

Marketing – Contact Centres

Gavin Eccles – Consultant and Professor

Brand Image on the Line

While contact centre operators generally accept that outsourcing customer service can improve dealings with clients, reduce costs and boost operating efficiencies, some also believe it doesn't help reinforce brand essence. This can be particularly true when non-native customer service representatives (CSRs), who have a totally different frame of cultural reference than the customers they are hired to serve, are used.

Too often, outsourced customer care is evaluated as a basic operational decision in contact centres – one that's made by a finance manager whose primary concern is to save money and increase operating margins. The risk of this approach is the huge potential for failure, not to mention the devastating effects a poorly executed program can have on a company's long-term customer satisfaction.

Finance's primary focus is on costs. And marketing often is busy developing creative, exploring new markets and launching products and services. Somewhere in the process it tends to be forgotten that the contact centre can be a central touch point in a company's go-to-market strategy, helping to reinforce brand image and foster customer retention and loyalty, and that it's worthy of resource commitment and dedication.

When customers refuse to deal with or are frustrated by telephone personnel the brand suffers. Underestimating the value of the contact centre, whether it's in-house or outsourced, can have a devastating effect on a brand's value. However, with proper planning, implementation and continuous process improvement, an outsourced customer care program can yield its intended cost savings and service level benefits, whilst avoiding the unintended consequences of an abandoned brand essence. One challenge associated with outsourcing is striking a balance between what the outsourced provider knows best – technology, computer telephony integration and customer service – and the intangible challenges of maintaining and extending a company's core brand essence.

The outsourced contact centre industry has seen dramatic changes over the past decade. Contact centres are no longer regarded as cost centres but rather as profit centres. Capitalising on inbound cross-selling opportunities has become quite common and recruiting and training multifunctional customer sales/service agents has supported such a move. However, just as the migration from "service" to "service and sell" came with an incremental price tag, so too will the evolutionary shift to that of offering a "branded customer service."

Accordingly, we must focus on integrating the needs of enlightened brand managers with those of sceptical financial officers to create a new service - one with incremental hiring, training and monitoring expenses. Decisions will need to be made in which "branding" wins over the traditional metrics of "cost" when evaluating the potential benefits of outsourcing. While initially there may be additional expenditures, ultimately the extended brand value will improve the overall return on investment of the total outsourced customer care effort. Beyond mere customer satisfaction and service performance-level analysis, branded customer service requires active customer participation. If customers exposed to this new kind of contact centre activity feel better about the brand, then branded customer service has been achieved.

To support such discussion, below is an example of branded customer services in a contact centre environment:

A prepaid telecoms product is developed and targeted to teenagers. The telecom company's advertising has a youthful edge, using age-appropriate language, colour and context that reflect its target audience. The customer care challenge is to deliver an enjoyable experience in which service levels are met and brand extension achieved. Essentially, there are two choices:

- (a) Develop a highly competent live operator and interactive voice response environment using traditional scripting and staid, reliable customer service agents, or
- (b) Develop a customer experience that delivers on service level requirements and functionality and has the hip edge of the core brand.

In Option (a), the customer experience is likely to be perceived as efficient and courteous – nice, but not supporting the brand. In Option (b), the provider is able to use the tone, slang and colloquialisms of its audience while delivering quality care. In other words, the target consumer will define the experience as, "Hey, that was cool!"

Remember that every customer touch-point is an opportunity to improve brand value. Making sure outsourcing agreements include both service and branding-level metrics is vital. Particularly in order for the contact centre to 'Live the Brand' and provide an experience that is part of the customer's expectation. This discussion then leads us on to define that are brands really missing the basics of establishing a real and consistent relationship with consumers? The word relationship is overly used in the world of businesses today, and most of the time it is not really conveying the real meaning and natural strengths of a relationship. A lot of companies are talking about having a relationship with customers and managing this relationship through different techniques and models including CRM. But compared to real life human relationships, what we experience in the market is more about manipulation than real connection at a human level.

In the midst of intense competitions and fast moving business scenes some brands and companies are missing a very important element when dealing with consumers and their other relevant constituencies: the human element.

The Human Face of Brands

The economic value of a brand is widely recognised, not just by brand owners but by investors as well. At the same time, the power of brands is directly related to their connection with customers; therefore, the law of transitivity makes the fate of businesses and their economic value directly related to the strength of their brands' connection with consumers. Building a strong and authentic relationship with consumers should respect the following elements:

1. **The Human Face of Brands:** To better connect with people, brands need a "human face." This has to be real and able to connect with their lives in a genuine manner; otherwise people will discount "faked personality" brands from their lives the same way they avoid people with unpleasant characters.

2. **The Positive Contribution/Proposition of Brands:** After defining a real human face and personality, brands need to bring a positive contribution to people's life; this is the brand offering or proposition. Without this contribution we won't have the basis for a sustainable and complete relationship. We can still have a certain level of relationship without a real contribution but this will remain at the awareness level but involving real interaction.

3. **Building the Real & Strong Connection:** Like people, a brand cannot have relationships with all available people. It has to make choices, (focus on certain segments and own a clear position in the mind). Those choices start from the very general to the very specific, from what kind of values this brand believes in to the level of transparency it has in its products or outlets.

4. **Living the Brand:** Living the brand is believing in what the brand stands for. How can this brand be materialised as a person and what kind of contribution is it bringing to the world, to a country or to a group of consumers?

To be a real and positive part of people's life a brand needs a human face and a real person's profile from values to behaviour, to communication, to social responsibility and contribution. In addition to that, it has to have a specific offering addressed to its target consumers.