TOP 10 TRAINING TIPS

Speaking at a contact centre conference in Orlando last month, I experienced a unique brand of customer service with the hotel staff. The agent did not have the skill or authority to respond to my request – a training issue that could have been avoided. **>> BY JEFF DORAN**

My room overlooked the loading docks and garbage bins behind the hotel. I could live with the view, however when the delivery trucks started arriving at 4:00 in the morning, the noise was hard to take. So I spoke to a customer service agent, explained my problem and requested a new room. The person was very polite but indicated they were fully booked and did not have another room available. I continued to describe my dilemma and again, the agent indicated they had no more rooms available but this time offered me a couple of solutions. She suggested I wear ear plugs at night. I told her I didn't have any ear plugs and I didn't think I could sleep with them in my ears anyway. She then suggested I try cotton. "It's softer and might be more comfortable". I let her know I wasn't interested in the cotton idea either. She apologized again and said that there really wasn't much she could do. I thanked her for her time and asked if she would be able to offer me a discount on the room for the inconvenience. She had to check with her supervisor. A minute later, she came back and said that they did not want a dissatisfied customer and immediately assigned me a new room.

Now, am I to assume that a room magically became available between the time she left to talk to her supervisor and the time she returned? It's possible, but highly unlikely. Why wasn't a new room offered in the first place? I find it interesting that I was offered a new room only after money entered the equation. In the end, I got what I wanted and the agent satisfied another customer – sort of.

I would like to think that this is not a policy issue but a training issue. If that's the case, then a number of things need to be incorporated into the training process to ensure this doesn't happen again. Here is my Top Ten suggestion list.

1. Develop a quality call document. Define a quality call and make sure everyone is familiar with its components. This is not a script, but a guideline to help create consistency in the way customers are serviced.

2. Anticipate customer concerns and practice responses to those concerns. Again, this must be consistent from agent to agent to make sure that all customers are treated equally.

3. Give sufficient authority to the front line. Allow the agent to make more meaningful decisions on behalf of the organization. This will drive up your first call resolution stats and make the agents feel much more in control.

4. Practice in a safe environment. Make sure agents are comfortable with all different situations. If they have the tools/skills to properly manage the call they will feel much more confident and provide better customer service.

5. Listen to recorded calls. If you can have your agents listen to their own calls, nine times out of 10, they will tell you what they did wrong and correct it themselves.

6. Develop a rigorous quality monitoring regimen. Measure a consistent number of calls per agent each month and feed that information back to the agent for remedial or up-skill training. Reviews should be done during weekly, monthly, quarterly and yearly review sessions.

7. Provide regular coaching. Supervisors or quality coaches need to administer a variety of coaching techniques to satisfy the demands of the business and agent learning styles. This could include side-by-side, one-on-one, remote, peer-to-peer and group sessions.

8. Build training and development into employee performance evaluations. This helps motivate agents to seek out training on their own and proactively ask for assistance.

9. Tie training and development to a career path model. If you don't have a career path model, it's a good idea to establish one. Employees need a vision of where they are going in the company and they need to know the skills, competencies, knowledge and experience needed to get there.

10. Discuss career path and development opportunities quarterly. Annual performance evaluations and career path discussions are not sufficient in today's tight labour market. This is an important component of your retention strategy.

Enlightened contact centres are aware of the effect that targeted training and development has on customer satisfaction. They also know the effect it has on employee morale and retention. In fact, from our Best Practices Report, Training and Development scores as one of the highest employee satisfaction categories for Contact Centre Employer of Choice certified contact centres.

It's important to understand that training and development programs are becoming more than just product knowledge and skills improvement sessions. They are becoming an integral component of the overall strategy of the contact centre and organization.

From orientation through to succession planning, make sure you are training and developing your employees to be successful in their careers. You don't want to be the one looking out your window at the garbage bins and loading docks wondering if your agents are providing outstanding customer service, or worse, if they're thinking of leaving the company.

At a glance

After working recently with an Egyptian outsourcer in Cairo and talking with management and staff, I've come to the conclusion that wherever your contact centre is located, employees want the same things: opportunities to learn, grow and be part of a successful organization. Make sure your training and development program reflects this.

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