

Recruiting Home-Based Employees

Since the late 1990s the convergence of technology and operations has allowed companies to bring to life the idea of taking work to people, rather than people to work. For companies with contact centers, this has important implications because it opens up new solutions to their problems. All traditional centers are limited to a recruiting radius around their physical center. This impacts not only the quality of candidates, but the high level at which they are able to do business.

Customers Want More

Recruiting customer service and sales agents who are passionate about your products and services coupled with strong customer service skills is the first step in providing a superior experience to your customers. Home-based contact center providers are uniquely poised to successfully match an employee with a caller because recruiters are not bound by geographical requirements. Home-based contact center providers can tap into a virtually unlimited pool of applicants, selecting only those that are a perfect match for the needs of the client. Matching the skills and passions of your customer service team to the attributes and needs of your customer base is the best way to provide the highest level of service possible.

However, the idea of providing home-based employees is a radical shift for almost every company, as it requires an overhauling of processes and technology. In truth, most companies are too tethered to the 'way they've always done it' to be successful. According to the Gartner Group, 60% of companies that will try home-based agents on their own will fail without the expertise of experienced resources. (Gartner, 2005) The backlash from customers who have received mediocre service from companies shows that consumers expect more than simply having their calls answered quickly.

If you think your key customer service metrics would increase by matching inquiries from your customers to people who combine passion for your products and the knowledge to provide the highest-quality service, you're probably right. You would begin to see your customer service indexes, sales metrics, and customer retention numbers begin to rise.

This is not a customer service dream; it is a reality that companies across the country are taking advantage of today. Call mirroring, the process of matching customer service agents directly with the needs and personalities of customers, is a win-win situation for businesses, customers, and employees alike. The customers experience interaction with businesses that is more intimate and more accurate, and are more loyal to the brand. Employees get to work with customers and questions that they can connect with, and are therefore more satisfied with their job. The increased loyalty of customers and satisfaction of employees provides businesses with additional customer business, customer referrals, and increased employee productivity.

Agents As Trusted Advisors

Imagine you are an executive for Bobbi Brown Cosmetics. Your entire brand is based upon a community of people who love your products and use them every day. What if you could have an unlimited geographic recruiting area and employ only people who wear Bobbi Brown makeup as your customer service representatives? Further, what if you could direct calls about specific product lines or colors to people who actually use those products themselves?

Or, at a different point in the spectrum, a travel site like Expedia.com could benefit by recruiting across the entire country to find people that are passionate about travel and have great experience in the travel industry. These people could even have a specific region of expertise like Europe, the Caribbean, or New York City. Imagine contacting Expedia and, each time, being able to make the best purchase decisions with the assistance of a person who has been to the location, and even stayed in the suggested hotel. Expedia would enable each of their customers to make the right choices the first time, enhancing their service experience and increasing return purchases.

Recruiting to this level of specification is not possible with any solution that involves offshoring or even a U.S.-based physical call center, whether it is outsourced or an internal center. With offshoring, agents from countries like India, China or the Philippines – despite the possibility that they are skilled and educated – cannot communicate as effectively with customers because they don't share cultural commonalities. Imagine a customer from Texas speaking with an agent from India about traveling to Italy. Any amount of training or travel guide study will fall short making this an ideal customer experience.

For any physical center, the typical strategy is to build facilities in low-cost areas with high unemployment or local or state governments that will provide financial benefits. With the turnover at a typical bricks and mortar facility ranging from 100-200% per year, and with competition against other centers coming to the same locations, burnout of the recruiting pool rapidly occurs that forces the center to lower its hiring standards or move the center entirely. When these factors are compounded, these centers are unable to provide the experienced, quality agents that are necessary to satisfy the customers of their products or services.

The Ideal Customer Service Agent

At this level of recruiting it is good to use a more detailed employee profile to define what specific skills your agents should possess. These profiles will provide a foundation for you to dig deeper and determine the strengths of each applicant. Be certain to ask about hobbies and previous work experience, and hire those agents that are the most natural fit for your customers' needs.

The connection that can be developed between your customer and your company in such a scenario is worth a great deal in customer retention and customer service quality. It also leads to an increase in average sales revenue and other financial metrics, as well as employee satisfaction and retention. Conversely, studies have shown that customer loyalty drops by up to 76% when a customer is less than satisfied with the customer service response he receives.

Customers who receive great customer service will associate your company with great care and will maintain or increase their loyalty to your company. Loyal customers are more receptive to up-selling and cross-selling opportunities; as many as half of customers are open to the possibilities of purchasing additional products and services at the time they contact your company with a customer service inquiry that is properly resolved. Also, consider the impact of referral business; a satisfied customer typically tells one to three people, while an unsatisfied customer talks to as many as 10 people about your company.

Finally, as mentioned throughout, matching a customer service and sales employee's job description with his skill set is also the best situation for the employee. As we all know, work dissatisfaction is driven in large part by employees who are forced to work in roles that are contrary to their abilities and void of passion for them. You can reduce attrition rates by providing enjoyable work to your employees through profiling them and then matching their skills to the correct roles and responsibilities.

About Allanna Kelsall :

As Vice President, Human Resources, Allanna Kelsall is responsible for all aspects of human resources, including recruitment and training. Allanna's experience includes over 10 years of senior human resource experience within the call center industry (both domestically and internationally throughout the Asia-Pacific region).

About Alpine Access :

Alpine Access, Inc. is a provider of outsourced call center solutions through the exclusive use of home-based agents working over the Internet.

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