



In the Center with Marcia Hicks

Tips for Handling Call Volume during Peak Times

Do busy times equal busy signals? A little planning can help your call center handle the peak times.

Every company has busy times of increased demand and stretched resources. Inbound call centers can be hard-hit during gift-giving seasons, following billing cycles or after new advertising or marketing campaigns are launched – all of which can overload phone lines, email boxes and Web pages, not to mention frazzling your agents.

Peak times are a permanent and integral part of the business model. A peak time can be defined as any consistent period of time with contact volumes that are 40 percent above normal.

So how can contact centers deal with peak times? How can you find a balance between being profitable and remaining responsive to customers? Following are a few suggestions to ensure your callers aren't put off by endless queues or extended email response time delays.

Whenever Possible, Control the Peak

Sometimes controlling the peak can be done fairly easily by ensuring that mailings, promotions and marketing campaigns are staggered. For instance, many companies send out their monthly bills on a daily basis, sorting them by last name, phone number or other criteria. This way, if customers have questions about a bill, the contacts don't all come in the same two- or three-day period each month.

However, most of the time, everything happens at once – the product hits shelves across the country, the ads start their rotation in the media and so on. If your center can't handle the subsequent increase in contacts, it may be wise to plan the upcoming program in stages.

One idea is to stagger direct-mail campaigns by mailing to different parts of your target population on different dates. While this approach may be impossible for some programs, it should be considered as an option when attempting to even out the amount of contacts handled during peak days and/or hours. Your call center will be better able to promptly handle customer contacts.

Plan Early

Call centers should start planning at least three months before peak periods. This time is necessary to determine staffing needs, hire and train temporary workers, and if necessary, schedule longer shifts for existing employees. Training new and temporary employees can take anywhere from a week to a month. A common strategy is to assign new agents to handle only certain types of contacts (e.g., calls, email, Internet) in an effort to save on training costs. You may even further specialize the type of calls such as catalog requests, new orders or order inquiries.

Another solution is to outsource contacts during busy periods. Outsourcing can be a way to control costs without having to worry about modifying your workspace or hiring new employees. You may decide to outsource a specific type of call and keep the more complicated calls in-house.

Test Programs

Call center staff are often put to the test when a new product or program is released. It's helpful to have a dry run for everyone involved. In this dry run, a percentage of the new product is introduced or a catalog is dropped in a limited geographic area. The goal is to determine how many people will call (what percentage of the group that received the catalog or were introduced to the product), what questions are asked most frequently, how

the customers feel about the product or service (positive or negative), and whether the agents have all the data they need to respond to customer inquiries.

Although companies often test products, they often neglect to test customer reactions gathered from contact points; e.g., calls, email and Internet transactions. This is very shortsighted, as the customer may have only one contact with the company. Do you really want to start that relationship without testing it first?

The test period can make a big difference, even if it's conducted only a few days in advance. With responses front-tested, you can then modify your scripts and fact sheets, or even determine if you should handle some frequently asked questions through an automated message.

You may also change the information posted on your Web site, thereby reducing calls and emails requesting information. The most important point is to solidify customer relationships, or at least reduce the chance that customers will go to the competition.

Use Technology and Automation to Your Advantage

In the majority of peak-time cases, callers will be greeted by a recorded message. In some instances, the system can announce how long a caller has to wait to speak to an agent. Companies using this technology are in the minority because of the added cost of software, but they boast a noticeable increase in customer satisfaction, which can validate the cost.

Even if your company doesn't have the technology in your ACD for "estimated time waiting" announcements, there's a work-around solution. You can estimate the average time a caller waits to speak to an agent by day and busy hours. Then you can manually record the estimated wait time in your greeting and program different greetings for different

continued on page 10

Handling Call Volume during Peaks
continued from page 9

periods. For instance, if your callers usually wait five minutes for an agent, in your opening greeting, tell customers that you welcome their calls; however, due to heavy call volumes, the wait is approximately five minutes. You may want to give them other options, such as a Web address, answers to frequently asked questions or a better time of day or day of the week to call.

You could also bypass the agent during peak periods by using a fully automated system such as speech recognition. Dismissed as unreliable a decade ago, speech technology is now a viable and customer-friendly solution to help absorb heavy call volume. While there is an extra upfront cost, the savings can quickly recoup the expense. Most customers prefer an answer by machine rather than eternally waiting for an agent. And once you have invested in this equipment, you can use it 24/7.

For example, in England, a popular retail store ran sales for two weeks following Boxing Day. During that time, 30 to 40 percent of the callers phoning

the store received a busy signal. To solve the problem, the store installed a speech recognition program and their busy signals went down considerably. The system paid for itself in a single two-week period, as more callers were able to get through and place orders.

Besides using automated systems at the beginning of the call, be sure to have tools in place for agents, as well. One of the biggest mistakes call centers make is not providing their agents with enough information. When callers have waited an extended period of time to talk to an agent, it would help the agent to have this information available. The agent can open a call with "Hello, I'm sorry you had to

wait so long. How can I help you?" Just that slight change in greeting can make a world of difference. Agents should know when callers might be irritated, so they can be ready to defuse anger.

Make Sure Your Agents Feel Appreciated

Appreciation and respect is very important. If you expect your agents to work additional hours, let them know your plans as early as possible. If they can

If you expect agents to work additional hours, let them know your plans as early as possible. If they can volunteer for specific time periods or additional shifts that work for them, their commitment will be stronger.

volunteer for specific time periods or additional shifts that work for them, their commitment will be stronger. Many employees have family obligations and need as much notice as possible to reschedule other commitments.

It's also essential to reward everyone for working through stressful peak times. Gift certificates for a restaurant or movie tickets are great incentive items. "Social" gifts are best, because they offer the agents a chance to do something with their family or friends. Don't reward agents for handling a certain volume of calls. "Short" contacts are not necessarily "good" contacts. Often, the opposite is true. And don't forget your support staff when you think about special treats such as lunch or rewards that you provide during stressful times. They may not be on the front lines, but they are an important part of the team and should be rewarded, too.

As a Last Resort...

In a worst-case scenario, consider using a forced-disconnect (not allowing a caller to wait). If you have too many callers waiting, you create a cycle of wait, abandon and recalling. A recorded message can explain your situation, provide callers with alternatives such as a better time to call and attempt to "save" the customer.

The last thing you want to do is alienate the caller. However, if you give them another way to contact you, there is a chance they will either use fax, email, Web or call back at a better time. Of course, you must have sufficient coverage for answering customers if they use another method to reach you. While it might seem a bit abrupt to force-disconnect a call, it's preferable to having your caller wait 30 minutes or longer. Also, remember you pay for every minute a caller waits on your toll free numbers.

By using these methods, your center should be able to better plan for peak periods and provide customers with the service they deserve. Planning, good use of technology, and knowing when to make tough decisions can ease the stress. [CCMReview](#)

Marcia Hicks

Marcia Hicks is a Senior Consultant at Kowal Associates, a contact center consulting firm in Boston, MA. She can be reached at 617-521-9000.

INCOMING CALLS MANAGEMENT INSTITUTE'S (ICMI'S) UPCOMING SEMINARS

SEMINAR	DATE	PLACE
Essential Skills and Knowledge for Effective Incoming Call Center Management	June 11-12	Chicago, IL
	July 16-17	Tampa, FL
	July 23-24	San Francisco, CA
Effective Strategic Planning for Senior Call Center Managers	June 25-26	San Diego, CA
	August 13-14	Philadelphia, PA
Understanding and Applying Today's Call Center Technologies	June 4-5	Seattle, WA
	July 9-10	Chicago, IL
Elevating Your Monitoring & Coaching Practices for Today's Demanding Call Center	June 26-27	Denver, CO
	July 9-10	Atlanta, GA
Measuring and Improving Customer Satisfaction and Loyalty	May 31	Toronto, ON

For more information on these seminars, or to register, please visit www.incoming.com or call ICMI at 800-672-6177 or 410-267-0700.