

# Train to Retain Top-Performing Agents

BY LISA BRIGHT

The call center agents who are most engaged in their jobs and aligned with their employers are the ones who are most committed to delivering outstanding customer care. They also know that keeping customers satisfied and loyal will help to ensure their companies' success — and they recognize what a critical role they play in this ongoing endeavor.

*Tried-and-true strategies for ensuring that your best agents are engaged, committed, progressing... and satisfied.*

center agents who were seeking new jobs about what they disliked most about their current positions. The No. 1 issue cited was the lack of promotional opportunities. In a similar study of call center employee turnover by business applications, systems and service provider

impacted by employee turnover. Higher training and recruiting costs were also among the top five issues. Fewer than half of the call centers that responded to the ICMI survey have a formal skill path that allows agents to earn a higher wage or hourly rate after attaining specific skill sets. And only slightly more than half have a formal career path in place that allows agents to advance within the call center or to other positions within the enterprise — certainly not a situation conducive to long-term engagement.

With all this in mind, the following strategies will help you to create the training and development opportunities that will attract top-notch employees to your call center — and keep them engaged, on board and providing loyalty-building customer service.

## PROVIDE A BLENDED TRAINING APPROACH

Today's call center training goes far beyond product knowledge, focusing additionally on such critical skills as the correct language to use with specific clients, problem-solving skills, conflict resolution and call escalation. While training once focused on adhering to rigid call-handling times, the best modern training emphasizes active listening, insightful probing and devoting the time needed to resolve each question or problem to the customer's complete satisfaction on



One of the best ways to build high levels of engagement is to provide agents with opportunities to learn, grow and advance in their jobs. By doing so, you demonstrate that you appreciate and value them as the intelligent, capable professionals that they are. Unfortunately, study after study shows that customer service employees are lacking these critical opportunities — and the resulting unhappiness is leading to sky-high turnover. For example, online recruiter Call Center Careers polled 1,000 call

Avaya, agents cited the lack of career paths, training and professional development among the top reasons for leaving their companies.

Call center turnover is costly in more ways than one. In its *2007 Agent Turnover and Retention Report*, ICMI found that the average direct cost when a frontline employee leaves ranges from \$2,500 to \$10,000. Further, nearly three-fourths of companies cited loss of service quality as the No. 1 issue

the initial call.

A training program that builds these critical skills — and keeps agents stimulated and progressing up the career ladder — requires much more than an old-fashioned classroom approach. Traditional classroom training is obsolete. One-size-fits-all training no longer works in today's dynamic call center, where agents require a wide range of specialized technical skills and customer knowledge. Incoming

call volumes are higher than ever. Interactions take place via multiple applications such as the phone switch, the database to track the calls, the knowledgebase to provide the answers to the inquiries, emails, live Web chats and other necessary tools. With staffing budgets stretched to the limit, few, if any, call centers have the luxury of trooping groups of trainees off to classes for extended periods of time.

The state-of-the-art solution is a well-designed blended learning environment. This combines group classes and multimedia training sessions with interactive, independent, on-demand e-learning that agents can accomplish on their own time and pace. To be most effective, blended training needs to include exercises that involve agents practicing the wide variety of actual customer interactions that they are likely to encounter on the job. These

## ► Finding the Best Candidates for Call Center Jobs

Before you can initiate an effective training and development program, you need to get top-notch candidates on board. This is a challenge, to say the least — particularly in an era where competition is intense and entry-level job candidates are often ill-prepared for the workplace. Call centers need to take advantage of every available tool and resource in their recruiting efforts, yet many are falling short in this critical area.

According to ICMI's *2007 Contact Center Recruiting and Hiring Survey Report*, most centers are not taking advantage of the most advanced and progressive candidate assessment tools and approaches. ICMI reports that:

- > 11.9% use job simulation software to help gauge candidates skills;
- > 13.4% use written (manual) attitude/motivation assessment tests;
- > 14.4% conduct job simulations via live role plays;
- > 20.6% use PC or Web-based attitude/motivation assessment tools and software;
- > 27.3% use written (manual) skills and knowledge assessment tests;
- > 35.6% have applicants interview with senior/experienced agents, and;
- > 39.7% currently use PC or Web-based skills and knowledge assessment tools and software.

Further, just under half of respondents said that their call centers use a job-preview tool or approach — such as a video of agents at work, a detailed tour of the call center, and/or job simulation software — to give agent candidates a good picture of what the job and work life in the call center are like. And only 41.4% of call centers surveyed said that they formally track the success of their recruitment methods to determine which methods most often lead to the hiring of a solid performing, long-term agent.

To make the best hiring decisions, use live phone screening and simulations that require candidates to demonstrate competency in handling specific types of customer interactions. Also, test candidates in handling e-mail and live Web chat if these channels will be used on the job. Remember that while you may be looking for candidates with college degrees, experience can be an even better teacher than education when it comes to building solid skills.

The most successful centers administer pre-hire tests to assess customer service skills and attributes such as intelligence, personality and honesty. Identify the skills and traits, or core competencies, needed to do the job and measure these up front, using every tool at your disposal. That's the best way to get the best on board. Then once you have great candidates on the team, you can provide the training and development opportunities that will keep them growing and going strong with your company for years to come.

simulations help agents build critical skills and confidence so they are equipped to expertly handle even the most challenging customer situations before they get on the phones.

E-training can be customized to the call center's specific needs and used for ongoing training and development, both to enhance agents' performance and to move them through increasingly higher levels of skill complexity and proficiency. E-learning can also be used to focus on and resolve specific problem areas. Supervisors can monitor agents' progress, provide feedback, coaching on areas that require further improvement and give praise and recognition when employees overcome performance problems and advance to higher levels of acuity. E-training includes live instruction over the Web where representatives sign on from a remote location, listening in via phone or voice over Internet protocol (VoIP), view presentations online, and interact through an electronic Q-and-A feature, a shared whiteboard or a polling feature.

Benefits of e-learning are that training can be delivered whenever it is needed and agents can use downtime to go through their modules. Content can be maintained in an easily accessible archive and updated as necessary. Not only can supervisors monitor employees' progress, but the agents can track their own performance, giving them more control over their development and advancement.

The best blended training programs for agents also include such tools as job-shadowing, transition training (where new-hires handle relatively simple calls in a highly supervised "nesting" environment,

and peer support and coaching. Using a mentor or "buddy system" can be the most effective way to orient new agents to the work environment, foster comfort, impart skills and quickly get them up to full productive capacity. To use mentoring to maximum advantage, managers need to identify those seasoned call center employees who have not only strong technical and customer service skills but are friendly, great communicators and, above all, patient. Managers then need to train veterans in supervisory skills before they pair them with novices, and work with the mentors to develop performance plans for the new agents.

### CREATE DEVELOPMENT PLANS THAT TAKE THEM HIGHER

A report by benchmarking consultancy group Best Practices in Chapel Hill, N.C., directly links the importance of engaging employees in their jobs and companies as a way to promote excellent customer service. This report also uncovers the best practice for engaging employees: an effective performance management system that includes goal-setting and reward, recognition and incentive programs.

The call centers with the highest levels of employee engagement, lowest turnover and most satisfied customers know that a one-size-fits-all mentality does not work for performance management any more than it does for training. Gone are the days when performance management consisted of little more than an annual appraisal. Today, the best call centers take a close look at individual employee competencies, learning needs and personal goals and then create a specific develop-

ment plan for each employee, mapping out exactly what the agent needs to do in order to achieve specific performance targets and position levels. For example, many call centers establish career paths with tiered positions that include opportunities for promotion into team leader, supervisory and management jobs.

The most effective development plans give employees a direct line of sight for how their performance fits into the overall company business strategy — which, of course, includes building customer satisfaction and loyalty. Then call centers build all learning and growth opportunities in a way that supports those business goals. Optimum development plans also provide opportunities for agents to go above and beyond their daily customer service jobs — giving them ample opportunities to work on special projects or in team environments that most interest them.

As part of effective performance management for agents, feedback needs to come from not only supervisors but from peers, employees from other departments who interact with agents and, most important, from the customers themselves. This "360-degree feedback" provides agents with a clearer, more reliable and comprehensive perspective on their performance. And employee surveys indicate that agents like this approach and feel it is generally a fairer form of assessment than simply getting feedback from one person — their boss.

### GETTING THE GREATEST BENEFIT FROM TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT PLANS

The best-designed agent training and development plans will not yield the greatest benefits if they

are not strongly and directly linked to organizational and business performance. So once the plans are in place, it is crucial to measure their outcomes against business results.

Three metrics are critical:

- > How well did the implementation of the training and development programs work?

- > How prepared are agents to perform their mission-critical tasks?

- > How has the business improved overall as a result of the training and development programs?

An ICMI survey on agent training and performance development revealed that fewer than half of call centers have a formal process in place for measuring the results of their training programs. To ensure

that yours gets the results you want, you need to look at such issues as:

- > Have employee morale and satisfaction measurably improved?

- > Is turnover down?

- > Is customer satisfaction and loyalty improving?

- > Has the bottom line improved because the cost savings due to reduced turnover and the increased customer revenues (more sales, larger customer base, higher loyalty levels) are far outweighing the expense of the training program?

Measuring these factors and their tie-in to business goals will help you to justify your investment in comprehensive blended training and development programs. By following these steps, you will have

loyal employees who are committed to delivering outstanding customer care — keeping customers satisfied and engaged — thus ensuring business success! ●



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