

The Service Level Group's Better Contact Center Series

A Quick, Easy Win—Ask the Front Line to Avoid Calls



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Would you like to learn about a simple, yet effective way to channel your frontline customer service representatives' energy in a desirable direction while, at the same time, positively influencing the company's bottom line?

In our consulting practice, we have the opportunity to talk directly with agents from contact centers of various sizes and scopes. Typically, we find that the more appreciated an agent feels, the less likely he or she is to display negative behaviors, such as trying to avoid work. Anyone who's spent time on the front lines as a call center representative or manager understands how thankless it can feel being in the trenches. Showing a little appreciation goes a long way toward improving agent morale, which then quickly finds its way into higher levels of customer service being provided.

One way you can help your agents feel more appreciated is by including them in more of the organization's decisions. Although many companies obtain employee input via internal surveys, team meetings or project committees, the feedback requested is often focused on a specific topic. In these cases, the information is presented in a way that makes representatives feel they're simply validating a decision that already has been made. And, unfortunately, there is little to no communication on the progress or status of their ideas. The next time they hear about it, it's in the form of an updated policy or procedure.

Use One Stone to Fix Two Problems

Forming process improvement teams of front line agents to focus on those issues they can directly influence is an effective alternative to traditional, static feedback methods. Not only will you be able to streamline call center processes, it's a great morale booster for your reps.

This method works particularly well if you want to reduce the number of unnecessary inbound telephone calls to your center. The business case for establishing this team is simple. How many calls do reps take each day that involves questions so common or basic, they don't even need to look up the customer's information to provide an answer? If this happens twice per rep, per day, and you have a call center with 30 agents, one "avoidable" question can generate at least 15,000 calls a year.

There is no one in your company who understands your customers and the questions they ask better than your frontline agents. So why not let them be the ones to develop the plan for "avoiding" frequently asked questions? When successfully implemented, this approach will reduce the inbound workload, and improve the morale of the folks who you want to be the happiest – the ones who continually touch the customer.

Following are a few considerations to keep in mind when establishing an "avoidable calls" team:

- This team belongs to the frontline representatives and needs to be kept separate from any other ongoing committees or meetings. Select someone from outside of the agents' reporting structure to lead the team. This person should be at a high level and have the ability to get the team any additional information or resources needed for success.
- Make sure the team is sponsored by an executive who can clearly communicate the team's objectives to the entire organization. This helps to ensure that supervisors understand the importance of the team and provide agents with the necessary time for meetings, etc. It also helps the team to get buy-in from other areas of the company. It's important for the executive to communicate the team's successes to the organization on a regular basis.
- Invite representatives from all supporting agencies to join the team, such as marketing, finance, telecom, billing, staff, Web site, mail room, etc. This is an important component to the team's success. Having the supporting agencies on board will help to identify quick wins, as well as reinforce the importance of the team and the ideas being generated by the front line.
- Schedule team meetings at the same time each week and ensure that each representative has a backup. Encourage team members to take the ideas and issues discussed back to their peers to solicit feedback and provide updates.
- Most importantly, the members of the team should approve any changes or updates in the final form. This will give them the feeling that they are directly affecting the business. The positive feelings generated will quickly make their way through the company.

Making an investment in your people can have long-lasting benefits for the organization. Once the entire organization understands the wealth of information available from frontline call center representatives, you'll have increased visibility for the center, plus companywide respect for your staff. Help your company to discover the hidden talents and skills possessed by your agents – leadership, project management, teamwork and more.

About the Author:



As a seasoned industry executive, popular speaker and highly regarded consultant, Tim Montgomery has guided thousands of contact center agents and leaders to improve individual and team performance, and exceed operational objectives. Drawing from these interactions and his extensive real-world experience, Tim founded **The Service Level Group** to help contact centers leverage the competitive advantages they have right at their finger tips. During his career, Tim has held a variety of leadership positions – everything from Call Center Manager to Vice President of Sales and Operations. His hands-on contact center leadership experience was fine-tuned by working for three of the most celebrated service companies in the world – **USAA, The Coca-Cola Company and The SCOOTER Store**. Prior to founding **The Service Level Group**, Tim spent three years as a Consultant, Seminar Leader, and Technology Advisor with **Incoming Calls Management Institute (ICMI)**. Tim's expertise in customer service and contact center operations allows him to lead a wide range of consulting engagements for companies in a variety of industries. His consulting partners have included some of the most recognized companies in America - **AIG, Lifetouch Publishing, Mitsubishi Motors, Premera Blue Cross, Deluxe Printing, Allstate, Kodak, Liberty Mutual, Cinergy, Meguiar's and The Gartner Group**. Tim has written articles and whitepapers on a variety of management, customer service, and call center topics and has been featured in many global publications. Tim earned both his BBA in Accounting and MBA degrees from degrees from the University of Texas @ San Antonio. Tim can be reached directly at TimM@ServiceLevelGroup.Com