Seven Actionable Tactics for Critical Contact Center Improvement

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69% of Americans say they're less likely to do business with a company after a bad call center experience.

Opinion Research Corporation

While every contact center is unique,   each shares a common thread: The way the work is delivered.

Calls emerge in a continual, random pattern and must be answered within seconds of arrival. To address this challenge, many contact centers have implemented creative forecasting, planning and scheduling processes, but no matter how effective these processes are, at some point, the incoming calls will outweigh the workforce, and calls will queue. Typically, this is when the fun begins and everyone's life seems to change a little. When calls are in queue, the smiles are gone, the pizza gets cold, the bathroom passes disappear, and the executives start shining the bat signal from the 20th floor.

I've had the opportunity to work with hundreds of contact centers and have witnessed the many ways companies react to queues. Most respond with what can best be described as an "attack the queue" approach. This approach has everyone in the organization panic-stricken when calls are in queue -- all other activities in the center are put on hold until the queue is driven down to zero. Typical results of this approach are higher-than-desired service levels, lower-than-expected workforce efficiency, plenty of agent/manager frustration and continuous non-telephone event rescheduling.

OPPORTUNITY #1 – Embrace queues!

A commonly overlooked fact is that queues are part of the plan and, thus, not necessarily a bad thing.

Unless you have a service level objective of 100% of calls answered within zero seconds, you're planning to allow a certain number of calls to enter the queue. Managing queues is what your automatic call distributor (ACD) is designed for; it grabs those calls that can't be answered immediately and holds them until an agent becomes available. Keep in mind that depending on their need, most customers will give you some time to "open the door." Of course, if the wait is too long, they may soon be looking for a door to a new company.

Overcoming the overly aggressive and often counter-productive "attack the queue" mindset is not an easy task. It requires educating everyone who influences the contact center's results – from frontline agents to senior executives. Don't worry, you don't have to train everyone to be a contact center expert – a simple presentation that outlines what it means to work in a contact center will get the ball rolling. Be sure to

clearly communicate your center's service level objective (e.g., definitions of the inputs, expected queue lengths, average speed of answer translation, the impact of each agent, etc.).

IMPACT: Getting everyone on board will not only save you time, it will create a new "calm" in your daily management routine, as well. And, doing it right, you'll lay the foundation for quickly and easily making additional positive changes. This is such a vital part of getting the support you need, <u>there is a special section at the end of this paper with ideas to help get you started.</u>

OPPORTUNITY #2 – Breakdown the organizational silos that have found their way into your call routing strategy

Once everyone is educated on the dynamic nature and the realities of the contact center, revisit your approach to providing customer support. Companies often get stuck in silos (products, divisions, activities, reporting relationships, etc.); this is transferred into the contact center and the way customers are handled.

Begin by asking yourself a few questions:

1) Do you force customers to wait in specific silos for service when often times there are people available in other silos who can help?

2) Do you have an organization with multiple contact centers that don't all report to the same leader?

3) Can your customers receive a different level of service depending on the reason (service, sales, technical, etc) or segment (business, consumer, partner, etc) of the call?

4) Does your center dedicate more time and effort to making real-time adjustments than it does to proactive forecasting activities?

5) Do you spend more time coordinating internal changes to shared processes and systems than you do implementing the change?

6) Is there one executive that truly owns the entire customer experience…both on and off the organizational chart?

Every four years, the average company loses more than half its customers.

Bain & Co.

Companies that begin to look at their call-routing strategy from a customer-centric vs. company-centric perspective normally find several holes in the way the customer is treated, differences in the way results are interpreted and gaps in who is really accountable. This confusion compounds the ever-present internal finger-pointing exercise that often results in more internal initiatives to help reinforce the customer-centric strategy. Unfortunately, these initiatives often end up addressing internal reporting, communication and organization chart issues, while the customer is still receiving the same "luck of the draw" experience. Regardless of how your organization tackles these issues, <u>you should start by giving every customer the same chance</u>

to get the same level of service, regardless of when or why they contact you. Ultimately you are one to them, and every contact is an opportunity to foster customer advocacy and loyalty.

IMPACT: If done correctly, you'll immediately gain capacity to handle more calls with the same number of agents and dramatically reduce your queue times. Don't confuse this with moving skills or giving authority for other departments to have access to agents – both are signs of a flawed planning process. This is all about balancing customer needs and your company's service capability; if you do it right, it doesn't require any real-time changes.

OPPORTUNITY #3 – Stop trying to solve problems by making your customers do your agent's work

Again, look at the operation from the customer's – not just the company's – perspective. Most contact centers are focused on increasing efficiency and lowering costs, which is not necessarily a bad thing, unless the customer experience and agent satisfaction is sacrificed.

A common approach to creating a more efficient contact center is to focus on reducing the amount of "agent engagement" time by moving responsibility to the customer (e.g., hiding the agent prompt in the IVR; forcing all of the up-front information-gathering via speech; and not providing phone numbers on a web site). While such approaches seem to make good financial sense, they all make the customer work harder to do business with you. And companies that adopt this approach quickly find that by passing work off to consumers, loyalty drops, customer attrition increases and once-valuable business intelligence is no longer available.

Think of it this way – If companies really believe that every contact is an opportunity to WOW the customer, improve loyalty and gain business intelligence, then why are so many initiatives focused on automating half or all of the interaction?

In the customer service world, it's real easy to get caught up in an ongoing "penny pinching" exercise to improve the bottom line. Customers quickly feel the pinch, followed by the pain -- and look for ways to ease it, which typically entails defecting to the competition.

Move your center from an efficiency-focused organization to a customer-focused one. Agent performance can be measured in many ways, but be sure the inputs are within their direct control – quality, adherence to schedule and procedures, first-contact resolution, initiation of cross-selling and upselling opportunities, etc. No matter what performance measures you choose, be sure to empower agents to focus on helping customers get the information they need – not just on reducing handle time to meet an efficiency goal. Strongly emphasize this with agents; help them understand the transition, the metrics for which they will be accountable, and what's in it for the customers they serve.

IMPACT: Removing these pressures from agents and allowing them to focus on service ensures the right thing is done the first time. With this you'll see a reduction in volume, improved customer results (revenue, retention, etc.), and, most importantly, you'll have better information to plan your day. Without an accurate view of what it takes to serve the customer, you'll never get the planning part right -- and if you don't get the planning part right, you're doomed to a life of continuous real-time management.

OPPORTUNITY #4 – Stop relying on system reports and start receiving immediate direction from agents and customers

Think about how often your company repositions itself – via product enhancements, new market segments, advertising messages, mergers, regulatory requirements, reaction to the competition's reposition, etc. These changes occur often and directly impact your customer's expectations of service and support. Consequently, you must revisit your call-routing strategy to ensure that it reflects changes in your organization and in your customers' needs and demands. If you focus on where the customer ends up and build from there, you'll never be able to move your organization to the next level. Just about all companies that offer live agent support have a gatekeeper – an IVR, auto attendant, etc. Leveraging these tools to help get the customer to the right agent quickly is a great idea, but if you're not providing the right menu choices, then your efforts are wasted.

Having an automated gatekeeper in place can cause problems of its own. Just because a customer selects a menu option doesn't mean that's why they called, and your internal reports (from any system) won't likely provide the true picture of demand. If you need more convincing, visit www.gethuman.com. Thousands of people visit this site every day to obtain a roadmap to navigate your IVR prompts…and, armed with this insider information, they no longer have to "listen carefully to the menu options."

Overcoming this challenge is easy: Stop basing decisions on your ACD reports and start basing them on input from your agents and customers. Many companies ask agents to code calls by type, and this is a good start, but the codes have to be regularly updated and the results continually shared if this approach is to be meaningful to the business. Give agents the ability and encourage them to provide additional information on changing customer expectations. Agents are always the first to know if customers are beginning to get frustrated with doing business with the company.

Of course, agents shouldn't be your only source of insight into the customer experience; your quality monitoring program recordings have thousands of nuggets of information to help you transform your business and offerings. In addition to capturing the customer experience via recordings to improve the service that agents provide, many companies have established dedicated departments to extract "voice of the customer" data that can transform the business as a whole. The key is to make this an

ongoing activity, with the results fed into a process that is flexible enough to quickly make a change to the way customers are served.

IMPACT: A clear understanding of why your customers call allows you to continually reinvent your access strategy – what to do with them when they get to the door and how to efficiently move them around once inside. This insight can also be moved to other parts of the organization (Marketing, IT, HR, etc) to enable them to make near real-time changes to things such as product information, web capabilities and hiring profiles. Not only will you reduce the volume into the center, you'll also improve customer satisfaction along the way.

OPPORTUNITY #5 – Move the training department to the frontline -- and let them drive

Training is often viewed as a separate department from the contact center – one with a different mission and that often reports to a different part of the organization. In some cases, the contact center has to coordinate and schedule time with the training department several weeks or months in advance. This not only creates another silo, in many cases by the time training is complete, the company and customers have already repositioned themselves several times.

Move your trainers from the classroom to the frontline. Give them responsibility for dissecting the daily feedback your center receives from agents and customers. Trainers can take this insight and apply their expertise to create "just-in-time" agent training and communication. Stop focusing on "perfect" training classes; instead, develop a flexible approach that is focused more on real-time customer service. Even without an automated e-learning solution, you can leverage your existing intranet and recording technologies in new ways to get this started.

"Hire for Attitude, Train for Everything Else"

Tom Peters

This is not to imply that your center can do away with formal classroom training entirely. You'll need such traditional training for new hires as well as for covering topics/modules that the trainers feel require a formal, offline approach. Focus the classroom training on the fundamental customer-centric skills that agents need – things that won't likely change with new products and changing customer expectations, like compassion, listening, setting expectations, capturing business intelligence, etc. Focusing on these skill sets will enable your agents to provide excellent customer experiences which in turn, help to foster high levels of agent engagement and retention. Completing the cycle, such high agent satisfaction is transferred directly to customers – they can "feel" it.

IMPACT: Making training an active part of your real-time solution helps to create a culture focused on continual development and improvement. Not only will agents see their daily struggles being addressed immediately, they'll also be provided with new tools and information to provide an enhanced customer experience. And, it's a new way to show agents you care about them and their quality of work life.

OPPORTUNITY #6 – Use existing technology to create and control capacity

As mentioned earlier, your quality monitoring system is an often-ignored yet extremely valuable tool for gathering customer business intelligence and keeping a finger on the pulse of the business. It also can serve as a quick early warning system -- use it to regularly keep tabs on everything regarding how you are serving customers. There are tools available that can also be used to provide real-time training or information necessary for agents to handle calls based on new customer or company demands. When done correctly, you can transform agent training from a push strategy (you send them away, at a scheduled time) to a pull strategy where they have more control over the expansion of their job knowledge and their personal growth.

Your daily real-time queue management program can also be improved with a foundational approach to agent training. This approach provides all agents with a basic understanding of the entire process and access to tools that allow them to move beyond their primary job skill. When things don't go as planned and calls queue beyond normal, you can add new routing capabilities and get customers talking to your agents and off hold. By providing agents with the tools, structure and roadmap to help customers find answers, you're no longer limited to the often chaotic movement of agents and skills to break down your self-created silos. Most ACDs have ways to automate the overflow to other queue groups or skills based on predetermined algorithms. By providing the appropriate tools to those with the foundation training, you'll have a lot more flexibility in where you send calls when things don't go as planned. And you'll free up all of the time and energy your company spends monitoring and reacting to changes in volumes.

Again, this is a focus on company productivity vs. individual agent efficiencies. With a foundational approach, customers' interactions with agents may take a little longer, but the customer's overall "engagement time" will likely be the same. Remember: Waiting on hold for three minutes and talking to an "efficient" agent for five minutes is the same as waiting on hold for 30 seconds and talking to a "foundational" agent for seven and a half minutes. And the customer is left with the feeling that you care about them and have people working for them… not them working for you.

IMPACT: Providing agents with new information at their fingertips addresses one of the most common frustrations voiced by agents in a contact center – not having the tools to help the customer efficiently and effectively. If done right, you'll gain the capacity you need to handle the planned and unplanned demand spikes and spend less time trying to drive calls out of queue. Not only will you get help from a new group of agents, you'll have more flexibility with your existing staff. Give every agent the ability to find the answer vs. having to transfer the customer.

"The Opposite of 'Remarkable' is 'Very Good'. Very Good is an everyday occurrence and hardly worth mentioning."

Seth Godin, Purple Cow

OPPORTUNITY #7 – Refocus efficiencies on reducing volume, NOT handle time

We've already touched on how many contact centers focus a lot of energy on reducing agent handle time. There are good things and bad things associated with AHT. If managed correctly, better handle times can result in improved service to all customers and in happier agents. However, if poorly managed, the outcomes can have disastrous effects -- higher agent turnover, loss of focus, management burnout, customer attrition, etc.

By moving away from attacking calls in queue and moving closer to the customer, you'll soon see a reduction in overall call volume. How? When you gather, record, report and centralize customer feedback, you'll quickly discover that your organization's errors and inefficiencies are what cause many of the calls to the center in the first place -- things like missing information on statements, non-user friendly IVR- and web-based self-service tools, confusing communications/letters, etc.

Armed with critical customer feedback in real-time, you can quickly make changes or adjustments to the things that are causing unnecessary calls into your center. A reduction in call volume has an even greater impact than an overall reduction in call handle time for a given skill set. The table below provides a comparison between a 5% talk time reduction (in a mid-sized contact center) and a 5% reduction in call volume:

"When agents are focused on their individual handle time, providing great customer service quickly becomes their 3rd or 4th priority"

Jay Minnucci
President, Service Agility

Agents	Calls	Service Level	Talk Time (seconds)	ACW Time (seconds)	Agent Cost Per Call @$15/hr	Daily Agent Cost Total	Telecom Daily Total	Daily People & Telecom Cost	Annual Costs
74	6400	80/20	200	100	$1.39	$8,880	$1,067	$9,947	$2,586,133
A 5% Reduction in Talk Time Through Improved Scheduling, Coaching, Metrics Application and Evaluation									
71	6400	80/20	190	100	$1.33	$8,520	$1,013	$9,533	$2,478,667
								Annual Savings	$ 107,467
A 5% Reduction in Call Volume Through Improved Real-Time Customer/Agent Feedback Communication									
70	6400	80/20	200	100	$1.38	$8,400	$1,013	$9,413	$2,447,467
								Annual Savings	$ 138,667

*assumes calls arrive in the same amount over 16 intervals a day

IMPACT: A temporary reduction in call volume will have a positive impact on your contact center's results, but with an ongoing, companywide focus, the improvements grow exponentially. If you transform your current real-time "queue" management efforts into a disciplined approach to eliminate the unnecessary reasons why customers call, you'll quickly find the same results without the chaos and headaches of trying to slay the queue.

Although challenging, managing a contact center isn't rocket science. Don't make it any harder than it needs to be. The best managers start with getting everyone on the same page -- showing execs and other departments how contact centers "behave". (**See example below for quick tips on getting the word out.**) Once everybody

is on the same page, begin the process of removing the self-created silos that customers end up in, then start to rethink the ways you deliver service.

Many of the tips and recommendations described in this paper were the result of asking "why?" and "why not?" Try new things and challenge the way processes have always been carried out. You don't have to wait on your vendors to provide you with new solutions that automate everything for you. Expose everyone to the quick wins staring your center in the eye – this isn't low hanging fruit; it's already on the ground. Once you prove that thinking differently works, getting buy-in for technology that allows you to quickly and easily access the wealth of real-time information you have right at your fingertips becomes a "no-brainer". And, if you do it right, the chaotic (and unnecessary) activity of continually "attacking" the queue will quickly become a thing of the past.

Appendix

Getting Yourself Up to Speed

If you're reading this, you're looking for new ideas, which is a great first step. Make sure that your knowledge of contact centers is reflective of the way things are still being done. Attend conferences, seminars and training courses that focus on the basics of contact center management, or more advanced courses on strategy and technology. Another way to keep abreast of the latest trends is to subscribe to – and READ – as many industry publications as you can. There are a lot of free contact center publications available, and most provide weekly email updates.

Once you are fully up to speed, get your peers and executives excited about contact center dynamics. The key is to create a vision – one that you can refer back to when conversations get off course (e.g., when senior managers begin to focus too much on how to make agents more productive AND maintain the same level of quality).

### Creating Your Vision

Step 1: Set the foundation

Minute by minute, calls arrive randomly, but when broken down to an interval (30 minutes), we can get pretty accurate with the forecast

The first slide shows this: Three intervals of 150 calls offered, arriving randomly during a 30-minute period. The message here is we can't control exactly when they'll arrive, but we can determine the overall number in a given interval:

Step 2: Relate it to staffing

To overcome the challenges with the minute-by-minute unpredictability of contact volume, contact centers use a formula to determine the number of agents required during each ½ hour – Erlang C (or if you have a WFM system, it may use a modified version).

150 Calls arriving minute by minute in an interval
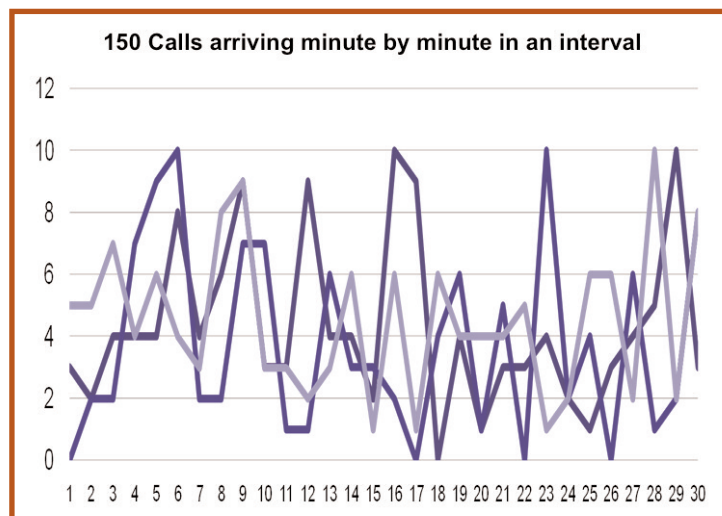
Based on our service level objective – in this case, 85% of calls answered within 30 seconds – and an overall average handle time of six minutes, the program tells us we need 35 agents staffed during the ½-hour interval.

It's important to point out that we need 35 people in chairs talking on the phone, in an after-call work state or waiting for the phone to ring. With any fewer than 35 agents, we will not be successful in meeting our objective. It's not an average for the interval, it's from minute one to minute 30 -- we need to have 35 people.
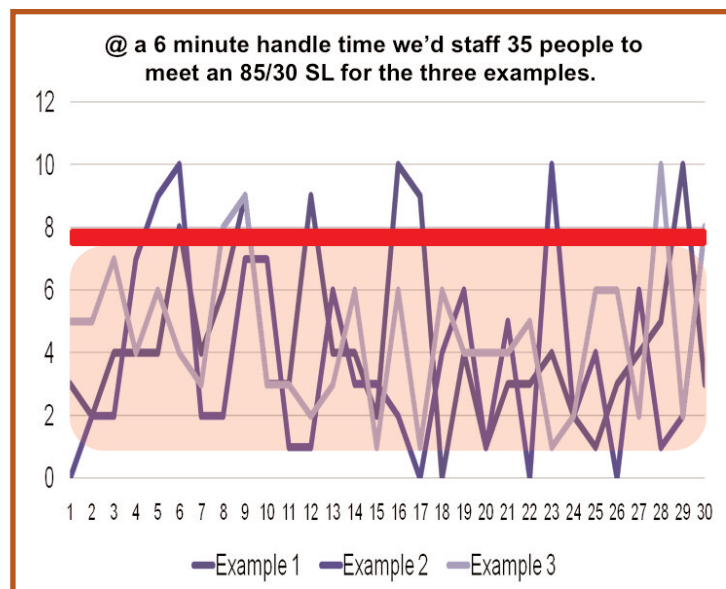
Step 3: Explain the "peaks and valleys" impact

Once you understand the randomness of call arrivals and the staffing requirements to overcome it, the real fun begins. I, personally use this slide on a regular basis. It goes a long way toward explaining the major challenges of managing an inbound contact center.
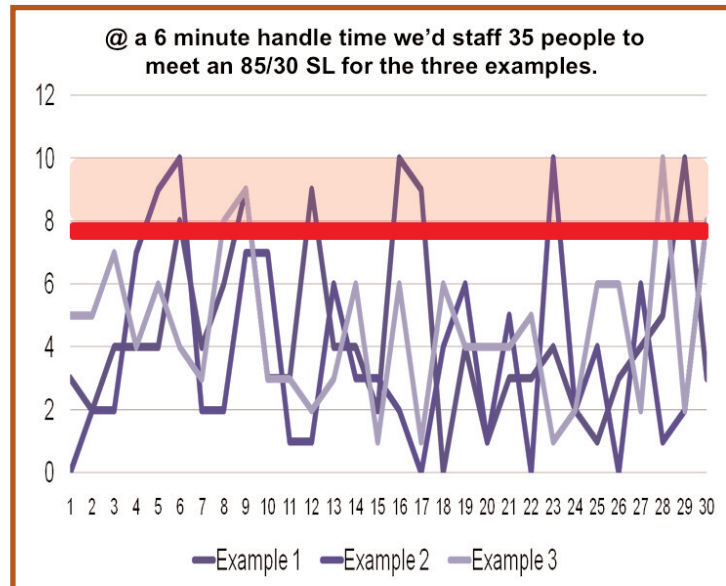
When looking at the arrival lines compared to the staffing line, you see that there are times when we have more calls than people – otherwise known as a queue. This is part of the plan – ACDs are designed to hold calls in queue until agents become available, and any service level objective below 100% in zero seconds is planning for some type of queue. Although some amount of queuing is planned, the only way to keep it under control is to ensure that you have the right number of people in place– in this case, 35 from interval start to finish.

The other take-away is the opposite of queues – when we have more people staffed than calls, or idle time. Yes, this is also a requirement in every contact center. To overcome the minute-by-minute random arrival, you have to build in some idle time. The only way to reduce it is to remove some of the staff, which will create queues, negatively impacting service level.

This is normally question-and-answer time. You need to be on your toes and prepared to talk about idle times. Being able to effectively communicate this will help you to gain a lot of credibility within your organization and, consequently, the support and resources you need to further the contact center along its path.

Step 4: Bring the concepts together to focus on employees and agents

Bring all of the concepts together with real-life data from your environment. The key here is to get the data out of the typical report format and create a simple, clean, easy-to-read visual. Demonstrate how losing just a couple of agents can have a dramatic impact on the service provided to customers. This slide

also shows how adding more staff doesn't really add to the overall customer experience. In addition, you can use this slide to show how not staffing the right number of agents impacts everyone on the floor. In this example, losing a couple of people not only lowers the level of service provided, but makes the agents who are on the phones work even harder, which can result in burnout and attrition.

About the Author

Tim Montgomery is CEO of **Cooney Solutions Group**. Tim is an accomplished author and has written numerous insightful and forward-thinking articles and whitepapers on a wide range of leadership/management, customer service, and contact center topics. His work has been featured in many global publications, industry journals and position papers. He is also a contributing author to highly regarded books on Leadership and Business Management, Customer Relationship Management, Call Center Operations Management and People Management.

Tim has personally assisted some of the world's most recognized service organizations – **USAA, DELL, AIG, Lifetouch Publishing, ADP, Mitsubishi Motors, The Scooter Store, Farmers Insurance, Premera Blue Cross, Deluxe Corporation, Allstate, Kodak, Liberty Mutual, Cinergy, Prudential, Meguiar's, Coca-Cola, Isagenix, Department of Veterans Affairs, AAA of Canada, American Family Insurance, The Gartner Group, Amerigroup, Prime Therapeutics, Erie Insurance, Harvard Medical School, and many more**.

About Cooney Solutions Group

General Bill Cooney and Tim Montgomery, two of the most experienced and respected experts in customer service and contact center management, founded CSG with the goal of offering affordable, world-class outsourcing solutions to organizations committed to delivering high-quality, customer experiences. They are further supported by a team of recognized experts in the areas of network utilization, operational efficiency and culture development. This "dream team" has served as advisors to some of the world's most recognized and celebrated customer care organizations.

For more information, please visit **www.cooneysolutionsgroup.com**.