Creating Cost Effective Customer Care

By Chris Conway
Vice President, Inbound & Interactive Services
DialAmerica

Many consumers are frustrated today with customer care hotlines.

"Why do I have to go through so many steps to reach a live agent?" "I entered my account number at the beginning of the call, so why is the agent asking me for it again?" "Why was I on hold for so long?"

At the same time, business executives responsible for providing customer care have their own frustrations. "Why can't consumers use our online help services, rather than talking to a live agent?" "How can we reduce the average length of a customer's call?" "How can I deliver a great customer care experience without breaking the bank?"

The truth is that designing and delivering a customer care program is a balancing act. On one side of the scale is the level of service to be offered – the hours of operation and the speed with which calls will be answered. On the other side is the cost of people and technology to deliver the desired customer service experience. Getting these two variables into alignment so that they satisfy the needs of the consumer and the business is the key!

With a high service level, for example, 80 percent of all calls are answered within 30 seconds. In contrast, with a low service level, 80 percent of all calls are answered in 480 seconds (eight minutes). Obviously, these two service levels deliver two very different consumer experiences and they also require two very different financial commitments.

But wait, there's another very important ingredient in the mix – one that can dramatically change the service level-cost relationship: efficiency. A well trained, closely supervised, highly efficient call center team, supported by superior technology, can deliver a high service level at a surprisingly affordable cost!

For over 50 years, working across dozens of consumer and business-to-business product and service categories, DialAmerica has relentlessly honed the efficiency of call center operations. We've learned how to maximize service levels, while reducing the cost-per-transaction. You might say we've 'cracked the code' on creating cost-effective customer care. Here are ten efficiency principles we've learned – and acted on – over the years:

1. Spread the workload. The bigger the program, the higher the efficiency. Larger campaigns afford opportunities to spread the workload over more agents. Thus, individual variability in handling time is smoothed out over an entire team, resulting in a higher overall efficiency level.
2. Reduce idle time. The ebb and flow of inbound calls inherently results in some degree of agent idle time. These minutes can be productively utilized, for

example, with clerical duties or outbound call responsibilities to minimize downtime.

3. Set benchmarks. Post-call work (e.g. inputting information after a call is resolved) can be time-consuming. Establish reasonable benchmarks for these tasks. Then monitor performance to ensure that time is not wasted.
4. Integrate systems. Support agents with seamlessly integrated systems. Make it easy for them to access all necessary data and avoid time-consuming delays that result from toggling between multiple programs or screens.
5. Increase self-service capabilities. Using interactive voice response (IVR) technologies, ask consumers to input identifying information before they reach a live person. But don't make them repeat this information when your agents speak to them!
6. Develop detailed FAQs. Provide agents with the specific knowledge they need to help consumers. Create a superior rep-FAQ interface with clearly categorized and easily understood answers so that virtually any question can be quickly addressed.
7. Recruit smartly. Working in a call center is not for everyone. Turnover is highest in the first few weeks as recruits realize what the job really entails. Reduce high levels of early turnover by 'double jacking' with new recruits, i.e. listening in as they handle calls, and giving them immediate, helpful feedback.
8. Closely supervise. Start new recruits in an 'incubation group' with a 1:6 supervisor to rep ratio. As they gain experience, move them into larger teams with a maximum1:12 supervisor to rep ratio.
9. Continuously train. Develop ongoing programs to strengthen selling skills, effectively utilize new technologies and address specific marketplace conditions. For example, in dealing with older customers, train reps in senior sensitivity – how to be more patient, courteous and respectful of the life circumstances of this generation.
10. Get everyone on the same page. Convene conferences with all campaign stakeholders – reps, supervisors, account managers and client marketers. Continuously improve the campaign by getting everyone's perspective on what's working and what's not.

Providing superior customer care is a goal of virtually every brand. But there's a cost to delivering a high service level. There are ways to moderate this cost, however, through efficient operations and business practices.

###