

Unlocking the hidden sales potential of your Customer Service Representatives

With the right tools, customer-facing organisations can now benefit from the untapped sales potential of their Customer Service Representatives, leading to higher revenues, greater staff productivity, and increased customer loyalty.

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For years now, the call centre has largely been viewed as a necessary evil, an inescapable cost centre that needs to be more and more efficient, with the ultimate aim being the shortest possible calls being handled by the fewest number of staff. As a result, modern call centres are often more famous for providing customers with frustration rather than efficient service, and for evoking feelings of anger and resentment in place of customer satisfaction.

Most companies are trying to achieve the same goals when it comes to managing customers: they want to improve the quality of customer service, reducing 'churn' of both customers and CSRs, whilst maximising contribution to the organisation's bottom line. Traditionally, however, the focus has been on the latter, primarily managed through cost reductions within the call centres. This is not a sustainable model for the majority of companies in today's competitive environment, especially in the current economic climate.

Moving customer service from a cost centre to a profit centre

Things, are changing. Many call centres are becoming more sales and customer orientated, in recognition that every customer touch point must now take on greater importance in the pursuit of improvements to the bottom line. Indeed, many organisations are now starting to realise that the customer service representatives (CSRs) who are taking inbound calls are in the perfect position to sell more – more comprehensive contracts, extra insurance, extended warranties, etc – to happy customers. At the same time, CSRs can also play a key role in turning things around for unhappy customers by solving their problems and answering their questions efficiently and effectively, therefore increasing customer retention numbers. And, ultimately, making it possible to sell to these customers in the future.

As such CSRs can begin to move from a traditional customer service role to a new approach that will transform service into sales. But they need the right technology, processes, systems and targets in place.

An economic downturn makes this change of focus even more important, as a tough economic climate means that consumers are under greater financial pressure generally, and therefore tend to more critically weigh their "needs" versus their "wants". As a result, superior customer service becomes even more critical to an organisation's success. Indeed, according to a recent study by Maritz (Financial Services Customer Experience Study, February 2008), satisfied customers are 50% more likely to listen to a sales offer, whilst dissatisfied customers (if they choose to listen) are twice as likely as satisfied customers to decline an offer after listening to it.



Simplification of the CSR desktop as a facilitator of sales growth

The 'perfect customer interaction' necessary to provide this essential high level of service is not as unachievable as it sounds. With the latest unified desktop technology, CSRs can now benefit from an intelligent, contextual view of customer and organisation data. This gives them a complete view of their customers' needs and the relevant company information required to solve problems, answer questions, and sell services effectively. And within a much shorter timescale.

Nowhere is this need for an 'intelligent view' of customer data more evident than within the insurance industry. Customers tend to call their insurance provider for only a few reasons: they are applying for a new policy or renewing an existing policy; they need to make a change to an existing policy (ie, add an additional person to a car insurance policy); or they are filing a claim.

All of these calls will require the CSR to access customer information that is relevant to that customer's specific query. If that information is not easily accessible – and the CSR therefore has to go hunting for it while the customer waits impatiently on the phone – the chances of selling additional products and services diminish greatly. This scenario is of particular concern for insurance companies as they operate in an industry where an organisation must actively re-sell their service every calendar year. This means that every call into their call centre must be treated like a sales call.

Across the insurance industry – and beyond – a large obstacle continues to hamper the CSRs' ability to offer a better quality of interaction with their customers: the chaotic maze of applications and tools that reside on today's contact centre desktops. Anecdotal evidence points to many CSRs in the insurance industry having between 20 and 30 open applications on the desktop at any one time. This can be both distracting and confusing for CSRs who are trying to provide efficient customer support, let alone the impact on their ability to maximise any cross or up-sell opportunities that may exist.

This problem of complexity extends beyond the number of the applications being used; agents in many companies are confused by a single application with cumbersome screens, where getting in and around the application to get the data they need is akin to brain surgery.

Without doubt, businesses can increase customer loyalty and boost sales by changing the quality of customer interaction, which is made possible when agents are able to focus on the customer, rather than on the systems they use. After all, one bad interaction with a contact centre agent can destroy all the customer loyalty that a company has worked so hard to earn. The importance of this was highlighted in a recent study by CFI Group (Contact Centre Satisfaction Survey 2008), which found that 95% of customers who have a satisfying contact centre experience will do business with the same company again, compared to only 35% of dissatisfied customers. And 92% of customers who have a satisfying contact centre experience will recommend the company to others, compared to only 9% of dissatisfied customers.



Getting the measurement and rewards structure right

The customer service problems are being made worse by companies who have chosen to place too much focus on Average Handle Time (AHT). This is the average duration of one call, typically measured from the customer's initiation of the call, and including any hold time, talk time, and related administrative tasks that follow the call.

By placing too much focus on AHT – and incentivising their agents using this measure – companies are putting pressure on the CSRs to spend less time on the phone, and/or to reduce or eliminate "wrap-up time" in order to complete certain administrative tasks. Thus reducing the opportunity and inclination of the CSR to spend time on cross-selling or up-selling. The overall reduction in operational costs gained from this reduced call length is almost certainly outweighed by the opportunity cost of the lost sales, not to mention the cost of losing a dissatisfied customer who feels that his problem has not been solved or that he had been rushed and unappreciated by the organisation.

Instead of focusing on AHT, companies would be better able to integrate revenue generation activities into a call if they thought in terms of Average Interaction Time (AIT). This new way of looking at CSRs' efficiency will allow call centre management to consider the actual dynamics within each call. Average Interaction Time can be defined as Average Process Time + Average Nurture Time + Average Wrap-Up Time.

Average process time and wrap-up time are self explanatory. Nurture time is the process of chatting with the customer. It is the time that the CSR actually spends understanding what the customer really needs, recommending additional services, building a relationship, being empathetic – whatever is needed to improve satisfaction and retention, and now can dramatically improve the bottom-line too!

To put this into context, if a CSR for a package holiday company had access to an easy-to-use system that could provide an 'intelligent view' of the customer and their specific holiday itinerary (and any previous holidays), the CSR would be able to have a better quality of customer interaction about the holiday (even to the extent of a jovial conversation with the customer, perhaps about their own holiday experiences).

Armed with all the right information (which, before they had implemented the unified desktop systems, they would not have had to hand or the time to find it), the CSR can try and add-on benefits to the customer, such as upgrading the room or flight, booking them onto excursions, or even extending their stay if a special offer were available – and, because of the connection and trust that the CSR has built with the customer, the offers are more likely to be accepted. This adds significant value for the customer, but also increases the sales for the company.



Empower your agents to sell

It is important to remember that the agents who are dealing with a company's inbound calls are the most significant cost within a contact centre, accounting for up to 80 per cent of the overall budget. And yet, at the same time, CSRs are also the company's most valuable asset. And possibly the only contact that customers have with the business. It is, therefore, essential that they are effective and reflect an accurate image of the organisation.

The best way to enable agents to do this – and to sell – is to empower them with all the information that they need to do their jobs well. After all, if an agent can access customer information – including purchase history, product information, and special offers, all on the same screen – then they will have all the knowledge that they need to complete these sales, boost revenues, and increase customer satisfaction.

About Jacada

Jacada is a leading global provider of unified service desktop and process optimization solutions that simplify and automate customer service processes. By bridging disconnected systems into a single, intelligent workspace, Jacada solutions create greater operational efficiency and increase agent and customer satisfaction. Founded in 1990, Jacada operates globally with offices in Atlanta, Georgia; Herzliya, Israel; London, England; and Munich, Germany.

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