

Press *5 If Ready to Explode

Are the language skills of the call-center agent really the issue? More likely, the misalignment of expectations will be the cause of the slow burn on the other end of the line.

By Paul Davies

Call-center bashing continues unabated in the popular media. The U.K. national media recently even reported a “trend” among companies there to bring their centers “home.” The story concerned mainly in-house customer service centers, not outsourced HR. However, although the consequences of upsetting paying customers may be different and even dire, the lessons are the same for HR.

Recalling for the moment the much overlooked principle that all men are created equal, we can, I hope, accept the fact that appropriately educated, recruited, trained, and rewarded “foreign” call-center staff are equally competent and motivated as “home grown” ones. So, if employees experience poor HR service and the cause is not the staff, what else is wrong?

Misunderstanding expectations can be the start of the problem. Labor arbitrage is only one part of the quest for cost reduction. Process standardization and simplification is a very substantive “other.” If the call center is set up to provide simple, standardized services when the employee still wants a more flexible, deal-with-my-problem approach, there is a mismatch.

The prime consideration (unless one reduces employees’ expectations) is to set up the center practices, competencies, and controls to match. Many of the things for which call centers are maligned are a matter of choice.

Take the telephone menu, for example. Don’t you hate having to punch in your ID number when what you used to do was give your name to someone who pulled up your record? And what about the long introductions followed by “If you don’t want this, punch that” and so forth. If you’re spectacularly unlucky, you’ll have to listen to half of it again in three languages.

It’s probably worth remembering that as painful as this can be, it’s soon forgotten if the call is dealt with well. But, after the voice prompt from hell, the customer is already primed to explode and, if greeted by the “All our representatives are busy” message, the explosion is inevitable.

All of this is avoidable, of course. A provider can have a polite receptionist redirect calls immediately to an overstaffed posse of waiting agents, but the buyer would have to pay for it. The point is not to introduce banks of call-center agents; it’s to get the right balance of

telephone technology and staff. Don’t upset people before the agent even answers the call.

Next, if a material proportion of employees are likely to be stumped by an accent other than their own, attention could be paid to balancing location and cost. This does not mean a “home” location. Accents and even languages vary within borders. Instead, very high levels of second-language competence and diction can be recruited, trained, and tested in low-cost locations. Alternatively, there are centers that actually recruit only native speakers to staff relatively low-cost but desirable “foreign” locations. Again, the issue is about the buyer balancing service expectations against cost.

If the center is staffed well, the call is answered smoothly, and there are no language barriers, what’s left is knowledge management and the supporting tools. The support structure for the agents both from team leaders and other team members is important. In particular, prompt escalation routes can ease pressure on everyone, including callers.

Additionally, though many companies have shied away from detailed desk procedures, this is not an option for service centers. The center’s protocols as well as those of the buyers’ processes, policies, and decision trees all must be documented. The tendency during transformation is for the buyers’ skilled staff to get frustrated with the process of transferring tacit knowledge. Unfortunately, if not recorded effectively, that knowledge is lost.

Also the entire knowledge tool set should be living, updated on a daily basis, and include a subject-indexed comments capability to allow agents to add new experiences, exceptions, answers, etc. The technology tools should allow the knowledge to be readily updated and recalled according to a caller’s need.

Providers have these capabilities, but buyers in the sourcing phase would do well to test how they are being used. First-call resolution and average pick-up times are helpful metrics, but get trends and written responses. Also, make sure you know what is included in the pick-up time; some might exclude voice menus. In an industry in which high turnover and short notice periods are expected, the codified management of knowledge and tasks—often dismissed as bureaucracy by employees with long institutional memories—is critical. **HRO**



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