

Putting Sales on the Call Center Agenda

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When is a sales representative not a sales representative?

That sounds like one of those brain teasers we learned as kids. Back when we had all the time in the world we could spend hours puzzling about the seeming contradictions in a simple question like, "What walks on four legs when young, two when adult and three when old?" I am sure you'll recall that the answer is man, and the "third leg" is a cane or walking stick.

It's the incongruity of the last part that derails you and always makes you stop and think — why an odd number of legs? It causes you to eliminate the most obvious answer because you just "know" that can't be it. But, finally, brain fatigue sets in, and you allow yourself consider what was once out of the question. Then, bingo, you have the answer.

So, when is a sales representative not a sales representative? When he or she is sleeping? Away from the job? That can't be it, at least for the great ones — they're always in character and always competitive.

Give up?

Seeing the Obvious

Ok.

A sales representative is not a sales representative when the person is not paid to perform like one. Sounds obvious, doesn't it? What I mean is, there are some jobs that have sales quotas or other selling requirements associated with them but no incentive compensation. The problem is, that's the key ingredient.

Selling is hard work but we forget that because the people who do it well make it look effortless. But try it, and you'll soon discover

that your ego is in for some rough handling. For every win there are numerous losses, setbacks and rejection and it takes a motivated individual to keep at it. That's why they call it incentive compensation, and that's why people are attracted to the selling life. They like the challenge, the opportunity to chart their own courses as well as the possibility of a big pay day.

Sales people are among the best-compensated, most trained, and best supported of an organization's employees.

Revising Conventional Wisdom

All of this brings me back to a subject I am finding to be more fascinating by the day. Right now, we're finishing up a survey of the call center space. We're specifically interested in questions about cross-selling and up-selling and other forms of revenue-generating activities that many call centers are turning to as their organizations seek new revenue generating activities.

What's interesting about the data so far is that the majority of organizations responding indicate that they see the issue of revenue generation in the call center as largely a training issue — not motivation or compensation. When given the opportunity to indicate that there are compensation and motivation elements of the process people are less likely to agree on those needs than they are to agree on the need for training, and to a lesser extent, measurement. There's a lot of stick, little carrot, here — and some noted frustration that the conventional wisdom is not working.

When we ask questions about the employees and their disposition to sell or about an organization's interest in getting more revenue from call center activity, we get an interesting mix. According to the executives who took our survey, they would like more reve-

nue, they encourage the idea, but all the things that are second nature in motivating outside sales representatives are overlooked when it comes to the call center.

Rising to the Challenge

These same organizations all have professional outside sales teams, and it is a matter of experience, tradition, and common sense to them that their sales representatives need a variety of carrots on the stick. So here's another brain teaser: Why is there such a difference between the ways each group is treated?

I suspect it is because consciously or unconsciously these organizations — and many more like them — have not made the necessary mental crossover to thinking about the call center in a new way. They haven't reached the "brain fatigue" phase. And they haven't yet gotten to the point where they are stuck wondering what they have to do to improve selling and revenue generation in general in the call center.

Right now, most of the tools available to call centers involve training or e-learning, workforce management and quality assurance — all of these are valuable but they aren't enough for this new challenge. And to be honest, the mission of the call center is confused because it is changing. The majority of the old metrics we have used to define success in the call center have something to do with cost avoidance, shortening call time, call wait time, first call resolution, limiting the length of the queue and much more.

Laying the Groundwork

Before we can successfully roll out sales as a new mission in the call center, a lot of background work will need to be done. We need to embed a sales process into the call handling process, add some kind of sales manager function, develop metrics for good work, and, yes, adjust compensation properly. All of these need to become normal parts of the call center before we can expect to training to be effective.

None of this is good or bad, but it does represent a great opportunity for savvy call center managers to get a leg up on the com-

petition. As usual, there will be winners and losers but at this stage, it's possible for everyone to benefit.



About the Author



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Denis Pombriant is a well known thought leader in CRM and he is the founder and managing principal of the Beagle Research Group, a CRM market research firm and consultancy. In 2003, CRM Magazine named Pombriant one of the most influential executives in the CRM industry. Pombriant's latest white paper, "The New Garage" discusses the emerging new enterprise software industry business model.

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