

Call Center Sourcing In-, Out- and Home-

Two of the most common – and most expensive – challenges of operating a call center are seasonal or cyclical variations in volume and the intra-day fluctuation inherent in the distribution of inbound calls. The former involves the considerable capital cost of “peak” resources (computers, phones, headsets, work surfaces, space – and in some cases, even additional facilities) not to mention the logistics of recruiting, interviewing, hiring, training and ultimately releasing a huge temporary workforce. The hourly peaks and valleys that characterize the arrival pattern of inbound calls invariably result in over or under staffing at any given point in time. The call center manager is often caught in the unenviable position of trying to balance service and cost and constantly explaining why the performance of one or the other is unacceptable.

Many companies believe that the customer relationship is too valuable to be entrusted to anyone outside the organization. For such companies who completely in-source their call center(s), the investment in seasonal personnel and infrastructure that goes unutilized or under utilized for most of the year is an accepted cost of that philosophy. They manage intra-day variability by staffing to handle a certain percentage of peak hour volume and by assigning other duties such as mail order entry, e-mail responses and outbound customer calls during the slow intervals. These are reasonable, and often quite effective, attempts at preserving productivity; but the administrative oversight involved in constantly shifting resources can become onerous, and the process often results in higher-priced employees performing the tasks of lower-priced employees.

For companies who believe that alignment with the right external partner can provide as good a customer experience as they, themselves, can offer, outsourcing is a viable option that can result in considerable savings. Certainly it obviates the need for costly seasonal build-up and breakdown. It can also effectively address the balance between service and productivity through routing calls to the external center once a designated queue threshold has been reached. Traditional outsourcing to another bricks-and-mortar call center is still subject, however, to the disruptions of inclement weather and other situations that keep employees from getting to the office. In addition, many clients may have the same seasonal requirements, causing the outsourcing center to face infrastructure and service/productivity challenges similar to those they are solving for their customers. These conditions can put pressure on the ability of an outsourcing center to consistently meet target service levels.

Enter home-sourcing. Customer reps working out of their homes is a concept that has been around for 20 years or more. Today, most large Automated Call Distributors (ACD's) offer a module to accommodate the inclusion of home agents in the call center network. In addition there is a growing number of outsourcing companies which employ a regional or national network of home agents to provide their clients a level of flexibility and responsiveness that is difficult, if not impossible, to attain through in-sourcing or traditional out-sourcing. Such a network can expand or contract in near real time to respond to unexpected changes in volume and is nearly impervious to conditions that would cause individuals to be unavailable for work. Whether home-sourcing is accomplished internally or in concert with an external partner, recruiting efforts can be tailored to a particular employee profile and/or to a particular geographical area. Former employees and current customers who are familiar with the company and its products could be specifically targeted as could qualified prospects who, for a host of reasons - including family considerations, physical limitations, unavailable transportation, or others - need or want to work from home. A company with a network of retail stores and outlets enjoys the further advantage of using these facilities as seasonal hiring hubs at which on-site interviews, training and product familiarization could be conducted by company personnel. Finally, there is considerable flexibility in the extent to which at-home agents are assimilated into the core organization. Call center leaders can track agent status, monitor customer calls and provide assistance just as they do for in-house employees. Ideally, home agents would be incorporated into a team structure as remote members, even attending team meetings through audio or video conferencing. Properly managed, they would be recognized as important contributors to a well-run operation and would experience the critical sense of belonging to the team.