

10 Top tips to deliver customer service excellence

by James Tanner
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Reducing customer service costs while improving customer satisfaction and loyalty is challenging in the best of times. During a recession, performing this becomes both more difficult and more essential to achieve.

Many businesses respond to tough economic times by cutting service costs and reducing service quality in a race to hit short-term financial targets. When the economy starts recovering, they increase investments in customer service to win back customers, but that's often too late. From our experience, by accomplishing these ten steps you can balance efficiency and quality in your service operations.

10 Golden Rules to challenge the recession:

1. Communicate the goal

Delivering excellent quality of service should be the central aim of any organisation. Everyone involved in the business, from top management to agents, needs to be aware of its importance and what they need to do to make this happen. By maintaining quality customer service during a slowdown, companies with a strong core of loyal customers position themselves for growth and gain a competitive edge.

2. Identify cost-saving initiatives

Reduce the call volume by pro-actively driving call traffic to more cost-effective self-service channels, for example an enhanced self-service claim-processing Web site or an interactive voice response system, as appropriate. Adopt a staggered schedule for your workforce. By using part-time workers to meet fluctuating workload demands, you can reduce your labour costs. If you invest in new technology, make sure that the IT or customer service managers are accountable for realising results from these new IT investments.

3. Define and measure 5 call performance targets

It is crucial that all agents understand their own performance targets and know how to achieve them; these targets need to be constantly monitored and reviewed, if necessary. Incentive schemes are required to reward the highly performing agents for quality and productivity if targets are met. For all new initiatives clear accountability for meeting performance targets need to be established.

4. Segment service levels

Identify and prioritise the different types of calls so that the most important ones are answered 100% of the time and no calls are abandoned. Retrain staff so they can recognise and better serve different customer segments based on customer value and customer needs. Consider reducing staffing during off-peak times and increase staffing level during peak call hours so

that all customers receive focused assistance. Constantly measure the cost of delivering different service levels against the value provided by the corresponding customer segment and constantly search for ways to reduce inefficiencies.

5. Make it easy for customers to contact you

Give customers choices of multiple channels: Phone, fax, email, SMS, Instant Messenger, Web call me back, online recorded messages and the option to leave a message. Mix of options help to reduce call volumes to agents (as these are the most expensive) and give the customer flexibility to contact you anywhere, anytime.

6. Help agents to be productive

List the top ten customer FAQs for each team in order of popularity. With this information you can inform your customers about choices of multiple channels as outlined above rather than making them choose the most obvious and often less effective option of dialling your call centre number. FAQs will also make your agents more productive as they have the answers to the most frequent questions at their fingertips.

7. Make the technology work for you

Set up automatic routines in your phone system so calls can be redirected to other teams/sites at busy times or when there is a staff shortage. Set up live alarms in your call centre software to alert a supervisor when predefined call limits have been reached, so remedial action can be taken. Use workforce management software to help you calculate in advance the number of staff required to respond to different call volumes. If you have more than one call centre, don't run them like separate businesses, with staffing based on call demand. Make the most of your call-routing software to help you reduce staffing costs by pooling resources. Instead of many separate queues for incoming calls, create one. Callers can be routed to the next available operator at any of the centres.

8. Strive for service consistency and quality

Set up standard procedures for new client orders and undertake regular customer surveys to ensure the telephone service you offer is working properly. Invest in learning about customer needs and then translate those insights into innovations that continuously improve services. Establish a strategy and planning group focused on customer service that looks a few years ahead to determine what the customer experience should be, how operations should be structured, what new technology can be leveraged, and how core processes can be improved to reduce inefficiency and cut costs. Superior service operations often have higher customer loyalty, which correlates with sustained growth.

9. Improve agent productivity and customer satisfaction

By deploying the screen popping software agents can view the telephone number of the caller, and if it is an existing customer, their name, address, a/c number, and any notes/history. It could also show details and questions for the agent to ask based on the number/option the customer dialled. This helps

to reduce the call time and makes the customer feel better about their relationship with your company.

10. Training

Agents need to be trained and trained well in multiple areas. The wider range of expertise they have, the more productive they become when answering different types of calls. Diverse agent skills also allow them to be re-assigned to other areas - where they are needed most at any given time enabling peaks in call volumes to be handled in a flexible way. However, if a customer needs specialist support, the agent should be able to route the call to a member of staff outside the call centre who has the expertise to resolve the problem fast. It is the team leaders' responsibility to listen to call recordings on a regular basis and deliver one-to-one coaching. By providing ongoing training and advice, they improve agent's performance and reinforce good practice. The whole call centre should strive to make the experience for every customer a positive one which will naturally lead to reduced call volumes (a lower number of repeat calls and shorter calls), thus reduced the overall costs.

James Turner is the managing director of Communications Department Ltd founded in 2000. Communications Department are cost-effective telecom specialists focussing on call handling optimisation and business performance improvements. Their customers include DVLA Northern Ireland, Great Western Ambulance Service and Whirlpool, among many others. He was also one of the founder shareholders of Peoples Phone PLC sold to Vodafone 1996 having built up 400,000 mobile phone subscribers. You can email James or call him on 0845 0130123