CUSTOMER SERVICE: UTILITY STYLE

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1   BUILD A HIGH-PERFORMANCE TEAM

I was asked to provide advice to a utility on ideas to improve its call center. My first visit was to the call center on a Monday morning. As I scanned the floor, I saw many customer service representatives walking around and chatting. Two employees were busy decorating the call center with streamers from the ceiling. One of them was standing on a chair to hang the streamers. The chair, by the way, was on rollers. And as I paused to look at the reader board, I noticed that more than 35 customers were in queue on the phone waiting for service. I did notice that one supervisor was aware that there was a customer queue. This supervisor was pointing and yelling to a customer service representative (CSR) on the other side of the room to "get back on the phone."

I met the manager of the call center in a private office away from the bustle of the call center floor. The manager boasted of the great work environment on the call center floor and remarked that celebration was one of the hallmarks of the team. I could not help but notice a panoramic photo of what appeared to be every CSR and supervisor in the call center. The manager confirmed that this was the case. The picture was to recognize the team for great teamwork. I remarked that it must have cost a bit in overtime to have the employees come in early to take the picture. I should not have been surprised, based on my recent observation of the call center floor, when the manager replied, "Oh, it didn't cost any overtime. I just had the phone system provide an auto message to the customer." This message indicated that due to an emergency, they were unable to take the customer's phone call.

This utility was wise to be looking for advice and consultation on improving its call center. The manager and supervisor did not display effective leadership skills or good business judgment. The manager was distanced from the daily operations and did not seem to have a sense of

2 HIRE, TRAIN, AND RETAIN THE BEST CUSTOMER SERVICE PROFESSIONALS

Customer care is the face of the utility to its customers. Having a team of talented, trained customer service professionals can have a major impact on customer satisfaction with a utility. Sears, Roebuck and Company has proven this relationship in the retail world with a business model that links employee attitudes to customer satisfaction and then to financial performance. As explained in chapter 1, the Sears model shows a definite link between improved employee attitudes and improvements in customer satisfaction, which result, in turn, in additional revenue growth.[1]

Customer service leaders are challenged to maintain a talented team in light of turnover both internally to other areas of the company and externally. Turnover based on voluntary separation in the utility and energy industry averages 6.7%.[2] Customer service organizations in utilities often trend higher than the average. A 2003 Watson Wyatt survey found that 40% of companies experience higher-than-average turnover rates within their customer service departments. Thus it is critical for customer care leaders to have a clear strategy to hire, train, and retain the best customer service professionals. This chapter will explore the strategies around hiring, training, and retaining the best customer service professionals.

HIRING STRATEGIES

I was at a call center conference among more than 1,000 call center professionals from around the world, specifically looking for best practices for hiring customer service professionals. As I was talking to a

one-third of total nonfatal injuries and illnesses. A best practice to reduce these types of injuries is to have a complete ergonomics program in place.

An ergonomics program will generally be a part of the company's overall safety program. It is a systematic method for preventing, evaluating, and managing work-related musculoskeletal disorders. Elements to include in an ergonomics program are worksite analysis, workstation design, and training.

Worksite analysis identifies jobs and workstations that may contain musculoskeletal hazards, the risk factors, and the causes of the risk factors. Outputs of the analysis will include recommendations to eliminate or minimize hazards by changing the jobs, workstations, tools, or environment to fit the worker.

This type of analysis may include individual consulting for employees with unique physical challenges. During my pregnancy, for example, George Popovici, senior safety engineer at NSTAR, personally checked and adjusted my workstation three times to accommodate my physical changes. George calls this his "desk-side service," and it has proved invaluable in addressing specific, unique employee needs in customer care.

It is important to ensure that adequate budget is allotted for fully adjustable workstations and ergonomic chairs. To ensure effective use of limited budget dollars, one should consider gaining advice from either internal safety professionals or external resources on the Internet or from facilities designers. Popovici indicates, "NSTAR has seen a return on investment in approximately a three-year period based on productivity and medical claims."[15]

Ergonomics awareness training can be particularly helpful to raise awareness of each employee concerning the importance of appropriate workstation positioning. Additionally, the training will provide the employees with steps they can take themselves to ensure their workstations are appropriately positioned, or exercises they can complete to mitigate fatigue. The comprehensive approach is successful. At NSTAR, for example, a 60% reduction of repetitive motion injuries was realized following ergonomic intervention and basic awareness training.

Providing appropriate tools and equipment. For customer care field employees, it is important to focus on proper attire, tools, and vehicles.

on response time, customer satisfaction with the complaint process, and reduction in specific complaints where intervention has occurred. Here are some suggested measures:

- Percent of complaints resolved within 24 hours

- Percent of complaints resolved within seven days

- Percent of customers satisfied or very satisfied with complaint process

- Number of repeat customers with complaints

- Number of complaints by type

Setting goals around measures will help provide focus on the importance of the complaint management process. The measures based on the complaint resolution time frame are good measures for shared scorecards with other departments, particularly departments that are integral to resolving specific complaints.

We have reviewed how to create a culture that celebrates complaints. We have discussed methods to improve the process of responding to complaints. And we have reviewed techniques to track, trend, and measure the complaint data. Now we are ready for our final step of using the data to improve the process.

IMPROVE THE PROCESS BASED ON THE DATA

When I talk to other utility leaders, I find that all capture customer complaints at some level. Some utilities only review the most escalated customer complaints that go to executives or the public service commission. The interesting phenomenon is that few utilities have a process in place to review the complaint data for trends that can be used to make improvements. To improve the customer experience, it is necessary to organize and analyze complaint data, establish ownership for the complaint process, and implement improvement results.

Telephony services

The first moment of truth for a customer who needs to contact a utility is finding what number to call. Many utilities are augmenting local phone lines with intelligent call answering via automatic phone number identification provided by inbound toll-free services or advanced local phone services. Using toll-free service numbers accelerates a utility's ability to identify the customer. This type of capability is critical in outage management as it enables customer self-service.

Additionally, toll-free numbers are a great tool for responding to specific customer groups or call types. The toll-free number has a cost associated with it, but the utility also gains the advantage of being able to reroute calls easily. Utilities often maintain local numbers to promote a local feel to their company or to reduce costs. However, augmenting with toll-free lines also is helpful for targeted types of phone calls. Many utilities offer toll-free numbers for outage calls or direct connection to a specialized service team, like the business or credit teams. At an average cost of around $0.04/minute, toll-free numbers are often very good options for customer service.

High call volume answering systems are a critical service from a customer satisfaction perspective and from an operational performance perspective. Potomac Electric Power Company (Pepco) states, "Knowing who is out and the density of the damage shortens restoration times by as much as 50%."[8] A high call volume answering system eliminates busy signals for customers. Additionally, the utility's outage management system can provide timely, accurate outage information and status. The system that Pepco has in place, in partnership with a third party, is designed to handle 100,000 incoming calls and 180,000 outbound calls per hour.

Language line services are great tools to assist in situations where English is not the first language. There are several services available now for a nominal fee that can provide translation skills. Most of these services can translate more than 50 languages. Pricing for the service is based on volume and a per-minute charge. The language line service provides the side benefit of measurement of the growth of various languages used by the customers. This can be useful in analysis of whether to staff internally for language services. In Florida, for example, most utilities have Spanish-speaking customer service representatives on staff. The language line data

This is a vast improvement from older systems, which only provided information on meter reading performance after an overnight batch process. This delay left little time for a supervisor to thoughtfully adjust routes to catch skipped meters, or even complete routes. One should remember that the supervisor will also be dealing with the unexpected situations that arise daily, like employees calling in sick or vehicles not working.

Proactively dealing with repeat access problems is an underutilized opportunity for many utilities. There are many reasons why meters cannot be accessed. For manual meter reading, this can range from dogs to terrain, construction, and customer prevention. Utilities too often do not actively address customer access issues and continue to allow the meter to be estimated. This is changing, though, as utilities put in place technology and processes that identify access problems and launch a series of actions to address these problems.

From a technology perspective, meter readers are provided information on their handheld devices, including data concerning the number of consecutive estimates. This prompts the meter reader to go to an extra effort to secure a read by perhaps going to the premise at a different time, or leaving instructions for the customer to call in the read.

From a process perspective, utilities are addressing accounts with access issues with soft reminders to the customers via letters or phone calls. If the problem persists, the utility will escalate the action up to and including service termination for a customer not providing meter readers access to the meter. In the extreme cases of service termination, utilities may choose to place some type of automated metering at the premise to mitigate further issues.

With AMR installations, it is important to have a process in place to address ERTs not responding. The ERTs encode consumption data and tamper data from the meter and communicate via radio to a data collection system. The most common reasons for ERTs not responding are battery failure and location. Early vintages of ERTs, installed in the late 1980s and early 1990s, had battery lives of seven to nine years. Current technology has doubled this battery life expectancy.

Utilities need to monitor, research, and address ERT failures. Reports that highlight repeat ERT failures are good tools to identify true problems. Utilities with mobile ARM installations should establish a threshold of