



CUSTOMER SERVICE

On Order...Better Call Centers for Citizens

by Wendi Pomerance Brick

As agencies respond to the President's order to streamline customer service, it is critical they rely on people, process, procedures, and technology to ensure the highest quality is delivered for every caller, every day.

The way we did business five years ago is no longer good enough to provide high-quality services in the quantity that is needed by our customers. When times get tough, leaders lead. Sometimes technology will provide an answer. Other times people will.

On April 27, 2011, President Obama issued an executive order directing agencies to develop and monitor customer service plans and performance measures, gather customer feedback, and focus on streamlining processes and using technology to drive improvements in service delivery.

Government agencies large and small now have an opportunity and directive to consider new ways to provide more and better services. As we implement these changes at all levels, our focus on using technology will result in consolidated contact centers arising as a prime way to provide "one-stop shops" for front-facing customer service applications.

Web-based applications are terrific, but not everyone who needs government has access to a computer. Almost everyone has access to a phone. If your agency is exploring the alternatives for customer access, here are some tips to make sure the reality of your contact center meets all the internal and external customer expectations.

First, focus on goals. How do we marry our ultimate service goals with both quantitative (how many calls) and qualitative (how good is the experience) measures of success?

Second, focus on the access point and delivery method. How will we as leaders manage the change to new equipment, new standards, new work environment, new office surroundings, new scheduling, and many new procedures and protocols? How do activities outside the control of the contact center drive service quality? How do we provide self-service opportunities so that people can access what they need 24/7 and never need to speak with an employee?

To answer these questions and achieve success, the key is to not simply rely on the technology to solve our problems. There are four pillars of creating a successful contact center deserving equal weight: people, processes, procedures, and technology (3P+T™). Together they provide a more efficient and effective way of providing government services to those who need them.

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Call Center Staff Tips

Managing or working in a contact center professionally requires a certain skill set, just like being a sales person or a doctor or a truck driver. It's really not practical to assume that you can ask people who work in the field or face-to-face with clients one day to put on a headset and start answering calls successfully the next.

In my experience, this is exactly what happens. The agency is so focused on the technology to support the contact center that they give minimal if any consideration to the people who will actually be answering the phones or to the supervisors who will be responsible for making the contact center successful. If you are a leader taking the opportunity to be involved with a project like this, don't make this mistake too. The result will be a disengaged workforce with low morale and a constituency that

Obama Administration Calls for Online Connections

After years of attempts to integrate online services with service delivery there is now real opportunity to achieve this thus far elusive goal. The Obama Administration's customer service executive order is an important step. Its support for streamlining services by "increasingly popular lower-cost, self-service options accessed by the Internet or mobile phone and improved processes that deliver services faster and more responsively" is important. It connects online tools with improved business processes and engagement.

—Anthony Hollingworth and Tim Cooper, see page 30
"Why Government Must Do Better With Web 2.0"

is not shy about voicing their displeasure and dissatisfaction to the higher ups and elected officials. For any student of effective leadership, you can see how this situation would spiral into disaster.

So, let's set ourselves up to succeed right from the start instead.

The first key to a successful contact center transition is to focus on the people. Get folks ready for their new situation. Talk to them (yes, talk to them) about how their days will be changing. Answer questions and fears about what is different about the new work situation and how the skills they already have will be key to their success going forward. Engage partners that have had this experience and can speak to your team.

Talk about the close monitoring of call quality and quantity because this is something government staff people are not at all generally used to. Without micromanaging, establish the criteria that will define the success of each call. This is the criteria you want your staff to meet. There should be multiple criteria that cover both the technical aspects of the contact, such as accuracy of staff answers, and criteria that cover interpersonal or customer service skills, such as if each customer is being treated with dignity and respect.

Inform staff of the new criteria. It's unfair to measure quality if the people providing the service are in the dark about the measures. Then provide both technical and professional training to develop the new skills they will need to succeed. Provide definitions and sample scripts for correct answers. Give teams the opportunity

Suggested Supervisor Monitoring Guidelines

Regular monitoring ensures the highest quality customer service delivery and provides a robust internal support system for all staff to be the best they can be. The primary purposes of monitoring are to evaluate training needs for agents and supervisors, to measure success and improvement in quality service delivery, and to identify potential programmatic process improvements. All supervisors who are engaged in service monitoring should understand and comply with the following concepts:

- monitoring monthly calls of agents within their units (with established minimum number of calls per agent)
- providing one-on-one coaching for each staff member on their team at least once during each calendar month
- informally monitoring calls by spending time walking the contact center and listening to live agent-client interactions
- coaching team members formally or informally. The more time spent here the better. Again a baseline target (say six to 10 hours a week of a supervisor's time or up to 25 percent) could be dedicated to this function.

to both role play fake calls and listen to their own calls together as a group. These continuous improvement exercises allow the team to work through calls together, thereby creating a baseline understanding of quality for the whole team.

Within this controlled environment, continue to emphasize the value of the individual employee. Define where employees (or agents) can use their own areas of expertise to allow for flexibility. Let people know where they have flexibility (empowerment) and where they don't.

Call quality monitoring affects supervisors dramatically as well. Each supervisor must understand the definitions and rate staff interactions equally. For example, regardless of whether Supervisor A or B rated a call, the calls should be rated the same. Get groups of supervisors together regularly for calibration exercises until all supervisors rate like calls within an acceptably small range.

Transition the supervisors, too. Let them know that as contact center supervisors they will walk the floor and assist the team by informally coaching after calls. They will do this a lot. When the supervisors are too focused on their previous duties (such as attending out-of-office meetings), they are not able to provide the front-line support needed in this new environment.

Listening In

Then there are procedures. Look at the way you do business everyday and how best to focus on what's important in this new environment. Establish a system that allows supervisors to monitor calls, both live and captured calls.

Spell out the "who, what, when, where, how, and how often" a supervisor should listen in on a random selection of calls. The random selection should include samples for each staff member. Supervisors also should walk the floor and listen to staff interacting with callers live.

Retool the ways that supervisors provide appropriate feedback in a timely manner. Annual performance

Supervisors will need to be comfortable and effective in providing frequent formal and informal coaching that is necessary to keep customer service at a high level. Equally important is positive feedback for staff. Even when a critique is necessary, supervisors should look to find at least one aspect of an interaction to praise.

evaluations are far from effective in day-to-day contact center operations. Supervisors will need to be comfortable and effective in providing frequent formal and informal coaching that is necessary to keep customer service at a high level. Equally important is positive feedback for staff. Even when a critique is necessary, supervisors should look to find at least one aspect of an interaction to praise.

Being The Storefront

Finally, the contact center is the front face of your organization, and is affected in the extreme by all the back office processes that impact the external customers. It's absolutely critical to examine and fix processes that affect the front line. Many times, the front-line employee is answering for back office processes and delays. These situations are very stressful for your contact center team. Your contact center is part of a much larger organization and is affected by processes beyond their control. If this is happening to your team, identify the processes at issue and break down the silos to help your contact center provide timely, accurate, and professional responses.

Self-Service?

Focus also on self-service opportunities. During a recent case study analysis, 28 different processes were identified that could be converted to offer self-service either over the phone or online. For one of those processes alone, the counter staff estimated it would cut foot traffic by 45 percent! Providing self-service opportunities (after streamlining the processes) will free up tremendous amounts of staff time so they could spend their time assisting people with more complex needs.

When developing your new contact center, involve the customers (both internal and external) in deciding your measures of success.

When starting up a new contact center, the customer's voice must be heard. Many contact centers fall short when striving to meet the customers' expectations because they assume they know the customers' expectations. When developing your new contact center, involve the customers (both internal and external) in deciding your measures of success.

Ultimately focusing equally on all four pillars of successful contact centers in government (people, process, procedures and technology) will ensure the highest quality service is delivered for every caller, every day.

Calibration Exercises

Calibration is the process of limiting variation in the way call quality is rated. There are two levels to call calibration. The first component is conducted in a group of supervisors only. The second level of these exercises is conducted with one supervisor and his team. Generally, two or three calls are listened to in a group setting and rated using the contact center's call quality monitoring guidelines.

To begin, sessions could be held weekly or bi-weekly. The ratings are discussed and debated. With the proper facilitation, the team will evolve to a point in which ratings amongst supervisors and team members are within a 5 percent or 10 percent tolerance, whatever is decided by the team as acceptable. This will take multiple sessions. Once calibration is reached, the sessions should continue, albeit less frequently.

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