



Is Your Contact Centre Losing You Customers?

Call centres have had a lot of bad press recently, and the reasons are pretty much what you'd expect. For outbound call centres the culprits are silent calls and nuisance sales calls – for inbound call centres the problems are being based off-shore and having long hold times. UK customers rightly expect a certain level of service and get very upset when they don't receive that service. From a caller's perspective, nothing is more frustrating than being held in a queue for an undetermined time because the call is not in-control. In a recent ICM poll, 55% of callers said they experienced significant hold times when calling companies, and 38% of callers to banks and financial institutions found this 'highly unsatisfactory'. Quite frankly, it's surprising the number is that low.

Of the issues mentioned, long hold times cause callers the greatest annoyance and frustration. If there are long hold times on a sales number, it can result in lost sales and a poor company image. If it is a customer service number, it results in frustrated customers who take out their frustration on the agents, which leads to longer talk times and stressed-out agents. A recent survey showed 32% attrition rates amongst call centre staff while 71% of managers reported that they had problems recruiting new staff.

All of this paints a pretty gloomy picture of the UK call centre industry. If we know the challenges, why haven't things improved? One problem is that focus seems to be concentrated on narrow metrics. For example, reducing 'talk-time' to reduce 'hold-time' and 'abandoned-calls' is considered the ultimate aim. Focus has always been on talk-time - this has resulted in pressure on agents to finish calls quickly, even if the customer's enquiry has not been fully resolved. The result is your customers need to make several calls to resolve one issue fully!

The focus should be on resolving customer's enquiries to completion the first time they call, no matter how long the call takes. Also, the most important metric to your customer is hold time, so address it directly.

How can this be achieved?

Make more use of the web. The company website should be kept up-to-date with the latest product and support information. This allows customers to help themselves: it allows them to research all your company's products before they contact the company. However, this only works if your customers have Internet access, and this isn't always the case.

You can make improvements to the call centre. More agents could be recruited, but this is not such an easy task with current recruitment difficulties, and of course, it takes time to recruit and train new staff. Additionally, more staff means higher costs

and it is more difficult to manage. Indeed, more staff doesn't always solve the problems of handling peaks in call traffic. Get it wrong and hold times escalate.

Some of the functions of the inbound call centre can be automated. This can be split into two functions:

- Automate for self-service
- Automate peak traffic callbacks

Self-service Automation is used when customers call for reference information on the company and products. This could be automated for caller self service access. Callers dial up and leave information with an automated system. The message and information is automatically sent to the relevant fulfilment department, without the intervention of an agent. The advantage of this to the caller is that they can request the information quickly without wasting very much time.

When designing the self-service system, look at things from your caller's perspective. Give your callers options. Don't force them down a route, give them choices. Give them the choice of talking to an agent or being called back. Use tone key menus sparingly and make it clear what the options are. Don't make assumptions about your callers. Don't assume they have studied the details of your tone key menu system! Overall the system should leave the caller with the feeling that they are in control.

Avoid the use of speaker-independent voice recognition; the technology available is not mature enough to handle callers from the diverse set of accents we have in the UK. Speech recognition systems frustrate callers because they are unable to recognise strong regional or national accents.

Peak Traffic Automation is used when all the agents are busy. Here, the caller is given the option of requesting a callback. The customer leaves their details with the system which is then queued for them. When an agent becomes free, the agent calls the customer back. The advantage to the caller is that they have wasted very little time and they can get on and do other things. The advantages to the call centre are the caller isn't agitated when they eventually speak to the agent, so the talk time is lower, and the agent isn't getting the brunt of the caller's frustration. This, combined with the effect of smoothing out call peaks, gives the agents an even load through their working day and reduces their overall stress.

Note that to avoid increased administration costs, any automated system should integrate with your existing call centre IT and telephone system.

One such automation enabler is the QBypass system from Felltech Ltd. has been designed with all the previous principles in mind. QBypass provides automated direct request to fulfilment for self service callers. It also automates callback and out-of-hours requests. The callers speak their details to the system and this information is queued for the first available agent – and there are no tone-key menus. It 'bolts on' to existing ACD (Automatic Call Distribution) systems and integrates with the call centre IT systems using standardised interfaces. And, to minimise disruption to your business, it is usually installed within a couple of hours.

In summary, all these systems work well based on one principle: trust. If someone requests a callback or an information pack, they leave a message, they 'trust' you to call them back.

Whatever method you choose, you must talk to your customers...eventually, before they talk to someone else!