Customer-Driven Training: Using the Voice of the Customer to Maximize your ROI

By Dr. Jodie Monger and Anne Nickerson

Can you clearly identify the ROI of your training program? When the CFO asks you this question, how will you respond? Training is *not* a cost of doing business; it's an investment that *must* have a positive return. If you are unable to communicate how training leads to performance and impacts the bottom line, then your CFO will make that decision for you. In this case, when belt-tightening occurs, the CFO will look toward your training program as one of the first areas to cut. So, you best be able to make the case that customer loyalty, wallet share, and market share are directly related to the positive actions of your agents.

In order to prepare to answer the CFO's question, Customer Relationship Metrics (Metrics) and Call Center Coach will highlight how training programs are missing the *most* critical component in their value proposition – the Voice of the Customer – and how you can positively change your case for training forever. By listening to your customers and turning their insights into action items for training, you will increase your program's ROI and prove your contact center's value to the company.

When agents are hired, we set them up in a room with other new agents, some computer equipment and a trainer. The immersion program is dictated by a pre-arranged schedule identical for each agent. While you probably *use* actual customer calls during the training sessions, you may not *listen* to what the customers are saying. The curriculum lacks the true Voice of the Customer (VOC), a voice that is not truly heard until the agent hits the floor and starts answering calls. Welcome to Customer Service, Day One! Not surprisingly, what an agent heard in training and what they hear from customers through their headset can be two very different things. "Welcome to the real world," has been heard many times on the floor from veterans to rookies, which only reinforces the difference between the two realities to agents. The way to correct this problem is to use insights from customers and turn them into *practice* for your agents.

Leveraging the Voice of the Customer

When building curriculum, trainers must leverage the VOC, continually updating the program with the drivers of caller satisfaction, directed toward making every customer interaction a "WOW" experience. If your training curriculum is the same as it was two years ago, there is no way that your program is customer-driven since your customers' expectations change continuously. The focus must not be on what you *think* the customer needs; they tell you directly every time you talk to them. Therefore, you must prepare your agents to be more effective advocates for your company. Some companies are attempting to overcome this weakness in training by combining, or at least sharing, resources between the Training and QA departments. While this is a step in the right direction, QA is only an internal evaluation and, so, you must add the voice of the customer into the process to get the most accurate view.

Customer Analytics Drive Change

Building the VOC into your training program is really very simple, once you know how. Volumes of information can be learned and leveraged by instituting a robust real-time survey immediately after a customer's interaction with an agent. Measuring multiple concepts about the company, the call and the agent will provide a complete picture of the experience and allow you to apply the analytics to create well-rounded agents. Allowing customers to elaborate on their scores to the quantitative part of your survey and describe the feelings behind their scores is the best way to use scientifically valid customer feedback to train and coach your agents.

Confidence is a Perception

Here are some actual customer comments taken from the thousands Metrics collect every month. Call Center Coach will demonstrate how you can apply these insights to modify your training curriculum.

> *"They've made commitments. They don't seem to understand issues such as service. I was very surprised because that's not the image that this company has in the marketplace."*

> *"I would have liked to have more assurance that this problem will be satisfied in an equitable manner."*

> *"You need to have people there who understand what's being done and who can provide some sort of better response. What you have are just answering service people."*

> *"There's no purpose having customer satisfaction personnel working in customer service. They have no authority to make any decisions or assist a customer having problems. It's really laughable and disheartening."*

The good news is that callers are describing quite clearly how they've scored your service; what each customer is saying to the training team is priceless. When all is said and done, these customers are saying that they have very little confidence in the answers being provided by the agents. So, how you do you train the agents to provide answers in which the callers are confident? What are the behavioral aspects for the agent to succeed on this driver of caller satisfaction?

Confidence has many facets. A customer's level of confidence is influenced first and foremost by the tone of voice used. Every customer service training class should include a voice tone exercise and individual grading using tape recorders, or recording systems already designed into telephone systems. Is the tone of voice strong, self-assured, assertive, evenly paced, and are the words easy to understand? Another easy training exercise is to have individuals state a sentence, repeating it out loud with emphasis on the first word, then the second word, etc. Use, for example, the sentence "I CAN help you resolve your issue." A different intention is understood if the agent said "I can help you resolve YOUR issue."

Secondly, does the agent have the authority to offer a solution to resolve the caller's issue? While the agent may or may not have an immediate solution, they need to let the customer know they will work on their behalf. In the eyes of the customer, the agent is the company, and has influence over the customer's perceptions. Imagine the difference if an agent said, "I'll try to see what I can do." vs. "Rest assured, I will definitely research this for you right now."

Know How to Say No

In many situations, agents are the messenger of bad news and customers may not like the answer:

> *"Even though the initial customer service representative may not be the one to solve the problem, I think there is a way to say I can't do that, or no, to a customer. Sometimes it isn't the, 'I can't help you', type of thing that frustrates a customer. It is the way that the message is articulated."*

> *"The company should be able to do more than just say 'sorry' about the problem. Being sympathetic is not helping my problem. I need definite answers. I feel you're not living up to your excellence."*

Not liking the answer is not unusual, however, agents can assist the customer to understand and accept the explanation. How can you train agents to protect satisfaction while not giving too much information? The secret is to give the customer what ***can*** be done, offering as many alternatives as possible, with sincerity and conviction. Most contact centers are aware of the common issues—regulations, policies, contracts, etc., that can cause an agent to have to say the "no" word. Knowing which alternatives are available, and practicing them during training goes a long way in favorably presenting the information to the customer. During training, provide agents a worksheet of negative, "I can't" statements that could come up during customer calls and challenge the group to turn them all into positive statements. Learning to avoid words and phrases like, "unfortunately," "but," "Our policy says…", and "I can't…" is possible once agents are trained on these techniques.

Policy is a Four-letter Word

When agents must enforce corporate policies, satisfaction is affected:

> *"My issue isn't with the representative, but with the policy of this company. This can't get*

> *handled until next week. That's a very weak policy on behalf of this company. This will affect my future purchase decisions."*
>
> *"When a customer complains about not getting service, don't just regurgitate the company policies. Find out answers and deliver. Customer service should be the number one focus of your company."*
>
> *"Offer some kind of acknowledgement...Your customer service offered no help. I realize it's your policy, but it wasn't very good."*

What is the best way to train agents to constructively "read policy" in a way consumers understand and accept as fair to both parties? First and foremost, agents need to understand the intent behind the policy, rather than use it as a crutch. The customer comments above give us some insight into what to say. For example, putting a different spin on how information is delivered can make all the difference to customers. Compare these two statements: "Our policy is that you cannot get your payment for at least a month" vs. saying to the customer, "I understand you were expecting a different outcome. I am forwarding your request to our specialists who will review your situation. You can expect an answer within the month." A customer's psychological response to the first will be defensive, whereas the second statement shows the customer that the agent is doing what is within their control to help out.

Consistency Leads to Credibility

How important is consistency to your training programs? Just listen to what your customers might say:

> *"I receive misinformation from the operators when I call in. One operator will tell me one thing, and another operator will tell me something else. Consistency is the key."*
>
> *"On two consecutive phone calls to your reservationists I was quoted two totally different prices. The second person's price was $20 higher in each category, and he indicated he had no idea where the first price came from. He made no effort to find out and that kind of inconsistency is not only inconvenient but unprofessional."*

How do you ensure consistency in your agents *and* the information available to them? Inconsistency is caused either by constantly changing information, lack of a communication process or protocol, and/or lack of checking back for understanding. There are three actions to ensure consistency. First, post changes and information in an on-line knowledge base so even those agents who haven't read e-mails, or may have missed a meeting, will see the latest updates. And, of course, have a designated person responsible for updates!

Second, calibrate calls with coaches and agents to ensure everyone interprets information as intended. Third, have a clear process to communicate change. One organization in the midst of frequent changes named a person on every team to be responsible to communicate changes *and* ensure understanding. One other important part of your training is to discuss with agents the policy of what to do if you don't know the answer, or are unsure of the answer to offer. Offer statements to practice with during training, such as "I would like to ensure I give you accurate information. I'd like to research this with a specialist. Would you like to hold while I do that, or may I call you back in 15 minutes?" Most customers will be glad to wait if they know they are getting accurate information.

Insights…Action…WOW!

Customers will tell you what drives their satisfaction…if you care to listen. These insights must be the foundation for your training curriculum. Take your customers' insights and turn them into customer-driven instruction and we guarantee you will boost your ROI, increase satisfaction among your agents, and *wow* your customers.

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