APPLY AGENT BEST PRACTICES AND BRIDGE THE SUCCESS GAP

Product No. 10041

ResponseDesignCorporation

CREATING THE UNCOMMON CALL CENTER

Apply Agent Best Practices and Bridge the Success Gap

Abstract

Prepare your customer contact agents for the 21st century by laying a foundation for their success. Best-practice companies do not leave their ability to meet employees' needs to chance - they focus on building the infrastructure that will ensure it. They do this step-by-step over time, with gradual and controlled changes. They deploy effective communication strategies at each and every step. And in the end, they are recognized for their unique and innovative practices in identifying, hiring, training, and rewarding successful agents.

This article highlights the findings from the American Productivity and Quality Center (APQC) consortium study entitled "The 21st Century Contact Center Rep." By providing insights on the strategies of seven best-in-class companies, you will learn about the practices to which they attribute their success. Using this information, you can shore up your foundation and bridge the gap to success.

Product No. 10041

Response Design Corporation | www.ResponseDesign.com | 609.601.5866

ResponseDesignCorporation
CREATING THE UNCOMMON CALL CENTER

Apply Agent Best Practices and Bridge the Success Gap

Kathryn E. Jackson Ph.D.

We worked with the American Productivity & Quality Center (APQC) as the subject matter experts for a consortium study entitled The "21st Century Call Center Rep." (The APQC is a not-for-profit organization dedicated to the transfer of knowledge.) The purpose of the study was to determine how the management of best-practice contact centers identified, hired, trained, and rewarded successful agents. In this effort, we joined with 21 sponsoring contact centers to conduct research and select seven contact centers innovative in supporting their agents. Managers from each of these "select" seven centers agreed to provide information to the APQC through questionnaires, site visits and telephone interviews. Following are some of the highlights of the study findings.

Building a Bridge

We found that in many ways, building a contact center capable of supporting agents into the 21st century is like building a bridge. From the time a bridge is envisioned to the time it bears its load, designers, developers, and project managers must accomplish many tasks. They must build the foundation of the bridge and, to provide stability, embed it deep below the water level. They must build concrete and steel piers on the foundation which extend up out of the water and are strong enough to bear weight. They must design spans, horizontal ties of consistent quality, crossing from one land mass to another, forming the bridge's connective tissue. Finally, they must install a safety railing.

Contact center managers are involved in similar tasks. Instead of pouring the foundation, they develop a strong foundational culture. Instead of positioning piers, they position a comprehensive agent-support organization. Instead of laying spans, they establish strong linkages between the training, monitoring, evaluating, and compensating of agents.

Finally, contact center managers provide agents with a safety railing by understanding and satisfying employee needs.

Creating a Foundational Culture

The study found that culture is critical in supporting the agent of the future. The foundation of a bridge rests deep under the water. However, even though it is invisible, it is the basis for supporting all action taken up on the bridge. The culture of the contact center is similar. It is the basis for many of the decisions everyone, from managers to front-line agents, make.

The companies that will support the 21st century contact center agent are investing right now in their employee base. A manager of one best-practice company said, "We focus on our employees. They feel special when they are hired and feel they need to give 100 percent."

In our study, we found best-practice companies develop a culture of:

- attention to stated values. Management may state values, but unless these values are reflected in the culture, they are of no use. In successful companies, values provide the framework for staff meeting agendas. In one company, because its values relate to its associates first, its customers second and business issues third; meeting agendas are prepared to address associates, customers and business issues in this order.
- visible agent support from contact center management. A supportive culture is one in which management consistently makes itself available to agents. Open-door policies are the rule. Paths are formalized to enable agents to escalate their issues and concerns.

Product No. 10041

Response Design Corporation | www.ResponseDesign.com | 609.601.5866

ResponseDesignCorporation
CREATING THE UNCOMMON CALL CENTER

- visible agent support from corporate management. Agents are very aware of their perceived importance to corporate management. In cases where corporate executives come onto the floor, sit with agents, and take calls, the agents begin to understand that they are a chief link between these executives and the customers.
- mutual respect. In best-practice companies, respect is demanded of and given to the front-line agent. In successful organizations, agents are considered "customers" of those individuals providing agent support: trainers, managers, forecasters, schedulers, etc. Hence, the extent to which these supporters are able to "satisfy" agents is measured and compensated.

In at least one best-practice company, employees created "rules to live by" to help ensure they would be treated fairly, not only by their managers, but also by their peers. They were part of a cross-functional team that wrote, distributed and solicited buy-in for this "code" spelling out the way one employee was to treat another. Since its development, this code has been an essential part of a contact center atmosphere of respect for the individual.

Some organizations that are not best practice advertise themselves as companies that empower employees while managing daily activities in the old "command and control" style. This type of conflict hinders the development of the truly effective 21st century front-line employee. How companies reward, recognize, involve and compensate the front line flows from the vision the company has for the contact center. This vision directly impacts the level of quality that the contact center can deliver to the customer.

Placing the Piers of A Comprehensive Support Organization

The development of agents' support organization is critical. It is the support organization that bears the weight of the contact center and gives the agents the stability they need to be productive. A support organization must be comprehensive, and in best-practice contact centers can include:

- internal help desks to answer questions from agents;
- supervisor support lines to handle escalated calls;
- a dedicated team to manage service level desks, managing call volume and service level on a half-hour basis; and
- transition teams to ease the new hire into proficiency. The goal of transition teams is to allow agents to take information from theoretical to practical. According to one best-practice manager, "Managers, trainers, and the officer of training form a tight circle around the new agents to ensure they are competent to do their jobs." In this company, the systems group documents the number of times new agents call in for their assistance. If a single agent calls in repeatedly for assistance with his or her system, the systems group alerts the agent's manager that additional training may be necessary for the individual agent.

In each of the best-practice companies, ultimate customer satisfaction is the focus of the support function.

Laying Spans of Linkages

Managers successfully moving toward the 21st century are careful to respect the linkages that impact their agents. These linkages start with the definition of core competencies (creating a picture of the successful agent) and follow a definite path through recruiting and hiring, assessing performance, rewarding and recognizing, compensation, and training (new hire and on-going).

Product No. 10041

Response Design Corporation | www.ResponseDesign.com | 609.601.5866

The development of strong linkages demands exquisite attention to detail and a high level of communication. Managers, trainers, human resource and technology professionals have to make a commitment that when they change one area of the span, all of its linkages are examined to see if they need to be changed as well.

In every contact center there are a variety of linkages. If linkages are not respected, the contact center team experiences "pain," for example:
- Agents hired for one strength are measured on another.
- Agents find their training does not prepare them for their jobs and feel they are out "on their own."
- The level of quality across sites, even across the center, is inconsistent.

Best-practice companies respect linkages through a comprehensive performance management system. The first step in establishing linkages, the definition of agent competencies, is the lynch pin to the performance management infrastructure. There has been much talk about competencies ever since David McClelland started the work in the 1940s. Their popularity has grown significantly in the past few years in the contact center's human performance management system. Companies realize that, when implemented correctly, the performance management system as defined by the competencies can and will determine the success for both the individual and the contact center.

As a part of exercises to identify competencies, most best-practice managers profile successful agents in their organizations. Several were surprised by their findings. Successful agents were not always the most highly educated or the most experienced, but all had a stable work history and an innate desire to serve customers. According to one site visit host, "We can train applicants on the systems interface and business knowledge, but the ability to be customer-oriented is inborn." Other frequently-mentioned characteristics of a successful agent included tolerance for stress, ability to work on a team, ability to learn, and ability to identify one's internal customer.

With a picture of the competent agent firmly in hand, best-practice managers screen intensively. Study results show that trained professionals on cross-functional teams do interviewing in best-practice companies. In many best-practice companies, managers believe that engaging the prospective agent in an interview conducted over the phone is an effective way to link present skills with future performance.

The picture of a competent agent has two sides, the soft side (responsiveness, friendliness, energy, etc.) and the hard side (proficiency with technology, product knowledge, etc.). The training programs of best-practice contact centers we studied mirror this balance. Through role play, tape recording and mentoring, trainers in best-practice contact centers seek to link training back to this complete picture of the competent agent.

In every best-practice company, the performance management system evolves over time.

However, when the managers change or alter the system, they do so with the agent in mind. The changes are gradual and controlled, with communication strategies in place for each step.
The performance management system truly does span the bridge, providing a level surface on which agents can work successfully.

Retaining Agents by Providing a Safety Railing

Agent retention is a challenge in most contact centers. However, contact centers that are satisfying the agent's needs on a regular basis are those that don't lose agents over the side of the bridge, even in stormy weather.

Product No. 10041

According to best practice companies there are three needs that management must meet for each employee to be successful. When the management team supplies these needs, then the company is positioned to experience greater success. The three needs are:

- The need to have clear expectations. Companies have a variety of ways for communicating expectations to employees, but in all cases, it is the responsibility of the front-line agent's immediate supervisor to communicate expectations clearly, carefully, frequently and explicitly.

  Best-practice companies begin the process of communicating expectations even before the agent is hired. When possible, applicants sit down with experienced agents on the phone so they are able to feel the atmosphere and the pace of the job before deciding to accept it. In best cases, applicants question the agents on issues such as job satisfaction, degree of difficulty of the job, and company culture.

  If you were to ask ten agents what it takes to be counted as an expert in your contact center, how many different answers would you get? If you would get more than one, you have some work to do supplying this need to your agents.

- The need to have consistent, clear feedback. Best-practice management believes that high levels of communication and a detailed performance management system best support agents. One company provides formal feedback on a monthly basis, giving agents a score that is a combination of qualitative assessment and quantitative measures composed of number of calls per hour, etc. The agents know exactly where their managers would like them to be in terms of this score and are given the training and the tools to attain it. In this company, goals for the entire center pass from corporate management to contact center management. These goals are then further distributed down to the supervisors of the various groups. Monthly, each agent is coached on the role he or she is to play in meeting the goal.

If you were to ask your agents where they are on the continuum of excellence would each be able to clearly state

the contact center performance standards and where they stand in relationship to those standards? If agents

haven't received feedback on their performance in the last two to three weeks then you have some work to do.

- The need to learn and grow. Best-practice companies desire that agents be successful, and are proactive in providing them opportunities to do so. A huge, all encompassing, resource consuming, continuous education program is not always necessary. Many successful centers train "just-in-time" and develop employees step-by-step. However, in all best-practice companies, trainers work with managers to carefully align the learning opportunities with the goals of the center and to make learning available to agents (usually at their desktops and usually 24 hours a day).

How many of your agents have documented action plans? This action plan is not the yearly appraisal but rather a

monthly look at how they (along with the coach's help) can improve their performance. Would your agents be

able to clearly state the action plan they are on to continue their quest for excellence? If not…

  A trend in contact center management is to make agents responsible for their own learning and development. Best-practice contact centers identify and communicate growth opportunities to agents and personalize a growth plan. Then, they encourage agents to be proactive in the pursuit of these opportunities.

ResponseDesignCorporation
CREATING THE UNCOMMON CALL CENTER

Rather than keep agents isolated at their work stations, best-practice management constantly finds ways to expose agents to the rest of the organization. In these companies, management makes time for the activities of cross-functional teams. In several companies, agents interact with others on a corporate-wide level through boards, committees and "ambassadorships," in which agents represent the contact center to other departments.

Best-practice companies do not leave their ability to meet agents needs to chance. All measure agent satisfaction and analyze the results for gaps in their abilities to meet employee needs. From this analysis they design and implement improvement plans.
Best practice management also avails itself of ideas for change generated from the floor.

Suggestions from agents are valued because management recognizes that those in close contact with the customers can better recognize opportunities to improve customer relationships. Many have agent suggestion programs, distributing the ideas generated systematically to process owners. If the ideas are implemented, agents receive rewards; coupons and gift certificates. In any case, management keeps agents in the loop as the suggestions are considered.

Conclusion

"Bridge building" by best-practice companies is done step-by-step over time. In the end, however, all the best practice bridges share the characteristics of stability, strength, and consistency.

Kathryn Jackson, co-founder of Response Design Corporation (RDC) and call center expert helps professionals get more from their call center. Response Design is the how-to source for integrating the call center into the customer relationship. Its independent consultants use call center web seminars, contact center consulting, call center tutorials, call center benchmarking, world class customer service articles, and best-in-class customer service practices to ensure you get the most from your call center investment.

Claim your free report Creating Strong Customer Relationships through E-mail by clicking on the title or e-mailing FreeReport@ResponseDesign.com. For additional uncommon call center ideas don't miss Kathryn's blog at www.responsedesign.com/corner.html.

Reprint permission
If you wish to reprint this article for non-commercial use, article must be complete and include all contact information. Commercial use of this article requires copyright reprint permission. Apply to Reprint@RresponseDesign.com.

Product No. 10041

Response Design Corporation | www.ResponseDesign.com | 609.601.5866