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## **Keep Your Holidays Happy and Bright with Skilled, Seasonal Staff**

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According to the National Retail Federation (NRF), retail sales during the months of November and December normally account for 25 percent to 50 percent of a retailer's annual sales volume both online and in traditional stores. Handling a dramatic increase in demand can be stressful, yet a solid performance often will determine the success or failure of an organization. Using qualified, skilled agents who are also knowledgeable about your company is essential for seamless operations during this critical holiday period.

For years, retailers have boosted staffing levels in anticipation of holiday shoppers. Companies typically hire temporary workers to handle seasonal sales fluctuations, train them for a week or two and then trusted them to handle customer interactions. *Yet, did you know that businesses can lose up to 10 customers for every one that complains of poor service during the holidays? In addition, according to the Portland Research Group, customer loyalty drops by 76 percent when a customer is less than satisfied with the response he or she receives.*

On the flip side, most consumers who have a positive customer service experience will talk about it with their friends. In one NRF survey, online shoppers told an average of 2.7 people about a positive experience, while traditional shoppers told 2.4 people about their experience. Christine Loeber, Program Manager of the Online Retail Strategies Planning Service for the Yankee Group (News - Alert) confirms, "Retailers that pay close attention to the details of customer service will be more successful in winning and keeping customers, improving customer loyalty, and increasing profitability than those that do not."

### **Home-Based Agents Offer an Alternative**

Providing exceptional customer service, especially during high-volume periods, can be tricky. Most retailers, whether brick-and-mortar or online, are limited by the infrastructure necessary to support a temporary swell of workers. By this I mean that companies must first find enough workers to handle the projected increase in sales. Then, they must have enough trainers and training classes to provide a basic overview to these newly hired employees.

Finally, once they've been hired and trained, where do they sit? In general, companies only can hire up to the number of available desks they have. This means that the physical limitations of an office space play a more important role in determining holiday staffing levels than does the number of employees needed to provide satisfactory customer service.

The home-based agent model gives retailers an easier, more cost-effective way to prepare for and manage customer service during peak selling times. Now, the size and quality of a company's call center is no longer dictated by its physical environment. Instead, with a dispersed workforce, the number of agents can quickly be adjusted up or down according to actual demand. This is very important during times when actual sale volumes fall short of forecasts. The operational costs of supporting expensive, under-utilized workers can be extremely detrimental to the financial health of an organization.

### **Train a Larger Workforce Throughout the Year**

Many retailers require that their customer service agents have in-depth product knowledge. In these cases, it is nearly impossible to adequately train temporary staff in time for the holidays or other seasonal spikes. However, customers utilizing the home-based agent model can have a large team of assigned agents working on their accounts at a reduced schedule for the majority of the year, with the understanding that they increase their hours during peak times.

For example, rather than having one agent working 40 hours a week, the home-based model can provide two people working 20 hours a week. During high seasons, these two agents then increase both their schedules to 40 hours. Now, the client has 80 hours of customer service assistance instead of 40, effectively doubling the workforce without hiring new people. Best of all, the agents handling the calls have been trained all year and have the most up-to-date product and company information. This training manifests itself in the premium service customers receive and the improved resulting loyalty.

Another seasonal staffing option, although not quite as predictable, is to leverage agents who only want to work during peak selling times. These agents are experienced at handling the unique challenges posed by the holidays and can quickly step in to assist customers by providing a great customer service experience.

### **Don't Risk a Bad Impression**

Why trust your customers to inexperienced, hastily trained temporary workers when you don't have to? The unmatched flexibility of the home-based agent model offers a unique way to maintain a qualified pool of agents that can be tapped into when necessary and can be trusted to add value to your organization at anytime. With highly qualified, outsourced agents, your customers will receive optimum care and your company can enjoy the full financial benefits of the frenzied shopping season.