



Call & Contact Centres – Public Sector vs. Private Sector

So how do public sector and private sector call & contact centres compare?

First off, and a point some may not agree with, we should accept that many calls represent a failing in the capabilities of our web site. Yes, the public sector has to meet the needs of hard to reach groups - people who have never used Google, booked an air flight or bought a book on-line – but the majority of the people phoning us have done, or will in the near future.

Next, we should see every contact from a customer as a gift. It is generally:

- A request for a new service, e.g. removal of an abandoned vehicle, a booking for a special/bulky collection etc. All of which are an opportunity to promote the organisation by meeting or even (another debatable point!) exceeding the customer's expectations. Many electorates' view of the council is based upon the performance of their regular waste collection service – their main interaction.
- A call because something has gone wrong, either a promise not met or a general call for assistance, e.g. a housing repair.

This is where the differences between the public sector and private sector start to become apparent. Good management information is generally at the heart of most private sector organisations, e.g. how much each and every transaction costs, by channel (i.e. face-to-face, telephone and electronic – web and SMS) and the impact of making changes to any given process. At Barclays Plc, a great deal of time was spent on the business case to add 'is there anything that I can help you with today' to the advisers' script. Multiply this few additional seconds of call time to 'x' million calls per year and you suddenly realise that there is a need to increase the workforce required to cope with this small but very significant change. However, if 'y%' of those customers asked respond positively, and ask about another product, and this results in an additional sale then this investment may be worth it.

In local government, we are frequently dealing with much lower volumes, and typically managing a far larger number of processes. This often means that the investment in producing the business case can outweigh any the potential savings, so as Management Troubleshoot, Sir Gerry Robinson (remember the NHS TV series?) said recently, we are better to make decisions on intuition, or – sorry for the plug - on the advice of external advisers who have done it 'x' times before – rather than to blow any potential savings on producing yet another business case for building a call or contact centre (or whatever it may be).

Another difference is the way that we handle calls. Few public sector organisations are obsessed to the same degree as the private sector on the number of calls we receive. Partly



it is for the reason given above (the costs outweigh the benefits) but also it is not what the public sector is about.

The private sector is about making a profit, and therefore is keen to:

- Resolve any problems that are its responsibility as quickly as possible,
- See if it can use the interaction as an opportunity to sell more.

In the public sector, we often:

- Take time to understand a caller's problems, because:
 - We acknowledge the often complex web of public and voluntary sector services,
 - If not handled correctly it can cause untold problems,
 - Often those calling are vulnerable and their problems need to be teased out,
 - Bottom line we have a duty to service the public, including hard to reach groups.

This is seen most starkly in the attention given to call duration. Whilst in the private sectors, each additional second increases costs, and therefore reduces profitability, which may in turn potentially impacts their share price, the same is not true in the public sector. Spending a little more time on a call may reveal additional problems, which can in turn uncover the root cause of a problem, both preventing further harm and costs.

Whilst both sectors should never lose sight of seeking out new efficiency savings, targeting staff to reduce calls durations (for calls which are not productive for the customer or the provider) can still produce undesired results. For example, it is not unheard of:

- Staff to terminate calls within the first few seconds to improve to average call duration stats.
- Staff to focus solely on the problem to hand rather than discovering and dealing with the root cause (which may save both sectors money in the long run).
- Customers recalling, either because another issue has uncovered itself (which may have been prevented with further investigation during the first calls) or re-dialing because they have been cut-off, and now have to be calmed down (more time) before their original enquiry can be dealt with.

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