Three back-office hacks for improved customer service

By Wynand Smit

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Communication, time and resolution work in relationship with one another and can all be improved. If they're made more efficient, the customer service machine will be faster and smoother, ensuring that what needs to get done does, and that customers experience great service, boosting loyalty and more business.

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The back office is highly instrumental in providing support to customers, but this can only work in concert with the front office or contact centre.

1. Back-office workflow efficiency

Although many customers engage with the front office, or contact centre, much of the actual work has to be done in the back office. An example would be change of bank details: the agent might log the request, but somebody in the back office with the relevant rights and access may have to do the actual work. So if either of those two people drop the ball, then service levels are less than optimal.

In the sales environment, if there's a process such as quality assurance, verification or something else that involves the back office, it can affect the time-to-money ratio, or cost of sales.

In order to ensure that the back office plays its role effectively, there must be effective communication mechanisms between front and back office. An example of the importance of this access: Customers call the contact centre and get told they have a billing issue, but that they can't speak to the billing person. There must be communication channels and access to the right resources at the right time.

In terms of workflow, the distribution of that work to such back-office individuals is essential, firstly for visibility and also so that it can be seen that they actually do the work and deliver on the promise. In this case, the ability to measure an issue to track processes through to resolution must be visible. So the workflow goes through stages, an issue may be escalated, the timeframes can be seen and this provides the means to report on whether or not it has been done well, and also so that the loop is closed and someone communicates back to the customer.

This 'loop closing' is important, and the responsibility for this should preferably be with a person in the front office; even if the back office has helped a customer with a specific issue, the front office must be the one to drive the communication in order to achieve effective resolution.

2. Rooting out problem areas

A problem area can be the lack of training or knowledge in the front office (when it comes to whom to contact, when to contact them, and for what specific issue): even though they might have access to the back office, they don't necessarily know which questions to ask which people. The lack of accountability or ownership of an issue can be problematic, specifically because those departments typically report to different people – somebody must remain accountable.

A specific technical issue could be disparate systems, so you call a number and you don't know if someone is available, you call, and they're not available. These days, with unified communication which is what should typically be supplied to back offices and contact centre-to-front offices, it means presence is a feature: it can be seen who is available to take a call before a call is placed. That feature resolves the issue of not knowing who is present and in the back office and whether they're available to assist.

3. Cutting down on time

From the customer's perspective, the quicker the job is done, and if the job is done well, the better the experience for the customer; the faster the use of time is optimised, the more efficient the company can be in providing resolution to the customer.

From the perspective of the business, optimising time has a great impact on resources, the more efficiently time is used, the more time the company has. There are two scenarios:

1. *Becoming proactive*: if the work that's supposed to be done can be done in a shorter time, the rest of the time can be spent in providing a better, more proactive, service to a customer.

   The time spent in the contact centre (and, similarly, in the back-office environment), a large contribution to the cost of time is the actual cost of the person, say, 71% of the cost, for example: the longer they take to solve issues, the longer the calls and processes take and the more time they need to spend on doing the actual task, the higher the cost of service will be, factoring in the cost of sale or the cost of collection, depending on whether or not it's a sales or collections environment.

It's really about paying attention to what's going on between front and back office, and ensuring that between the two there's efficient communication in place, so that at all times the customer's needs are prioritised, the workforce is productive, and resolutions can be carried out and monitored.

ABOUT WYNAND SMIT

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