



# Unlocking the sales potential of customer service

**M**ost companies are trying to achieve the same goals when it comes to managing customers in the call centre: they want to improve the quality of customer service, reducing 'churn' of both customers and agents, while maximising contribution to the organisation's bottom line. Traditionally, however, the focus has been on the latter, primarily managed through cost reductions within the call centres. This is not a sustainable model for the majority of companies in the current economic climate.

Many call centres are now becoming more sales and customer orientated, in recognition that every customer touch point must now take on greater importance in the pursuit of improvements to the bottom line. Indeed, organisations are now starting to realise that the customer service representatives (CSRs) who are taking inbound calls are in the perfect position to sell more – more comprehensive contracts, extra insurance, extended warranties, etc – to happy customers. At the same time, CSRs can also play a key role in turning things around for unhappy customers by solving their problems and answering their questions efficiently and effectively, therefore increasing customer retention, and, ultimately, making it possible to sell to

**With the right tools, customer-facing organisations can benefit from the untapped sales potential of their customer service agents, says Guy Tweedale**

these customers in the future.

As such, CSRs can begin to an approach that will transform service into sales. But they need the right technology, processes, systems and targets in place.

The economic downturn makes this change of focus even more important, as a tough climate means that consumers are under greater financial

pressure, and therefore tend to more critically weigh their needs against their wants. According to a study by Maritz (Financial Services Customer Experience Study,

February 2008), satisfied customers are 50 per cent more likely to listen to a sales offer, while dissatisfied customers (if they choose to listen) are twice as likely as satisfied customers to decline an offer after listening to it.

The 'perfect customer interaction' necessary to provide this essential high level of service is not as unachievable as it sounds. With the latest unified desktop technology, CSRs can now benefit from an intelligent, contextual view of customer and organisation data. This gives them a complete view of their customers' needs and the relevant

company information required to solve problems, answer questions, and sell services effectively, within a much shorter time.

Nowhere is this need for an intelligent view of customer data more evident than within the insurance industry. Customers tend to call their insurance provider for only a few reasons: they are applying for a new policy or renewing an existing policy; they need to make a change to an existing policy (ie, add an additional person to a car insurance policy); or they are filing a claim.

All of these calls will require the CSR to access customer information that is relevant to that specific query. If the information is not easily accessible – and the CSR has to go hunting for it – the chances of selling additional products and services diminish greatly. This scenario is of particular concern for insurance companies, as they operate in a market where they must resell their service every year. Every call into their call centre should then be treated like a sales call.

Across the insurance industry – and beyond – a large obstacle continues to hamper the CSRs' ability to offer a better quality of interaction with their customers: the chaotic maze of applications and tools that reside on today's contact centre desktops. Anecdotal evidence points to many

**'Satisfied customers are 50% more likely to listen to a sales offer'**



CSRs in the insurance industry having between 20 and 30 open applications on the desktop at any one time. This can be both distracting and confusing for CSRs who are trying to provide efficient customer support, let alone the impact on their ability to maximise any cross or up-sell opportunities.

This problem of complexity extends beyond the number of the applications; agents in many companies are confused by a single application with cumbersome screens, where getting in and around the application to get the data they need is like brain surgery.

Without doubt, businesses can increase customer loyalty and boost sales by changing the quality of customer interaction, which is made possible when agents are able to focus on the customer, rather than on the systems they use. After all, one bad interaction with a contact centre agent can destroy all the customer loyalty that a company has worked so hard to earn. The importance of this was highlighted in a study by CFI Group (Contact Centre Satisfaction Survey 2008), which found that 95 per cent of customers who have a satisfying contact centre experience will do business with the

same company again, compared with only 35 per cent of dissatisfied customers. And 92 per cent of customers who have a satisfying experience will recommend the firm to others, compared with only 9 per cent of dissatisfied customers.

Customer service problems are being made worse by companies that have chosen to place too much focus on average handle time (AHT). This is the average duration of one call, typically measured from the customer's initiation of the call, and including any hold time, talk time and related administrative tasks that follow the call.

By placing too much focus on AHT – and incentivising their agents using this measure – companies are putting pressure on the CSRs to spend less time on the phone, and/or to reduce or eliminate 'wrap-up time' in order to complete certain administrative tasks. This cuts the opportunity and inclination of the CSR to spend time on cross-selling or up-selling. The

overall reduction in operational costs gained from this reduced call length is almost certainly outweighed by the opportunity cost of the lost sales, not to mention the cost of losing a dissatisfied

customer who feels that his problem has not been solved or that he has been rushed and unappreciated.

Instead of focusing on AHT, companies would be better able to integrate revenue generation activities into a call if they thought in terms of average interaction time (AIT). This way of looking at CSRs' efficiency will allow call centre management to consider the actual dynamics within each call. AIT can be defined as average process time + average nurture time + average wrap-up time.

Average process time and wrap-up time are self explanatory. Nurture time is the process of chatting with the customer. It is the time that the CSR actually spends understanding what the customer really needs, recommending additional services, building a relationship, being empathetic – whatever is needed to

improve satisfaction and retention, and now can dramatically improve the bottom-line too.

To put this into context, if a CSR for a package holiday company had access to an easy-to-use system that could provide an 'intelligent view' of the customer and their specific holiday itinerary (and any previous holidays), the CSR would be able to have a better quality of interaction about the holiday (even to the extent of a jovial conversation with the customer, perhaps about their own holiday experiences).

Armed with all the right information, the CSR can try and add-on benefits to the customer, such as upgrading the room or flight, booking them onto excursions, or even extending their stay if a special offer were available – and, because of the connection and trust that the CSR has built with the customer, the offers are more likely to be accepted. This adds significant value for the customer, but also increases sales for the company.

It is important to remember that the agents who are dealing with a company's inbound calls are the most significant cost within a contact centre, accounting for up to 80 per cent of the budget. And yet CSRs are also one of the company's most valuable assets and possibly the only contact that customers have with the business. It is essential that they are effective and reflect an accurate image of the organisation. The best way to enable agents to do this – and to sell – is to empower them with the information that they need to do their jobs well.

**A pitch for simplicity: streamlining the customer service desktop**



**'One bad interaction with a contact centre agent can destroy loyalty'**

**contributor**

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