SCORE WITH RAPPORT!

Connection, mutual understanding and trust are the cornerstones of rapport.

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Early in 2020, *Pipeline* published results from the 2020 Contact Center Challenges & Priorities survey and declared 2020 the "Year of the Agent." The focus on the agent is a change from 2019's "Improving the Customer Experience," which continued as leadership's top challenge.

Given the current COVID circumstances, I believe that the 2020 findings remain true as the agent is the lynchpin between the company and the customer experience. We must be diligent in reinforcing the skills that empower our frontline agents to deliver on the customer experience promise. That being said, I want to talk about building rapport as it relates to contact center management, the front line and customers.

Rapport is a fundamental communication strategy and the basis for *strategic communication*. Once rapport is mastered, agents are able to interact more effectively with callers, and with any luck, management. Management also can learn a lot from studying rapport, as it is the basis for persuasion and influence… both critical in 21st century leadership.

The Power of Rapport

Rapport is defined as "a relationship of mutual understanding or trust and agreement between people" (Visual Thesaurus, Thinkmap Inc.). The definition sounds easy enough and it is, once the strategies to build rapport are understood and adopted. In his book, "Unlimited Power" (Free Press, 1986), Tony Robbins writes that "Communication is Power." I received this book as a gift in 1987 and it remains on my nightstand to this day. One of the most interesting aspects of this notion is that we all possess the ability to EMPOWER ourselves. I like to call it, "I POWER"… the power to build rapport and communicate effectively toward the outcomes we are trying to produce.

Contact center agents first and foremost must know the outcomes that the organization is trying to produce when it comes to the customer experience. I never cease to be amazed when listening to calls or sitting side-by-side with agents that are sleepwalking through interactions and totally missing opportunities to engage. The most egregious failure I've witnessed is a financial institution where a caller had to make account adjustments due to the death of her spouse. The agent neglected to offer any condolences—nothing, nada—just jumped right into the verification process.

Sometimes we neglect to consider the detail to which we must go when teaching all the elements of the customer experience. Many elements rely on the ability to communicate and to pick up on communication cues which, when recognized, enhance our ability to respond in a way that sparks a connection. This "connection" is a critical success factor in building mutual understanding and trust. These are the cornerstones of rapport.

Rapport-building is both an art and a science. The very definition of the word describes beautifully the job of most contact centers. Now let's add a beginning to the definition: "Our job is to build with our consumers… a relationship of mutual understanding or trust and agreement between people." This sums it up nicely and begs the question, "How exactly do we do that?" I would like to propose one approach.

The approach begins with the management team in its entirety—director, quality and training managers, workforce management, supervisors and any others (HR, etc.) likely to interact with or influence the front line. Rapport is as much strategic as it is personal. While the focus is on professional development, it is personal interest and energy in the pursuit that determines ultimate proficiency.

Hire the Right People

No one can force another person to be personable; you have to hire for that. This is the very first step that management must take when building a contact center dedicated to delivering on customer experience objectives. Hire the people most likely to be personable! Hire those that are optimistic and passionate about life and enthusiastic about learning and self-development. These human qualities are often as important as years of contact center work experience.

I recommend adding an optimism assessment to your organization's hiring process. Take a look at the free online Learned Optimism Test adapted from Dr. Martin Seligman's book, "Learned Optimism" (First Vintage Book Edition, January 2006).

Ignite Team Passion

The contact center's management team must understand the same lessons as the front line when it comes to building rapport. In order to properly teach rapport-building, one must also be a student of rapport. It is a lifelong learning experience!

To begin, your management team must first look at its own passion. Do you show passion for your vision? Have you embedded the vision into agent training and coaching? The worst coaching line in the world is this preface to an agent's critique: "When I was a rep..." You have likely just lost your student! Humans are driven by self-interest; nobody cares as much about your experience as much as they do their own.

Eliminate phrases such as the one cited above and use carefully crafted questions:

- How did what I observed contribute to the customer's experience?
- What else could have been covered during this interaction?
- What do you feel went well?
- Were there times when you were uncertain during this call?
- What other products or services would have fit in this conversation?
- Is there anything you need from me to help you improve?

"Ask" beats "tell" when it comes to coaching. Reinforcing brand and experience objectives creates context for the conversation and strengthens commitment to the brand and experience factors. Asking questions is critical to getting at how well the tools, training and technology are supporting stated outcomes.

> "Rapport is the ultimate tool for producing results with other people. No matter what you want in your life, if you can develop rapport with the right people, you'll be able to fill their needs, and they will be able to fill yours."
>
> —TONY ROBBINS

When management demonstrates passion for the vision and brand it is ten times more powerful than painting a phrase or word clouds all over the walls and stairwells. Actions speak louder than words!

Passionate communication when coaching and training demonstrates belief in our company's objectives. We must be certain to avoid conflicting messages as it shatters an agent's trust. Consider a situation in which the vision and brand say how great and wonderful the organization is. However, training barely exists after the new-hire experience, quality is purely a compliance audit of did/didn't statements, feedback is "automated," and restrictions on servicing the consumer are abundant. These suggest to frontline staff that they actually cannot be trusted. Incongruent messages lead agents to doubt rather than to trust; this literally impairs their ability to build rapport.

Give Rapport Some Clarity

So let's assume that leadership is on board with a "Score with Rapport" program. What do agents really need to know? Here is a broad framework to jumpstart the program.

Albert Mehrabian, Professor Emeritus of Psychology at the University of California, Los Angeles, characterized the elements of rapport and personal communication in the following way:

- 7% words
- 38% tonality
- 55% physiology (body language)

When discussing interaction skills with agents, we must educate them on the fact that they literally have the ability to control the interaction by building rapport... deliberately.

Consider the impact of word choice. Alert your teams to the fact that words assign meaning; they also assign intensity. Agents must be able to monitor simultaneously their own word choice while listening to the words the caller uses to describe their situation. As an example, suppose a caller uses the word "frustration." If the agent responds, "I understand your frustration," one may think, good we're on the same page. Yet, that is NOT the page you want to be on! Instead, the agent may say, "I understand your concern." (This is what Tony Robbins calls "transformational vocabulary.") By changing the word, the agent has, in fact, diminished the intensity of the language.

Using a caller's name appropriately is also an important factor. I use "appropriately" because some "scripted" operations actually measure agents on how many times the caller's name is used. In my experience, this only serves to make the agent sound robotic rather than truly engaged. Acknowledging unique attributes the caller has shared assures that they feel listened to. This is likely the single greatest element in rapport-building. Effective



listening leads to effective word choice. This contributes to rapport-building, which contributes to creating an "agreement." This skill requires focus and practice, as does tonality.

Your tone of voice is a combination of pace, pitch, volume and tempo. Most contact centers make assessing tone relatively easy given the fact that we have call recordings. Being able to hear yourself is an effective method when evaluating voice quality. Monotone or robotic responses do not build rapport; on the contrary, it feels like you don't care. Talking too slowly or too quickly can be irritating, although pace can be a great soother when the caller is angry. You provide a calming effect when slowing down your speech while lowering your voice. This is where word choice and tone come together.

I sometimes go nuts when I watch some crime show and the 911 dispatchers scream at the caller to "CALM DOWN." It never seems to work. They ought to try slowing down and lowering their voice to let the caller know that "I'm here to help you. What is your address, emergency…?" I am not aware of a single situation where telling someone to calm down does anything more than inflame another person.

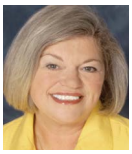
Hiring for voice interactions really needs to start with a phone interview. If that fails, you save yourself the trouble of advancing that candidate any further. The good news about tonality, however, is that it is one of the great flexibilities of the human form. There are many online resources for voice exercises. Simply google "how to improve my speaking voice" and boom… tons of options come up.

Finally, there is body language. Some may say that, while you are on the phone, body language has no impact on the interaction. I disagree. If a person slouches or lies down on their desk, it is quite likely you will know it! The quality of the interaction is impacted by posture, breathing, hydration and a smile. Put a smile on your face. Let your brain know you are happy!! (A great giveaway… purchase mirrors for agents' desks.) You might also promote "deskercises" for your agents. Again, there are tons of resources available online.

Build Rapport at All Levels

So, how do you "score" with rapport? Earn points for reduction in stress, reduction of escalations, improvements in quality and accuracy to name a few! Look for ways to build and strengthen rapport at all levels of the organization. Agents need to know that the management team is applying the same skills to the front line as the front line is applying to consumers.

Score with Rapport! Build on these skills and optimism will prevail… even in difficult times.



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