

Seven Steps to Successful Phone Customer Support

There may be more devices on the market, but your customers are still calling in. Here's how you set up a customer support operation to answer their calls and their questions.

It's no secret that smartphones are pervasive. In fact, according to a fall 2013 Pew Research Center report 56 percent of U.S. adults now own a smartphone – up from 35 percent just two years prior.

In the rush to embrace smartphones, however, many companies have lost their way with respect to customer support. Exceedingly anxious to adopt the “smart,” they've forgotten the value of the “phone.”

That's a mistake, data show—especially when it comes to customer care. Consider, for example, the results of a 2013 report from Forrester Research Inc. Titled **Understand Communication Channel Needs to Craft Your Customer Service Strategy**, which confirmed that while digital channels have become more popular, traditional phone support is still consumers' preferred vehicle for receiving customer care.

“Telephoning a live representative

remains the most frequently used customer service channel, and its usage is relatively consistent over time and across generations,” states the Forrester report, which also reveals that nearly three-quarters (73 percent) of online adults have used phone-based customer service in the last year. Similarly, 69 percent of online adults reported satisfaction with the customer service they received by phone—more than any other channel.

“This shows that customers are not abandoning the traditional customer service channels in favor of newer ones, but are increasing the total number of channels they use when interacting with companies.”

Even as companies experiment with new and emerging customer contact channels, therefore, the most successful businesses are those that take a back-to-basics approach to customer care, specifically one that focuses on developing a successful phone support operation. At the

center of that operation is a thriving call center.

Creating a Successful Call Center

Setting up a successful call center is a complex task that requires more than just money and time.

Here are the seven steps you need to take to set yourself up for success:

1 Determine customer preferences.

Phone support is the most popular customer contact channel for most customers—but not all customers. In fact, Forrester found that 41 percent of consumers ages 18 to 46 prefer online customer service to the telephone. While phone support is still popular in general, different demographics have different preferences and phone support may not be the preferred channel for your specific audience. Before you invest in phone

support, therefore, make sure your customers will use it. Surveys and web metrics—reviewing web traffic to your company's "Contact Us" page, for example—are great ways to hone in on the communication channels your customers prefer.

2 Set goals, objectives.

If you determine that your customers value phone support, the first step toward giving it to them is setting clear goals to guide your efforts. If your goal is customer acquisition – i.e. generating sales – for instance your call center and phone support teams will look different than if you're a subscription commerce business focusing on retaining customers. It will look even more different if your main objective is purely to help customers– technical support, for example.

Whatever your objective, having a purpose will help you make informed decisions about everything from the size of your phone support team to how you staff and train team members it.

3 Decide whether to go it alone or outsource.

In 2012, Forrester reported that 28 percent of companies either outsourced customer care or were

interested in doing so. The only surprising fact about Forrester's finding is that more companies aren't outsourcing their customer care considering the investment an in-house center demands.

One of the most common considerations is budget: Call centers not only require dedicated staff, but also dedicated space, energy, technology and infrastructure – all of which cost money.

Established call centers already have these things place. Similarly, customer care outsourcing specialists are either already fully staffed or have sophisticated recruitment processes in place to staff teams quickly, saving their clients the costly exercise of finding the right employees, not to mention the expense associated with paying wages, benefits and taxes associated with full-time employees.

Keep in mind that outsourcing customer care has strategic benefits as well as financial.

Outsourcing phone support will allow you to accomplish a couple of things. On the one hand you can focus your staff's time on core competencies keeping them engaged and dedicated to value-creating activities (a tactic that

improves customer experience and staff retention). Furthermore by putting customer care in the hands of a partner who has skills and experience you lack, your company can rest assured that customers are being treated in line with best practices, and not managed in an ad hoc manner – an issue for untrained customer support teams.

Naturally owning your customer care also has advantages, such as greater oversight of quality and consistency, increased staff loyalty, improved data-security confidence and reduced risk from vendor dependencies.

4 Choose: Physical or virtual?

Call centers can be physical or virtual. The former is a central location where customer care agents work alongside one another at onsite workstations. The latter is a remote environment that utilizes geographically dispersed agents who typically work from home or from any of several small satellite offices. Each has its own distinct advantages.

Because they house all customer care agents in a single place physical call centers typically make it easier for companies to consolidate their customer care

operations, which makes it easier to manage workflows, provide training and create a consistent customer care experience.

Likewise, physical locations facilitate interdepartmental collaboration—knowledge sharing between customer service and marketing, for example—and immersing agents in a brand, which makes it easier for them to evangelize as well as remain true to brand essence and values.

Physical locations are also far superior when it comes to security, a key concern at a time when new business models and intellectual property are essential to a company's competitive advantage.

Virtual call centers, on the other hand, often help companies control costs, scale up quickly and reduce agent turnover.

5 Hire the best agents.

Whether you own or outsource your call center, the quality of phone support hinges on the caliber of your customer service agents. The attributes you should look for depend largely on your company's objectives. Typically the profile of an ideal agent should take into account both aptitude and attitude.

In terms of aptitude agents may need experience with certain software or technology, or subject-matter expertise relevant to your product or service. In terms of attitude, agents should demonstrate qualities such as patience, empathy and geniality – not to mention patience and the ability to remain composed in trying situations.

Communication, including language fluency and accent neutralization (no matter what language you need to provide support for) and problem solving skills also are key. If you're outsourcing phone support, ensure agents meet your desired profile by asking potential vendors how they screen agents and by requesting the opportunity to place test calls with agents who will be assigned to your account.

6 Invest in infrastructure.

If you plan to own your call center, you'll need to brace for the investment in space and technology. The most important advice: extend your timeline and do the necessary research and due diligence. You'll need a considerable amount of hardware including a dedicated multi-line phone system, CRM software, as well as headsets, computers and workstations for each of your agents. Additionally, you may

need to upgrade your servers and network to accommodate the additional voice and data bandwidth generated by your call center. Data security and other information technology safeguards such as extra servers and additional internet lines for redundancy, for example.

If you plan to outsource your call center, confirm that potential vendors have made these investments—and that they continue making them to keep their systems and technology up-to-date.

7 Facilitate success.

When you're setting up an owned or outsourced call center, you can maximize customer satisfaction by paying special attention to agents' training and work environment.

On the training side utilize existing staff—whoever is currently taking customer phone calls—to develop scripts and scenarios based on the most common questions and comments your company receives. Because they are familiar with what your customers need and expect, those individuals can be an invaluable resource as you establish and expand your call center.

On the environment side, there are two key components: physical comfort as well psychological comfort. Remember that comfortable agents are effective agents; therefore, height-adjustable chairs and desks, ergonomic keyboards, sound barriers and hands-free, noise-cancelling headsets are critical. More importantly, though, is the need for a

real, active and meaningful culture.

Your customer support teams are on the frontline of dissatisfied customers and deal with a considerable amount of tension and stress. In order to help them help your customers, it is critical that you provide them with the training, tools and outlets to not only do their jobs well but also feel like they are a part of the team – a

larger movement, which they most certainly are.

Ultimately, the success of your customer care center will not be driven by how amazing your technology is, it will be powered by the agents who are willing to go to any lengths to keep your customers happy.