

Turn your customer service agents into advisors

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Grow revenues and increase customer retention by dispelling these three contact centre myths



Poor call interactions can kill a customer relationship. A recent Accenture Strategy Study found that over half of U.S. consumers had switched service providers in the past year due to poor service (banks, retailers and cable and satellite television providers were said to be the worst offenders).

The estimated cost of customers switching due to poor service? \$1.6 trillion. And this same report said that 83% of U.S. consumers preferred dealing with human beings over digital channels to solve customer service issues.

That puts two things into perspective: One, there is a big cost associated with getting things wrong when it comes to customer call resolution. And two, there's a lot of opportunity for customer acquisition if you are known for getting things right.

That's why it's important to create a consensus among front line staff that their mission should be to maximize the value of every contact. For inbound call centres in particular, these calls should be recognized as an opportunity where the customer is putting the company in a position to help. Customers are calling in to the

organization for an answer but what they really want is a solution.

Finding that solution is what forms the basis of a good customer experience. And a good understanding of service can turn your agents into advisors, as long as you kill a few persistent myths. Here are three that many companies regularly live by.

Myth #1: You can't provide good customer service if you are selling

In our call centre coaching and development work, easily 70% of the agents we train believe that it is not good customer service to push a product or service if that wasn't what the customer was calling about.

That kind of thinking comes from a good place but great customer experience is about determining what the customer needs and presenting that solution, which could be information or the purchase of a product or service they didn't know about.

It sounds obvious but it's a difficult concept to sell to service agents. You have to develop the concept in a workshop by asking small training groups to describe their best customer experiences. Almost every time we conduct this exercise, agents will talk about their own situations as customers where they personally received insight into something they didn't know about.

Agents need to buy into the idea that they must anticipate a customer's needs and educate them about the offerings. If that leads to a purchasing decision, that's a win for all parties.

Myth #2: Customers just want you to answer their questions

When we interviewed the customer service agents of a loyalty program as part of a call centre assessment project, we learned that many felt that spending an hour on the phone with the same person answering questions and providing lots of options was great customer service.

But too much information convolutes the customer's thought process. When agents do this, customers tend to just call back and book something with another agent or they don't call back at all! (89% of Canadians say their number one frustration is not being able to have their problem solved based on their first interaction). An agent's job is to guide the customer through the options.

If your call centre is seeing a lot of this type of behavior, it usually means your agents are confused about your organization's stated goals and how their job connects to it. This is where your organization must do a better job of communicating the goals.

Where we've seen the most success is when companies outline goals in terms of key areas and then show their agents how a successful call has an impact on these objectives.

Myth #3: Customers are just looking for the best price

If your agents think it's all about price, it means they don't have a clear understanding of who your customer is and, therefore what he or she really needs.

At one call centre we worked with in the travel industry, 80% of the agents believed the customers they were speaking with were retired and on fixed incomes.

But the company's research studies indicated that most of its customers were in fact working professionals who made over \$150,000 a year. This revelation completely changed the agents' notion that these customers just wanted the lowest price.

Building a robust understanding of the customer profile and needs is a critical first step to any contact centre's performance improvement program. Once your agents understand and appreciate who your customers are, they will start to see the value in the variety of services and offerings that can be provided.

More than understanding the customers, agents should have a clear idea of how they fit into the customer experience equation. Breaking these myths allows agents to deepen their understanding not only of their role but of their ability to connect with the customer.

That better understanding can resonate with customers who will come to see their call not as a necessary annoyance but a better way to find the service they need. That's when they will see the agent as a trusted advisor. And that ultimately puts the organization in a better position to sell additional products and services. Top performing customer contact operations we have worked with have seen revenue improvements of 20 to 30%.

As we move to a customer experience model of doing business—where the relationship is measured by the individual's experience during all points of contact against their expectations—how your contact centre manages these expectations will ultimately be the defining element in its ability to generate revenues.

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