

LEADING THOUGHTS



Don't Let Budget Cuts Damage the Customer Experience

By Lesley Vereen, Service Agility

How can you compromise without sacrificing quality?

Ideas to ensure that your contact center keeps delivering on the brand promise.

When things get tough, organizations tend to view some of the people processes as frills — those things that are “nice to do when we have time and money.” Nothing could be further from the truth. Now, more than ever, it’s critical to be vigilant about your people practices. Three that are essential to supporting your frontline staff are quality monitoring, training and staff reward/retention efforts. The following ideas can help you to meet your service goals and support your staff when fewer resources are available.

QUALITY MONITORING

- Cut back on the number of monitored calls. If you’ve been monitoring eight calls per agent per month, reduce it to four. This will also reduce, but not eliminate, time needed for feedback and coaching.
- Implement peer monitoring. Enlist the aid of your tenured high-performing agents in the monitoring and coaching process.
- Rather than randomly selecting calls to monitor, alternate by monitoring different segments of customers.
- Monitor specific call types and issues. Listen for criteria such as “cancel service,” “I called yesterday,” “billing error,” etc. Put the scoring aside and simply monitor to identify why the call occurred and to understand the source of the issue. (Be sure to share the information with other departments, like marketing and sales, to further demonstrate the value added by the call center.)
- Give agents an opportunity to listen to their own calls. Agents are great at identifying process improvement opportunities. Yes, it takes them off of the phone, but it will be well worth it. The coaching job is so much easier when agents can pinpoint their own areas of improvement.
- Monitor long calls to identify opportunities to handle calls more efficiently and reduce handle time.
- Monitor short calls to identify quality issues or misdirected calls that can be reduced or eliminated with appropriate IVR-scripting, call-routing or self-service options.
- Conduct a gap analysis — listen to the consistently high-performers and those who struggle. Identify the performance gaps, and provide focused training or coaching. The need for training or individual coaching will be

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determined by which issues apply to the group vs. to individuals.

- Communicate any changes that you make to the monitoring and coaching process to your employees. They need to know what changes are occurring, what new things you're trying and why. Enlisting their support and feedback will help you to gain their trust and engagement in the process.

TRAINING

- Hold shift update meetings. These should be occurring normally, but increase the frequency, using updates and tips from quality monitoring findings. Set a time limit — with some being a brief five minutes of information sharing or reinforcement of information and others 10 to 15 minutes.
 - Give agents an opportunity to contribute and suggest topics for these brief pre-shift meetings.
 - Be creative — encourage use of quick games and role-play demonstrations to reinforce new products, services and examples of how to handle specific call types.
- Use instant messages for “need to know now” information.
- Develop training newsletters delivered via email. Be sure to reinforce information provided and allow time for questions and comments in the start of shift update meetings.
- Take requests for employee-identified training needs, as well as ideas and volunteers to assist in developing training for a specific need.

- Invite guest speakers from other departments.
- Conduct side-by-side monitoring. While this could also be in the quality monitoring category, double-jacking with agents as they handle calls gives you an opportunity to talk with them, foster a 1:1 relationship while focusing on their specific needs and/or requests for assistance.
- Use results from customer satisfaction surveys (those specific to the call center) to coach and train employees on what matters most to your customers.
- Identify focused training opportunities that will give the most bang for the buck. Focused training can empower frontline employees with the confidence to move from basic servicing to a consultative handling of requests, presenting solutions and increasing business through appropriate upselling or cross-selling.

RECOGNITION AND RETENTION

- Be a visible presence on the call center floor and be aware of the environment. Is there a positive hum in your center or is it more like confusion and chaos? Know what's going on and use team meetings and shift updates to address concerns.
- Supervisors play a critical role in job satisfaction — and dissatisfaction with the supervisor relationship is the No. 1 reason why employees leave a job. Time constraints for monitoring, formal coaching and training can quickly deteriorate into zero time if left unchecked. Supervisors need time to develop their employees. Besides the positive effects of coaching and

ongoing training, don't overlook the emotional impact of simply talking to employees, acknowledging their efforts and improvements and letting them know they are appreciated.

- Turnover is inevitable, but that doesn't mean it should just be accepted. Employee satisfaction surveys and focus groups can help identify gaps between how happy and engaged you think employees are and the reality. Focus groups of eight to 10 employees provide the opportunity to openly communicate in a safe non-threatening environment, and lets employees know their voice is being heard and listened to. Hold them once a month, alternating attendees and mixing agents from different teams and of different tenure. Seek their suggestions and let them know what actions can be taken. Be honest about things that are not likely to be changed in the near future.
- No-/low-cost rewards and recognition can go a long way to retaining valuable, high-performing employees and maintaining morale despite the daily challenges.
 - Ask for employee suggestions about the types of rewards offered.
 - Recognize and reward individuals in a way that is meaningful to them. For one person, it might be a gift of time off. For another, it might be an opportunity to take more responsibility and be involved in a new project.
 - The simple surprise of an individual's favorite candy bar appearing on his or her desk after handling a difficult call has the potential to bring a winning smile, which may last long enough to

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be heard with the next, "Hello, this is Terry. How may I assist you today?"

Distinguish Your Service

Whether the economy is thriving or in a downturn, the quality of customer service is the single most critical differentiator between one company and the next. How

will you provide the kind of service that really impresses customers? It starts with supporting the people who support your customers, and acknowledging that the human element is the lifeblood of the organization. How do you want your customers' experience to be viewed? That of dealing with a company cutting back in ways that impact the service provided, or one in which service is the cor-

nerstone and the staff have the support to provide a quality interaction? 

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Use Staffing Models to Illustrate Impact of Staff Cuts on Service

If staff cuts are on the horizon, it's time to get out your Erlang C calculator, update your staffing model and develop multiple scenarios illustrating how an 8%, 10% and 15% staff reduction will impact service and other metrics. Will call volume increase? Will people take more sick days reducing available staff even further? Yes, there is a correlation there!

For instance, let's imagine that you have 50 agents, your service level goal is 80% of calls answered in 30 seconds, your quality scores are at 95% and first-call resolution (FCR) is currently 80%. In this example, assuming the same call volumes and call handle times, let's say that the 10% staff reduction indicates that, with 45 agents, service level will be 55% in 30 seconds. (Note that small centers see a significant impact to the service level with even slight staff adjustments.)

Service level is your customer's first perception of a quality experience. With a 55/30 service level, many callers will be in queue much longer than in the past. If they were used to waiting anywhere from 30 seconds to three minutes, perhaps they're now waiting 12 minutes or longer. In the past, we've seen a definite correlation between lower service levels and quality, so don't be surprised if quality dips to 70% or lower, and FCR to 60% or lower. What else happens when customers are unhappy about how long they waited to reach you?

- They complain about how long it took, which lowers customer satisfaction (increased ASA)
- Talk time increases while the agent listens and apologizes (increased AHT)
- Occupancy rates increase because there is less time between calls
- Employee satisfaction and morale drops, and you now have disgruntled agents because you made the customers grumpy
- Turnover and burnout increase
- Recruiting and training costs increase (assuming those who leave are replaced)
- FCR goes down and quality suffers

Using staffing models to create different scenarios can help you to demonstrate to senior execs that a smaller reduction (say, 5% instead of 10%), along with decreasing some non-phone activities, can allow you to provide an acceptable though lower level of accessibility for customers.

ABOUT US

Contact Center Pipeline is a monthly instructional journal focused on driving business success through effective contact center direction and decisions. Each issue contains informative articles, case studies, best practices, research and coverage of trends that impact the customer experience. Our writers and contributors are well-known industry experts with a unique understanding of how to optimize resources and maximize the value the organization provides to its customers.

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