

## Call Centers On The Boom

Communication tool that is still used most frequently is a telephone. There is hardly any business that works without a phone. Personalization of your customer service with call center is an effective way to improve business communication via a telephone. A successful marketing campaign starts with a keen understanding of your customers. By knowing you what your customer wants you can serve your customers more efficiently. A call center is a central place where customer and other telephone calls are handled by an organization, usually with some amount of computer automation. Call centers are best defined as operational centers set up to utilize telecommunication and computer technologies to automate various high-volume inbound and/or outbound telephone activities and services. Inbound contact centers are typically characterized as providing a particular set of services to customer making inbound contacts with the centers.

The Call Centers can be classified into mainly:

- **Standalone Call Centers**, the the most common type of call center environment today. This type of infrastructure evolved out of a need to provide additional or improved services to the claimants and to reduce operating costs. Standalone call centers do not share or route incoming calls between them. Each center is almost identical in voice/data infrastructure; the only major difference between them being the capacity of the center to support the expected volume of calls designated in the region where the call center is placed.
- **Networked Call centers**, that have the capability to route calls to another center if there are no available agents at the first center. The capability can be very sophisticated or very rudimentary. The basic design of networked call centers is very similar to the standalone call centers, with the exception of interconnecting line(s). The most significant difference would be the inclusion of interconnecting telephone/data lines between the centers, such as Integrated Services Digital Network (ISDN) or T-1. The purpose of these interconnecting lines is to allow somelevel of call routing between call centers. Calls being routed would normally be overflow calls or calls routed based upon predefined criteria.
- **Virtual Call Centers**, defined as multiple geographic call center sites that appear to the consumer, through the use of telecommunications equipment and software, to be one single site. The most significant difference between networked call centers and the virtual call center is the ability of the system to route an inbound telephone call to the next available agent regardless of where that agent is geographically located.

There are 3 distinct phases of a Call center's life.

1. **Feasibility Analysis and Planning Phase** referred to as strategic implementation planning, focuses upon the general planning decisions and issues, and is developed in the feasibility and design pahases of the project.
2. **Design Phase** activities begin with detailing the project management and organizational plan. All the roles and responsibilities of the team must be clearly established. The workload estimates used for the original concept development and evaluation must be refined and used to determine the specific equipment, facilities, and staffing requirements.
3. **Implementation Phase** entails the actual development of the system and includes activities such as acquisition and installation of system components, application development, initial workforce development activities, and initial marketing activities.

4. **Operational Phase**, the final life cycle phase where the system is brought into full-scale operations. Once the system is operational, activities include monitoring and managing both the system and the workforce.

The qualities of an ideal call center lie in-

- Flexibility- The call center should be able to adapt to the requirements of the client company and ready to offer tailor made packages.
- Good technological capability and maintenance facility.
- Emergency backup facility should be available.
- Language – The vendor should be able to offer services in the native language of the prospective customers (e.g. English). The fluency in language and accents are important to many customers.
- Should have a professional approach with ‘human touch’ and courteous- It is very important that the persons working in the call center should not only have prompt and professional solutions for the problems of the customers but they should also have a ‘human touch’ so as to provide complete satisfaction to the customer.
- Good reputation, business philosophy and ethics.
- Commitment for customer satisfaction.

Call centers have the ability to generate unprecedented job growth. Call centers alone in the USA have created atleast 5 million jobs starting from the 1990. In Australia the decision to lift the ban on import of advanced telephony equipment (September 96) has led to a yearly 25% Call Centre growth creating some new 100,000 employment oppertunities for the Australian citizens. Similar figures come out of Europe with Great Britain and Ireland the frontrunners in the Call Centre race. South Africa opened the most modern state of the art Call Centre building in the Southern Hemisphere and committed Absa bank to become a leading force in making South Africa a hub for Call Centres. Today probably 20-30,000 people are employed in the Call Center field. The key here is the large unemployed black work force – most speak a very understandable English, the natural friendliness and empathy of these people would make customer service training a breeze, and both the German and Dutch languages are well covered too.

In recent years India has become a major hub of call center facilities. India's call center industry accounts for a quarter of all software and services exports from the country. Indian call centers and Information enabled technology services are currently employing about 1.2 million people and transforming into an almost \$2 billion industry. In order to meet the growing international demand for cost-effective, customer-oriented call centers, many organizations worldwide are outsourcing these services by setting up call centers in India.

Basic 'Mantra' for a successful call center is 'Customer satisfaction at affordable price'. All good call centers use some kind of contact manager software that helps in building a customer database. A prospective client wanting to have a call center facility has two options – either he sets up his own personalized call center for his business or utilize the services of professional 'outsourcing company' providing call center facility. The outsourcing option is usually much cheaper but finding the right vendor for your business is sometimes a problem.

As competition to provide customers with the best level of service intensifies, businesses are looking for new, advanced technology solutions that can be implemented quickly, at a reasonable cost, without compromising current call center operations. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, basic telephone call centers are no longer enough to meet customer service needs, particularly in the fast-paced and changing world of the Internet. Traditional call centers with telephones and workstations are being radically transformed into customer contact centers. This new breed of call center does not rely strictly upon telephones and databases, but opens up the call center to multiple methods of contact or communication including:

- Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP)
- Internet transactions
- Voice-to-Text files
- Electronic mail (email)
- Fax/fax-back
- Unified messaging

Internet communication solutions are integrated with the call center so Internet contacts can be centrally queued, routed, logged, and monitored. This blending simplifies multi-channel administration and management by leveraging previous call center investments benefits in-

- Improve the customer experience through consistent service across the Internet and telephone.
- Reduce customer wait time — customers get the first available CSR regardless of the communication channel being used.
- Lower customer service costs — subject matter experts can now work across communication channels.
- Centralize resources to better manage varying communication channel volumes.
- Simplify multi-channel communication management through consolidated reports.
- Leverage previous call center investments by integrating Internet communication solutions with your existing call center.

A Call Center may fail for various reasons like-

- Disregard for potential of staff. Use of terms like 'agents' to dehumanise people. Burn-out accepted as inevitable cost of a tough job. No or little training to improve communication & relationship skills of reps.
- Lack of strategic vision for the Call Centre and how it adds-value to the organisation paying the operational cost. Call factory measurements substitute for meaningful benchmarks which could help senior management relate to the value created in call outcomes.
- Management role is that of enforcement rather than coaching & skills development.
- New Technology viewed as the only way to improve productivity.