

Spiralling out of control?

Stop going round in circles with your inbound customer service. Let Steve Shellabear outline some useful training tips that can be easily implemented to get your call centre back on the straight and narrow.

While the term 'inbound' conjures up images of agents receiving calls, improving inbound activity means involving staff at all levels to increase standards of service. If your programme is not to be purely cosmetic, it will require the involvement of senior and middle management to define the business case, be involved in strategic decision making and help develop the programme.

Many factors can affect the success of an inbound training programme; there are five stages that need to be considered, planned and carried out. These are: pre-design, design, delivery, evaluation, and reinforcement and development. Find out to what extent you have management backing to achieve the stated aims of the training programme.

For implementing something fairly straightforward, such as a two-day skills-based course for a small group, this should be simple. But if the programme is longer in duration, more comprehensive, or for larger numbers, then there will be a cost before the return on investment (ROI) is realised.

Of course, having the right people in place has the potential to reduce training costs, increase standards of customer service to the customer and raise overall productivity for the organisation.

To recruit agents with the appropriate mix of skills, experience and aptitude requires putting in the recruitment procedures for better personnel selection. This typically includes writing job descriptions and people profiles. Following this, you need to carry out telephone and competency based interviews.

Depending upon the age of your organisation, you may have inherited staff that have a skill set that no longer fits the business requirement. It's important that you can take an objective view, providing training and development opportunities, and acting when it's apparent staff would be more successful in another role.

While many members of staff are recruited for the values they bring as well as their capabilities, these should not be taken for granted. Agents have suggested to us that they find it difficult to sustain exceptional standards of service, 24 x 7, with little recognition, praise or reward.

There are many monetary and non-monetary incentive schemes used in call/contact centres. The key is to build up confidence, knowledge and skill by encouraging involvement. You should aim to have everyone wanting to play, while ensuring that your high performers feel challenged. It's important to recognise that not everyone is motivated in the same way or by the same things, so tailor your rewards to the individual and group.

Reward programmes that are linked to quantitative and qualitative data on performance and involve staff in choosing the best performers are very successful. Better performing staff may also help transfer skills to colleagues who are underperforming.

Ongoing monitoring by team leaders of variances outside target KPIs, CSFs and SLAs will help to identify your training needs in a number of areas.

There are two aspects to the delivery of your programme: content and approach. The content for an inbound training programme will focus on developing the competencies that staff need to serve the business. Typically, the agents' training modules will be built around:

- meeting and exceeding the needs of the customers;
- improving performance, with a practical work to enhance relevant skills. For example, stages within the call flows;
- specification of attainable performance standards, such as response times, calls abandoned, complaint reductions and so on;
- agreement and commitment to proposed changes in working methods, including benefits to individuals through appropriate reward and recognition systems.

Theory, discussion and practical work will include areas such as voice control, listening, questioning skills, giving clear explanations, rapport skills and state management. Tape recorders and telephones/headsets are used so that participants can hear how they perform in specific scenarios.

Facilitating behavioural change in others is a skill and usually improves with practice. You, your managers or trainers should work in a knowledgeable, encouraging and self aware way.

While training styles and methods will vary from person to person and training room to workstation, principles should remain consistent.

To transfer the learning back in to the workplace, course participants have to appreciate the value of what they are learning and understand how it can be applied. One way of doing this is to make time for action planning.

At regular intervals throughout the course, allow time for participants to write down tips, techniques and methods they find particularly useful. These may be discussed with colleagues to increase understanding.

Course evaluation can take place immediately at the end of a formal training session. Bramley, in his book *Evaluating Training Effectiveness*, describes five levels at which objectives can be set and evaluated. He says: 'Training leads to reactions, which lead to learning, which lead to changes in behaviour, which lead to changes in the organisation, which lead to change in the achievement of ultimate goals.'

This highlights the need to set up a robust monitoring and evaluation method that determines the ROI training and development contributes to the business.

X rated

Methods you can start using today are to monitor improvements upon ratings in an individual's annual appraisal and to monitor developments in high 'self efficacy' - that is, the perception of how able a person is to successfully carry out a course of action required to deal with a particular situation.

Get your agents and team leaders to make a list of the 20 most important aspects of the job. Then ask them to rate themselves on each of those items, using a ten point scale - one being 'not confident' and ten being 'completely confident' - both before and after the programme. Compare the two scores. If your training has been effective, you'll see an increase in perceptions of measures of gain or change.

Training will have a limited effect unless reinforced and developed in the centre. Clearly defined individual goals, written in to personal and professional development plans owned by the individual and supported by a committed team of coaches, can reap dividends for the individual, your centre - and the customer.

published in Call Centre Focus Training Supplement - August 2003