

# Dealing with Customer Inquiries

By BNET Editorial

published on BNET.com 5/02/2007

Businesses need mechanisms to respond to inquiries or requests for help from existing and potential customers. These customer helplines are essential for delivering support, service, advice, and information—and they add value to a business.

To make sure your helpline is effective, staff it with knowledgeable people who have good interpersonal skills and training in customer-service techniques. To maximize the benefit to customers, respond to queries immediately where possible, or arrange to call the customer back on more complex queries. Ensure that the customer is satisfied with the response at the end of the conversation.

## What You Need to Know

---

### Should helpline services be provided free of charge?

Helplines should be free because they are essential for customer satisfaction. They add value to the original purchase and strengthen your relationship with the customer. If you offer information services to the general public, you may wish to charge callers, which is usually through a premium rate number.

### Who should work on the helpline?

Trained customer service staff can help customers report a problem effectively and may be able to offer advice or help up to a certain level. When the query goes beyond their level of knowledge, the customer service representative arranges for a specialist to call the customer back within an agreed time.

### Can we outsource a helpline service?

Provided the external organization's team undergoes thorough training, there is no reason why the helpline cannot be outsourced.

# What to Do

---

## Set Up a Helpline

The most important thing about a helpline is that it really needs to *help*, so there are a number of rules to remember when creating one:

- Make it convenient. Offer customers a toll-free phone number to encourage contact. Make sure the helpline is available at times that meet customer needs.
- Select the right staff—people with extensive, up-to-date product knowledge. Make sure they are trained in customer service techniques so they can deal effectively with different types of questions and problems.
- Provide the right backup. Helpline staff need to have access to any existing product, technical or service databases, as well as guidelines on the actions they can take to deal with different types of complaint. Make sure they know how to quickly obtain any authorization they need to take action.
- Make the service fast and reliable. Respond to queries immediately or arrange to call the customer back if needed. Use an “escalation procedure” (see below for more information) to deal with complaints that cannot be resolved within agreed time frames.
- Follow up to make sure the customer is satisfied with the response.
- Investigate what level of support you can offer over the Internet. For example, you could establish a “frequently asked questions” (FAQ) section on your Web site to tackle most basic questions.

## Plan Staffing Levels

There’s nothing worse than getting to a helpline but then being kept on hold for a long time. Ask your telephone vendor to provide a report on the number of calls to the helpline number, as well as the average waiting time, and then analyze the pattern of calls during the period ( day, week, month, or year), identifying the peaks and troughs. This will help you to determine the current and planned level of calls per day, the ratio of staff to calls, and therefore how many helpline staff you need.

If you have very marked peak and off-peak periods, decide whether you can meet demand using current staff resources, or whether it might be beneficial to use technologies such as voicemail to handle some of the incoming calls. If you can afford it, you could also consider using an external call handling service to manage overload or peak traffic.

## **Develop Skills**

Make sure that helpline staff have appropriate helpline skills. These might include product knowledge, telephone technique, and technical, product service, administrative, and customer service skills.

When you have identified the needed skills, compare these with the current skills of your helpline staff, and identify the areas that need to be improved. Implement training and monitor performance improvements, ensure that staff know how to use any new technology, and obtain customer feedback to evaluate performance.

## **Provide Customer Information for Staff**

Your staff will be able to provide a prompt response and personal service if they've been given enough customer information. Provide a simple system so helpline staff can quickly access customer records—and add to the record any information they glean from the helpline contact.

## **Establish Escalation Procedures**

There are always some calls that cannot be dealt with immediately. Establish an “escalation procedure” to make sure no calls slip through the cracks. Identify critical types of helpline requests, including technical support, complaints, and breakdowns, and set target response times for such queries. Appoint a supervisor to monitor conformance to target response times, escalate to a designated manager any queries that exceed target times, and monitor the responses to escalated queries.

## **Record Helpline Usage**

How many calls does your helpline receive per day, per week, per month, per year? What types of call does it receive and what is the volume of each type of call? Which customers are the most regular helpline users? Which media generate most inquiries to the helpline? What is the impact of promotional campaigns on helpline activity? What are the most frequent complaints, queries, and requests for support? Which type of request uses most resources? What is the average call time for different types of request? Keeping track of the answers to these questions will help you ensure that your helpline is effective.

## Promote the Service

Above all, make sure customers know what help is available to them. Include the helpline number in advertisements, publications, Web site pages, and other promotional material, as well as on invoices, delivery notes, instructions, user guides, and other product documentation.

## What to Avoid

---

### You Put the Wrong People on the Helpline

The people who run the helpline should have good customer service skills and a level of product and technical knowledge that enables them to provide the right answer or put the customer in contact with the right specialist.

### You Provide an Inadequate Service

When customers call a helpline, they are looking for a quick response. Make sure you have enough lines and staff so that calls can be answered quickly.

### You Fail to Call the Customer Back

If helpline staff cannot deal with queries immediately, they should let the customer know when someone will call with the answer. Make sure those return calls are completed to the customer's satisfaction.

## Where to Learn More

---

### Books:

Bodin, Madeline, and Keith Dawson. *The Call Center Dictionary: The Complete Guide to Call Center and Customer Support Technology Solutions*. 3rd ed. Academic Press, 2004.

Cleveland, Brad. *Call Center Management on Fast Forward: Succeeding in Today's Dynamic Customer Contact Environment*. Call Center Press, 2006.

Dawson, Keith. *The Call Center Handbook: The Complete Guide to Starting, Running and Improving Your Customer Contact Center*. 4th ed. CMP Books, 2004.

Tseng, Mitchell M. *Advances in Mass Customization and Personalization*. Springer, 2005.

## Web Sites:

The Association of Call Center Managers (ACCM): [www.callcentermanagers.org](http://www.callcentermanagers.org)

*Callcenter* magazine: [www.callcentermagazine.com](http://www.callcentermagazine.com)

CCNG International: [www.ccng.com](http://www.ccng.com)

International Contact Center Benchmarking Consortium (ICCBC): [www.iccbc.org](http://www.iccbc.org)

Copyright © 2007 CNET Networks, Inc. All Rights Reserved.