

Plan, Don't Panic

FIVE CRITICAL STEPS FOR SUCCESSFUL CALL CENTERS

Major initiatives or shifting priorities can often disrupt the smooth operation of your call center. While careful planning and communication will minimize complications during everyday call center activities, there are several steps that can be taken to ensure the successful operation of your call center during unexpected, even chaotic circumstances.

The Contact Center Experts at Align provide solutions to achieve business results and exceed customer expectations.

For example, the launch of a new product is a common but complicated initiative often wrought with miscommunication and unforeseen issues. In the scenario below a call center manager is faced with unexpected obstacles that could trigger failure for the entire product launch effort. What follows is a five step repeatable plan that will help any call center to prepare and prevail during the launch of such an initiative.

So, it is Thursday, and the workweek is almost over. As the manager of a Software Support Call Center group for a world-renowned technology giant, you could not have asked for a better week.

Your team leaders have completed their "one-on-ones" on schedule for the first time in months. Your call abandon rates are down, and your average speed of answer is the best it has ever been. You have taken action to get your staff turnover levels to even out. Life is really looking up.

You stroll through the office, grinning from ear to ear, until you run into the Director of Software Development in the hallway. He too is smiling, and he can barely contain his excitement about the launch of the new software product. He boasts that sales are about to go through the roof.

He compliments the Sales and Marketing teams for pulling together the literature to send to customers, and explains the design of the Web site that will promote the new software.

Though you listen enthusiastically to his plans, you begin your own mental checklist. The manager of a call center must always be thinking ahead: How will we support the new product, and what is the impact on the call center and its resources?

You want to make sure that the appropriate staffing is in place to handle the anticipated influx of calls. You certainly want to ensure that your software support specialists have been properly trained on the new product so that they can intelligently deal with customer questions. You know a mechanism must be established to allow your specialists to contact the software developers if there are questions that they cannot handle. You are also thinking about the technology arrangements that need to take place. As these thoughts race through your head, you ask the Director when the literature will be mailed out to customers and when the webpage modifications will be made.

The Director looks you straight in the eye and nonchalantly tells you that the literature was already mailed out, and the Web page will start promoting the software tomorrow morning.

WHEN CALM TURNS TO CHAOS

With your mouth wide open, eyes now the size of the smile that has left your face, you wonder what you can possibly do to prepare for this.

Worse yet, you call the Telecom Director to see if you can get some basic call flows in place very quickly, and you realize that she does not have a clue what you are talking about. No one has spoken to her about this initiative.

After some additional digging, you also realize that the toll-free number (you know, the one that has been printed in all the literature and is posted on the Web site) was ordered, but never implemented. When you dial it, you get a message from the network indicating that the “number is not in service.”

CHAOS TURNS TO PANIC!!!

Have you ever found yourself in a similar situation? Too many of our clients have. They find themselves asking - “What happened? How did we get into this mess?” Failure to communicate obviously is the key.

How can you avoid this trap & what is the proper flow of communication?

I cannot stress enough the importance of the communication flow. In our example, the company was in a position to have an extremely successful product launch. The marketing pieces were all in place, but the necessary infrastructure and processes to ensure a successful campaign were completely absent.

Imagine the customers’ reactions when they dialed the new toll-free number, and they received a message indicating that the number was not in service. Some may not make any additional attempt to contact the company – their business would be lost. A few would likely dial the general support toll-free number to discuss the new software. However the call center software specialists would

not be prepared to field calls about a software product that they had never heard of.

How can your company avoid this potentially devastating situation? The following steps would help improve chances for success:

1) Meet with Key Business Departments

Call center managers should meet on a regular basis with Senior Management, Marketing and Sales, Product Development, and the Telecom/IT staff. This will enable them to react in an organized fashion when a new initiative is conceived.

2) Plan

As soon as you are aware there is a project that will impact the call center staff, make sure you think of all of the ramifications.

A. Plan a course of action for the marketing literature and “customer touch points”:

- When will the literature be released?
- How do you want to get the message out to customers (Web page, print ads, media ads, brochures, etc.)?
- Is a new toll-free number required?
- If yes, is there enough capacity on the existing telecom facilities in your telephone system to handle the additional calls that the campaign will surely generate?
- How can you ensure that all of your customer touch points are consistent?

B. What changes to the call center infrastructure are necessary? Consider:

- How many additional staff will be required to handle the calls?
- What training is required?
- Which reports will best measure the effectiveness of the marketing campaign?

C. Work with the Telecom Director regarding the call center programming modifications.

- Determine which of your specialists can best handle these types of customer contacts.
- What treatment should be offered to the callers in queue when there are no support specialists available to immediately handle calls?

D. Work with the IT Director to ensure your support specialists have access to the necessary information.

E. Identify the internal support infrastructure:

- Who should the support specialists contact if they cannot answer a customer question?
- Who will monitor the internal support to ensure that questions are responded to in a timely manner?

3) Test

Allow adequate time for thorough testing. Make sure that all of the call center programming is working properly before you launch the new application into production. Often, we find a permanent Lab environment works well for this testing.

4) Train

Make sure your support staff is trained and ready to handle the customer contacts.

- Do they know exactly when customers will start contacting the center?
- Do they thoroughly understand the new product?
- Do they know how to research questions?
- Do they know who to contact if there are questions they cannot handle?

5) Monitor the Results

Monitor calls and review reports when the customer calls begin coming in.

- A. Make sure your call center staff is handling the customer contacts effectively.
- B. If modifications are required, make them immediately.

In any launch of a new product, there are bound to be a few glitches. But careful planning and effective communication will go a long way toward ensuring the success of a new initiative.



Diane Halliwell

Director of Contact Center Solutions,
Align Communications

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