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## Contact Center Agents: Training To Survive

By Brendan Read

**Smarter training includes getting agents ready to communicate more frequently with customers via e-mail, SMS and Web chat by training them on the high-level grammar, writing, comprehension, and keyboard skills these forms require. While these channels' volumes are small, they will expand due to their growing popularity.**

Training contact center staff/agents in soft skills such as empathy, and hard ones like selling and support, and supervisors in getting the most out of their agents, is arguably the best set of tools available to help companies survive and grow. Superior training can shorten calls and eliminate repeat ones, thereby lowering call expenses, shrink staff attrition and boost sales and customer retention.

For her Ph.D in industrial psychology, Rosarme D'Ausilio, president and founder of Hi.iman Technologies Global, used soft-skills training in a case study that resulted in shortening the calls for a Connecticut utility by 22.3 seconds and saved the company 325,000 a year. It also netted a dividend of increasing customer satisfaction by 9.7 percent.

Given such performance are companies in these challenging times investing in training? Sadly the opposite is occurring, say training experts. While they continue to train new hires to bring them up to speed they are cutting back on new skills and refresher training to keep existing staff current and at the top of their form. That is leading to contact center teams that lack the topnotch skills to interact with scarce, choosy, and demanding customers who know that they can go elsewhere.

Moreover too many firms are asking customer service and support agents to take on cross-selling/upselling to boost revenues but without providing necessary training for those tasks, reports Maggie Klenke, co-founder, The Call Center School. This approach risks failure, she warns, because these selling is a very different skillset and culture from service; these agents were selected for their service not their sales abilities.

Yet savings have to be found somewhere or else firms may risk going out of business. Cutting training is a preferable alternative over letting staff go, which leads to longer queues and more customer dissatisfaction, leading to churn and drops in sales.

The way forward appears to be more focused training and creatively using cost-effective techniques and solutions. This last group encompasses technology-based training: self-directed elearning including simulations, instructor-led conferenced (Web/webinar or video) sessions, podcasts and chat-based employee social networking sites, integrated with in-person training.

Contact center managers also need to educate senior management on training benefits in dollars-and-cents language. While firms understand customer value they need to be shown how without adequate training they could lose their customers.

"Let's say you're with a large firm and five percent of the calls you get are bad ones and you multiply that by the customers' dollar value," says D'Ausilio. "Would you be willing to invest \$100,000 to reduce that one million dollars of exposure of bad call experiences, not to mention the cost of customers leaving and acquiring new ones to replace those lost?"

### **Smarter Training**

Firms need to train smarter and more-cost-effectively, points out Kathryn Jackson, president and co-founder of Response Design Corporation. Too many train whether or not a gap exists or don't apply any training at all even if a gap exists. Instead, training needs to address the specific requirements of the jobs and applied only to demonstrated performance issues.

Companies also need to get better at assessing training needs and producing ROIs for training. Ones based on the effects of the training on how resolving performance issues improve results from individuals, departments, and companies.

Organizations may also have to bring the type of training up a notch or two. All trainers she says know that students are quickly lulled into complacency if presentations are nothing but bullet points of required knowledge.

"Students need to be able to move at their own pace and they need to explore a topic from multiple angles," explains Jackson. "They need simulations and challenges to self-assess what they do/don't know or can/can't do."

Smart training includes a thorough understanding of customers' needs and issues. This can be provided via advanced analytics says Richard Herbst, vice president, learning and performance, TeleTech. Many products and services often require detailed knowledge and continuous learning as software updates and other enhancements take place regularly. Yet training such a large amount of material is time-and-cost-prohibitive.

With the insights gained by analytics, managers address the majority of callers through a specific training focus. It also enables employees to request, or managers to assign, on-demand training in concentrated, decisive learning events.

"This approach significantly reduces training time, which saves costs and more rapidly produces results," explains Herbst. "It increases the agents' success, as they better absorb more manageable sections of data, and apply their learning on the contact center floor more quickly."

Smarter training also includes getting agents ready to communicate more frequently with customers via e-mail, SMS and Web chat by training them on the high-level grammar, writing, comprehension, and keyboard skills these forms require. While these channels' volumes are small they will expand thanks to their popularity with the succeeding generation and with the explosive growth of and increasing dependence on broadband wireless communications.

"Multichannel training is a train coming and contact centers need to get on board," says Alton Martin, CEO of COPC. "When they get on they will find another benefit and that is improved agent retention by increased variety in the work they perform, in channels that as consumers they are very familiar with."

### **The Shift to Technology-Based Training**

Training has traditionally been done in-person at company or offsite locations. Yet this means is being supplemented and in some cases supplanted by technology-based training to supplement or in some cases supplant traditional in-person instructor-led training. These tools cut travel costs and productivity Relevant Products/Services losses caused by staff not at work.

Nina Kawalek, principal of The Resource Center for Customer Service Professionals, has seen a surge in registrations for her online Service Representative Certification training courses and exams. The program is suitable for both contact center customer care and internal tech support professionals.

"We see support managers registering themselves, trying it out, then purchasing the course at a volume discount for the rest of the team," reports Kawalek. Technology-based training tools also enable more staff members such as agents and floor-level supervisors to be directly trained, thereby improving performance, as opposed to relying on being taught by superiors who had taken the courses. For example, Verint has introduced desktop learning libraries i.e. self-learning web-based clips that customers can distribute to agents and supervisors.

Technology-based training solutions are becoming more robust and versatile. Ulysses Learnings CallMentor System simulation-based e-learning software provides clients the options of having it stored locally on agents' computers, accessible through organizations' LANs/WANs, through Ulysses' application service provider or any combination. The enhanced technology has enabled Ulysses Learning's training solutions to be readily deployed from North America to India, Malaysia and other locations in between.

"As contact centers continue to migrate towards self-directed learning, an important consideration is that e-learning needs to be highly interactive Relevant Products/Services and provide sufficient opportunity for learning and practicing the targeted skills," says Mark W. Brodsky, Ulysses Learning president and CEO. "At the same time, organizations are realizing more than ever that their contact center agents are an extension of their overall brand and at the front line of delivering the corporate brand promise."

Avaya Relevant Products/Services is introducing video tutorials along with a 10 to 15 step file in its customer designed to help agents learn how to use the many features on its solutions.

"The idea came from our customer advisory panel who said that Avaya IP Agent had so many features and so many configuration options that it was becoming difficult for agents to remember how to use them all," explains Mike Harwell, Contact Center Desktop Product Management.

Conferenced training incorporates the key benefits of traditional in-person instruction -- the real-time interaction with the teachers and the other students that are key for new/updated skills such as service and sales -- with the cost-saving travel avoidance of e-learning.

Interactive Intelligence is rolling out conferenced Web-based training to teach IT staff and users on how to use, update, customize, and troubleshoot its solutions. The new tool allows users to remotely control its Customer Interaction Center servers at the firm's Indianapolis headquarters, thereby turning their desktops into simulators. Instructors can give their online lectures, following which the students can do their lab on the CICs.

With this program customers can get more from their investments and experience fewer and shorter downtime resulting from technical issues says the firm. It also avoids training and practice on production machines, which frees up capacity and prevents any problems.

"Getting people to come to one of our training centers and then spend money on classes on top of their travel expenses is a little more difficult this year," says Cindy Phillips, manager of Education Services. "Allowing them to sit at their desks and take the training right there is win-win."

TelStrat uses hybrid in-person and conferenced training for its Engage workforce optimization solution. Typically this includes an on-site TelStrat facilitator leading the customer's group, with a remote subject matter expert presenting training on that particular product. Tools such as WebEx are used to allow both the facilitator and the remote SME to control customers systems and lead them through the training.

The firm has strived to make its product easy to install, configure, and use, which limits the training needed.

"A number of our over 1,600 customers have even installed, configured and maintained their systems without formal training from TelStrat," says marketing director Ed Templeman. "Others are quite happy with the local training they receive from the over 200 Engage resellers in our partner network."

TeleTech uses chat for collaboration and problem-solving, which supports other methods including e-learning, simulation, and in-class facilitation. The learning and knowledge is retained and can be easily referenced as all the information remains online, making it searchable.

"Through social media, we save costs and provide associates (agents) access to live, real-time specialists who could be anywhere in the world, who use chat and other applications to obtain knowledge and share solutions across the globe," explains Herbst. "Social media takes knowledge share well beyond e-learning by allowing people with different skill sets at different sites to share knowledge, ask questions and interact virtually."

Verint has recently incorporated the oldest form of technology training: printed courseware into its product education. The instructor-led and online training references the courseware.

"Courseware gives our customers more details that they can easily refresh and review than we're able to cover in the training sessions," explains Mike Dodge, manager of applications training.

### **Technology-Based Training Limits?**

There are limits to technology-based training. The method is poor at teaching soft skills such as empathy via role-playing, says Call Center School Co-founder Penny Reynolds. Such training should be done instead in the contact centers followed by e-learning and conference-based methods.

"There is a lot you miss out on by taking people out of face-to-face classroom environment," explains Reynolds. "Trainers can make eye contact, see agents nod their heads. Classroom almost always has better impact."

Yet is this the case? Home-agent teleservices firm Alpine Access doesn't think so. While many other firms with home agents do as Reynolds recommends, it relies totally on technology-based training through its Alpine Access University. For example it uses live conference sessions to demonstrate the skills, competencies and knowledge its agents have acquired in the learning and are able to apply to real-work scenarios via role-plays and peer-to-peer interactions.

"Often one assumes that to 'teach' soft skills, a face-to-face interaction is required, yet every day, our people, who are located throughout the United States, speak with individuals that they never physically meet," explains Diana Derry, vice president, learning community services, for Alpine Access University. "Individuals who work in contact centers -- at home or in a traditional brick and mortar one -- do not have the physical non-verbal cues that one can learn to read and rely upon in face-to-face interactions. Because our agents' daily interactions are not face-to-face, we are able to closely approximate in our program an authentic experience in training."