

In FOCUS contact center

Dialing While Raging

Companies can curb customers' growing anger toward call centers with basic interpersonal communications.

BY TOBY GOOLEY

The expression "all the rage" has taken on new meaning in contact centers lately. Anecdotal evidence indicates that call center reps are subjected to increasing verbal abuse by customers. Tales of unintelligible foreign contact center agents have reached the status of urban legend, and self-service technology is so widely disliked that a recent comic strip joked about "mind-numbing menu options and endless transfers."

A new study conducted for the Customer Care Alliance confirms and quantifies the extent of that problem. The results of the 2004 National Customer Rage Study found that 73 percent of the 1,000 respondents (contact center callers) said they had experienced rage, which is defined as being "extremely upset" or "very upset," when they called a vendor to report a problem within the past year. That statistic is up from 65 percent in 2003, says Scott Broetzmann, president and sponsor of the Customer Care Measurement & Consulting study.



and 6 percent admitted to cursing or using profanity.

"In part, the confrontational posture consumers are taking is induced by the decisions and policies corporate America has made to make it more difficult to complain to call centers," Broetzmann says. The "brute application of customer-care technology" and failure to offer customers the remedies they want are what is behind declining satisfaction levels, he believes.

"Improving customer care doesn't involve a great intellectual challenge. It's a matter of making and reinforcing the right kind of policies on handling complaints."

What *do* customers want? For respondents, money was the least of their concerns. Non-monetary remedies, including repairs, explanations, assurances that a problem wouldn't recur, a chance to vent, and genuine, unscripted apologies all scored higher than refunds, free products, and other forms of compensation. Satisfaction levels for respondents who received non-monetary remedies, moreover, were dramatically higher than for those who didn't. And time is of the essence: The sooner a problem was fully resolved, the higher the satisfaction level climbed.

Although the study's results highlight what companies are doing wrong, it also reveals what contact centers can do to boost satisfaction and brand loyalty.

High on the list is using technology to facilitate—rather than create—roadblocks to interpersonal communication. Other ideas include gearing performance metrics around how customers want their complaints to be handled; being flexible regarding options for resolving customer complaints; and dropping standardized, scripted responses in favor of more genuine

Empowerment + Empathy = Satisfied Customers

It's no surprise to its customers that Muzi Motors of Needham, Mass., is routinely recertified as a "Blue Oval" dealership by Ford Motor Company. Ford awards the coveted designation to dealers that consistently meet high standards of customer satisfaction.

From the customer's point of view, the service department is where the rubber meets the road. A scheduling coordinator, four service advisors, and a department manager typically handle 700 calls each week. About 200 calls are resolved over the telephone, while the balance result in visits, says Neal Cammarano, CEO of the family-owned business.

Although satisfaction levels are high, Muzi makes sure service advisors know how to handle complaints. Based partly on the results of a personality test, the company hires people who can maintain professionalism under pressure, juggle multiple tasks, and are patient, articulate and outgoing.

New service advisors are paired with a mentor and spend two weeks observing how experienced staff interact with customers before they can take any calls. Says Cammarano: "You don't have to be an expert mechanic to be a service advisor. Understanding people's needs is more important."

Finally, the company empowers advisors to use their best judgment to solve problems. "There's no canned speech. We want them to have empathy and understand the customer's frustration," Cammarano says.

Still, staff must judge when to request a manager's intervention. Customers who remain dissatisfied are invited to speak with the owners. The program appears to work. Cammarano says: "With all the customers we have, I may get a couple of [complaint] calls a year."



Ford awards the coveted designation to dealers that meet high standards of customer satisfaction.

An Apology Goes a Long Way

The Customer Care Alliance has determined that non-monetary remedies gain greater customer satisfaction.

	NOTHING	APPOLOGY	EXPLANATION	CHANCE TO VENT	ASSURANCE
Satisfied	3%	50%	38%	31%	41%
Mollified	32%	17%	54%	57%	52%
Dissatisfied	65%	8%	8%	12%	7%

Source: Customer Care Alliance
For more information, go to www.ccareall.org.

Contact center agents are getting an earful. More than half (55 percent) of the respondents said they had threatened to contact management. They also threatened to report the organization to a regulatory agency (16 percent), take legal action (7 percent), or contact the media (6 percent). One-fourth yelled or raised their voices,

and relevant communications between the agents and the customers.

"The positive news here is that improving customer care doesn't involve a great intellectual challenge," sums up Broetzmann. "It's a matter of making and reinforcing the right kind of policies on handling complaints." ■

How do your CSRs resolve customer complaints? E-mail us at infocus-contactcenter@1to1.com.