

Building Customer Relationships: A Head Start



by Don Mick

Is there a time when contact center executives get to relax and enjoy the benefits of effectively managing a mission critical operation? In my experience, not very often. As much as we know that managing customer relationships can provide strategic advantage to organizations, most contact center executives labor under the burden of being viewed as a necessary expense as they constantly try to meet rigorous performance standards while containing or cutting costs.

One effect of the reality of not being seen as a strategic asset is that contact center executives are usually constrained to tactical efforts to improve performance. They seldom have the resources, people or the money required to initiate strategic improvements in performance.

Is there a way for an assertive contact center executive to “do customer relationship management”, a kind of “CRM lite” as it were? The purpose of this brief article is to suggest that there is.

It is possible to understand what is frustrating to customers by having a dialogue with the contact center staff about what is frustrating for them. One way to quickly detect opportunities to improve the customer experience is by looking at what would improve the work experience of the contact center staff.

This is a 6 step process.

1. Ask your staff what frustrates them and what would make their work lives better.
2. Assess what changes can be made to make improvements.
3. Determine what changes affect the customer relationship.
4. Test the improvements and get feedback from customers.
5. Implement the improvements.
6. Assure consistency.

One of the first times that I tried this process, the senior executives in the company asked what we would hope to get from the staff. Wouldn't they just say “more money”? Wouldn't the list be short and non-actionable? In that instance a team of ten created a list of issues three pages long of things that would make their work life better. Many of the items focused on aspects of the relationship with the customers where staff felt stress because they were not able to meet the customers' needs in a seamless way.

This type of exercise usually produces a list of items that is both rich and actionable. Many of the ideas will not require technology to implement. For those that do the process affords an opportunity to make a business case for the investment required to acquire the capability or tools needed.

The front line contact center staff are people in direct contact with customers every day. They genuinely share the customer's pain when things are not going well. Sometimes the customer makes his or her pain the contact center person's pain when things are not going well. There is a significant advantage to contact center staff in having processes and business rules that help them to please customers. Because they are *in* the relationship every day, they usually know what would make the customer happy.

What is different about this approach from more traditional strategic initiatives? Consider the following:

- It starts with the experience of people who work with customers every day; it is not driven by a reengineering abstraction or a technology.
- It is not a labor intensive, comprehensive process redesign effort but rather an effort tightly focused on felt pain.
- The process can be done with a small number of contact center staff and does not require a large number of consultants or external resources to execute the program successfully. At the same time, some outside experience can be helpful to facilitate objectively and break free of organizational assumptions about what is possible.
- Changes can usually be made quickly because of the precise nature of the recommendations that emerge.
- The contact center executive can control the process and the outcome.
- This process has proven to be an effective way for contact center staff to raise strategic issues with senior management. In one organization, for example, it was apparent that much of the call center's operating practices were determined by "knowledge limitations" and that better "knowledge management" would afford major opportunities to improve the customer experience and lower overall call center costs.

When this process is done well, it invariably produces practical opportunities to improve the customer experience, improve staff satisfaction and lower the cost of operations. Generally the short-term savings are tactical in nature – perhaps 10-12 percent on the operations addressed. It is also usually possible to put an economic value on the improvement in the customer experience. The program can be part of a more strategic effort, but it is reasonable to test this type of process in a smaller way before undertaking something major.

What is the value of this approach? This does not require Accenture or large complex consulting teams to support success. This is an opportunity to start down a cost effective path to measurable improvement.

In summary, get practical improvements by asking what would make work life better for call center staff. Their answers will produce suggestions that positively impact customers as well. With a bit of analysis and creativity, you will develop a set of practical suggestions that will produce measurable improvements.