchmark Against the Best

You can benchmark your support operations against industry best

practices and compare your operations against those of other world-class organizations.

Gain an Advantage over the Competition

Your clients, shareholders, investors, and prospects will recognize the commitment your company has made to become certified. Use the certification process to set your organization apart from your competitors who may not be currently certified.

Improve Service Delivery

The improvements that you make in an effort to achieve certification will benefit your customers by providing them with improved service delivery, better trained staff, and better implementation and documentation of key processes and procedures. Virtually all support organizations could improve in one area or another.

Retain Customers by “Blocking-Out” the Competition

Your customers will recognize the commitment your company has made to becoming certified. Use the certification process as a customer retention tool to set your organization apart from the competition. It's one thing to claim quality support; it's another to prove it.

Leverage a Continuous Improvement Program

Competitors driving improvements in services, new products and services, changing customer demands, and new markets are just a few areas that offer ongoing support



challenges. Certification helps assure that your customers will receive a high quality of support. And, on-going re-certification can drive continuous improvements year after year. You'll have a continuous improvement program in place that enables you to provide world-class service to your customers.

Gain Consistency Across your Support Organizations

As example, the Support Center Practices (SCP) Certification program defines a common vocabulary and best practice roadmap. By certifying each support center in your organization you drive process and performance consistency across your organization. By providing a common goal and vocabulary, traditional organizational barriers that can derail other continuous improvement efforts across support centers are eliminated.

Return on Investment

Certification creates value in many ways. It focuses your support center on results that directly impact on your bottom line. Depending on the certification program you select, your initial investment can be less than ? of a full time equivalent per support center with minimal implementation costs.

Efficiency

With a leading certification program you should expect greatly improved effectiveness and / or efficiencies of the

processes in place within your support centers, including improved response times and lower operational costs.

Differentiation

Achieving certification with a leading program means you have joined the best of the best. It isn't easy, but recognition of value seldom is. As example, with the SCP Certification program, you must pass a rigorous onsite audit covering all program elements (minimum customer satisfaction score is required to proceed with audit) to attain certification.

Consistency

Certification should provide additional focus on strategic planning for your support organization. You should be able to implement common support practices leading to high quality support delivered consistently world wide, develop consistent use of tools, implement standard set of support metrics, and enhance your support strategy and vision.

Recognition

Certification can help raise the internal and external awareness of value of the customer support organization. Internal recognition elevates morale within your support organization and your customers will appreciate the value of post sales support. This helps you leverage service as a competitive advantage

Selecting a Certification Program

Once you've decided to seek certification, do your homework and select the program that is best for you. A few things to consider...

What is the program's track record?

Who developed the certification criteria? Who sponsors it? How long has it been available?

Who are the certified participants?

Check the names of organizations that have been through the certification process. How are they perceived in the market? Call a few of them and ask for their direct feedback and ask about the benefits they have received.

What is the market acceptance?

Is the program the internationally accepted standard that others are compared to? How many organizations have adopted the certification program?

What are costs?

Are all fees stated upfront? Are there associated consulting fees? Some certification programs require costly consulting engagements or additional fees. Learn all the costs up front and avoid any surprises.

How often is the program revised and updated?

Being world-class today doesn't mean world-class next year. New trends and technology are continually raising the bar on superior customer support

levels. Make certain the certification program you selected is updated and revised on a regular, published schedule.

Program Content

Look for a program that can quantify the effectiveness of your support, based on stringent performance standards that represent best practices in the industry.

The program should establish a foundation to build on existing quality processes, and provide a clear focus on measurable results. Make sure the program is designed specifically to increase customer satisfaction and loyalty through improvements in operational effectiveness and staff productivity and provides a continuous improvement program that enables you to provide world-class service to your customers. After all – that's the bottom line.

Summary

I hope this article has provided you with valuable information. If you have any questions about site certification, feel free to email me at gcoleman@servicestrategies.com. For more information about the industry leading Support Center Practices (SCP) Certification program, visit www.spcertification.com





Five Myths About Closing For The Sale

By Mo Bellio

True or False: A sales person should make an offer and a closing attempt at least one time on every call.

Many managers come up with reasons why this statement is false. We believe, however, that it is true. Sales people should definitely make an offer and a closing attempt on every customer contact.

The reasons are obvious. Sales increase because we are offering and closing more often. Customers enjoy more value from our organization, keeping them coming back for more. A call center organization with strong revenues has more leverage when competing within the organization for limited funds. For example, the next new phone system purchase or computer upgrade is more likely to go to the call center, provided revenues justify it.

Why don't more telephone sales people close more often? Myths. Sales people – and managers – use false “truths” as their reasoning for not being more aggressive on the phones. This article will feature a number of these

myths, and why they deserve their title. Eliminating myths means better production and happier customers.

Myth One: “If The Customer Wants What We Offer, He/She Will Ask For It.”

This is a “human nature” myth. Many callers procrastinate. For many thousands of callers that come into your center each month, they should buy, but don't. Your product will solve a problem that will enhance their productivity or lifestyle, and they know it, but they prefer to procrastinate. Procrastination is unhealthy at best. We can solve this by making at least one closing attempt on every call. If they can't afford it or don't need it, they will say so.

How often have you said to yourself, “I think I should shop around a bit more,” only to forget about the issue and continue to put up with a less effective way of doing things? We can eliminate this counter-productive behavior by making a closing attempt.

Myth Two: “She Sounded Like She Could Not Afford It.”

In person, we can tell many things about a buyer, yet we still can not tell for certain whether a buyer has the money to pay. On the phones it is simply impossible. Many callers even begin by saying, “I'm interested in your lowest priced...” This is a protective measure that usually has nothing to do with whether they can afford the product. Even many bad-credit class customers are just bad payers. Often they can afford anything they want to buy. Ask for a credit card, and make the close.

This myth is the root of many selling ills. When we think this way, we are “profiling” our customers. Many telephone associates also profile senior citizens, people with poor vocabularies or strong slang, people with accents and more. Eliminate this myth and close with confidence. If they need it and can afford it, they will buy it.

Myth Three: “We Don't Want To Upset Callers By Pushing Products On Them.”

“Mr. Johnson, I can have this in your hands by tomorrow

afternoon so you can start taking advantage of it immediately, okay?” Wow! That was pushy. Wouldn't you be upset if you heard that kind of aggression from a sales person? Of course not. This myth stems from sales people's resistance to selling. We often hear it in customer service centers that are trying to transition to service/sales.

Myth Four: “This Product Has Problems, So They Are Just Going To Cancel It Anyway.”

Some products are riddled with problems and should not be on the market. Most products, however, have only a few problems, if any. The vast majority of callers keep what they buy, and would even keep more if telephone associates did a better job of matching products to customer needs. Don't let your sales people tell you things like, “You know, Bob told me that Sharon overheard Susan saying that ninety per cent of these product sales are canceling in the first week.” It probably is not true.

If 50% of product sales are canceling because of product difficulties, should sales people still sell the product? The answer is, of course, up to management.



If, however, management feels that this is an acceptable number of cancellations, we strongly recommend that sales people make the closing attempts. If 1000 sales occur each week, 500 customers are keeping what they buy. Close with confidence because you do not know who the “keepers” are going to be.

Myth Five: “Making A Closing Attempt Just Sounds So Sales-ish.”

Not true. If your automobile mechanic strongly recommends a new air filter and explains why it is important to buy it, you are likely going to listen. If your dentist tells you that there is a large cavity in the back of one of your molars, and it needs to be fixed, are you going to think he is “selling” you a filling? Of course not. When we present ourselves as product experts, people expect us to make strong recommendations, especially if our products improve productivity or enhance lifestyles. Not encouraging a caller to buy will seem more unusual to the caller.

Telephone associates are the ones guilty of making things sound too sales-ish.

“Would you like to try it, because, you know, you can cancel at any time?” Closing attempts like this tell customers that you are not serious, perhaps even that you’re trying to “sell” them something that they don’t need.

Conclusion

Closing effectiveness must accompany any good product offer and benefit statement. Focus telephone associates on why they **should** close, rather than why they should not, and you will watch your sales go up quickly. In addition, your sales people will see their role on the phone as urgent in helping callers fix problems and take advantage of new product benefits.

Mo Bellio is president of the [Florida Corporate Training Center](#), a sales and floor-management training organization, dedicated to improving sales and service within the complex contact center environment. FCTC’s clients include Hewlett Packard, BellSouth, DHL, GE Securities, Sprint, SouthTrust Bank and many others. Their contact number is 800-683-9022. ■

NEWS

MOHR PARTNERS NEGOTIATES 55,000 SF LEASE FOR TXU ENERGY

Dallas – Mohr Partners Inc., an international corporate real estate advisor, announced that Dallas-based TXU Energy has signed a 55,000 square foot sublease from the Fluor Corporation at Lake Pointe Plaza in Sugar Land, a suburb of Houston, Texas for its third call center.

According to Gianni LaBarba of Mohr Partners who represented TXU in the transaction with Bob Mohr and John Shaunfield, Mohr Partners was selected based on their extensive call center experience.

“We evaluated and presented numerous locations statewide before the class A space at One Fluor Daniel Drive was chosen,” said LaBarba. “TXU was interested in the Greater-Houston area and offered a strong labor pool for the more than 400 jobs that will be created. The space at One Fluor Daniel Drive was a perfect fit due to its immediate availability,

cost savings and potential for future expansion.”

The call center is expected to open in June. Fluor Corporation is the current leaseholder for Lake Pointe Plaza, a one- million square-foot four-building complex.

Dallas-based Mohr Partners Inc. is an international corporate real estate services, advisement and consulting firm with 22 offices and affiliates worldwide in 10 countries. Recently the firm announced their 15th US office in Minneapolis, naming local real estate veterans Roger Christensen and Clint Baer as managing directors. Since 1986, Mohr Partners has been managing real estate portfolios for corporations and completes in excess of 1,800 transactions each year for their clients. **For more information** on Mohr Partners please visit: www.mohrpartners.com.





Concerto Software Expands Contact Center Offerings by Acquiring CenterForce Technologies' Performance Optimization and Workforce Management Solutions

WESTFORD, Mass., - Concerto Software, Inc., a proven provider of contact center solutions, announced that it has acquired all assets and certain liabilities of CenterForce Technologies, a pioneer in contact center performance optimization and workforce management software.

The acquisition brings four new solutions to Concerto Software's product suite, including RightForce® for Internet-based workforce management; Analyzer(TM) for performance analysis and agent scorecards; Optimizer(TM) for best-time-to-call; and Planner(TM) for workforce planning and forecasting for outbound campaigns. Companies can now look to Concerto Software for its knowledge and capabilities across the contact center, from helping them manage customer interactions across multiple channels to maximizing the power and efficiency of their agents through analysis and scheduling.

"Given that one of the most

significant investments made in any contact center is in the agents themselves, adding the CenterForce products to our portfolio enables us to offer our customers additional expertise and functionality that can dramatically improve the way they manage their businesses — and therefore improve their bottom lines," said Jim Foy, President and CEO of Concerto Software. "By offering performance optimization and workforce management solutions, we are providing customers with even more choice and flexibility, combined with the benefit of being able to build a true long-term partnership with a single solutions provider."

CenterForce Technologies joined the Concerto Software Technology Partner Program as a Premier Partner in 1996. As a result of this, many joint customers currently benefit from the value of the existing product integrations between all of CenterForce's performance optimization solutions and the suite of Concerto Software contact center solutions. With this acquisition, Concerto Software intends to enhance and deepen these integrations, enabling

customers to realize even greater value from the joint solutions more quickly and easily.

"We have been using both Concerto Software and CenterForce for several years and have seen tangible improvements in our agent productivity and overall efficiency," said Sue Dickason, Senior Vice President, Centralized Collections at Branch Bank & Trust. "We expect enormous value in now having these solutions managed and supported by one company with a solid track record and we anticipate a long, prosperous relationship with Concerto Software."

Bob Kelly, CenterForce's CEO, has joined Concerto Software as Vice President of Performance Optimization Solutions and the former CenterForce Bethesda, MD headquarters is now a Concerto Software office.

"We are excited to become an integral part of Concerto Software," said Kelly. "Our suite of solutions will provide significant value-add for customers that are looking for the next level of performance from their contact center human and technology resources." ■

IEX Offers Advanced Solution for Contact Center Performance Management

Merced Systems Selected to Provide Performance Optimization Technology

Richardson, Texas - Expanding its range of contact center optimization solutions, IEX, a Tekelec company (Nasdaq: TKLC), announced an agreement with Merced Systems whereby IEX will include the Merced Performance Suite in the company's product offerings. IEX, the leading provider of contact center workforce management software, and Merced Systems, a leader in contact center performance management technology, further announced their intent to provide enhanced integration and functional capabilities between the IEX TotalView Workforce Management system and the Merced solution.

"This agreement represents a significant step for IEX as the company joins an elite group of technology suppliers with a demonstrated understanding of the importance of performance management to an overall



contact center optimization strategy,” said Paul Stockford, chief analyst, SaddleTree Research. “The tight integration of workforce management with performance management provides a cost-effective and comprehensive performance optimization solution and represents the leading edge in the next generation of contact center productivity tools.”

The IEX performance management offering will be supplied with pre-built integration to the IEX TotalView Workforce Management system providing an out-of-the-box solution that can be deployed rapidly and cost-effectively. Pre-configured key performance indicators (KPIs) based on workforce management and other information in the TotalView database, along with report and dashboard templates, let customers quickly gain insights on their current performance results and begin implementing plans for improvement. Future feature enhancements of the solution include a workforce management dashboard targeting the performance of workforce

planning and forecasting teams and synchronized system administration features.

“Performance management is a natural extension of workforce management, as it focuses on workforce productivity improvement. Together, these solutions are central to the process of contact center optimization,” says Debbie May, IEX president. “The combination of these two industry leading solutions along with our in-depth knowledge of contact center operations provides a truly unique and superior choice for improving performance in the contact center.”

Merced performance management technology helps contact centers optimize performance by providing personalized information to every role in the organization, improving management decision-making and automating key manual processes. The solution automatically integrates information from various systems within the contact center (ACD, IVR, Quality, CRM, HR, and others), and consolidates it into a single, easy to manage data repository for use in providing personalized

performance dashboards, automated reports and advanced analytical capabilities including drill-down, sorting and filtering. Fully integrated workflow functionality ensures that performance improvement actions are taken through the use of automated alerts and electronic forms to collect information and track activities and task completions. The capability for business users to make changes to the system easily without IT or developer support and the ability to personalize information access and display by both role and business unit further differentiate this solution from similar performance management products.

“Our solutions put actionable information into the hands of people who can use it to create real improvement in the contact center, and it helps create an environment of accountability and performance,” says Mark Selcow, Merced Systems president. “Customers realize a return on their investment in many ways: through staff productivity gains, automation of administrative tasks,

reduced turnover and lowered staffing requirements.”

ShopNBC Selects Envision Click2Coach to Enhance Customer Service

Nation’s Third-Largest Home Shopping Network Using Envision Solutions for Agent Training and Back-Office Support

Seattle - Envision Telephony, Inc., a leading provider of contact center software solutions, announced that ShopNBC is using the Envision Click2Coach(r) solution to help maximize each customer contact and to develop agent skills to empower them to deliver top-quality customer service. The Envision Click2Coach solution includes Envision(tm) Quality Monitoring and Envision(tm) eLearning and is a complete set of training, quality monitoring and evaluation tools to coach agents for success. Click2Coach enables supervisors to coach agents more frequently, and because of its effective training tools, agents receive information and training more often which has increased the



accuracy and consistency of customer interactions at ShopNBC.

In its customer contact center, ShopNBC recently introduced a new tool called One View. One View enables agents to view all customer information on one screen. With Envision Click2Coach, ShopNBC quickly trained all of the agents to use the tool correctly thereby assessing customer needs and information faster. Not only are agents in the customer contact center benefiting from the Envision Click2Coach solution but ShopNBC is using it in other parts of its business to help achieve its corporate goal of excellent customer service. For example, the Customer Service Operations group, who rarely deals with customers, uses the tool to monitor interactions with vendors. ShopNBC also uses customer recordings from Envision Click2Coach to help corporate executives better understand customer needs.

"We are very pleased with Envision's solution as a tool for improving customer service," said Howard Fox, senior vice president of operations and customer service. "In addition, deploying Envision

Click2Coach required zero IT support on our end as it was as a seamless integration. Customer service is a top priority at ShopNBC, and we look forward to Envision's solution helping us achieve our goals in this area."

"Consumers expect great service, especially when they are on the phone," said Rodney Kuhn, CEO of Envision. "Helping agents become efficient and effective has long been Envision's objective, and we are pleased to work with leading partners like ShopNBC to deliver our innovative solutions."

ShopNBC is devoted to customer service in every facet of its corporate culture. They recently rolled out a company-wide initiative called "Red Carpet Care." In the "Red Carpet Care" program, ShopNBC is turning up the passion on exceeding customer expectations. ShopNBC sees Envision as an integral part of its initiative. In one month, the company has seen a decrease in call handle times and is well on its way to meeting its goals of first call resolution.



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