

The Business Wallpaper

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Is Your Company's Call Center Doing Everything It Can To Keep Its Customers?

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Nearly all your customers are pulled together into one giant place. They've come because they want to buy something. Or they've got a question about how your product works or a complaint about how it doesn't. Who normally handles all these questions? Of course it is the call center. They manage more than 95 percent of a company's electronic customer interactions. The people manning the front lines of your company and those who represent your voice to the world are usually the entry-level workers who are constantly pressured to keep talk times low and sales volumes high while dealing with angry customers and results-oriented managers.

On top of that, how many times have you heard the phrase "the system is down" as a reason that you cannot, at this moment, obtain a service or product? Computer systems seem to frequently break down and generally technology personnel work fast and furious to restore them and later determine causes of those failures so they may institute procedures to avoid future break downs. However, systems failure is more of a marketing or customer service issue than one of technology, and can affect any industry or marketplace.

In the health care industry, systems failure can lead to increasing costs and wasted resources. For example, Chest Physical Therapy Services that deploys therapists to children will routinely need authorization from an insurance company before providing treatment. Imagine a scenario



where a case manager at a major national insurance company is called to authorize treatment for a 6-year-old boy who could not be released from hospital without scheduled treatment, and the agent was told the system was down. The case manager who authorizes such services enters the data manually and informs the therapy services that everything would be settled once the system is online again. After over two months have lapse, a letter is sent by the insurance company requesting information about the 6-year old boy, which was already provided when he was hospitalized.

Eventually a letter is issued by the insurance company stating that they will not pay a single cent because there was no authorization recorded in the system. And, eventually when the agent was contacted again, he replies that since it had taken so long an appeal letter must be written to management for the case to be reconsidered.

Too many people are using "the system is down" as a crutch that replaces the original idea that the "system" is a process and method of serving customers. Technology based systems and their problems should be invisible to customers, and the problems of the customer agent should not be made the problem of the customer.

Most companies ignore the importance of their call centers at their peril. According to Stanley A. Brown it costs four to 10 times as much to win over a new customer as it does to provide good service to an existing customer. More-

over, it is also more profitable to keep existing customers than acquire new ones. One of the main reasons is that a loyal customer rarely focuses on price alone but instead sees customer relationships in term of “value for money”. In this way, the customer acts as an advocate for the enterprise and thus helps attract new customers.

Skeptical executives may still take the view that technology alone will ensure the success of a contact center to build customer relationship. This is not true. Many companies with excellent CRM understand that to improve business practices and customer relationships is by engaging people, CRM technology and customer data as part of an overarching program; it also involves process and organizational changes, with the ultimate aim of differentiating itself through superior customer relationship/customer-centric organization. According to Jon Anton, a few forward-thinking companies, most of them in the financial services, high-tech manufacturing and insurance sectors, have managed to keep the turnover rates of their call center support staff under

10 percent. They believe it is dangerous to put highly critical activity of customer contact in the hands of the least trained, lowest paid people. They have built a culture by giving these positions the importance they really deserve and make it a place where people really want to work.

References

Anton, Jon and Michael Hoeck, E-Business Customer Service, The Anton Press of Santa Maria, California, 2002.

Stanley A. Brown, Customer Relationship Management: A Strategic Imperative in the World of e-Business, Johd Wiley and Sons, 2000.

Article written by Jon Anton can be found at [HTTP://www.darwinmag.com/read/020102/cleveland_2.html](http://www.darwinmag.com/read/020102/cleveland_2.html)

A Note From the Editor

The first issue of this bulletin was supposed to be “published” sometime in January 2004 but due to unavoidable circumstances, the launching had to be delayed one month. The editor will try his best to avoid future delays in “publication” of future issues.

Colleagues at the faculty have expressed their concern about the name of the bulletin that may cause many academicians to shy away from contributing to this bulletin. It was suggested that the name of this bulletin be changed so that it welcomes a wider group of article contributors, and more importantly, readership. Taking the queue from this feedback, the name of this bulletin has been changed to The Business Wallpaper. It is hoped that because of this change of name colleagues from the Faculty of Business Administration as well as the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences can spare a few minutes of their time to write articles for this bulletin.