ASK NUS PROFS

Setting up a call centre

Q: Should an SME set up a call centre, and what are the factors to consider before setting up one, because it seems expensive? Is there a minimum number of staff required for a call centre to work? — Victoria Poh

A: Call centres sit on the front line of the customer service experience, where call centre agents provide customer service functions, sales support and/or address helpdesk enquiries. Call centres are often the customer’s first – and sometimes the only – human interaction with the company.

It is good that a company, be it an SME or a MNC, wants to seriously consider investing in setting up a good call centre. One must remember that investing in a call centre is more than just providing a customer service hotline for customers to call through.

When setting up a call centre, it is important to bear in mind that it is not just the hardware that management has to think about but the heartware issues as well – which are about providing a good quality customer experience. Too often, bad call centre experiences spoil thousands of daily opportunities to drive business value.

Some key factors to consider when setting up a call centre are:

♦ What is the objective and aim of having a call centre?
♦ What type of calls is the call centre going to handle? Is it inbound, outbound, appointment setting, sales, database clean-up, etc or all of the above?
♦ What type of service is the call centre going to function as: helpdesk, customer service or technical support?
♦ Will the call centre agents handle only phone calls? Or will there be an integration of phone, Web or e-mail functions to perform as well?
♦ Labour or staffing availability, HR & training, expertise, performance evaluation, compensation and incentives
♦ Call volume fluctuations and staffing needs – this is in tandem with the objective of the call centre
♦ Good infrastructure – facilities, a good telephony system, headsets, computer hardware, contact software, e-mail and webpage/webchat capabilities, call scripts

The minimum number of staff to have for the call centre really depends on what the call centre is set up for. What are the roles and duties that the call centre needs to perform? It can be sophisticated with all the bells and whistles of integrating phone, e-mail and web-based capabilities and supported by a good and expensive customer relationship management (CRM) system; or one that is as simple and basic as assigning one or two staff members to handle phone calls with a simple but updated CRM database to serve its functions.

Setting up a call centre may not be cheap. But if management sees it as an investment in customer relationship building, then the call centre will definitely have the potential to build a company’s brand image and even generate incremental sales through cross-selling, up-selling and lead generation.

Call centres are the “heart and soul” of the organisation and the “voice of the customer”. It bridges the communication gap between the organisation and the customers, and provides a human touch to what can be another nameless transaction.

— Regina Yeo, assistant lecturer, Department of Marketing, NUS Business School