



The new rules for measurement

Call centre directors are quitting KPIs in favour of more revealing statistics, says **Claudia Hathway**

As a call centre manager, you spend a good deal of your time thinking in numbers. You need to know how your call centre is performing, so you gather the statistics that tell you how many calls each agent is taking and how much each of those calls is costing you. That's the only way to work out how effective your centre is on a day-to-day basis, right? Well, no, actually.

It seems that we may have been getting it all backwards, as Tony Heard, sales director at outsourcing firm Teletech explains: "There has been a conscious move over the last year away from measuring performance on inputs such as cost per agent or average handling time, and towards measuring outputs like cost per sale or cost to serve. To be honest, I think it's about time, as it's a much more realistic measure of a

centre's overall performance and the actual cost to a firm."

Indeed, Alan Heap of training company Purple Monster insists that measuring within the wrong parameters can also be damaging for the culture within your call centre. "Many types of performance measurement imposed on staff today focus on negative rather than positive aspects of performance," he says. So, if this way of measuring is so harmful, why do managers insist on using them?

Unfortunately, these metrics are often what are easiest to collect because the technology in today's call centres measures the number of calls made per hour and the duration of those calls as a matter of course. The good news is that many firms are moving away from the harder statistics and are aligning their measurements with what the business is actually trying

to achieve — profitable staff and good customer service.

So, at the top of the list of the new rules of measurement is having the correct recruitment policies and motivation strategies in place for your CSRs and team leaders.

"It's no good recruitment people who are not interested in connecting with customers and then trying to force certain behaviours on them," argues Robert Myatt, a director at business psychology firm Kaisen Consulting. "It is vital to give CSRs and agents clear goals and parameters. Essentially, what you need to do is lay out what an acceptable performance looks like and then also let them know what constitutes an exceptional performance." Myatt also recommends dispensing with the negative, as "a preoccupation with the unacceptable is de-motivating over time".

Hedda Bird of consultancy 3C Associates agrees that focusing on positive goals is best: "Giving people meaningful goals can motivate them to take on more work, as well as make them feel more important," she says.

Heap also blames the preponderance of scripts for poor performance by creating negativity and a lack of genuine motivation amongst teams. "Scripts give a strong message to an individual that they are not trusted to think on their feet, removing any responsibility from them," he explains.

While an element of scripting may be necessary for your business, especially in compliance situations, it's not advisable to use scripts to try and force agents into a certain way of behaving towards customers. "One call centre I came across was trying to encourage agents to establish a rapport," adds Myatt, "so they had them say the customer's name three times within the first minute." Trying to create this kind of formula can backfire, as it often sounds forced and leaves the customer with a negative impression," he continues. "Those agents with a natural desire to engage with the customer will feel stifled by a rigid script."

But this can be a bit of a leap of faith for some companies because allowing agents freedom to answer calls in the best way for each individual customer initially reflects badly on traditional KPIs. Average handling time will be up and number of calls answered will go down.

However, this does mean that the customer is getting a better service and first call resolution will go up. As Heap explains: "Agents who present a more human face invariably won't reach their targeted number of calls and so will receive a 'poor' rating, even if their success rate in terms of call outcomes is superior. Employees who do as they are told appear to be doing a better job than those who seek to

innovate — and yet ironically it's the latter who will likely thrive in more senior positions in the firm."

An argument that could be used to counter these measures is that they are more difficult to quantify than the hard stats we are all used to measuring. The number of sales per hour, for example is easy to put a value to. But how do you quantify whether or not the customer was happy at the end of the call?

There are any number of companies out there offering customer satisfaction questionnaires after call completion, but these are difficult because the very people you want to answer the survey — your best customers — are the least likely to take part in such a survey. Call monitoring is one way of determining the success of a call, but this is much more labour-intensive than simply printing off a series of stats.

So, when it comes to measurement, it's important to take a long-term view. It's extremely tempting in the minute-by-minute world of call centre management to become short-sighted. But don't fall into the trap of assuming that because your call centre metrics appear to show a huge number of calls taken or sales made that your centre is a success. Real success comes from making your customers happy and the only way you can truly measure that is to free your agents from the constraints of traditional metrics. ■

Performance measurements focus too often on the negative

