

Customer satisfaction... are you bovvered?

by **Tim Burfoot**

Do utilities really care about customer satisfaction? Many people responsible for customer service are heard to say that customer satisfaction is critical. But deep down they know that the management information used to understand performance concentrates on anything but customer satisfaction. Perhaps they just claim customer satisfaction is important because it sounds more acceptable than "getting our cost-to-serve as low as possible is the most important thing we can do".

To put the theory to the test, we commissioned some independent research among contact centre directors, managers and heads of department. We made sure that almost two-thirds (62 per cent) had two or more contact centres, and that a significant proportion also used outsourced contact centres as part of their overall provision. The research was undertaken by Spectrum Consulting between May and July this year.

The resulting report found that although the contact centres surveyed ranked improved customer service as their most important aim, we were staggered to find that half of them didn't even measure the number of calls taken to resolve a customer query.

Of those that did measure customer satisfaction in some way, in-house contact centres were much more proactive. Among them, 83 per cent sent out questionnaires; 43 per cent called customers at random; 43 per cent calculated average call value; and 26 per cent asked customers to stay online to complete a brief survey. Despite this, the most common approach to measuring customer satisfaction (undertaken by all respondents) was to listen to a selection of calls and make a subjective judgement.

Other research has shown UK consumers are fighting back against poor contact centre service. Almost one in five people say they have ditched a company solely because of a bad experience with the call centre. This means something in the order of £8.4 million in lost business. That 20 per cent of consumers have walked away from an organisation as a result of poor contact centre service ought to be a cause for alarm, but perhaps organisations are unaware of the problem because their management information systems are not tuned in to the right things.

In some areas our findings were encouraging. When asked about the relative importance of different roles the contact centre plays in the customer experience proposition

we found that improving customer service ranked top (100 per cent). This was followed by resolving customer problems quickly and efficiently (89 per cent). It then took a bit of a downer with reducing cost (72 per cent) but bounced back with increasing sales (66 per cent) and creating a marketing differentiator (54 per cent).

Yet when asked about measuring customer satisfaction, creating a marketing differentiator did not feature at all. In fact, respondents generally fell back on tried and tested hygiene factors including reducing time to answer (76 per cent), cutting average wait time (72 per cent), resolving customer needs immediately (69 per cent) and reducing abandoned calls (59 per cent). Rapid access to customer records (45 per cent) and rapid customer identification (45 per cent) were ranked sixth and seventh.

This schizophrenic attitude to customer satisfaction versus cost and efficiency

would be bad enough in a purely in-house environment, but we found further significant disconnects between what managers say is important versus what they actually do in outsourced centres. Here, only 43 per cent sent out questionnaires and less than one-third (29 per cent) carried out any random customer calling. For outsourced centres it seems to be all about reporting on call numbers rather than call quality.

So what's to be done? The first thing is to ditch all your management information and give the production team a holiday. A break from the treadmill of cutting and pasting data between spreadsheets will probably come as a welcome relief.

Use the time you would have been reviewing the management information to ask yourself what your contact centres are really there for. And, more importantly,

what matters to customers. When you really understand what motivates your customers, you stand a better chance of figuring out what you need to measure and how to do it. But you need space for this because it's not easy. Cutting out the white noise from your regular management information would be a good place to start.

And one final thought. Suggesting that contact centres can be a marketing differentiator is a bit like saying a "rounder wheel" will sell better. The whole point about a wheel is that it is round. The whole point about a contact centre is that it deals with contacts. After a generation of contact centres in the UK you would think we could do better.

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