

Can Outsourcing Contact Center Functions Work for Me?

by Barbara Dove, President, Sickle Brook Services.

The need for companies to address functions which are not in their area of core competency is growing as margins are eroded with lower sales. Outsourcing these functions can be a less costly alternative and can be done effectively with the right partner.

At a recent WBZ breakfast for entrepreneurs we heard that the major failure for new startups is due to inability to react to changes in demand. New startups react too slowly to a dramatic increase or decrease in demand for their product or service. Some companies are mitigating this problem by partnering with outsourced services where the skill needed is not a core competency of the business. One area companies are outsourcing is their customer helpdesk.

Customer contact activity can be a drain on resources, but a necessary feature in any business. It is important to stay on top of what the customer is thinking about your product. However this area is often neglected as the demands of other parts of the business take over. The operation may not be adequately staffed, and calls may have to be addressed by several members of the staff who are working on other activities. These interruptions can be costly to productivity, and may not need much work to be answered.

Software developers at a firm, for example, experience interruptions caused not by the software sold, but by the customer's operating system, existing network setup, or hardware. Problems that come into the software company may be unrelated to the product and should be referred to a competent pc support operation, but having none, the small software development firm answers the questions in order to get the customer up and running.

A competent helpdesk outsourcer can be a partner who is set up to grow and shrink with you. As your business is not the sole source of income for this outsourcing business, they are able to plan changes in size according to their customer needs and absorb some of the volatility businesses experience in growth and contraction.

An effective helpdesk outsourcing firm can provide the needed expertise to answer the basic calls where the solution is known, respond to calls that are unrelated to the product, and summarize all activity for the company.

One way to partner with an outsourcer is to filter calls at the company and pass on those that the outsourcer can answer. Automated call distribution mechanisms can be used to facilitate this call distribution. The outsourcer will summarize activity and report statistics on responsiveness. One issue with this method is that no one is looking at the entire base of calls to analyze the type and root-cause resolution of these calls.

Another approach is to have the Helpdesk Outsourcer answer all incoming contacts from customers responding to those unrelated to the product and commonly known problems. They will escalate only those calls requiring a skill set within the company's area of core competency.

As the Helpdesk Outsourcer gains knowledge of common problems they can create and post updated FAQ files for the company. Often they will be able to rewrite manuals or on-line help files to provide solutions to common problems where the customer can retrieve them easily. Some Helpdesk providers can develop and deliver training on the product as well to mitigate incorrect use of the product, or help the customer get better use of the product.

The Helpdesk Outsourcer accumulates most of the customer interaction as first line support and is in touch with the customer's needs. Analysis can lead to problem solving and elimination of redundant calls by providing free information for the customer. This leads inevitably to reduced call activity and customers gain more information over the web and contact the helpdesk less and less. Some Helpdesk Service Providers regard this as lost revenue. A good Helpdesk Outsourcer will find other ways to expand the business. And a happy customer will recommend the service that eliminates waste, runs efficiently and costs less in the long run.

Outsourcing a helpdesk functions to a third party provides many advantages that an existing business may not be able to effectively address. If they approach the right third party and stay on top of the outsourced activity, they will find costs lower and customers more satisfied. Customers will return for better product and great service.

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