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Conveying Culture Through Calls

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When talking about Alpine Access' home-based agent model, I frequently get asked if outsourced call center agents can be trusted to communicate a company's culture as effectively as in-house staff. When agents are scattered across the country, can they provide premium customer service in a way that accurately reflects a client's values and beliefs? The answer is definitely YES.

Not only is it possible for a team of home-based agents to effectively represent a client's company, because of the model's ability to attract the right agent for each employment opportunity, they actually outperform internal customer service representatives. The key to effectively communicating culture through customer service calls is customizing the recruiting, orientation and ongoing training processes.

Recruiting

A strong client partnership is critical to the success of any outsourced service. An initial consultation with you before agents are hired provides an opportunity to clearly define the best agent profile for answering calls. We recommend you provide as much company information as possible. This could include values and mission statements, job descriptions used for internal hirings, or any keywords or phrases that you don't want to hear agents using during calls, such as "no" or "we don't do that."

This information is used to develop applicant screening questions that reinforce your existing hiring practices. For example, when recruiting for a clothing retailer, you could include screening questions such as "How do you view shopping?" or "Explain the difference between cashmere and cotton." By creating a completely customized screening questionnaire, you are guaranteed that the agents hired will have exactly the same, or better, qualifications than internal teams. In fact, home-based agent positions are in such demand, it is possible to hand-pick individuals that have your desired skill sets.

In addition to identifying appropriate industry experience, it is also important to evaluate customer service skills. With the home-based agent model, 100% of the interview process is conducted virtually. This allows recruiters to evaluate applicants strictly on the experience a customer would have with the agent. Using a voice-screening process, recruiters assess how well

applicants follow directions, how clearly they speak, the speed of their conversations, what tone they use, etc.

Recruiting the right people from the beginning is crucial. While product and company information can be learned, attitude and values can not.

New Employee Orientation

Once agents are hired to exact client specifications, they complete a rigorous training program. Again, as the client, you need to be involved in creating a training curriculum that matches your internal hiring procedures. Our new employee orientation is customized for each client. A Curriculum Development Team attends on-site client training classes, combines it with client-provided materials and then adapts it to the virtual environment.

The more involvement your team has in the initial training, the better job your outsourced agents will do handling customer service calls in a way that positively reflects your company and strengthens your brand. For example, your executives could be incorporated into virtual training sessions as subject matter experts or guest speakers. The process of training home-based agents should map as closely as possible to the training provided to company personnel. Whether it is self-paced learning or 100% trainer led classes, the initial orientation programs for home-based agents must offer the same experience and knowledge as the internal client courses.

On top of the curriculum you provide, your outsourced partner also needs to demonstrate some creativity in adapting training to a dispersed workforce. For example, Alpine Access frequently requires special activities be completed by our agents to help them get a better feel for their assigned client. Recently the training department developed a scavenger hunt for a group of agents designated to answer calls for a retail chain. Agents had to physically visit a client store to find a list of specific products. This reinforced product knowledge and offered valuable hands-on training.

Ongoing Training

Lastly, ongoing training is critical for maintaining a high performing team of agents. The flexibility of a home-based agent model makes it easy to conduct training while handling a large volume of calls. When additional training is needed, one group of agents can be called upon to handle service calls, while another group goes through training. This saves you time and money because training can be done in a shorter timeframe and requires no interruption to your customer service.

As part of the ongoing training, your outsourced partner should always be looking for ways to help outsourced agents feel a part of your organization. One of our clients required that agents assigned to their account must live with a 40-mile radius of one of its stores. As part of the job description, every agent was required to visit the store once a quarter to see the latest product lines, talk with internal employees and discuss any company changes. It has proven to be an effective method for keeping all agents, whether outsourced or in-house, informed and knowledgeable.

Utilizing the home-based agent model can be a strategic tool for communicating your brand attributes and reinforcing the values that form the foundation of your company. Through customized recruiting and training practices, these agents have been proven to actually perform better in field tests. For one client, Alpine Access' home-based agents' average order size was 30 percent higher than the average order size of the company's own, in-house call center agents. By taking time to hire the right individuals, provide them with customized tools and dedicating time for ongoing training, your team of agents will prove to be a valuable asset to your organization.