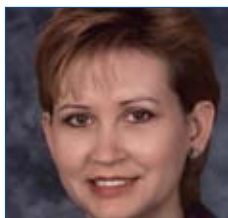


LEADING THOUGHTS



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Moments of Truth: Drive Organizational Value through Every Interaction

Are your processes distracting frontline agents from providing world-class service?

Achieving world-class status is something that most call center leaders strive for, but rarely experience. Only 5% of companies attain the “world-class” category, according to a recent study by a leading service organization. The majority (80%) fall into “average” or “below average” status.

Most want to achieve greatness; they simply don’t know how.

World-class companies have reached a level that 95% of their competitors have not. Many of those competitors are, in fact, very good — and that is their downfall. Marketing expert and author Seth Godin captured the root of the problem well. He commented that: “The opposite of remarkable is very good. Very good is an everyday occurrence and hardly worth mentioning.” By focusing on the activities that have made them very good, they are distracted from those actions that would allow them to become remarkable.

We often find call centers placing too much attention on numbers and technology. Though both are important, such an approach can cause the center to miss the real opportunity that presents itself hundreds or even thousands of times each day.

Focus on Giving Customers What They Want

The first step on the journey to providing remarkable service is to focus on reality. Unlike Stevie Wonder’s ‘80s hit song, customers don’t just call to say I love you. They have real issues and they expect you to solve

them. Customers call with high expectations that your business will provide them with accurate information in a timely and courteous manner.

If your agents can provide the desired service quickly with high quality and a smile, there is a chance they can exceed the customers’ expectations and deliver a remarkable service experience. But no matter how fast the phone is answered or how friendly your agents are, if the problem isn’t resolved, your organization will not exceed the customer’s expectations.

Can your agents provide a caller with world-class service? Of course, most can. But can most of your agents do that on every call, 50 times a day, five days a week, 50 weeks a year — 10,000 times? Even for “very good” companies, the answer is a resounding “no.” Only in world-class companies does service meet or exceed customer expectations consistently. These companies are doing things a little differently, and their reward is customers who love them.

Getting callers to believe that they love your business is not easy — after all, love is a pretty strong word. When we talk about a customer’s love, we’re really talking about customer loyalty. Would your customer leave you? The goal is to achieve such a strong service relationship with your customers that your company represents the standard that other organizations must strive to meet. You then have real “stickiness” with your customers.

Today, with the Internet and all of the different

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vehicles that enable customers to both praise and speak ill of companies, loyalty is taking center stage — and the centrality of customer loyalty to business success is borne out in industry metrics. More and more companies are looking to create Net Promoters (customers who would recommend your company to others). That starts with making customers fall in love with your organization — so much so that they feel compelled to tell others that they love doing business with you.

Is Your Call Center Ready for the Moment of Truth?

Think about the companies that you love — most people have two or three. If you consider why you love doing business with them, you'll find that you can usually identify specific behaviors that they demonstrate, which you can use in your call center. It generally involves the "moment of truth" — addressing each customer's issue as if it were the most important.

In call centers, we tend to focus on the high-level strategic plan and initiatives. We spend a lot of time talking about all of the really cool call center technology that's out there. While you do need to have the right technology, such tools only help us to prepare for each moment of truth.

Why is the moment of truth so crucial? Customers who are merely satisfied with the service they receive are still at risk. Customer expectations are ever-increasing, and thus, "being satisfied" is no longer sufficient to win in today's highly competitive business world. Customer satisfaction is an *enabler* to loyalty. To achieve actual loyalty, your center has to be ready for every single moment of truth — and that means all of the 50 calls, 50 emails or 50 chat sessions handled by each agent every day. Amazingly, the average agent has 10,000 opportunities each year to create and influence customer loyalty. Each of those can have a ripple effect, especially if the customer is not satisfied.

As you develop your service delivery strategy, a key question to consider is, "Am I preparing my front line to provide the level of service my customers expect for every moment of truth?"

Customers' Expectations Are Evolving

Your agents need the right tools, knowledge and focus to provide service that exceeds

customers' expectations. But what are those expectations? Changing customer service practices and attitudes, especially with regard to call centers, have been exemplified through highly visible media coverage by publications such as *BusinessWeek*. In March 2007, the magazine ran a cover story on "Customer Service Champs," which featured a ranking of the top 20 customer service companies in the United States. The article highlighted all of the things that these companies did to provide excellent service and foster strong customer loyalty. Fast forward to March 2008. That year's issue on the same topic also included a ranking of the top 20 customer service providers, but the cover article, titled, "Customer Vigilantes: Fighting for Truth, Justice and the Right to Speak to a Manager," focused on frustrated and fed-up customers empowering themselves by taking control of bad service experiences.

Customers' requirements are changing faster than ever before, and companies need to keep pace. Customers know that they are in control, and they are demanding that organizations pay attention to that fact. They demand that each moment of truth meet their needs, and they're willing to go to incredible lengths to get results.

Accessibility Sets the Stage

Many companies erroneously fixate on service level accessibility. They focus on achieving a certain metric, and believe that this makes them world class. It's true that customers expect their service to be timely, thus, accessibility is important. However, customers are impressed that you solved their problem, and even more impressed if they didn't have to wait long for you to do it. If the core request — solving the problem — isn't addressed, the customer cannot move on to appreciating the speed with which

Get Key Players Involved in the Discussion

Company leaders must view the call center for what it really is: a "process improvement incubator." With 10,000 moments of truth per agent per year, there is huge opportunity — and every contact has value.

The best companies focus on their customer/agent interactions and realize that each contact is not just a way to delight a single customer. With the proper attention, a single interaction can provide feedback that helps to delight hundreds or thousands of customers in future contacts. It starts with asking some basic questions of every single contact:

- How did this work?
- What did we do to solve the issue?
- What else could we have done to improve the customer experience?

It's essential to take what you learn from individual moments of truth and apply that knowledge across the board.

you answered the phone. It's a great example of putting the cart before the horse.

Even so, having agents available when your customers call does underscore the customers' value to your organization. To that end, be certain to have agents available during every interval throughout the day. Failure to do so will not only prevent you from achieving world-class status, but it can also put each of your customers at risk, since poor service levels send a message that you don't value them. You're not only wasting your customers' time; ultimately, when you do the math, it also costs *you* more.

If you have an environment where the door is not "open" when you say it will be, customers typically will wait, hang up and then call back — getting more frustrated at each step. Meanwhile, your agents have to contend with that frustration. Consequently, they feel undervalued and also become frustrated, resulting in high employee turnover and low customer satisfaction and loyalty. But it's important to remember that having a great service level objective in place is only an enabler to customer loyalty — it won't get you to world-class by itself.

Not Everything Has to Be a Number in a Call Center

The front line is where the moment of truth occurs for the customer, and it's where customer

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loyalty is built. Your business objectives must clearly focus on what is most important, and agents must have influence over how their job is designed. How can your staff be the voice of your customer, the face of your organization and the enabler of customer loyalty when they believe that:

- “We are always the last to know.”
- “We have no flexibility in our environment.”
- “Management over-measures everything, whether it’s important or not.”

These are the types of complaints that agents share. They are the road blocks to providing excellent service, and the reason why so many agents do not feel engaged. Your agents cannot deliver during moments of truth if they are not engaged, and often the numbers we share with them cause them to be disenfranchised rather than engaged.

Great customer service companies boast high


levels of agent engagement. Research also has shown a direct correlation between employee engagement and increased revenue and profitability. Happier employees provide better service. It’s as simple as that. You can give agents all of the best tools and training, but if they are not engaged, your customers will feel it, and loyalty will suffer.

Convert Agents into Customer Experience Engineers

To truly engage your agents and empower them to continually improve their performance, as well as the center’s, you must help them to view their job differently. Agents have to see themselves as “customer experience engineers.” Agents who adopt this customer-centric mindset instinctively think about how they can solve each customer’s problem, and more importantly, what they can do to improve the service experience in the future.

To inspire agents to become true customer experience engineers, you have to create a strong level of buy-in. How do you do that? Spend time

with your agents to gather their feedback and ask them what you can do to help them provide stellar customer service. Then act on their suggestions. The best centers ask agents for their ideas before implementing a new process or program, and empower them to help create, implement and manage these processes and/or programs.

Now THAT’S how to turn your agents into customer experience engineers. 

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Common Obstacles to Providing a Superior Customer Experience

Over the last 20 years, we’ve had the opportunity to work with many call center agents. We’ve spent a lot of time on the front line listening to calls and collecting agent feedback, and we’ve conducted focus groups with hundreds of agents in a broad range of call centers. In our work helping organizations to improve their service operations, many of the final solutions come directly from the frontline employees.

Invariably, the managers at each new company we work with will justify certain actions in their call centers by saying: “We’re different.” But the reality is that their agents all basically provide the same feedback. Remember that it is the individual actions of agents responding to independent service requests that build customer loyalty. Therefore, the frontline agent is in the best position to share what prevents them from being able to focus on providing world-class service.

The following are common themes that we have heard from the frontline staff of almost every company we’ve worked with:

- Lack of communication — agents are the last ones to know
- Need additional schedule flexibility and daily stability
- Metrics that drive wrong behaviors
- Punishing the masses for the few
- Too much focus on the negative
- Need more management visibility
- Not enough formal training after being hired

What most agents are saying is that they aren’t given the tools to be prepared for each moment of truth, and their work environment hinders their ability to pursue ways to fix this. If your agents feel the same way (and experience suggests that they probably do), you’ll need to address these concerns before moving things to the next level.

ABOUT US

Contact Center Pipeline is a monthly instructional journal focused on driving business success through effective contact center direction and decisions. Each issue contains informative articles, case studies, best practices, research and coverage of trends that impact the customer experience. Our writers and contributors are well-known industry experts with a unique understanding of how to optimize resources and maximize the value the organization provides to its customers.

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