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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: CONTACT CENTERS



Creating the Customer-Centric Contact Center

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While contact centers have been built around telephone technologies, customer-facing employees need to interact with customers across all communication channels.

Customers with questions and concerns are no longer just reaching out to merchants via the phone: They want to be able to reach a customer service representative in the way they want, when they want. And with social media as the new complaint center, contact center representatives need to know when and how to monitor what is being said.

This means hiring and retaining the

right employees to handle new means of customer communications, making sure the right technologies are in place, and knowing what metrics will help improve customer satisfaction rates is as important as ever.

Here's a look at what you need to do to create today's customer-centric contact center.

Hiring and Training

When customer service representatives are bombarded by upset customers, the reps themselves tend to start getting upset. When you are looking to hire contact cen-

ter reps, that's part of the expectation you need to set.

You need somebody levelheaded in the position, someone who is friendly and fair, firm on policy, but also understanding of the customer's concerns.

Having the right customer service reps in place will mean the difference between whether you have more satisfied customers, higher workforce morale and a bigger bottom line.

The average turnover rate in U.S. contact centers is 43%. And that does not include contact centers that have more than 1,000 agents—that turnover rate is 70%.



So how can you fight those turnover rates?

Hire for the attitude, train for the skills: For an employee to thrive in a contact center he or she needs to be a natural problem solver, have excellent interpersonal skills, a positive attitude, be a team player and remain calm under pressure.

Be honest and clear about the nature of the job: Managers need to be clear and open about the job's expectations. Exposing potential candidates to the contact center before hire can help ensure they fully understand the environment.

Consider lengthening the training process: One of the best ways to foster higher engagement among agents is to ensure they feel prepared, comfortable and part of the team. In order to do so, you might need to extend the training process for new hires and implement new initiatives.

Metrics

Customers have heightened expectations of service, and front-line staffs have new demands and requirements.

Penny Reynolds, a co-founder of education company and contact center consultancy The Call Center School, outlines four metrics associated with how she defines service to the caller.

Blockage: Measures indicating blockage (busy signals) by time of day or occurrences of "all trunks busy" situations are utilized by most centers. Failure to include a blockage goal allows a center to always meet its speed-of-answer goal by simply blocking the excess calls. This can have a negative effect on customer accessibility and satisfaction while the contact center looks like it is doing a great job in terms of managing the queue.

Abandon rate: It should be noted, however, that abandon rate is not entirely under the contact center's control. While abandons are affected by the average wait time in queue (which can be controlled by the contact center), a multitude of other factors influence this number, such as individual caller tolerance, time of day, availability of

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service alternatives and so on.

Self-service availability: In the contact center, self-service utilization is an important gauge of accessibility and is typically measured as an overall number, by self-service methodology and menu points, and by time of day or by demographic group. In the contact center, self-service utilization should also be tracked. In cases of web chat, automated alternatives such as FAQs or use of help functions can reduce the requirement for the live interaction with a web chat agent.

Service level: In the contact center, speed of answer for live chat should also be measured and reported with a service level or ASA number. Many centers measure for both initial response as well as the back-and-forth times, since having too many open web chat sessions can slow the expected response time once an interac-

tion has begun.

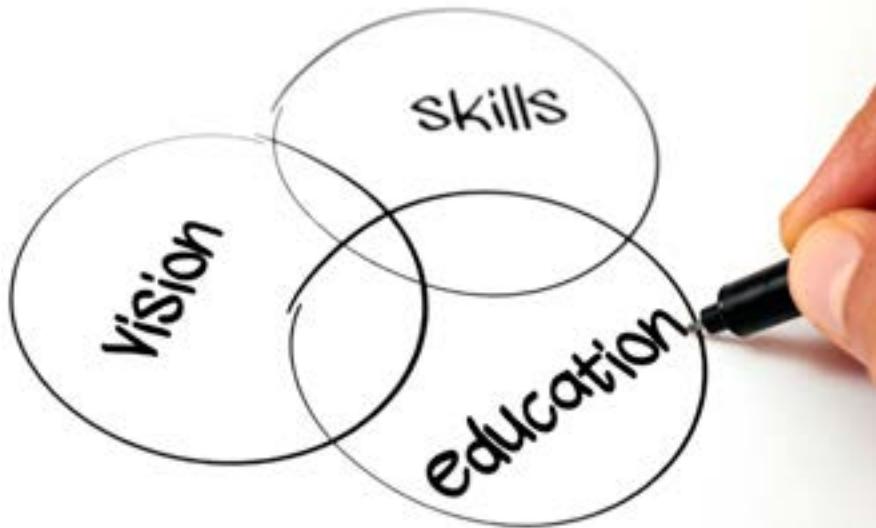
Even as the contact center continually evolves to handle new channels and greater complexity, improving the efficiency and productivity of your customer experience agents doesn't have to be complicated.

On the contrary, one of the best things you can do right now is to keep it simple, and implementing just a handful of the following key best practices will help to keep you working smarter, not harder.

Following these four basic steps can yield impactful results without undergoing a major overhaul of your operations.

Start with culture: Everything you do will be undermined if you don't have the right culture, so it's important to unite your team around a common mission—one that will give meaning to the daily activities of your staff.

If your goal is to improve customer loy-





5 TIPS FOR THE HOLIDAYS

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The holidays are upon us. Below are five simple tips to ensure the seasonal staff in your contact centers are prepared for the increased volume during the holidays.

► Use experienced agents

To prepare for the increased volume in your contact center, you'll have hired seasonal staff to help take orders and correspond with customers. It's best to train the newer seasonal staff on the basics, and leave the more complicated processes to your most experienced team members. This helps to cut down on training time and also helps prevent your regular team members from being spread too thin at the busiest time of year.

► Dedicate email agents

Contact centers are no longer just phone centers; they encompass the Internet as well. You'll want to make sure you have dedicated agents to handle all the email correspondence. It's important to respond

to all inquiries and customer correspondence in a timely manner, typically within 24 hours or less of receiving the initial customer contact.

► Script correspondence

To provide consistent service and to also ensure the message is being delivered according to your company standards, it's a good idea to have prepared scripts available — especially for your email agents. They can always adjust some of the information, but the body or main point of the email should be consistent. This prevents them from having to draft a new email for every situation, which in turn cuts down on correspondence time.

► Use live chat

Live chat can be especially helpful during

peak times, such as the upcoming holidays. Your agents can provide immediate answers, which will prevent a back log of customer questions or issues from piling up in the contact center.

► Intranet FAQ

If you haven't already, develop an FAQ center on your company Intranet. This will give seasonal staff answers to the most commonly asked questions. Let's face it; they typically don't remember everything in training, especially for such a short period of time, so having the additional resources readily available for them is extremely important.

Kim Silva is operations team leader for Fairytale Brownies.

alty, for example, make sure that employees get this message from day one. At every touch point—recruiting, hiring, onboarding—your message should be the same so that accomplishing your goals will be unencumbered by mixed messages.

Define what success looks like: This means determining what success actually means this week, this month, and this year. In the contact center, the temptation is to work all day long without thinking about and recognizing milestones, accomplishments, and progress. So it's important to define up front what your team is working toward and what it will feel like when you get there.

Set priorities: There are so many different metrics by which contact centers measure themselves. Determine which of these metrics is most important to the customer and then clearly define them to agents. Clear and descriptive priorities help focus the contact center and provide agents with reminders on which areas to improve upon.

Know your team and manage accordingly: You may have one agent who is extremely customer service-oriented but isn't very technical and vice versa. Based on respective strengths and weaknesses, you can pair these agents together to mentor one another and improve each other's skill. Peer engagement gives agents ownership and passion and empowers you to lead so that you don't try to tackle every task on your own.

Social media

More merchants are monitoring social media in the contact center (46.5%) than ever before, according to the results of the MCM Outlook 2013 survey.

Of the respondents that indicated they monitor social media in the contact center, more than half (54.4%) said they monitor and respond to customer complaints and praise on Facebook; 15.8% said they follow and engage in conversations on LinkedIn, and 11.4% said they do the same on Twitter.

Social media should no longer be sole-

ly looked at as a marketing tool for your brand; it should be used as a tool to interact with your customers and a place to offer great customer experience.

But for many merchants, getting a social media strategy in place is not a top contact center priority, even though Oracle reports that 75% of consumers have posted a negative comment on a social media site after experiencing a poor customer experience.

Even with a high number of shoppers taking their claims to sites such as Facebook and Twitter, the Oracle report shows that 70% of merchants admit to having "little understanding" of the social media conversations happening around their brand.

Getting social in the contact center is one of the best ways to boost customer service and the customer experience. According to the report, getting the contact center in tune with social media helps merchants listen and respond across all channels, allows them to be where its customers are "talking" and allows merchants to build a community.



Forecasting

Anyone who has ever been responsible for ensuring that the right number of contact center agents are in their seats at the right time can tell you that producing an accurate schedule can be complex.

An accurate forecast is crucial for accurate scheduling as well as reaching and maintaining desired service levels. If you are experiencing pain points in trying to produce an accurate forecast, you need a strategy that will help ensure you are maximizing available agents with call demand.

There are two simple effects of getting the forecast wrong and both cost you money. Overstaffing creates a scenario for idle, unproductive agents who suffer from low morale or become bored or distracted and not focused on customer service. Understaffing can result in lost customers due to abandoned calls or poor customer service.

A poor forecast can result in high staffing costs and lost customer revenue, but forecast accuracy depends on many factors. The key is ensuring that the forecasting tool has as much information about what happened in the past and what you expect in the future, and that it will allow you to properly utilize it.

An additional consideration for ensuring the forecaster has sufficient information is the quality of that information. The nature of the data is important. Validate your historical data by comparing new incoming data against a previously validated set of historical data.

Even as the contact center continually evolves to handle new channels and greater complexity, improving the efficiency and productivity of your customer experience agents doesn't have to be complicated.

Email and Live Chat

Last holiday season, Best Buy eliminated email as a means of communication from its customer service page and replaced it with a live chat feature. Best Buy told Multichannel Merchant the change was based on customer feedback, and that its customers prefer live chat over email.

But email's demise may be greatly exaggerated: According to Boldchat and the e-tailing group's 2013 Live Chat Effectiveness report, email has been consumers' most-preferred method of communication with the contact center for the past three years.

Even though email as a preferred communication method with retailers has declined from 63% in 2011 to 53% in 2013, the survey results show that email remains the dominant choice among survey respondents.

Of those respondents who said they prefer to communicate with merchants via email, 58% said it's because they receive a more complete answer, and 45% said they can check from multiple devices.

Though speed and dialog are important aspects of live chat, 26% of those who prefer communicating via email said they prefer having one-way communication versus a dialog, and 22% said they are not in a hurry to get a response.

Meanwhile, the report shows that live chat as a preferred communication method with merchants is virtually flat. While 18% of respondents said they prefer live chat in 2011, 17% said it was their preferred communication method in 2013.

While email can be considered a tried-and-true communication tool, live chat can still be viewed as an emerging technology. According to MCM Outlook 2013, just 30.7% of respondents said they have live chat as a site function, and another 17.8% said they do not offer live chat, but are considering it.

One issue contact centers have with live chat is finding the right personnel to use it as a response tool. If you have employees who are skilled at responding to customer emails, then you have the right people in place to respond to live chat.

One way is to think of live chat as a virtual sales clerk—an online agent who is ready to assist your clients in any way they want—with a product, shipping or sizing, or with a coupon question. Personal interaction is the key to successful live chat, so if you set your live chat up to be tended to by autobots, you're going to lose that human interaction.

Ashley Bailey, ecommerce director at WhiteFlash.com, an international diamond and fine jewelry company, says running constant analytics has not only helped create real-time changes to chat features, but has also helped identify site issues. Keeping track of the live chat program, she says, "makes it a lot faster to not only find an item for our customers, but also to make the sale."

Since installing live chat onto the site, Bailey says, Whiteflash.com has seen a 27% conversion increase at checkout compared to last year. ■

