

Call center or cost center?

How to derive value from your call center

Call centers can become major cost centers if they're not managed correctly. Practices surrounding customer interactions must reflect the changes in customer expectations and their communication preferences, which requires companies to constantly chase the newest, most efficient processes and resources.

"Call centers have become more than just customer support," says Margi Shaw, Chief Operations Officer at CIMCO Communications. "They are the nerve center of an organization and are more responsible than any other department in your organization for the satisfaction of the customer."

Your call center contributes to your company's bottom line by increasing customer satisfaction, controlling operational costs and increasing revenue. Using the right technology can help ease some of those burdens and help you maximize the value of a call center.

Smart Business spoke with Shaw about how to make sure you have an effective and cost-efficient call center.

Why can call centers become so costly?

Today there is more pressure on call centers to take on additional responsibilities including cross-selling and up selling, being more skilled and solving more problems. The number of tools and reporting required to meet those demands can become a large investment and can be overwhelming if not planned and managed correctly.

In addition, more call centers are becoming 'contact' centers, because calling is just one mechanism for customers to reach a company. While agent assistance should still be a component of any robust call center, companies can find greater value by redefining call centers as 'multimedia customer interaction centers.'

Whether B2B or B2C, customers are complex and constantly change how they want to reach their vendors. To ensure you are accessible to your clients, call center technology may need to include Web, e-mail, SMS, self-service applications, social media such as Twitter, live chat and other applications. Making the right technology decisions now can allow you a scalable solution that will help control costs long term.

Where do you begin when creating an overall technology strategy for your call center?

■ Evaluate your current customer service model. How do customers want to be



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reached? Do customers want to use self service, or do they want to talk to a live person? How has customer interaction changed recently? What information do you need to be able to disseminate to and receive from your customers? How many contacts does it take for issue resolution? Develop an overall strategy for every type of contact you need to have with your customers.

■ Examine your internal communications and processes. What roadblocks exist that prevent a free-flowing exchange of information both internally and externally? Are there manual processes that are holding up productivity and efficiency? Identifying improvement areas will help you determine the types of technology solutions you need to support your business model.

■ Conduct a thorough review of your overall operations and identify areas that drive up costs. How do different areas of your call center function? How much does each call or customer interaction cost? Is there any correlation between your lower customer satisfaction scores and areas where costs are higher?

■ Assess the different types of technologies that can meet the needs of your organization and your customers. Keep in mind that your technology solution may include multiple applications working together. A good technology service provider can help you develop a strong technology strategy that meets your overall goals.

What technologies are available to help reduce costs or keep them low?

Consider technologies that converge your voice and data communications into one solution and that do not require capital investments. Hosted Voice over IP (VoIP) is a feature-rich technology that shares many of the same advantages of VoIP telephony services, including the ability to integrate with other solutions. The call center actually acts as a distributed enterprise, just as the hosted VoIP solution can provide distributed communications companywide.

An IP infrastructure more easily allows for remote agents, which can enhance service while cutting costs. Call centers can also take advantage of unified communications features of VoIP systems to enable better support for customers, such as messaging, presence and fax integration. Most VoIP solutions contain the ability to manage the call from the agent's personal computer with rich features for customer care and call control. VoIP call center solutions can be more scalable and allow for rapid expansion with limited infrastructure investment.

Additional options are IVR functions and Web self-service functions. By placing the power of information updates and tracking in your customers' hands, you are freeing up agents to service more pressing customer issues. If you are not sure where to start, your technology service provider can assist in determining the right solution for your business.

How can you make sure your call center is scalable to the changing demands of customers?

Consider on-demand or hosted solutions that are paid via a monthly fee or license, with easy upgrades, rather than premise-based solutions that require capital investments. Review new technologies regularly and determine where you can incorporate them for efficiency and to provide better customer support.

Survey your customers on how you can support them better. Look at how your solution can integrate with other technologies, as you may need to work with multiple vendors and service providers to customize your solution. A good technology partner will sit down with you and discuss your current and future goals and develop a scalable, productive and cost-efficient solution that will ensure your business success. <<

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