The 2005 Voice of the Customer Year in Review …and Plan for the Future

By Dr. Jodie Monger

Another great year is in the history books. It is time to document our lessons and those of others to insure that 2006 is the year we solidify our contact centers as strategic weapons and refute the pervasive cost center myth. So did your leadership team do all that was possible to listen, properly measure, and leverage the voice of your customers? Will 2006 be the Year of the Relationship Management Centers?

We all know, the need for customer service never stops, call lengths continue to increase as self-service reduces the easy calls and the focus on the contact center has never been greater. Scrutiny, self-reflection, and future planning are what this year is all about. Customer Relationship Metrics has seen many changes in the industry during 2005. Our learnings, observations and studies may assist with your own resolutions for 2006. Do things differently, even slightly, and you may be in the same place next year. More than likely you will then be worse because your competition will have improved and customer expectations will have increased.

Make your list and refer to it throughout the year. When you get a chance, give us an update on your progress. Or call us for some moral support.

As a contact center professional committed to listen to the voice of my customers and dedicated to bring out the best in my employees, I will:

1. Bring the Voice of the Customer to the conference room table

No matter how much information and numbers are available to the management team, no one can argue with valid customer feedback. With the Voice of the Customer (VOC) in hand, management can hear what customers are saying – about your company, your service and the individual representatives who assisted them – and use it in the conference room meetings. Engineering the customer experience starts here.

2. Go beyond traditional metrics to create value throughout the entire organization

Contact centers are recognized as relationship management centers within organizations and it is time to change the published metrics to reinforce this new value position. Customer-focused metrics take value from the contact center, taking it to the organization. Package the customer intelligence and share it. Make it a part of your mission to create a dependence on your center. Start by measuring in ways that will assist other parts of the organization to make decisions.

3. Measure customer experiences for each interaction channel

Customer experience data from all channels should be used to create the contact center value measurement for the organization. Each channel should be profitable and these measurements should assist with the overall view of the contact center as a strategic weapon, or in need of investment. Caution – avoid channel survey slamming. In order to measure correctly, you must measure the customer experience in their respective channel of contact. By using specific metrics, you can also identify if agent skills and support tools are suited for the channel they are supporting. If you don't measure the right things, you will be unable to take appropriate actions.

If you do not learn to measure what elevates you from being a cost center, you will not be viewed as a strategic weapon. You will have to live and work with the cost center perception, as long as you perpetuate it.

4. Collect the *right* kind of customer satisfaction data

Valid customer feedback referred to in Resolution #3 is the bottom layer of the Hierarchy of Measurement Needs pyramid. This is often the point where too many programs fail, or do worse by causing poor management decisions. Review your measurement program to insure its validity and reliability. It (or them for multiple channels) should include more than numeric satisfaction scores. How do the customers feel about the experience? Resolve to have an effective VOC program that collects scores AND comments. It's the *feelings and intent* behind the scores and analysis that are critical to the process. The right data also means having enough data (sample size) and robust data (enough details of the experience are measured).

5. Collect customer satisfaction data at the right time

The best method for an accurate and reliable VOC measurement is by real-time post-call surveys. Evaluations are completed immediately (no call back) after the interaction with the agent and allow the caller to answer both qualitative and quantitative questions about their interaction. Evaluations are assigned to the specific agent who handled the call. According to scientific research, analysis from evaluations that are delayed contain several biases (errors) and is, therefore, not as reliable. Use delayed methods to assess other types of service quality, for example, a follow up process or the correction of billing problems, but not for customer service evaluations.

6. Use the Voice of the Customer to make everybody happy

Since the Voice of the Customer is directly from customers, the insight will improve training and coaching programs within the center. An effectively trainined agent will have a better experience, personally and for the company. Track employee satisfaction over time to prove what the research shows - happier agents generate happier customers. Agents are happier because meaningful feedback and development is possible and compensation and scoring are tied to more meaningful Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). This is one cycle you want to be on – the one with positive momentum. Customers are happier because they are increasingly getting better service from your contact center and agents are happier because they have the confidence to provide better service, and so on. The outcomes from the VOC measurement program are felt by customers, employees and the company.

7. Insure that the quality scorecard gives the complete view of agent performance

While training programs may be delivered to large groups, monitoring and coaching provides the individualized attention for the agents on the floor. Although monitoring provides some individualized training when time permits, this is only an internal assessment. In the majority of cases, agents receive coaching and/or monitoring on what the *monitoring form* deems necessary. These are internal expectations. To get a complete view, three pieces of the quality scorecard are necessary - the quality monitoring based on communicated standards, the call metrics (e.g., AHT, ACW, adherence to schedule, etc.) and the most often forgotten – but most important – Voice of the Customer.

8. Identify the ROI of training program

When the CFO asks about the ROI of your training program, how will you respond? Training is *not* a cost of doing business; it's an investment that *must* have a positive return. If you are unable to communicate how training leads to performance and impacts the bottom line, then your CFO will make that decision for you. If your training curriculum is the same as it was two years ago, there is no way that your program is customer-driven because your customers' expectations change continuously. The focus must not be on what you *think* the customer needs; but rather what they tell you each time they speak with you. Prepare your agents to be more effective advocates for your company. So that you can anticipate the CFOs, or any other management member's questions, here are three ways to validate the ROI of a coaching program:

- Customer value, or revenue generated by retaining customers vs. cost of marketing and sales to obtain a new customer
- Savings as a result of minimizing attrition; many representatives leave a position for lack of development or communication with their supervisor
- Savings accrued as a result of performance efficiency, such a first contact resolution.

9. Have a plan because "close enough" doesn't count

You may say that your VOC results are "close enough" and you are not concerned about the accuracy of the data. Why wouldn't you question the results to be as accurate as possible? Let us put this "close enough" concept to the test. To what extent does the Quality Control process affect scores for the tens of thousands of real-time post-call surveys Metrics collects each month? On average, between four and five percent of the surveys we collect need to be adjusted in some manner. Doesn't sound like much does it? But when you consider the use of the results and what "dirty data" may do to your processes and people, it is four or five percent too much.

10. Know that customers make errors when answering surveys

One of the most common errors when using customer data is the assumption that all customers completed the survey correctly. Without a doubt, this is an incorrect assumption and underscores the importance of a comprehensive quality control process BEFORE reporting is generated and you attempt to act on the results. Customers can be scoring different agents than the ones who assisted them on the original call due to numerous reasons. The most common error, by far, is customers that reverse (flip) the survey scoring scale. By giving the customer an opportunity to leave a comment, and then using comments in a quality control process to clean the data, it allows the scores to be explained and the data to be valid.

11. Not count on "dirty data" to make important decisions

Most people in contact centers anxiously await Customer Metrics because it is the validation of their existence. Unfortunately too many assume, without questioning, that the results are reliable. Without questioning the results, you are likely to accept this information and make important decisions based on incorrect information. Do not accept results generated from "dirty data". Dirty data points are simply taken at face value from the customer – essentially in a raw format. Think of this "dirty" data as noise – as you will be hearing about it from all levels within your organization. This management error puts your company, your center, your agents, and your ROI calculations that use this data, and you at risk.

12. Recognize that what we measure drives behavior

Stop to think about what you *really* measure because what you measure truly drives the behavior of the representatives, the team managers, the quality team, and the center manager. As an example, consider Average Handle Time (AHT) as a standard metric in the contact center. In most cases, the management team and team leaders determine AHT goals for the general types of calls. All representatives are then held to that standard, no matter what direction the call may take, or the type of customer on the phone. While we intend to encourage effective call control, this metric teaches the representatives to *manage* the call to that AHT goal number, which may be contradictory to the customer's needs. It is too tempting for a representative to watch the amount of time on the phone and end the call when it comes close to the AHT target. This is obviously not the behavior we intend to encourage and the AHT metric does little to tell us if the customer experience is satisfactory for callers. Think about measuring the customers' perception of being treated as a valued customer!!

13. Teach agents to understand the customer

Agents do need to understand company policy, products and services, how the technology works, workflow and basic customer service skills. Another critical aspect is that agents understand service from the *customer's point of view*. From the beginning introduce the Voice of the Customer (VOC) standards and expectations as an on-going customer-driven tool for improving service delivery. Accountability from the beginning creates the essential ingredients for optimal customer satisfaction.

As 2005 has come to a close, we have seen many changes to the contact center industry on many levels. Many of the traditional metrics, training programs and customer feedback models are changing. Why? Because the Voice of the Customer is being heard more loudly, more often and more effectively than ever before. And for that, 2006 shows new promise to be a year where customers are not just heard, but *listened* to.

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