



## Contact Centre Action

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## Checked Your Pulse Lately?

If you are like the rest of us, you only go to the doctor when you are sick.

Likewise with our call centre, we only seek professional help when we know we have a problem. We wait for obvious symptoms – long call queues, long call durations, increased staff turnover, increased customer complaints – before we take action. When you think about it, this isn't very wise. Call centres are increasingly the primary interface between your business and your customers. Customers are becoming less loyal and more demanding of excellent customer service. The business that provides the best customer service is likely to be the most successful business. It is therefore critical for the success of our business that our call centre is running efficiently and the service experienced by all customers is nothing short of excellent.

Call centres are perfect candidates for preventative medicine. However, if things are starting to go off the rails, what do we usually do? We take one or both of the two most expensive actions we can:

- We employ additional staff, committing the company to additional expenditure in wages and other costs year after year. Remember, staff costs are typically 70% - 75% of the operational costs in most call centres.
- We buy technology, which will help, but are you getting maximum return for your investment? And what technology do you really need? What technology will enhance your customer's experience?

So what is the alternative?

Start with using specialist professional help to health check your call centre. Look at the current situation – your current technology, your staff recruitment, your training, your management and support structures, your workflows and processes, the customers you service and the level of service you provide. Also look outside your call centre – what is the overall strategy of the business, how will the business change over the next five years or so, what performance do other areas of the business (Marketing, IT, Finance, etc) expect from the call centre, and are they satisfied with the current performance?

A health check such as this goes beyond the symptoms. It will identify the exact areas to focus on to improve the current situation as quickly as possible, and maximise the return on any investment required. It may also show that additional technology is not required, that an operational change such as rostering, workflow or structure may provide significant benefits. Use the health check to develop a

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strategy to allow budgeting for any required expenditure, and allow the prioritising of such expenditure over the next few years.

Follow the health check by focusing on the key areas identified in the health check. Some of the more common areas identified are described below.

Depending on your circumstances, changing either your processes and workflows, or your technology will usually improve the performance of your call centre. For maximum benefit, they need to be considered together. There is a wealth of technology available today, but what is right for you? It is pointless encouraging your customers to contact you via email if you are an emergency services call centre! What will improve the performance of your call centre and improve your customer's experience, while complementing your long-term business strategies? Not considering the long-term goals of the business may mean that an investment made today is prematurely obsolete. It is better to consider total cost of ownership over an extended period rather than buying technology based on today's price. When considering technology, don't just look at the traditional PABX, ACD, CTI and IVR that has formed the basis of most call centres for some time now. Look at the ability to integrate with your existing customer management systems, as well as considering less common technologies such as workforce management, speech recognition, call recording for quality and training purposes, as well as performance management software. While significant productivity gains can be made through the use of these technologies, they are often overlooked. Remember that whenever you change or upgrade technology you will also need to change your processes, procedures and metrics to achieve the maximum benefit from your investment in technology.

In many call centres, significant improvements can be made by looking at the reason for calls and using this information to reduce calls where appropriate. Why do your customers call? Is there a particular page on your web site, or a form or brochure that customers find confusing? Can your customers find the information from another source, other than by calling you? Is there another method of contact – email, web, fax, SMS etc – that is more appropriate than a phone call? Has another department invited them to call without realising the impact it would have on your call centre?

Another key area is having the right number of people on the phone at the right time. This includes rostering, having the right mix of full and part time staff, adherence to schedule and improving workflow to ensure staff are not distracted by off the phone work at inappropriate times.

Appropriate training will improve morale, improve customer service and reduce average handle times. Train your staff to provide outstanding customer service and ensure your customers continue to do business with you. Remember, if you can reduce your average handle time by 15 seconds per call, and you take 2,000 calls per day, you will reduce your overall work by 8 hours per day. Teaching your staff basic queueing principles will also help them understand why adherence is so important.

Call centres hold, or can obtain, a wealth of information about your customers. Ensure your call centre and staff are aligned with the overall goals of your business and use this customer information appropriately to increase your sales. 'Mine' the data you hold on your customers and ensure you deal with your customers in the ways they prefer. Consider segmenting your customers so your highest value customers receive a higher level of service to reduce the likelihood that they may 'churn' to your competitors.

Why is your staff turnover high? What is good and bad about working in your call centre? Is your environment suitable? Do your staff feel valued and understand the reason for their job? Are their goals and objectives clearly understood and

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measureable? Do your staff receive an adequate level of support and training? The full cost of recruitment is often not fully appreciated. When you consider the fees you pay to your recruitment agency, your time to interview, the amount of time it takes for the new staff member to be productive, the cost of providing induction training and the impact to your customers of having an inexperienced staff member, staff turnover is very expensive. It is usually more cost-effective to improve your staff facilities, provide additional training, provide a career path and provide recognition and reward in order to reduce staff turnover. Your people are your most valuable asset.

Using a specialist advisor can save you money, both in the short term and in the longer term. An independent third party that can provide an unbiased view of your operation, understanding the call centre industry and its current trends will ensure you gain maximum benefit while minimising your investment and risk. They can look at all aspects of your call centre, not just the technology, and make recommendations based on your individual needs. They can also assist you with implementing operational, procedural and technical change. Every call centre is different, there is no such thing as 'one size fits all'.

Before you undergo surgery, you would most likely seek a second opinion. Do the same with your call centre.

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