



At the Buzzer: Think About Your Service Desk Differently, Get Winning Results

by Matt McConnell

It's no secret that customers really want just two things from their interactions with the service desk: speed and accuracy.

They want someone to answer the phone quickly, someone who can help them with their problems, and someone who can provide solutions that are correct and helpful. So, if this is what your customers expect from your service desk, is it set up to deliver on these expectations? And if not, why not?

Studies have shown that the average speed of answer for contact centers in general is about thirty seconds, yet the widespread customer perception is that they are on hold an average of *11.5 minutes*.¹ This tells us that even an answer speed of thirty seconds won't be fast enough! Customers clearly want to get through faster.

As far as accuracy goes, the picture's even bleaker. In a 2011 customer experience impact report, 57 percent of the customers surveyed said that companies are

“clueless” and that the customer often knows more about the company than the customer service representative. Even worse, 89 percent of customers took their business to a competitor following a poor customer experience.² Clearly, speed and accuracy have a profound effect on the customer experience.

At the same time, companies regularly measure the overall customer experience by tracking metrics like first call resolution, customer satisfaction, and net promoter score. Most service desks measure these metrics each day and report on them monthly, if not weekly. But despite knowing what their customers think about them, they're still not giving their customers what they want and expect. What gives?

¹ ContactBabel, “The US Contact Center Decision-Makers’ Guide,” p. 98. Available online at www.contactbabel.com.

² RightNow, “2011 Customer Experience Impact (CEI) Report: Getting to the Heart of the Consumer and Brand Relationship,” p. 4-5. Available online at www.oracle.com.



Aligning with the Company's Customer Experience Strategy

In fairness, the typical service desk agent's day has become increasingly more complex over the past several decades. Today's consumers are more empowered than ever. They have a wealth of information at their disposal, they are extremely knowledgeable about any company's products and services, and they demand a higher level of service.

Often, after customers have exhausted their self-service options, the last stop is the service desk and, more times than not, they're frustrated and their issues are complex. It's at this point that service desk agents hold your brand—and the customer's loyalty—in their hands. It's make-or-break time, and everybody knows it.

As the volume of complex inquiries coming into the service desk has increased, this pressure has led many companies to adjust their customer experience strategies to make sure that frontline agents are equipped to deliver personalized customer service and support.

But the volume and complexity of calls isn't the only problem. Another issue is the expanding number of interaction points a customer now has with your company. While some customers prefer to interact through social media, others want to send an email or talk to an agent on the phone. Still other customer interactions are cross-channel, with customers moving from one channel to the next and expecting continuity between the touch points—an element that is missing in many enterprise strategies. Each of these channels provides another opportunity for agents to either build loyalty or drive customers away.

Brand-conscious companies have responded by trying to align the service desk with the company's overall customer experience strategy, even hiring executives specifically dedicated to this task. But providing a consistently outstanding customer experience is still a challenge for most service and support organizations.

Part of the challenge is that training time hasn't increased at the same rate as call complexity. Finding time to train and coach agents so they're equipped to handle complex customer issues is of paramount importance, but—as we all know—time is the service desk's most precious resource.

Overstaffing and Personal Trainers

Even the best-run desks have peaks and valleys in call volume. However, staffing to peaks leads to unproductive valleys when call volume tapers off. Most desks typically staff to peaks of 80 percent, because this is what has been widely accepted as tolerable to customers. However, as customer expectations increase, this is beginning to change.

In a staff of dozens or even hundreds of agents, there will be a wide range of knowledge and experience. On top of that, each individual agent will have different strengths, weaknesses, and gaps in knowledge, making it difficult to ensure that everyone will deliver accurate answers to customers. Together with time constraints, these factors make it difficult to deliver cost-effective speed and accuracy.

However, if service desks continue to operate in this way, we will fail to meet customer expectations, which will, in turn, affect

customer loyalty. When employees fail to perform, this has an effect on loyalty, and all of this has an effect on the service desk's ability to achieve its overall goals. So, knowing that staffing to peaks, overstaffing the valleys, and bringing in a personal trainer to address each individual agent's weaknesses just isn't realistic, how do we overcome this challenge?

The Old Paradigm: The Service Desk as a Baseball Team

In order to give customers what they really want, service desks must be willing to challenge some of the paradigms of our time and think differently about the service desk and its role in the customer experience strategy. For example, most service desks today are run like a baseball team.

Agents spend about 60 percent of their time handling calls, another 11 percent idle (logged into the ACD and waiting for calls), and 29 percent completing various shrinkage activities (logged out of the ACD and completing off-phone work).³

Like baseball players waiting on and off the field, agents spend a lot of time standing around, waiting for something to happen. Agents are logged in for some of the time (on-field) and logged off some of the time (off-field), but even when they are on the field and logged in, 15 percent of this "on-field" time is spent sitting idle, waiting for the next call. This adds up to 17 hours of idle time per month *per agent*!

Idle time is extremely inefficient, but there's a myth in the service desk industry that agents need this idle time because it is restorative and it keeps them from burning out. But most of these breaks come in two-minute intervals, which don't allow agents enough time to complete any meaningful activity.

This is the way the service desk has traditionally operated. It doesn't allow the service desk to give customers what they want, yet we have stuck with it for thirty years. But what if we thought about the service desk differently? What if we could deliver a higher level of service, improve efficiency, and reduce agent attrition—all without increasing costs?

The New Paradigm: The Service Desk as a Basketball Team

Instead of a baseball team, we should think about the service desk like a basketball team, with players dynamically switching between defense and offense and constantly moving up and down the court. By allowing agents to switch between on-phone and off-phone activities, we can make them more efficient and productive.

³ The data on idle time and shrinkage was collected by surveys conducted and sponsored by Knowlagent. The following reports are both available online at www.knowlagent.com: "2010 Contact Center Shrinkage Survey" and "2011 Knowlagent Contact Center Productivity Survey."



To do this, we'd need to take better advantage of idle time. For example, when call volume drops, idle time can be redistributed in fifteen-minute blocks and agents can choose from a personalized queue of non-call-related activities designed to make them better at their jobs and more equipped to provide accurate responses to customer queries. These activities can include anything from coaching, training, or reading the knowledge base to processing email and completing other back-office activities.

Under this model, agents no longer need "off-field" time (shrinkage) because they can complete these activities while they wait for their next calls. When call volume spikes, they can quickly and smoothly transition to answering calls.

This is what's known as an "intraday" time management methodology, and the service desks that have implemented this methodology have seen profound results. And while intraday time management has long been a manual process, there are new automated technologies that are taking this process to a whole new level. The result? Customers get what they want: speed (service level) and accuracy (expertise). Agents get what they want: variety and personalized development. Management gets what it wants: customer loyalty, low attrition, and efficiency.

Everybody wins.



About the Author

Matt McConnell is the chairman and CEO of Knowlagent, the Atlanta-based company he cofounded in 1995. Matt's passion is helping his clients improve their customer service by improving the performance of their service desk agents. He is the author of *Customer Service at a Crossroads* (Anton Press, 2003), he holds eleven software patents, and he's a regular speaker at industry events. To learn more

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