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Five Prerequisites of a Profit Center

In February in Orlando, a Loyalty Management Strategy Conference/2004 was sponsored by Omega Management Group Corp. The event brought, for the first time, contact center managers and operational staff in the same room with CRM executives from customer service, sales, marketing and human resources to “compare notes” to determine how best to boost revenue via customer loyalty and satisfaction while at the same time reduce costs through maximized productivity.

The group uncovered five ways to accomplish these objectives and turn contact centers into profit centers.

1. **Translate business goals into contact center goals.**

By benchmarking customer satisfaction as well as performance analytics, contact centers can better align themselves with the company's business goals. For example, increasing agent call handling volume by reducing talk time is one example of reducing costs and boosting efficiency. That may look good for the contact center's performance, but is it meeting the company's business goal of building customer satisfaction and loyalty? Often not. Short talk times seldom allow the customer to ask all related questions or agents to test for understanding. In fact, the pressure to dispatch calls as quickly as possible gives the caller the impression that they are raising problems rather than acknowledging that they are valued customers who have legitimate questions or issues that need to be fully addressed. Contact centers cannot afford to be penny-wise and pound-foolish.

2. **Introduce sales and marketing teams to contact center groups.**

In most companies, these functional areas seldom meet or exchange information. Yet they almost always talk to the same customers. Contact center staff should know how sales and marketing positions the company, while sales and marketing should know how the contact center addresses and handles its customers. The more closely the two departments follow the same game plan, the more likely they'll win the battle for customer satisfaction and loyalty through a true team effort.

3. Take action when exception events occur.

While routine events are the way things generally occur, it's how centers react to the unforeseen (the extreme positive or negative developments) that spell success or failure. Too often contact centers aren't aware of the extreme situation “triggers” that often fall into their laps, such as the filing of lawsuit against the firm (negative) or the patent approval on a new product (positive). When a caller is absolutely irate for some reason, the company may be in imminent danger of losing that customer forever—but what's the trigger? The contact center *must* do more than simply record the call outcome or follow the prescribed problem escalation procedure. At the same time, when customers call because they're ecstatic over some product feature or service provided, the contact center *must* be sure news of that happy customer doesn't remain a closely held secret. In all cases of extreme good or bad events, contact center staff must alert appropriate business executives so high-level action can be taken to resolve a crisis or capitalize on a home run.

4. Measure customer satisfaction and loyalty.

Since the contact center is the crossroads of most high-volume interaction with customers, take advantage of the situation by capturing data that measures customer satisfaction and loyalty. For inbound calls, this can be done without adding appreciably to talk time. By sprinkling just a few context-specific questions into the script, agents can obtain critical qualitative data that can be extremely valuable to the company's competitiveness. For outbound calls, of course, a formal satisfaction program and campaign can be developed to gain a comprehensive understanding of what customers think of the company's service and support capabilities along with other customer touch points.

This measurement step is key because it builds a case for the ultimate motivator: cash or other in-kind reward program. By gathering even partial customer satisfaction and loyalty data, contact center staff and management begin to see that their performance has a direct bearing on the company's high-level business results.

5. Compensate your contact center staff for increases in customer satisfaction.

This step motivates teams to exceed customer expectations by rewarding them financially for measurable improvements in customer satisfaction and loyalty. Why should this only apply to salespeople? Whether it's cash, merchandise or any other program that tracks and rewards positive performance, compensating contact center staff for doing their jobs exceptionally well not only serves the company's best interests, but also helps reduce agent churn and builds a spirit of teamwork at all levels of the contact center.

Does top management regularly ask you, “How are things going over there in the contact center?” If not, following suggestions such as these should get you attention at the C-level. When that happens, it's a clear signal that you've become equal partner in the company's strategic hierarchy.

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