Expert Angle: Treating Employees as Customers

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Many executives and training organizations point directly to employee attitudes and behaviors as the cause of more than 2/3 of customer dissatisfaction and customer attrition. This then leads call center management to focus almost all their energy on monitoring and coaching the individual customer service representative (CSR). I disagree with this approach, as almost all employees come to work wanting to do a good job. In many cases, customer unhappiness occurs when a CSR tells the customer exactly what the company instructs them to. This message unfortunately results in dissatisfaction, not usually for the company, but for the CSR. That is not the CSR's fault, it is management's fault!

This article, a short version of the session Janet Bailey of Starbucks and I will present at ACCE in Seattle, will suggest how to create metrics and tools that will both make employees successful, and prevent a significant part of the call center workload. This workload is often unnecessary, and causes frustration amongst front-line employees because they know it is preventable.

Causes of workload and dissatisfaction and the impact on employee satisfaction

While almost all employees want to do well, the processes and policies they work under, coupled with insufficient managerial support, are often the real cause of customer dissatisfaction and disloyalty. Additional causes of service workload are confusion due to complex offerings, unclear direction, and unpleasant surprises due to incorrectly set expectations.

A study of 600 companies by the American Society of Quality in November 2012, found that the single largest challenge they face is the setting of proper expectations. This is due to a number of internal and external factors, but expectation and confusion-based issues can cause up to 30% of service workload. Almost all of it is preventable!

The other major cause of dissatisfaction is the lack of "understanding tools" that agents have to effectively handle and respond to customer contacts. These tools include empowerment, flexibility to apply rules, clear believable explanations as to why the policies exist, and management support that celebrates employees when they effectively handle the tough issues creatively. Any shortage of these can translate from dissatisfaction of the employee into dissatisfaction of the customer.

Why should you care about this preventable workload and lack of tools? Because repetitive and preventable contacts, and a lack of necessary tools, can create a vicious cycle which prevents good service. Frustrated employees…who then take direct blame from customers…creates unhappy employees...which creates unhappy customers. And so the cycle continues.

Unhappy employees provide poor service, convey negative attitudes about their employer, and fail to go the extra mile for the customer. Further, these employees often leave—fast. But preventing workload, adjusting policies, and supporting employees can turn the entire experience around! The customer gets great service, the employee has fewer hassles, and the company has more satisfied, productive employees and customers.

Questions to enhance CSR success and prevent additional workload

The following are nine questions you should consider asking when you quality monitor your front-line agents. Each question generates a key metric which will help move your contact center from a firefighting approach, into a preventive/value add mode of service. The first three will be familiar; the last six may be new.

1. Empathy – did the employee use voice tone to sound genuinely concerned?
2. Effective listening – did the employee use active listening and reflect back and confirm key facts?
3. Knowledge and Knowledgebases – did the CSR accurately respond to the problem, and provide detail from the Knowledgebase as needed?
4. Clarity – did the agent provide a clear explanation of policies and decisions?
5. Empowerment – did the employee fully use available empowerment and flexibility to satisfy the customer?
6. Preventive education – when appropriate, did the CSR educate the customer on how to avoid future problems? (In many cases, this education is actually a delighter, and prevents future workload!)
7. Emotional connection – did the employee attempt to create an emotional connection, if appropriate?
8. Prevention - was this call preventable in the first place?
9. Customer rating - If the customer took a survey, how would they rate the call?

Metrics that you should be careful in using

There are four metrics that I have found to be useful, but that are often overemphasized or misused in an attempt to simplify the approach to management of the contact center.

1. Average speed of answer – ASA can be extended up to 60-90 seconds with little to no damage, if the call is effectively handled, once answered
2. Average handle time – this can penalize CSRs who happen to encounter more difficult calls, forcing them to truncate service on the calls that make the greatest impression on customers
3. Net Promoter Score – this metric is a blunt instrument that ignores customers who give a score of 7 or 8 (called passives by the NPS process), which could include 30-40% of all customers
4. Customer Effort – this metric penalizes contact centers by including the customer's effort of finding who or where to call. This is usually the website's fault, and not that of the CSR

Tools to enhance success

There are four tools that lead to significantly higher first contact resolution (FCR) and high customer satisfaction (CSAT). Each will be described in detail during our ACCE session.

1. Flexible solution spaces – provides multiple solutions to the same issue depending on specific circumstances – allows CSRs to "break the rules" without breaking the rules
2. Clear believable solution spaces – the explanation of 'why' is often more important to the customer than the actual resolution – they most want to be treated fairly
3. Knowledge Management systems - effective and continuously updated
4. Evaluation and feedback system - emphasize satisfaction over short-term productivity programs for all employees, not just top 10%

Summary

Employees become frustrated when they handle the same preventable question over-and-over. They become even more frustrated when they lack the empowerment, explanations, and information needed to give the great service they know is possible. Contact center directors can reduce workload and turnover, by moving from firefighting to prevention, and providing the key tools noted above.

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