

Increased Agent Coaching Produces Widespread Performance Improvements

By Howard Lee

Everyone has a different definition of what constitutes a great vacation. Some people like beaches, others prefer mountains. Some people want to go where the natives speak the same language, while others don't mind trying their hand at a foreign tongue.

When it comes to actually planning the vacation, however, it's safe to say that everyone is in agreement. People want to work with a travel company whose representatives can explain the various packages clearly and concisely. They want to interact with professionals who can communicate all travel restrictions. And they want to talk with agents who can anticipate problems – and provide solutions before they occur.

Few companies do it better than Carlson Leisure Travel Services (CLTS). An operating division of Carlson Leisure Group, CLTS is a national provider of travel award redemption services for financial institutions. Two call centers and over 400 agents handle the incoming requests for travel fulfillment. Yet, while the call centers were handling the huge volume of inquiries very effectively, CLTS felt there was room for improvement.

Who can blame them? It's no secret that in today's competitive marketplace, customer service is a powerful way to successfully differentiate between your services and those of your competitors. Since the call center is the primary "touchpoint" between a company and its customers, it naturally follows that improving the quality of call center service will improve a company's relationship with customers, while concurrently augmenting customers' loyalty to a company and its products.

But improved customer service was only part of the equation. Like all call center managers, those in charge at CLTS wanted reduced call handling time and related costs. What's more, the managers knew that the more efficient and successful the company's agents could be in building travel packages with the lowest fares and rates, the more revenue would be generated for the company.

Therefore, the "smarter" its agents worked – following call procedures, improving accuracy, and correctly using call tools - the better. To make the situation even more challenging, CLTS also wanted to maintain agent attendance levels and maintain or improve turnover rates.

QA from the Inside

Like many companies, CLTS relied on its own resources to handle the quality assurance (QA) monitoring and evaluation of phone calls, using tools and procedures developed by call center supervisors. The company had, in fact, created an internal group whose main responsibility was the monitoring of other agents. This internal monitoring group was comprised primarily of CLTS's most effective call agents. In some cases, dedicated supervisors were appointed to this team, while in other cases, supervisors had the monitoring tasks added to their existing management duties.

This approach to call center monitoring is hardly unique. In most call centers, quality monitoring and coaching are viewed as "necessary evils": activities mandated by upper management that take place – if at all – when time allows. In most call centers, there is simply not enough staff to perform the job with any regularity. And, on any given day, if call volumes increase unexpectedly (as they often do), supervisors must relegate their monitoring to the back burner so they can jump on the phones and help handle calls.

Consequently, it's not unusual for supervisors to run out of time and find themselves in a rush to complete evaluations during the last few days of the month. This is certainly not the most desirable way to judge an agent's – or a center's – total quality performance.

CLTS decided that an outside consultant was the best alternative to this untenable situation; as a result, the company contracted a contact center quality assurance firm to conduct a pilot program of agent evaluations in one of its call centers. A primary focus of the program was to increase the frequency of agent evaluations, and the results were clear.

While CLTS had been conducting a mere 3-5 evaluations per agent per month, the outside firm began performing about twice as many – 8 evaluations per agent per month. Although this may not appear to be a dramatic increase, consider this: increasing the frequency of call monitoring – even by just a few calls per agent per month – can have a dramatic impact on a call center's quality and profitability.

Evaluations covered a variety of attributes, including:

- Proper call handling
- Policies and procedures
- Selling skills
- Soft skills (voice tone, professionalism/rapport, and handling caller objections)

The program was designed so that supervisors would automatically provide coaching to any agent whose performance went below the threshold of a 90% total QA score.

Quality Results

CLTS's pilot program yielded positive results in several ways. Most significantly, they were able to increase the revenue generated on calls over the three-month program. In addition, CLTS reduced average talk time by 4%, which resulted in a corresponding 4% cost reduction in operational expense. Management was also pleased to see that overall QA scores increased 12%, while agents' accuracy increased 6%. CLTS also achieved coaching levels of 100%.

It should be noted that these quality and performance improvements were achieved with no negative impact on agent attendance or schedule adherence.

CLTS was extremely satisfied with the improved quality scores, increased call efficiency and increased revenue at its call centers – and surprised that these improvements were achieved primarily through simply increasing the frequency of monitoring and coaching. The secret was not high-tech recording gadgetry or complicated systems, but rather how often quality monitoring occurs and how often feedback and evaluations are delivered to agents. Infrequent coaching results in little, if any, improvement, and in fact allows bad habits to form and take hold.

It's a common-sense approach: If you coach any person on any skill – from call handling to a golf swing – the more frequently you coach, the more rapidly improvement will occur.

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