

## **6 Common Contact Center Mistakes**

*We tapped contact center industry experts to discuss common gaffes and ways to avoid them and get back on track.*

by Coreen Bailor

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Companies spend millions on call center technology, infrastructure, salaries, training, and R&D, but a disrespectful agent can quickly nullify it all. And, unfortunately for businesses, even the slightest slip, such as talking over customers or interrupting them, can prompt once-loyal customers to leave. Although all contact center mistakes are not apparent to your customers, that doesn't mean that errors are any less damaging to your company's service efforts. Here, contact center industry experts reveal six common, but sometimes overlooked, blunders that plague the industry, and offer advice for avoiding or reversing missteps.

### **Outsourcing the Headaches**

Contact center environments are governed by call metrics, but what gets overlooked occasionally is that some customer inquiries can be prevented. The trick is to understand the root of the problem. Examining processes, customer communication channels like phone calls and mail, and communicating with agents will help, according to Don Van Doren, president of Vanguard Communications, a consultancy specializing in customer contact and convergence. Some contact center execs assume that the best approach to fixing a process is to outsource it, but this can be costly, especially if the poor process is adopted by the outsourcer. Instead, reconfigure the process prior to considering an outsourced model.

Ken Landoline, principal analyst at Saddletree Research, cites an example of a communications company that was faced with roughly 50 percent of its customers calling its support center after billing cycles. "Every time they sent a monthly bill, [calls] were just bringing the call center down to its knees, and their first thought was, Let's outsource this," he says. Their instincts were wrong. Saddletree performed an analysis that revealed the company's call volume after its billing cycle stemmed from issues like confusing bills. The company reformatted its bill presentation, which included displaying answers to FAQs. As a result, call volumes after billing cycles plunged to about 10 percent to 15 percent.

"It's wrong to think that outsourcing can fix a flawed process in your system," Landoline says. "If things are not going right with a process, you have to fix the process and then worry about whether or not you want to outsource it."

## **The Self-Service Misconception**

The evolution of self-service has enabled many organizations to deepen their cost-cutting initiatives. Customers can execute more transactional functions without the assistance of a live agent. More basic inquiries, such as making payments, are often handled independently by the customer through an IVR, allowing agents to devote more time to complex customer inquiries. When this happens, some centers expect a substantial decline in calls fielded by agents. But this is not always the case, at least early on.

"Lots of call center managers have felt that as soon as they put on a [voice] self-service application, they could cut down on the number of agents they had staffing the center and in some cases the exact opposite occurred," Landoline says. "Typically, when you put in a self-service application people are going to play with it, and it may drive more voice calls than before, because people are going to come back and make sure their transaction did take place. Lots of people have told me when they put in a self-service application their voice calls actually went up for two, three, four months--until there was a leveling off...when they got comfortable with the self-service application."

Make sure that the self-service channels you want to implement are in line with what customers want and what your business unit needs. "When the goal is to simply automate more functions, essentially adding more paths for the customer to take in self-service channels, companies risk further frustrating customers by making the experience more complex and lost in the maze of self-service roadblocks," says Robert Wollan, global managing partner of Accenture's Customer Contact Transformation Practice (CRM). "By looking at particular customer segments and what self-service options that segment needs [and] wants before adding them, leading companies consistently get a much higher usage of that particular function and greater satisfaction from the customer."

Esteban Kolsky, research director at Gartner, notes that when many companies deploy self-service, they don't realize how much it costs to maintain. "They think that once they deploy it pretty much goes on its own forever and ever," he says. His rule of thumb for determining maintenance costs is to double your implementation outlay, which will determine your maintenance costs over the first three years. For example, if you spent \$150,000 on implementing, then expect to shell out \$300,000 to maintain the system through the first three years.

A channel specific to self-service where some organizations stumble is email, specifically, responding to emails in a timely manner with sufficient answers. In fact, Kolsky notes that one third of

organizations don't respond to any emails that are sent to them through customer service.

"If you don't respond to the email, at some point the customer is going to pick up the phone and call," says Donna Fluss, principal at DMG Consulting. "When [companies] don't respond they're generating calls or, worse, they're just losing customers."

### **Downplaying the Assets**

It's a dilemma shared by most contact centers, regardless of seat size or industry--shedding their cost-cutting stigmas and gaining recognition as a strategic branch within the enterprise. But where many centers falter is in improperly portraying their alignment with corporate goals. Rather than focusing mostly on call stats, speak the language of the company's senior management--the center's impact on generating revenue.

"When we speak to the CEO of the company and he asks, 'How are things going in the call center?' [if] we say average handle time is down 10 percent, he probably won't know what that means," Van Doren says. "But more important, if that's the only thing we're talking about, then the only lever he's got to improve things is by saying, 'Let's get it down another 10 percent.'" If the center highlights measurements such as average sales per call or average sales per agent, statistics that directly sway the company's bottom line, "now all of a sudden you have a message that's much more interesting to the senior management committees," Van Doren says.

The contact center manager of a large software company took this approach after struggling to get additional resources for the company's technical support arm. "The call center was seen as a cost center within the company," says Bob Furniss, president and founder of CRM and contact center consultancy Touchpoint Associates (TPA). "No matter what the manager shared with the executives, they always fell into the routine of wanting more service for less cost." TPA examined the organization's support center and observed that it significantly contributed to the organization's fiscal health, pulling in about \$1 million annually in service contracts.

The manager began to report the center's hand in bolstering revenue, and according to Furniss, "she said that she saw this change in the review of what her technical support organization was about."

Proving the contact center's value as a strategic business unit, however, doesn't mean talking purely in terms of dollar signs. Contact centers house scores of valuable customer information,

including what likes and dislikes about product offerings. Feed the collected information back to other company departments, enabling the company to better meet and surpass its customers' needs.

Huntington Bank is in the middle stages of executing an initiative to use customer feedback more effectively. This effort began with a coordinated team comprising call center employees and staff from other departments, according to Maggie Klenke, founding partner at The Call Center School. As a result of Huntington's committee, its marketing department can access valuable information such as what customers are saying about the product. "That's the kind of feedback they're dying for and can't get and here's a place where it's all happening," Klenke says. "To me that's a really key role for the call center. It's the role that positions the call center as a strategic asset of the company."

### **Peak Period Paralysis**

"When calls are at their peak for a couple of hours or for a short period of time, then the concept of 'this is not a good time for us to do coaching, feedback, and monitoring' probably makes sense," Furniss says. "But when a company gets into a mode where it's an entire month or it's during the busiest time of the year that lasts multiple days or multiple weeks, that's the time that a lot of companies will say...we can't possibly pull anyone off to do coaching and feedback."

This was the issue facing a large insurance company in the midst of a massive growth surge, according to Furniss. During particular times of the month, usually spanning an eight- or nine-day period, the company discontinued all agent coaching and feedback initiatives to ensure that enough reps were on the floor. The insurance firm had also recently revamped how policies were managed and retrained all staff. The capper? Thirty percent of the workforce had less than three months' tenure, so if new employees completed their initial training during a peak period, supervisors weren't able to secure adequate time with the rookies to coach and offer feedback. Naturally, lack of guidance often results in performance reductions and cost increases. To cap its coaching woes, the insurance company overhauled its schedules. Supervisors were given 15 minutes of daily coaching time for each employee, and first-call resolution rates rose.

Although a busy time of the month or a peak season may seem like the worst possible time to pull agents off the phone for coaching, don't be afraid. Examine your workforce management during your busiest period, and factor forecasted spikes and optimal coaching blocks into schedules. This is especially important in a sales

environment, where requiring struggling agents to stay on the phone may actually cost you money, Furniss notes.

### **Failing to Follow Up**

Training is an essential ingredient to achieving contact center excellence, but what's often overlooked is the follow-up process after conducting manager training. "Suppose that I am training frontline managers to deliver better or higher quality performance feedback. It's assumed that they're going to go out and deliver better performance feedback. But the follow-up isn't in place to help them really practice in a real situation [or] get the coaching and feedback they need," says Brian Cole, senior consultant at CLG, a strategy and behavioral change consultancy.

Be clear on the goals and objectives of the process or the training program. Then assess the success of the managers by examining what they are doing differently and evaluate how they are affecting agents' performance.

### **Ignoring Agents**

Contact center agents are the mouthpieces of an organization. Yet, some organizations implement procedural changes without considering the impact of these changes on the reps and the behaviors that need to be changed to support the refreshed process, according to Cole.

For example, too often centers will implement a system without involving the agents, the system users. "You need to involve your users in all system implementations," Fluss says. "But I don't mean just invite them to sit at the table. They have to actively participate in defining system needs and in making sure that [it's] usable."

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### **10 Questions Every Call Center Manager Should Answer:**

- How does your call center fit into the bigger corporate picture?
- Why are people calling you?
- What's your ideal service-level objective?
- What does it cost to run your call center for one hour?
- Are your employees happy?
- What does the future look like in 12 to 18 months?
- What new or existing legislation affects your call center?
- How does existing and new technology affect your call center?
- What's your disaster recovery plan?
- What are your three initiatives for improvement?

*Source: Call Centers For Dummies, John Wiley & Sons, 2005*