MANAGING THE CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE

HOW TO SYSTEMATICALLY CLOSE THE CUSTOMER SATISFACTION GAP
Overview

Customer satisfaction is king. A recent Purdue University study found that the repurchase rate of a product increased 11% when customers reported they were happy with the phone support or service they received.1 Decision makers in the contact center world have taken such findings to heart and have become increasingly focused on implementing strategies to improve their customers’ experiences on the phone. One indicator of this trend has been the rush to implement Customer Relationship Management (CRM) systems to help agents efficiently manage the increasingly large quantities of data they need to access. Another response has been to implement knowledge base tools, supplementary training sessions, and internal search engine applications. Still, with a few exceptions, customer satisfaction has only gotten worse.

The following white paper will discuss the problems of both legacy and newer technology-based approaches to the customer service issues that persistently plague contact centers and will offer alternate solutions that have been proven to significantly reduce the “quality gap” between a facility’s best and lowest performing agents.

Market Trends

Anyone looking at the contact center sector as recently as a decade ago would have noticed an almost single-minded focus on reducing costs. The trend at the time was to select a facility location with wage rate as the sole factor, often without very much analysis regarding suitability on any other dimension. In the outsourcing world, the metric that overrode all others in importance, for both clients and managers, was average handle time. Shorter calls meant lower cost.

Times have changed considerably. A 2010 survey of 141 executives from North American firms revealed the following:2

- 90% said that customer service was “very important” or “critical” to their 2010 strategy
- 80% said that they wanted to differentiate their firm through a focus on customer experience
- When asked to name their biggest obstacle today, the number one response was “customer experience strategy”

Figure 1: 2010 survey of 141 executives from North American firms
Why has there been such a major shift in focus? The answer comes down to bottom-line profitability. During the period that most firms were fixated on reducing expenses, those companies that managed to foster brand strength, loyalty, and retention by concentrating on strong phone service, made more money. For example, a 2009 study conducted by Forrester Research, found that for an average $10 billion company, making improvements in customer service generates an additional $284 million in revenue.\(^3\)

The industry, however, has been slow to find a way to successfully capitalize on findings such as these. It is interesting to note that in the 2010 survey mentioned earlier, only 11% of executives responded that they had a “very disciplined” approach to fostering a consistently excellent customer experience.

The Challenges of Delivering Consistent Quality Performance

There are four main challenges that prevent contact centers from effectively driving high levels of customer service across the majority of their workforce. These factors are a limited talent pool, a lack of objective standards, the shortcomings of conventional product knowledge training, and the inherent problems of most knowledge bases and accompanying search engines.

Limited Talent Pool

Contact centers have notoriously high levels of attrition. It is not unusual to encounter sites with turnover of 300%. Reasons for this figure include the tendency for agents to view call center work as a way station to another career, competition from nearby facilities, and the stressful nature of the work. Agents that do perform exceptionally well and see themselves as having a long-term career with the organization are often promoted to supervisor or trainer positions, which is another reason that a center’s best agents stop regularly interacting with customers over time.

While certain environments are more conducive to limiting attrition, such as rural locations where the facility is a top employment opportunity, regular turnover at even lower levels can eventually damage customer service. For example, if a 100-seat facility has 30% attrition, 30 agents will have to be replaced each year. Within only a few years, this center with attrition levels that are stellar by industry standards, will have burned through the majority of the talented people in the area who are suited to or willing to perform call center work. Research shows that for every percentage point decrease in customer satisfaction survey measurement, there was a corresponding 1% increase in customer churn.\(^4\)
High attrition places contact centers in a difficult position. The costs of maintaining a call center facility are substantial, and every empty seat translates into money lost, not to mention the damaging effect on service levels. Management often has to quickly fill seats with whatever “belly buttons” they can find, regardless of whether the new hires possess the talent, voice quality, or empathy to provide the customer with an ideal experience. In these common scenarios, the operations team all too often finds themselves in the unenviable position of having no options other than crossing their fingers and hoping for the best.

**Shortcomings of Product Knowledge Training**

According to renowned educational expert Edgar Dale, students in a classroom environment, where large quantities of material have to be absorbed in a short period of time, typically only remember 10% of what they read and 20% of what they hear. Due to the often frantic nature of a new project ramp up, as well as the regular need to fill empty seats to meet service level goals, cramming new reps’ heads full of information in a relatively short period of time is more often than not the norm in the contact center world.

Unfortunately, many of the programs that representatives are hired to handle are not simple. Depending on the line of business, agents may have to simultaneously deal with up to seven CRM, knowledge base, and software systems, while answering questions on topics that might include complicated technical matters, benefits packages, financial structures, payment plans or one of any number of complex areas. In fact, many of these issues are so complicated that it is not uncommon for supervisors to provide incorrect information to their team members.

With all the room for agent error and confusion, it stands to reason that the possibility that a customer will have a poor experience is a considerable one. Of course, call center managers will at times happen upon agents with superior memories, natural call handling skills, and the work ethic to seek out additional training on their own time. While these skills are important and leaders certainly should do everything in their power to foster them, relying on the hope that the majority of the work staff will inherently possess these characteristics is the contact center equivalent to wishing on a star.
Knowledge Base (and Search Engine) Problems

One of the ways that many organizations have decided to attack the customer experience problem is by investing large amounts of time and money in the creation of extensive knowledge base systems. While giving agents access to information is important, the recent craze for these tools has often created as many issues as it has solved. According to Tom Sweeny, a principal at the consulting firm ServiceXRG, “the quantity of content is taking a bite out of the quality. Organizations that have made a commitment to create content for their knowledge base are going overboard, incenting and driving individuals to contribute and push that content into the knowledge base just as quickly as it can be identified and created.”

As part of his analysis, Tom Sweeny examined the knowledge management processes of 117 companies. He found that the average “clutter rate” of the knowledge base systems his firm examined was 56.6%. In other words, over half of all the content made available in these tools is inactive.

Sweeny’s findings are alarming. Providing dead or incorrect information sources to agents as their only means of addressing customers’ questions and concerns not only severely damages the customer experience but also eliminates management’s credibility with the workforce. Furthermore, burying agents with an unmanageable glut of information, even if it is correct, makes it extremely difficult for these agents to find the answers they need to deliver a satisfactory customer experience.

Oftentimes organizations teach representatives to use a proprietary or client-based search engine to help them navigate the overabundance of work instructions, FAQs, and step actions. With these internal search engines, agents who type in a topic or question see a number of possible links to appropriate information. The issue with internal search engines, however, is that a search might result in anywhere from 5 to 30 pages of links, from which the agent is expected to locate the one needed to address the customer’s question.

At this point, the typical agent has 3 options:

1. **The agent can spend the time to find the best link.** The problem with this approach is it often takes a very long time, especially for less tenured agents, which causes high average handle times and unhappy customers.

2. **The agent can put the customer on hold and get the answer from a supervisor.** In these cases, a supervisor will often not be available at a moment’s notice to answer the question. This can result in longer average handle times and even more dissatisfied customers. Furthermore, there is no real guarantee that the supervisor has the correct information.
3. The agent can ignore the knowledge base and rely on their memory to address the customer’s issue. Unfortunately, agents’ memories are imperfect. An agent only has to give one wrong answer based on gaps in knowledge, partial data collection, or an incomplete understanding of the facts for a customer to become dissatisfied with the experience and by extension with the product or service.

In other words, the call center agent that needs to rely on a typical knowledge base tool or search engine to attempt to properly handle a customer interaction is at a distinct disadvantage, regardless of which approach they choose.

Lack of Objective Standards

Regardless of the strength of an organization’s technology or training, if an agent’s word choice demonstrates a lack of empathy, shows disrespect, or conveys a lack of product expertise, the customer-agent interaction will be a negative one. Even seemingly small elements such as slang or grammar mistakes can serve as red flags to the customer that the agent is incompetent, whether or not that is the case. When an agent fails to properly acknowledge a customer’s concerns or gives verbal indications of impatience, this can cause irrevocable damage to the customer experience and his or her perception of the company or client’s brand.

No amount of empathy training or speech coaching can fully eliminate this problem. It is inevitable that the staff will consist of agents with a wide range of speaking styles and personalities. Likewise, it is nearly impossible for any training session, no matter how intensive, to combat an entire lifetime of learning to speak and interact in a certain way.

Additionally, on most call floors there is no real objective standard by which to drive professional speech and phone behavior. Quality Assurance Reps may be asked to evaluate agents on areas such as voice quality, professionalism, empathy, or politeness, but these terms can have entirely different meanings to different people. Trying to drive appropriate behavior by telling agents to “be empathetic” or “be polite” often lacks power when there is no consensus on what exactly these terms mean.

The Solution: Scientific Management of the Customer Experience

A new subset of CRM technology known as CEM (Customer Experience Management) has recently emerged. Unlike traditional CRM and knowledge base tools, which are designed to simply organize and make available large quantities of information, CEM tools help agents maximize the customer experience on a systematic basis.

A technology that offers call handling verbiage and true guided knowledge management in one combined platform can substantially help drive customer satisfaction. However, according to recent studies by Gartner and other research firms, vendors and users widely report that many CEM solutions are still falling short in solving customer service issues.
So what should a product or service provider, vendor, or contact center manager look for in a system to help agents drive a superior customer experience?

Elements of an Effective Call Handling System

Must Be Based on Extensive Monitoring

Providing agents with verbiage to handle key areas of a customer-agent interaction can be invaluable in driving a level of speech that ensures agents will be uniformly viewed as empathetic product experts. However, the creators of this sort of verbiage often make the mistake of basing what they write on what they personally perceive to be effective, rather than what is happening on real calls. Agents who handle calls day in and day out often resent when management requires them to use these sorts of scripted solutions, because of the disconnect between the words presented in the tool and the concepts they observe to work or not work in the real world. As a result, agents tend to disregard these sorts of aids. In the cases where management firmly enforces their use, performance can suffer and/or agents can become demoralized.

Every effective call handling tool is based on extensive call monitoring. Developers must create call flows and any accompanying word-for-word modules on the call handling techniques of the very best performing agents, with the pitfalls of the lowest performing agents eliminated. The more calls a development team monitors, the better the resulting call flows and verbatims will be.

Must Be Structurally Optimized

When a development team monitors hundreds or thousands of calls, certain patterns emerge. One such pattern is that under performing agents handle calls in a variety of different ways while top performing agents exhibit striking similarities in how they manage interactions with customers.

From these extensive monitoring sessions, an ideal call handling structure has become evident:

1. Opening/Information Verification
2. Probing
3. Research
4. Solution
5. Closing/After Call Work

Figure 3: Anatomy of a successful inbound call.
This is the anatomy of a successful inbound call. Calls made up of these steps in this order will result in consistently satisfied customers and low average handle times.

**To drive the ideal customer experience:**

- The agent must probe all issues and details before attempting to solve the problem.
- Since many customer issues are interrelated, providing an answer based on impartial information can lead to incomplete or incorrect information.
- Providing wrong answers because of incomplete probing can lead to a loss of credibility from which the agent cannot recover.

*The optimal call handling tool for inbound customer service and technical support should be based on this proven anatomy of a successful inbound call.*

**Must Be Call Driver Oriented**

In order for a call handling tool to allow agents to maximize the customer experience, it must deliver product information, work instructions, and knowledge in a truly targeted fashion. In accordance with the 80/20 rule, 80% of dissatisfied customers result from roughly 20% of all possible call drivers. Instead of presenting agents with a wide-angle search engine that forces them to wade through page after page of information, the best call handling technologies point agents to the exact paragraph or sentence of the work instruction needed to handle the specific call driver. The often argued premise that there are too many possible questions in an inbound environment to provide targeted answers is simply false. With a limited number of call drivers causing the bulk of the problem calls, it is essential that the call handling technology quickly drive agents to the specific information they need to handle the questions that matter. With a call driver oriented tool, the original knowledge base need not be discarded. Instead, the tool should be able to integrate with the legacy or client system to guide agents through the optimal call flow and linking them to the most appropriate piece of information in the database whenever necessary.

![Figure 4: 80% of dissatisfied customers result from roughly 20% of all possible call drivers.](image-url)
Must Be Thoroughly Tested

No call handling tool can successfully manage the customer experience on a large scale without extensive and thorough testing. Before any critical thinking aid is rolled out to the entire call floor, a small test group should be selected to use the tool. The development team should monitor the test group closely, conduct focus groups, and regularly update the tool with any changes based on observation and agent feedback. This process should continue until KPI goals are met or exceeded for a long enough period of time to prove that it works.

A Well-Rounded KPI Approach

In developing a tool or technology to consistently drive superior customer satisfaction, the development team must not lose focus on any Key Performance Indicator. Development and testing must not end until the project meets or exceeds the customer satisfaction goal, but also goals such as Average Handle Time, First Call Resolution, and any others that apply. A winning call handling tool effectively drives performance in every area of the phone interaction.

How The Results Companies Can Help

The Results Companies is a customer contact solutions provider for many Fortune 500 companies. Established in 1990, Results provides services through over 4,000 agents located in 13 locations worldwide. Results is an organization with a proven track record in customer service and sales performance. With a foundation rich in technology and innovation, Results has developed systems designed to improve call management to enhance service, performance and the customers’ overall end experience. For 20 years, Results has partnered with organizations to grow their customer base and increase their market share.

One of the keys to Results’ success is the Results ReadiCall system. Results ReadiCall is a desktop knowledge and call flow tool that provides the structure, verbiage, guidance, and optimal call handling processes that are often not available to agents handling inbound customer service programs. This well-tested system allows agents to improve customer satisfaction, reduce handle time, increase first call resolution, decrease hold times, and improve conversion, up-sell, retention or other appropriate performance measurement results. Agents are provided with optimal questions to ask at appropriate points of every call, enabling them to unearth all the essential information needed to get to the root of a problem and ultimately solve it in the shortest time.

The Results ReadiCall system can also quickly and automatically direct the agent to the exact location on the client’s system or online training materials where they can find the information necessary to handle the customer’s needs. The system also dramatically cuts down the After Call Work time by auto-populating much of the postcall documentation that is generally required.
To Learn More

To learn more about The Results Companies or its programs, please call 954.926.4147 or send an email to Geri.Green@resultstel.com.