

# customer care and call centre training

*Customers' expectations of telephone service continue to rise. Here Steve Shellabear outlines some of the conditions and requirements for customer care and call centre training*

There are now more than 7,000 call centres\* established in the UK, employing 1% of the population (1). More people work in them than do so in the coal, steel and utilities companies put together. This figure is predicted to double by the year 2000.

This phenomenal growth in the use of the telephone promises the consumer increased efficiency and speed of response. Call centres have been hailed as the key to greater productivity, reduced telephone costs, superior customer service, efficient mass call handling, increased sales and innovative marketing. However, the speed with which many operations are being set up, combined with fast changing technology and managerial inexperience, are creating implementation problems that threaten to damage the reputations of the companies they serve. A recent study undertaken by the Henley Centre (2) and sponsored by Cable and Wireless Communications, shows that 'more than one in ten calls leave customers feeling irritated, annoyed or furious'. The report highlights the media, utilities and insurance sectors as the worst offenders.

Customers' expectations of telephone service are rising as more companies strive to differentiate themselves through their service. As organisations grasp the opportunities and potential risks of not managing this powerful medium, increasingly sophisticated training programmes are being produced to support the staff 'at the sharp end' of the customer interface, as well as those who provide support for those operators or agents.

The design and delivery of effective call centre training programmes requires a blend of operational knowledge and specialist training skills; these span the commercial, technical and humanistic. As a training practitioner, deciding which methodology and content is appropriate for an organisation's programme means considering a number of external variables.

Below is an outline of the skills and knowledge related to those variable factors.

## **Commercial**

The first area involves understanding the organisation's business, its objectives, strategy and life cycle as a call centre.

All customer service training should be clearly linked to the needs of the business and measured through the ongoing achievement of service standards, key performance indicators, targets and objectives.

In practice, how clearly these have been defined varies considerably, as does the design and implementation of human resource infrastructure to support their achievement. Goaling, management style and recruitment are also areas where input may be required as part of a customer service or management strategy.

For the majority of businesses, a call centre is not its only sales distribution or service channel. This means the call centre's processes and working practices must be integrated with others in the business if they are to function in providing a 'seamless service' to the customer.

The term 'call centre' has become a popularly understood name for any organisation that employs staff who use the telephone. These include: arrears collection, telemarketing, sales and customer service. In reality, all organisations and call centres are different and at different stages of growth. For example, some of the pioneers in telephone banking have now been established for over ten years. In a fast-moving growth industry this is a long time. Many are now becoming full blown 'communication or contact centres' that utilise direct mail, video, faxes, electronic mail, the telephone and the internet as channels to market. Organisations that are improving existing call centres or developing them into communication centres have very different needs to those just setting up. For example, technology, culture and working practices will be more developed. Likewise, those organisations rationalising existing call centres face different challenges, all of which ultimately impact upon the experience of service the customer receives.

## Technical

For those less familiar with telephone technology, Automatic Call Distributors (ACDs) that route incoming calls to free agents, reducing waiting times, have been the 'norm' for some time. Most of us as consumers have also encountered Interactive Voice Response (IVR) where, as a caller, we select the service we require from a 'menu' using a touch-tone phone. Voice Response Units (VRUs) are a similar 'electronic representative' though differing slightly in functionality to the IVR. Less well known to those outside the industry are Predictive and Power Diallers that seek to reduce operators' 'downtime' in making outbound calls; 'screen pop', which combines computers and telephony technology, providing agents with a prepared script on their computer for the specific customer query, in the caller's language; and 'swing groups' that allow staff to combine inbound and outbound phoning activity effectively. It is beyond the scope of this article to provide in-depth information about these, suffice to say they are likely to feature in a call centre training programme, so the practitioner should be conversant with them. Call management, the organisation's computer and software system, e-mail, voicemail, regulatory procedures and specific company and product knowledge would also be featured.

The Internet has been widely predicted to change the face of shopping in the UK, and is acknowledged as one of the fastest growing marketing and distribution channels. Major business now have their own electronic shop window, via a web site. Soon the customer will be able to simply click a button on the web page to talk to a customer representative, either by voice or text, pre-selecting the type of conversation they wish to have.

Concerns over security have restricted the Internet's widespread use as a sales tool; however, developments will soon enable escorted 'browsing' of websites by synchronised agents and customers who can view the same pages simultaneously and control what information is sent to each other, including encrypted payment details. In the meantime, forward thinking companies have created virtual retail outlets within call centres using the Internet, with human operators taking order details at point of sale.

Sara Gunnerson, believes prospects are good for the future. She says: "The business domain is the largest and fastest growing segment of the Internet, with nearly 25% of hosts worldwide. This promises to provide business with the potential to reach customers with personalised sales and services that utilise state-of-the-art technology." (3)

There is a growing trend to either outsource the call centre requirement to an established third party, reducing set-up and operating costs or, alternatively, 'insourcing' call centre staff to the organisation's premises.

Both of these options mean that recruitment, training and management of the agents is undertaken by experienced professionals. For many companies without a call centre, training resources or an established infrastructure, this is a cost-effective alternative to venturing into an increasingly complex area.

## Humanistic

Telephone communication and customer service skills training can reap enormous benefits for the customer, organisation and individual. But this only happens if the people who receive the training, experience it as valuable and relevant. A number of factors contribute to this.

Analysing the job, producing profiles and competency matrices that staff are recruited to, should ensure that the right people, with potential to be developed are in place. However, it is still important to conduct a training needs analysis prior to training design, asking: 'What do we want the team to do after the training?' This is even more important where the organisation is long established and has policies such as zero redundancies, is rationalising existing operations or is obliged to offer positions internally to staff before recruiting from outside. Based on the flawed premise that 'anyone can use the phone', call centres can become dumping grounds for staff who are not wanted in other areas of the business.

Different call centre agents will have different learning needs. For example, a seasoned agent who has worked in the company or industry for years requires a different training

and development plan to someone joining straight from university, or with little experience. Honouring this and dovetailing the needs of the business with that of the individual takes careful consideration and detailed planning. Many call centres find this too difficult and instead opt for a 'sheep dip' approach that provides the same basic training for all and then little else. Staff can be given the same training initially.

Indeed, given the broad range of skills, experience and disparate cultures in many call centres, one of the first tasks is often to ensure that all staff have a generic skill set, service orientation and vocabulary to communicate their learning experiences. After this, personal and professional development plans need to be written and aligned to business needs. Coaching, mentoring and an appraisal system should be installed to support the process.

The content of a 'Foundation Telephone and Customer Service Skills' course typically includes: customer service philosophy, conversation and social skills, dealing with difficult calls, such as complaints and abuse, empathy, motivation, and rapport skills. Role-plays and modifying one's impact in the light of feedback and reflection are likely to be important ingredients. However, an effective programme will focus on developing the person's awareness and ability to learn, rather than simply teaching techniques like 'smile as you dial'. Too superficial an approach is likely to be regarded as insulting by experienced agents, even though they may greatly need to develop their service or communication skills. These conditions place a greater onus upon the trainer delivering the material to be comfortable working with emotions, resistance and barriers to learning, rather than the instructional approach that may be appropriate for technical aspects of the programme, like computer or telephone equipment. Methods used in this interpersonal area can be drawn from Neuro Linguistic Programming, Accelerated/Speed Learning, Gestalt and Transactional Analysis as well as company specific information. Large programmes are likely to include coaching, supervision and call centre management skills as well as defining or redefining values and vision as part of the strategic initiative.

Call centres, out of necessity, are required to closely monitor individual and team results to achieve their business objectives. Conversion rates, waiting times, abandonment rates and other key statistics will be displayed prominently on wallboards and flip charts around the centre. Understanding and using these statistics effectively is often an important training need.

These results can be used to motivate and highlight how well the organisation is fulfilling its customer service ethic and strategy, as well as the viability of the centre.

Unfortunately, some centres have had problems with capacity, systems capability, or a scarcity of skilled operators. This has led to complaints, often directed to the chief executive officer or managing director. This in turn can lead to operational management feeling pressurised. It can also result in those service standards defined as 'satisfying the caller in a timely manner' being translated by operators as 'there's a big queue waiting, so get the call over and get rid of the customer as quickly as possible!' Unless the customer service vision is owned and embodied across the whole centre and both senior and operational management are seen to fully support it, prioritising its service

objectives, customer service training programmes will have little effect. Those in the front line need to feel the centre or organisation is backing them. There is little incentive to change one's behaviour or attitude if nothing else in the system is seen to change.

Because of the rapid growth of call centres in the Midlands, the north of England, Scotland and Ireland, an increasingly well educated, often multilingual workforce can now take their pick of the best call centre employers in any given area. Parts of Scotland, known for its high concentration of centres, have spawned the beginnings of a 'roving call centre community' who having developed a generic and easily transposable skill set, move from centre to centre in search of the best working conditions and remuneration. This supports the view of management guru Charles Handy, who believes "the future is freelance". In his opinion workers will build up packages of jobs working for a number of companies and their loyalty will be to themselves rather than to a single employer.

If this view is correct, staff turnover may increase in call centres. According to a report published by Income Data Services<sup>4</sup>, currently a third of call handlers leave their jobs each year, fed up with the pressures of work and low pay. Recent research has revealed that the average length of service for call centre agents is 30 months.

Whilst rates of pay vary considerably across the country, with the better centres already paying higher salaries, these conditions may provide the impetus for employers generally to upgrade working conditions, training and career opportunities, in an attempt to avoid the predicted shortage of skilled staff.

In the US, where call centres have been established for many years and are big business, telephone agent's salaries are reported to be comparable with face-to-face salespeople and considerably higher than the UK. Call centres have also gained recognition and credibility that is still being built in the UK. For example, Harvard University offers a Call Centre MBA. Generally, people in the US do not hold the negative attitudes towards telephone sales or customer service that are found in the UK.

Should these changes occur, it will require a radical rethink for many call centre managers. This could mean that working conditions for staff will improve, with morale increasing and stress levels reducing. In a 1997 benchmarking study<sup>5</sup> of 106 call centres, absenteeism averaged 5%, compared with the national average of 3.5%. A similar study conducted in 1998, of 192 call centres, revealed that the figure for absenteeism had risen to 5.63%. It could also mean that recipients of call centre training programmes at all levels, will become more knowledgeable and discerning, having experienced a greater variety of training as they develop their careers, moving from one organisation and centre to another.

This, in turn, could necessitate consultants and trainers to truly offer 'best practice' advice by keeping abreast of progress in call centre technology, business, training and humanistic development. This does not mean adopting a generalist approach but rather the recognition that providing specialist advice or training must include an appreciation of the other elements necessary for a call centre to be successful. This includes the customer management strategy. Any one strand, such as HR and training, even when

asked to implement a discrete event, cannot be effective in isolation. Organisations require integrated solutions, which mean collaboration, communication and integration of know how.

## References

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