

Call Center Week Speaker Q&A



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1. **How long have you been working in call centers?**
11 years in a Call Center but 19 in the catalog industry.
2. **Please tell me about your contact centers.**
 - a. **What types of customers do you service?**
People who enjoy home furnishings, who are redecorating their homes and who want a lot of choices when choosing merchandise for their home.
 - b. **What types of services do you provide?**
Order Entry. Customer Service. We handle customer email and chat sessions. Scheduling and Forecasting. Quality Assurance. Design Trade. Support functions such as declined credit cards, fraud, direct ship vendor management, parts, swatches, mail order processing and freight carrier claims. We also have 10 retail stores across the United States where we provide some customer service support.
 - c. **How many contact centers do you operate?**
One
 - d. **Where is your contact center located?**
St. Louis, Missouri
 - e. **How many customer service reps do you employ?**
We have approximately 138 employees in our Contact Center.
3. **What makes your call center unique?**
Our Call Center leadership team has been with the company for a long time, which provides a lot of stability and a very unique culture. We try really hard to make a personal connection with all of the team members. We send hand written notes to the top ranked employees, recognize birthdays and company anniversaries and have a monthly contest called "Caught Fishing" which recognizes positive performance. We have a large room that is painted like a whimsical fish bowl and it is called the "Think Tank." It has two PC's in it so employees can check their personal email, surf the Internet (with restrictions of course), or spend time on schoolwork. We try to make everyone feel like parts of a team but recognize them as individuals. I know it sounds cliché but the difference is in the people.
4. **How do you build a people-focused organization through incentives and motivation?**
Our Customer Service team has a Pay-for-Performance plan and quality assurance comprises 30% of the equation. We don't have any other incentive plans in our Contact Center but we do have a meaningful company-wide profit sharing plan. We communicate company performance quarterly and provide feedback as to what each department can do to impact profitability and

potential distribution. Our employees are really excited about the plan and look forward to seeing how they make a difference.

5. **What tools and strategies are you employing to empower your agents to deliver unique and quality experiences with customers?**
We have an internally developed CRM system that provides our employees with all the relevant data they need to take care of customers including things such as how much they have ordered returned and canceled. We have created guidelines that empower our team to do everything they can to keep a customer from canceling their order or having to return their product. We are fortunate to have an IT team which responds quickly to suggestions that make our business better.
6. **How do you make sure your entire company hears and responds to the Voice of the Customer?**
We produce a catalog, customer's vote on what they like by making purchases and we work hard to ensure their satisfaction. We encourage everyone to spend time cross training so they can actually listen to live calls while also working with our order entry system. We insert customer feedback cards in random packages so our customers can rate our service and product quality. The information obtained from this feedback is shared with the appropriate department. We have just installed a call monitoring and recording system so we are able to listen to calls from our desktop and if we want to share a particular interaction with someone else in the organization we are easily able to do so. All letters written to the president are routed to my team to research and respond to and he trusts we will make sure the customer is treated fairly.
7. **What are some common challenges that occur in your centers? How do you overcome them?**
We struggle with the same things I hear everyone else talking about such as:
 - a. What are the right metrics to manage?
 - b. Turnover/Retention
 - c. What is the most effective incentive plan?
 - d. How do I recruit a higher caliber of applicant?

The way we overcome them is to meet regularly as a team, encourage our open door policy, respond quickly to employee suggestions and concerns, participate in share groups and attend conferences.
8. **What is your recent greatest business related accomplishment (over the last 18 months)?**
In May 2006 we sold our business to the Home Depot. Transitioning our organization in to such a large company while maintaining the spirit that defined who we are took a lot of work. Fortunately, with a very strong leadership team we have been able to successfully take advantage of our synergies while also helping each other improve systems, policies and procedures. We had to transition our Contact Center from one that was shared by two companies (one of the companies was not sold to the Home Depot) to an independent stand-alone center.
9. **What are you most proud of in your call center?**
Our Contact Center leadership team and culture. We have created an environment, which is fun to work in, free of bureaucracy and relatively easy to understand. We share our financial information company wide and it is managed by a group of approachable managers.

10. Please describe your funniest call center experience.

We had just purchased a new phone system and I was paged to the Contact Center Customer Service area. On the phone was a customer who was obviously quite a bit older and she was not responding to the Sales Consultant when prompted. We could hear the bird she owned in the background so we knew we were still connected but she would not reply to our questions. Concerned that she may have had a stroke or heart attack my employee asked me what we should do. I got on the phone and said, "Mrs. Jones. If you can hear me please speak up, otherwise I will have to call for medical assistance." No response. We called 911 in her area and explained the situation and were told that they would send someone out immediately. I got back on the line with Mrs. Jones and explained that help was on its way. Soon I could actually hear the sirens in the background from her phone and just as I was ready to say, "Mrs. Jones, help has arrived and they will be knocking on your door" I realized the phone had accidentally been put on MUTE! The customer couldn't hear a word we had been saying to her!!! I pressed the mute button and said, "Mrs. Jones?" and she immediately replied, "Yes?" I had to tell her that the knocking on her door was the local fire department and that if there were any charges for their unnecessary visit we would be paying them.

11. What is your major source of research (including publications, websites and newsletters) on call centers?

I am leading a Catalog Share Group, which is made up of Contact Center leaders from twenty-three catalog companies. We provide each other information on how various challenges have been handled, we have a monthly conference call where different topics are discussed, and we periodically visit each other's Call Centers. I also subscribe to Multi-Channel Merchant, DM News and belong to the Customer Contact Council. (www.ccc.executiveboard.com)

12. What's the most useful business book that you'd recommend?

[GO Put Your Strengths to Work](#) by Marcus Buckingham

13. What are the top points you are hoping to portray to the audience at call center week?

If you can't measure it you can't manage it. As the Internet becomes more and more prevalent we have to look at our business differently than we have in the past. Also, it is very important that all levels of management have easy access to the performance measures and that everyone is on the same page regarding goals.

14. Why do you enjoy/look forward to Call Center Week?

It is refreshing to see that other people in the world are crazy enough to be in the Contact Center industry! I enjoy sharing and hearing how all of us handle the challenges that occur in our centers. I love meeting new people and having others to contact when I am struggling with a particular issue.