

Time to stop treating the symptoms?

A MEDICAL ANALOGY

A patient comes into the Emergency Room of a hospital, bleeding severely from the head. The patient's wife tells the triage nurse that her husband passed out and hit his head on a table. The nurse wheels the patient into the treatment area, and several ER doctors work to stop the bleeding and stitch the patient's head. The patient is sent home with pain medication and instructions to treat the stitches.

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

Two days later, the same patient comes into the Emergency Room, again bleeding severely from the head. The patient's wife again tells the triage nurse that her husband passed out and hit his head on a table. Once again, the nurse wheels the patient into the treatment area, and the ER doctors repeat the regimen completed during the first visit, sending the patient home with the same instructions.

Two days later, the same patient is brought back to the Emergency Room in a coma, and the patient succumbs in a few hours.

WHAT WENT WRONG?

It is clear from the example above that everyone in the ER wanted to help the patient. They reacted quickly to stop the bleeding and carefully provided instructions to keep the patient comfortable when arriving home. The problem is that everyone was treating the SYMPTOM. They should have been trying to diagnose the cause. Why was the patient passing out in the first place?

IS IT TIME TO LOOK BEYOND "INDUSTRY STANDARD STATISTICS"?

All too often, Contact Center managers are focused on bringing statistics into line with "industry standards". How often have you heard managers say:

- "We need to bring our abandonment rates down"
- "Queue times are too long"
- "We need to get our Service Levels up"
- "We are constantly transferring calls from one department to the other"

In an effort to solve these problems, managers are constantly looking for short-term fixes -- adjusting staff levels, changing out technology, hiring temps -- anything that will provide a quick resolution to their persistent problems. All too often, they are treating the symptoms just as the ER doctors did. They are not finding the root causes to the problems that exist within the Contact Center. Let's examine where they should be looking for answers.

THE GREAT MISCONCEPTION

When things go wrong in the Contact Center, everyone wants to point a finger at the management of that center. This approach assumes that the Contact Center is an "island unto itself". In reality, this statement could not be further from the truth.

The Contact Center's ability to effectively service the customer is extremely dependent upon several factors. Failure in any one or more of these factors can significantly impact the success of the Contact Center. Unfortunately, in many cases, these failures may also negatively impact the customers' perception of the firm, as these perceptions are often formed as a result of the customer service experience.

ROOT CAUSE ANALYSIS – A SIMPLE CONCEPT . . . IN THEORY

There are many reasons why Call Centers struggle with achieving excellent customer service. We will focus in on five key areas, which include the following:

- Customer “touch points”
- Internal processes, procedures, and workflows
- Training
- Departmental interactions
- Communication channels within the firm

Let’s briefly examine each one of these areas to see how they impact the Contact Center’s performance.

Customer Touch Points

What is a “customer touch point”? It can be anything that “touches” customers, including marketing brochures, letters, Directory Assistance, emails, Interactive Voice Response applications, web sites and applications, etc. Where can the problems occur? There are several areas to examine, as follows:

1. Are the touch points consistent?
 - a. Do they clearly convey to the customer how to access the firm?
 - b. Do they all have the same look and feel?
 - c. Are they consistent in their message?
 - d. Are they updated as changes occur in the organization?
2. Are the technology touch points easy to use?
 - a. Is there a defined customer contact strategy?
 - b. Has the firm considered the reactions of customers before implementing technology touch points?
 - c. Are IVR and Auto Attendant menus concise and written from the customer’s perspective?
 - d. Are web applications intuitive?

Problems in any one of the areas identified above can cause confusion among customers in contacting the firm. Furthermore, inconsistencies among the various touch points often give the customer the impression that the firm is disjointed and unorganized.

Internal Processes and Workflows

Potential problems in the area of internal processes and workflows can be countless. Some of the major challenges are addressed in the statements below.

1. Are there defined processes and workflows for various types of customer contacts? If yes, are they:
 - a. Documented?
 - b. Communicated to Contact Center staff?
 - c. Communicated to key departments that interact with the Contact Center?
 - d. Communicated to customers, as necessary, to ensure that their expectations can be managed appropriately?
 - e. Updated as changes are made in the organization?
2. Are there defined evaluation criteria that measure staff adherence to the processes, procedures, and workflows? If yes:
 - a. Are they clearly communicated to the Contact Center staff?
 - b. Have incentives and salary structure been developed to incorporate these performance criteria?
 - c. Have retraining strategies been developed to address inadequate adherence to these criteria?

Problems in any one of these areas can cause inconsistent or inefficient handling of customer contacts. They can also result in staff frustration, as Contact Center personnel are ill prepared to resolve customer interactions efficiently.

Training

Training is often an area that is overlooked. In scenarios where Contact Center managers are reacting to long queue times and abandoned calls, training moves to the back of the priority line, and new staff is often “thrown on the phones” without adequate preparation. As a result, managers actually exacerbate existing issues while trying to solve an immediate need. In many cases:

1. Call handling time is significantly increased.
2. Resolutions are inconsistent, and often not correct, creating customer callbacks.
3. Staff frustration is very high, often resulting in an increase in turnover rates.

Departmental Interactions

Contact Center groups would often operate very efficiently if there wasn’t a need to rely on other departments for information or resolution.

Unfortunately, this is frequently not the case. The following areas can be problematic in these interactions:

1. Processes, procedures, and workflows in the organization are department centric, and not established from an enterprise perspective. Therefore, what is in place in the Contact Center may be in direct conflict with what is in place in other departments.
2. The Contact Center may communicate timeframe expectations to the customer that are not met due to the interaction with other departments. This can result in callbacks, customer frustration levels, and the perception of ineffective service.

Communication Channels within the Firm

Some examples of internal communication channel issues that can negatively impact customer service include the following:

1. The IT department schedules system downtime without informing the Contact Center. Problems occur when systems are brought back up, and the Contact Center is left without the necessary tools and databases to resolve customer issues. Clearly, this is a change management and communication problem.
2. Product Development releases a new product, and marketing promotes that product without informing or training the Contact Center staff. The Contact Center staff is therefore not prepared to answer product questions when customers call.
3. The firm sends out a mailing to customers indicating a change in policy. The Contact Center staff does not receive a copy of the mailing, nor are they aware that the change in policy occurs. Again, customers call to question the change, and the Center is completely unaware that anything has taken place. Sound ridiculous? Maybe, but these situations occur much more often than we imagine.

IN SUMMARY . . .

This is a world where everyone wants an immediate answer to a question, or an immediate resolution to an issue. Unfortunately, in Contact Centers, and quite often in business generally, these quick answers do not exist. Many firms can get away with these problems when they are just starting out, but as companies grow, these problems intensify. Future growth may depend on the ability to diagnose and resolve these issues. Clearly, resolutions are often not easy. However, success is only achieved through the treatment of root causes, rather than the application of band-aids to everyday symptoms.

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