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Have No Fear: Home-based Agents Meet Highest Quality Standards

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Let's face it: the term "outsourcing" can strike terror in the hearts of those who thrive on control. Some managers are cautious about trusting the very heart of their business, customer service, to people they can't see or touch. It's a common but unfounded concern. In fact, virtual call centers guarantee quality in exactly the same way as traditional centers.

Still not convinced? Below is an overview of the tools and information typically provided to both agents and clients that allow companies to enjoy the financial benefits of using a remote workforce, while still meeting (and exceeding) the highest quality standards.

Tools of the Trade for Agents

Quality service begins by providing agents with easy access to all the information they need to perform their jobs. To accomplish this, virtual call centers use an electronic hub or Web center that electronically connects the agent to both the call center and the client's intranet. In this way, it is possible to replicate the in-house agent experience delivered through the Web.

Think about the processes and technology used by an agent within your corporate environment. The agent arrives at the office, sits down at a desk, powers up a computer and turns on a headset. Next, the agent signs into the network, signaling that the station is ready to begin accepting calls.

The on-site agent can likely check work schedules, receive instant messages from the team leader, access manuals and policies, read the latest news and send e-mail. Virtual call centers provide agents with the same tools and resources. However, rather than being housed at a brick-and-mortar center using the company intranet, all of the information is accessed virtually through a secured connection using Web center applications.

Typical tools and data used to provide quality service include:

- Communication applications such as instant messaging, e-mail, bulletin boards or chat rooms used to communicate with other departments, managers or agents.
- Training modules.

- Assigned work schedules.
- Human resource information such as vacation or time-off forms, employee handbooks and lists of holidays.
- Best practices for delivering outstanding customer service.
- Client-specific information. For example, a retail client may need agents to have access to clothing catalogs, the latest specials or even pictures of the current window displays.

Electronic scheduling is another tool virtual call centers use to maintain appropriate levels of staffing. Understaffing can seriously affect the quality of service provided, while over-staffing adds unnecessary expenses. When a home-based agent logs on (or off), a scheduling program compares the agent's actual schedule to the assigned schedule. If any variations are detected, a team manager is immediately notified.

With this instant verification, team managers can see who is taking calls, compare it to the client's demand, and make immediate corrections. For example, when a client experiences an unexpected surge in call volume, e-mails or instant messages are sent asking for additional staff. In fact, Alpine Access has chat rooms specifically for people who are available to work but aren't scheduled.

Real-Time Information For Clients

Knowing exactly what an agent is doing and saying at all times is another important piece of providing quality service. Virtual call centers offer monitoring features that create windows into each agent's working environment. Clients interested in knowing exactly what is going on can "peek" into these windows at anytime. By logging into the Web center, they can access features such as:

1. Customized reports. There are all types of customized reports or tools available to help clients monitor the quality of service being provided by home-based agents. Examples of reports include:

- Productivity reports showing aggregated or individual-level data. These could include average call length, average on-hold time, or number of calls answered in a given time period.
- Key performance indicators (KPIs). KPIs are typically provided by the company and then incorporated into the reporting features. This could be anything from the number of orders placed to the most recent customer satisfaction scores.

2. Call review. Just as in the physical environment, a client can dial in at any time to hear actual service calls taking place. One important point: I recommend looking for an outsourcing partner that allows you to listen to calls without having to make prior arrangements. Some outsourcing companies provide limited conferencing access, which restricts your ability to pop on and off calls when you want. You also want to work with someone that offers the option to record 100 percent of your calls. In this way you or your managers can listen and review when it is most convenient.

The Human Factor

Technology has opened the doors for a new way of handling calls. It's truly amazing how an in-house service department can be recreated in the virtual world. But technology, tools and information are only as good as the people who use them. In addition to technology resources, experienced team and staff members are necessary to provide one more layer of quality control.

Every virtual call center constructs their teams a little differently. What clients need to look for is a structure that provides agents with immediate access to multiple, experienced coaches. If agents need help solving problems or answering questions, someone needs to be available. In a virtual environment, help is typically provided through instant messaging, chat groups, bulletin boards, etc. Some call centers even have a group of people solely dedicated to watching calls across all programs to ensure quality and achieve the highest satisfaction rates possible.

Quality is Job #1

Home-based call centers are expected to grow three-fold in the next three years. While companies may have initial concerns about maintaining control, once they experience the reality of improved operational efficiencies, increased revenue and happier customers, they are believers. Reputable outsourcing companies have implemented layers upon layers of checks and balances to ensure security and to provide quality results customers can trust. It's enough to make even the most skeptical cynic sleep easy at night.