

Improving Customer Service on the Phone

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A customer's first contact with an organization is often by telephone. That's why it's helpful to periodically evaluate how your organization receives and manages phone contact and identify opportunities to improve the quality and accuracy of communications.

What You Need to Know

Interactive Voice Response (IVR) and similar services appear impersonal. Isn't this a barrier to customer satisfaction?

Many consumers have experienced the problems of poorly designed IVR systems, which can be extremely slow and frustrating to use. However, when they are effectively implemented, IVR services can reduce wait times and provide customers with a quick, simple way to order products and services, or to obtain information. When handling a high volume of calls, it may not be feasible to offer a live service to all callers. However, an IVR system should allow users to access an operator for problems or complex questions.

What is the importance of telephone services as e-mail and online chat grow in popularity?

Telephone services remain extremely popular with and important to many consumers. In fact, many Web sites display telephone contact buttons on their pages to enable visitors to place calls to the company directly from the site. The telephone offers a level of flexibility and a personal element that cannot yet be matched by electronic communication. However, the speed of electronic communication has raised customer expectations for all types of communication, so it's important to maintain the quality of call handling services.

Is it better to reduce costs by handling customer inquiries via e-mail and/or self-service on the Web site?

When evaluating alternative approaches for handling customer inquiries, there is often a trade-off between cost and quality of service. While self-service and e-mail reduce costs and free support staff to do other work, customers may be left frustrated when they cannot get a complete answer. If your customer support requirements are straightforward, some level of automation may be beneficial.

However, as support requirements become more complex, some investment in telephone staff and systems is typically required.

What to Do

Avoid Call Handling Pitfalls

A customer's first contact with an organization is often by telephone. However, the telephone can create as many problems as it solves; if customers receive unfavorable treatment on the telephone, they may take their business elsewhere. Because first impressions are critical, these call-handling pitfalls should be avoided:

- the caller is disconnected;
- calls go unanswered;
- the caller is passed from one extension or department to another;
- the caller is put on lengthy or indefinite hold.

Consider Voice Processing Technology

Voice processing is a technology which provides the capability to collect and respond to a user's spoken needs, without the involvement of a live person. When applied to telephony systems, voice processing technology can lead to improved customer service, productivity, and efficiency through a wide range of solutions such as voice mail, interactive voice response, and fax messaging.

Surveys indicate that 75% of all business calls fail to get through on the first attempt and when they do, half of those calls require only one-way communication. These calls interrupt staff activity which is often more important than the call itself. Additionally, research indicates that 90% of written messages contain insufficient or inaccurate information. Voice processing technology can resolve many of these issues and demonstrate quality customer care.

By studying how telephone communications are received and managed by your organization, you can identify opportunities to improve their quality and accuracy. Voice processing technology might be leveraged to:

- answer calls and take messages efficiently;
- transfer calls to other numbers or to cell phones;
- access messages easily;
- forward information to colleagues;

- prioritize work.

Know the Benefits of Voice Processing Solutions

Voice processing solutions can offer a number of important benefits to companies and their customers. These include:

- improving customer service;
- streamlining call handling;
- guaranteeing consistent, positive call handling and message delivery;
- making organizations more accessible and responsive to customers;
- providing customers with convenient, time-saving, valued-added services.

Case Study 1

A service organization handled incoming calls during business hours on weekdays only. It was determined that each week, approximately 1,000 calls were attempted after hours or on weekends, when there was no access to staff members. By implementing an automated voice processing system, the company enabled callers to connect to a known extension immediately, or to leave a message when calling outside normal business hours. Daytime callers now reach their required destination much more quickly, and messages are returned promptly the next business day. The overall result is a much improved service that is well worth the cost of the new system.

Case Study 2

A corporation wanted to improve its customer service and competitive position while reducing the cost of sales. It established a special customer information line, providing callers 24-hour access to sales brochures and company information. Customers now request the required document(s) from a voice menu and supply their fax number; the automated system immediately faxes the requested document(s). Customers appreciate this efficient means of obtaining printed documents, and the company has significantly reduced the cost of processing and fulfilling such requests.

Keep Mobile and Remote Staff Connected

In many organizations, critical sales and other staff members spend the majority of their time working at client sites or in the field. When equipped with the proper features, the telephone system can be programmed to seamlessly transfer calls to alternate numbers for employees working away from the office. Staff members can keep in touch wherever they are, greatly improving productivity and client service.

Select the Appropriate Voice Processing Options

Voice processing solutions operate with existing telephone systems, and installation is usually simple and cost-effective. A wide variety of voice processing solutions exist, including:

- **Voice Mail/Voice Messaging**

Incoming calls are diverted to a mailbox whenever the recipient does not answer. The caller receives a personal message and is typically given a choice of leaving a voice message, entering another extension, or being transferred to an assistant or other designated alternate contact. Most voice mail systems offer extended messaging capabilities, allowing mailbox owners to record, send, receive, answer, copy, save, and distribute voice messages to more than one person at any time.

- **Automated Attendant**

Calls are answered by a voice processing server, which enables callers to route themselves to the desired extension by following a clear verbal menu of options (which often includes an option to access a directory). This eliminates long ring or hold times and abandoned calls during peak periods, and operators are freed to handle non-routine calls. The system is especially ideal for coverage of calls outside business hours.

- **Single-Digit Menus**

Callers indicate their need and essentially route their own calls by pressing single telephone keys in response to a voice prompt. For example: "Welcome to the company. For customer service, press 1. For sales, press 2. For product information, press 3." Single-digit menus enable organizations to provide callers with an efficient automated information request service and routing system, improving customer service and reducing or even eliminating the need for personal assistance.

- **Voice Forms**

This is an efficient, cost-effective way of handling large numbers of routine and consistent inquiries—for example, catalog orders or requests for printed information. Voice forms are often used to replace the repetitive dialog required to collect data such as name, address, or account number from individual callers. A voice form solution is ideal in a situation such as Case Study 2, above.

- **Interactive Voice Response (IVR)**

IVR is a specialist application which can be leveraged to perform routine tasks; it enables a high degree of interaction between callers and a host system without requiring the involvement of a live company representative. IVR is very useful for capturing data, such as an account number and password, and automating the response to that data, such as providing an account balance. It can be an effective means of reducing operating costs and increasing productivity. When designed well, IVR systems can improve customer satisfaction and loyalty by enabling around-the-clock service.

- **Unified Messaging**

This is an advanced application of voice processing technology, bridging the gap between voice mail, e-mail, fax, and data messages. Unified messaging provides users with just one mailbox, consolidating all communications, whatever their form, and making them equally accessible and manageable from one location.

What to Avoid

You Don't Allocate Enough Resources

Companies receiving a high volume of incoming calls must be able to process them quickly and efficiently, even at peak periods. However, many companies do not analyze their call records, and thus fail to notice when unacceptable response times occur. If customers cannot complete their call in an acceptable amount of time, their satisfaction plummets. It is essential to allocate call handling resources according to actual call rates. If you cannot maintain the staffing levels required in a cost-effective manner, consider incorporating automated call handling techniques to guarantee acceptable response times.

You Rely Too Heavily on Call Automation

Although automated telephone systems can greatly increase response times, they can also contribute to customer frustration. It is important to strike a balance between cost-effective automation and personal service.

You Provide Poor Service

Customer service is expected to be easy to use, always available, and reliable. You must support this critical function with trained staff and a robust communications infrastructure that evolves with increases in volume or complexity. Any decline in quality can do significant damage to your company's reputation and ultimately, its profitability.

Where to Learn More

Book:

Clegg, Brian. *The Invisible Customer*. Milford, CT: Kogan Page, 2000.

Web Site:

American Marketing Association: www.marketingpower.com

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