Contact Center Pipeline

IDIOM INSIGHTS
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THE FINE ART OF CONTACT CENTER MANAGEMENT - PART 2

The five factors of Caller Tolerance.

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THE FIVE FACTORS OF CALLER TOLERANCE.

BY KATHLEEN M. PETERSON, POWERHOUSE CONSULTING, INC.

In last month's Contact Center Pipeline article, my topic was on the Art and Science of contact center management and its three driving forces: Random Call Arrival, Visible and Invisible Queue, and Caller Tolerance.

This month's article completes the topic and focuses on Caller Tolerance and its five critical factors: degree of motivation, substitutes available, expectations, time available, and human factors.

When we discuss Caller Tolerance we seek to define callers' capacity to tolerate the unfavorable condition known as "hold" to the public and "delay" to contact center leadership.

Understanding the five factors of caller tolerance is important because it fuels proper resource planning and impacts customer experience (CX) outcomes. (We will focus on normal conditions and not queue conditions that make headlines and heads roll.)

> ***WHEN WE DISCUSS CALLER TOLERANCE WE SEEK TO DEFINE CALLERS' CAPACITY TO TOLERATE THE UNFAVORABLE CONDITION KNOWN AS "HOLD"...***

Keep in mind that caller tolerances do change when conditions change. For example, callers stuck in an airport with flights being cancelled will hang on in the airline's queue regardless of their tolerance for delay under normal conditions.

1. DEGREE OF MOTIVATION

Let's begin by determining how important the call is to the business.

For new customers (prospects), should you work harder to get their calls handled faster because they are high value contacts? The prospect has a high value to the business but a low tolerance for delay.

Accordingly, different treatments in the queue may be considered when designing for the prospect call. Call routing may be given priority to reduce delay.

It provides this prospect group a higher service level by routing to a team trained to optimize these opportunities. The team can assure quality and favorable outcomes for the prospect and the business.

Treatment plans for new customers cannot be at the expense of existing customers, though they may have a higher tolerance for delay due to existing business relationships. (I only have one bank to call for account issues, one airline from which I bought a ticket, and one utility company and cell phone provider.)

The menu selection often determines the treatment of existing customers as well as the caller's tolerance for delay. Technical Support may not offer the same service level as Sales, but often has a lower abandon rate due to caller motivation.

Caller motivation impacts abandon rates. If you want to reduce abandons you must observe and closely study abandon data. Study abandon percentages by time of day, average time to abandon by queue, and longest wait; these are great indicators that assist planning.

Keep in mind that abandon is a response to a condition; it is not a condition in and of itself. Callers abandon when their tolerance for delay has been exceeded.

If you want to manage abandon you must manage delay. If you want to manage delay, manage service levels with an understanding of your various callers' motivations. This assures routing to the proper resource in the best timeframe possible. That is an art form!

2. SUBSTITUTES AVAILABLE

There are many questions to pose when evaluating the CX related to the ease of getting to products and services without human interaction. What substitute channels are available to callers? What self-service options are available? How well do they work?

A business's delay announcements often suggest that callers visit their website for faster service. But this becomes annoying if you are calling about a website failure.



> ***CONTACT CENTER MANAGEMENT OFFERS A LIFETIME OF LEARNING AND TO ME THAT IS THE REAL ART!***

More and more alternative access channels are available today. These include email, websites, IVRs, mobile apps, artificial Intelligence (AI) chat, chatbots, etc. But the channel must fit the need to be effective and it must work to be efficient.

3. EXPECTATIONS

Expectations are often driven by a company's reputation, brand, and the promised customer experience. It is materialized by planning and (let's face it) by the budget.

Callers have different expectations when calling a public utility or government agency than when calling a well-regarded company like L.L. Bean.

Most of us, at a minimum, expect that our issues will be resolved. If callers are forced to wait, it is critical that the calls be routed to be "handled," not just answered.

The calls must be routed to places where the callers can conclude their business. Callers whose tolerance for delay has been reached often simply hang up and the contact center sees abandon rates rise. One thing for certain is that high abandon sends the message that callers' expectations are not being met and an analysis of causes is required.

4. TIME AVAILABLE

This one is simple. Simply ask a couple of questions. How much time does the caller have to invest in the delay? Does time of day have an impact?

Many contact centers have found that average time to abandon increases in the evening hours; this indicates that callers are willing to wait longer after regular business hours for their calls to be answered. They are relieved of the time constraints the workday presents.

If there are indicators of a higher tolerance for delay during different hours of operation some organizations are comfortable staffing using a lower service level. This reduces staffing but causes no harm to callers. I recommend that before making any staff reductions, conduct a complete analysis of agent utilization to avoid burning out assets on any particular shift.

5. HUMAN FACTORS

Have you ever been on hold on your cell phone and gone through a tunnel or other coverage dead zone that ended the call? It shows as an abandon call to the contact center! So, keep in mind that not all abandons are due to a lack of tolerance for delay.

Some abandons are caused by technical issues, like the above. But other causes are simply human factors. Like someone interrupting the caller while on hold and they abandon to deal with another issue.

The list of human factors is endless, so, ahem "abandon" the need to take responsibility for all abandon calls.

For reporting purposes, if your service level objective is 80% of calls answered in 20 seconds, most contact center leaders are comfortable deducting all abandons that occurred before 20 seconds or whatever is your particular service level objective.

Keep in mind that it is unlikely there were any opportunities to recover those calls. These early abandons are most likely driven by those human factors (and other factors) over which the contact center has no control.

INTEGRATING THE DRIVING FORCES

The driving forces in contact center management—Random Call Arrival, Visible and Invisible Queue, and Caller Tolerance—are pivotal to both understanding and developing the operational activities required to deliver on CX-based outcomes.

The customer, the center, and the frontline are represented within these drivers. The understanding of Random Call Arrival enhances the frontline's understanding of the WHYs. For example, why can't everyone go to lunch or break together? Why is the contact center not always available to participate in that "companywide" town hall?



Graphing out those interval arrival charts provides the ability to prove patterns and demonstrate how resources are allocated.

The Invisible Queue is a reality in the contact center. It is critical to make it come alive and have relevance for agents when calls in queue are displayed. Training must include how to contribute to desired outcomes throughout the day. Everyone must understand what that queue means and what causes queues to grow. (This is a great discussion exercise.)

And finally, Caller Tolerance and its five critical factors is a massive topic to explore. It is critical to elevate all three driving forces to an "art form." Remember that art is defined as "a superior skill you can learn by study, practice, and observation."

I recommend that you examine these driving forces via an all-inclusive activity with your management team, agents, and executives! Ask relevant questions and have participants write down what THEY think and review the answers and recommendations together.

Trust me, this can be fun. I have conducted this exercise thousands of times in training and it always yields rich insights.

Sometimes the insight is that the team has NO common insight. This is an indication that exercises such as this must take place for the leadership and staff to operate under the same knowledge set. The ability to understand and apply the findings of your exercise will enhance your knowledge of caller needs and the needs of the business.

In conclusion, managing all channels is important, but managing today's calls is becoming more important, more valuable, and more expensive. Person-to-person phone interactions often consist of complex transactions and interactions that require a human's capabilities to resolve.

Integrate the three driving forces into every aspect of managing your contact center and critically observe your outcomes. Contact center management offers a lifetime of learning and to me that is the real art!

Kathleen is taking a few months for hard-earned time off. We are running two of her most popular-ever articles in July and August in honor of her continued dedication to our readers.



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