

## AGILITY FACTOR



## Measuring Customer Handle Time: Introducing ACTI

By Jay Minnucci, Service Agility

**Introducing ACTI** — a new metric that aligns service quality and efficient delivery for a lasting impact on customer loyalty and costs.

Ask almost any contact center manager or director what the average handle time (AHT) of the operation is, and you will usually get a specific, accurate answer. There are plenty of reasons for this, and the importance we place on this metric is behind most of them. There is no doubt that it is a necessary component to forecasting and staffing. It is also a great tool for measuring consistency of responses (in conjunction with qualitative data). Some find average handle time to be a good way to identify top performers — though at least as many others out there would dispute that claim.

Of course, it is also a very easy metric to get. Many standard reports generated from just about any ACD provide it. And while there may be slight variations in the calculations used by various phone systems, there is pretty much universal agreement about what it measures — the average amount of time it takes an agent to complete a phone transaction (including all of the talk and after-call work time). But while AHT is easy to capture and often utilized, it is a decidedly internal metric. The focus is on how long it takes our resources to handle the transaction, not how much time the customer invested.

And that is what has me so frustrated. In an industry devoted to serving the customer, why is it that we can quote the AHT, but we cannot quote the average amount of time a customer invests with us? The short answer, of course, is that it is not in front of us on a report. But in an industry where we have nearly every data point we want at our fingertips, why don't we

have this one? While it may be true that the vendors generally have not supplied it, we certainly haven't beaten down their doors asking for it. If we want to walk the talk about customer satisfaction, it is our responsibility to make sure that our metrics are pointing in the same direction as our intentions. When it comes to the concept of handle time, we have missed the mark.

At the Annual Call Center Exhibition in Phoenix last fall, I gave a presentation on a new metric that can better align a contact center with its mission. At the conference, I named this the "average customer handle time," but I'm finding it is too easy to confuse this with the AHT that many of us have been familiar with for so long. Therefore, I have renamed it the "average customer time investment" (ACTI). You won't find it in your standard ACD reports (not yet, anyway), but you can piece it together using some other basic data — and this is one number that is worth the time to calculate. Before running the math, though, we need to explore what ACTI is and why it is so important.

### The Value of ACTI

So what is the ACTI? It is the average amount of time a customer has to spend to complete a call transaction. It includes the time required to navigate a menu, wait for an agent and discuss the situation. It includes any time that the customer may be put on hold, and if the call is subsequently transferred to someone else, it includes all that transfer time and

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ensuing talk time. In other words, it is the average amount of time a customer will have to shift from more pleasurable activities to resolving an inquiry with your company.

Why is the concept of a customer's time investment so important? To answer this, think about all the factors that go into a customer's satisfaction with a service transaction. These differ some by industry and company, but at the highest level, many are common. Customers want accurate information. They want a courteous agent. They want complete answers. They want follow-through.

Everything in the above list, while important, is also fully contained within the single interaction. A courteous agent, for example, helps me feel better about the transaction, but once my call is over, the feeling is gone. Likewise, the confidence that you will follow through on my case is important, but it will not help me in dealing with the next issue that comes up in my life.

Time, however, is different. When you save me time, I can use it elsewhere. In a world where the amount of quality time is continu-

ously shrinking, being "easy to do business with" becomes one of those emotional factors that influences buying decisions and drives loyalty numbers higher. Time that can be reinvested in other activities is a benefit that extends beyond the parameters of our phone call. I can use it somewhere else, much as I can reuse money you save me when you lower the price of your product. Like money, time is a currency, and we all want as much discretionary time as possible.

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And let's be clear here — we are not talking about cutting off a customer or offering less service in order to shave a few seconds off the clock. The proper approach to instituting the ACTI is to set a high standard of service quality, and *then* go about delivering it as

### Putting the Pieces Together


efficiently as possible. Inherent in the concept is the understanding that a high-quality eight-minute call is better than a sub-par six-minute call. Equally important, though, is the recognition that the high-quality five-minute call trumps them both. The customer now has more time back in his or her life... and as a side benefit, you spent less money to get the better result (impress the customer and reduce costs — who could argue with that?).

While standard ACD reports typically do not provide an ACTI, getting the basic number is fairly easy. It includes only three components, and the first two are available to pretty much anyone with an ACD: average talk time (ATT) and average speed of answer (ASA). The third component is the average amount of time it takes to navigate your menu (including listening to those introductory messages). Many systems do not provide this, so you may need to do some estimating based on the selections chosen by your customers and the timing of each option (see the sidebar for an

your Agility Factor" button on the home page.

I recommend reporting the ACTI right alongside your other daily, weekly and monthly metrics. Continuous exposure helps to raise awareness, and it will make people think twice when adding wordy disclaimers to your scripts or increasing menu choices. Such actions will now have a real and visible cost associated with them, and that transparency will help to improve the decision-making in your organization.

### Service Quality with Efficiency

The old adage that "what gets measured, improves" is and always has been applicable to contact centers. Rather than ignoring it or trying to fight it, use it to drive the change you want to see in your operation. The ACTI puts the customer first, and offers up cost savings as a side dish to those that find ways to improve it. That's a great recipe for success. 

IN A WORLD WHERE THE AMOUNT OF QUALITY TIME IS CONTINUALLY SHRINKING, BEING "EASY TO DO BUSINESS WITH" BECOMES ONE OF THOSE EMOTIONAL FACTORS THAT INFLUENCES BUYING DECISIONS AND DRIVES LOYALTY NUMBERS HIGHER.

## ABOUT US

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## The Basic ACTI Calculation

Let's use an example to show how a basic ACTI calculation is made. Assume that the average speed of answer (ASA) is 30 seconds, and the average talk time (ATT) for the center is 300 seconds. The final number you need is the average amount of time it takes to navigate your introductory messages and menu. If you have that – great. Add the three numbers together and you have your ACTI. If you don't have it – and many of you won't – you may be able to calculate it without getting too detailed. Check your IVR and/or ACD reports to get a breakout of the percentage of the selections made by your callers. In our example, everyone listens to a few introductory messages, after which we find the following:

**18%** select sales

**63%** select service

**19%** select technical support

You then need to know the average amount of time it takes to get through your introductory messages and each of those selections. For our example, we do not have any report that provides that, so we need to estimate it by grabbing a stopwatch and trying each selection a number of times and taking the average. Once we did that, we found the following:

- Our introductory messages take 14 seconds
- Sales takes six seconds (we only have a message after that one, no submenu)
- Service takes 33 seconds (we have to enter an account number)
- Technical support takes 47 seconds (we have to enter an account number and go through a submenu)

That's all we need to determine our average menu navigation time.

**Set up a table like this to get the number:**

(A) Selection	(B) Frequency	(C) Average Navigation Time	(D) Weighting (B x C)
Introductory Messages	1.00 (all calls)	14 seconds	14.00
1 – Sales	.18	6 seconds	1.08
2 – Service	.63	33 seconds	20.79
3 – Tech Support	.19	47 seconds	8.93
<b>Total (add the numbers in column D and round to the closest whole number): 45 seconds</b>			

Now we have everything we need to calculate our **ACTI.**

**In our example, the ACTI is:**

Segment	# of Seconds
Menu Navigation	45
ASA	30
ATT	300
<b>ACTI</b>	<b>375 seconds</b>

LIKE MONEY,  
TIME IS A  
CURRENCY,  
AND WE ALL  
WANT AS MUCH  
DISCRETIONARY  
TIME AS  
POSSIBLE.

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