

Dangers you face if you avoid customers' telephone calls

FORCING customers to use lower-cost channels and restricting their access to the telephone risks customer defection and routinely fails in its aim of saving money.

In new research, the customer management consultancy Ember Services, says that organisations that offer multiple channels and allow customers to use them as they wish are experiencing significant cost savings and greater customer satisfaction.

Ember's research, carried out among directors of more than 30 leading organisations that have adopted alternative channels, cites these as top performers:

- National Rail Enquiries, which has seen customer enquiries grow by 343 per cent over nine years yet still achieved a fourfold reduction in operating cost by migrating 80 per cent of all contacts to the web.

- Since co-locating its online and call centre teams, Surrey County Council has increased the percentage of enquiries handled online from 85pc to 94pc and cut its average cost per enquiry by 38pc.

- HomeDepot, which estimates that it has deflected 15m potential telephone calls and helped solve 8,500 customer problems via Twitter.

- Carphone Warehouse, whose YouTube "how to" guides have been viewed more than 6m times since their introduction in 2009, averting calls to the call centre.

Ember's founder and director, Mike Havard, said: "None of these companies have abandoned the telephone channel or restricted its availability. Instead, they have identified those tasks customers are happy to complete by other means and encouraged them to do so. Customers are happy to use alternative channels, but expect to do so on their own terms. Companies that restrict customer choice will suffer their disapproval."

Ember's research report, carried out on behalf of Sword Ciboodle, offers this advice for organisations planning multi-channel strategies:

- Customers' channel prefer-



Ember Services' founder and director, Mike Havard

ences are multiple, not singular and will change day-to-day basis according to their situation and the task they wish to complete. Companies must offer multiple platform choices and make sure they are simultaneously available and linked, so that the customer experience is seamless across all channels.

- Customers will embrace alternative channels if they see benefit for them as well as the provider. Instead of forcing customers to use lower-cost channels by restricting their options, companies must analyse the drivers of "expensive" phone-based or in-store interactions and deflect them by offering proactive information via other channels. This has the dual benefit of reducing operating costs and boosting service reputation.

- Customers will typically revert to the telephone for complex or emotionally charged enquiries. Therefore, companies must maintain a sustainable body of agents, invest appropriately to develop their skills and provide them with information and insight that will help them serve customers better. This includes providing a single view of the customer's interaction history across all channels, so that the service offered is "joined up" and informed.

Copies of the report, Why Multi-Channel Must Mean Multiple Choice, are available at www.emberservices.com or email paul.mackenzie@emberservices.com

Dump scripts and call timing and you'll benefit, say academics

YOU can improve morale – and the bottom line – by giving agents the power to drop scripts and end their call time targets, according to academics at Loughborough University.

It results in a personalised service which is having major benefits for businesses, they say.

Dr Ayham Jaaron and Professor Chris Backhouse, in Loughborough's Wolfson School of Mechanical and Manufacturing Engineering, spent a year studying operations at the Velux call centre in Glenrothes which uses systems thinking design (STD).

STD, they say, is based on designing organisational systems around customer demand instead of in functional hierarchies. Call centre staff manage each customer call from start to finish and are empowered to make decisions and contact colleagues and managers across the organisation for specialist information, using conference calls involving the customer.

They report that organic structures such as STD remove call-handling time targets and scripts, reduce training time for new recruits, and jobs are wide in scope with employees empowered to perform a variety of tasks.

Additional benefits for staff include a more rewarding job

experience in a less stressful environment.

Businesses experience a lower level of turnover and absenteeism amongst front-line staff, who have a high level of commitment to their employers (for Velux, staff turnover was less than half the average reported by the Contact Centre Association at the time of research), and both productivity and service quality are improved.

And for customers, their calls are dealt with at the initial point of contact in a friendly and efficient manner.

Dr Jaaron said: "Call centres regularly get bad press, but they are often the main channel of contact between an organisation and its customers, so getting the service right is of utmost importance.

"In cases where products or services are comparable, and in an ever-competitive market, customers base their choice of provider on their levels of customer service.

"Our research has shown that by implementing a systems thinking design approach, staff gain greater affective commitment to their employers which has multiple benefits to companies including financial and reputational gains. It's a win-win situation."

Campaign to save call centre jobs

IN A BID to save call centre jobs, Marketing Derby staged a jobs fair at Pride Park, Derby, the site of the Egg call centre which is set to close at the end of November.

Thirty-two employers offered 1,000 job opportunities. It is not yet known how many applicants were successful.

It is part of a campaign by Marketing Derby, backed by the city council, to safeguard the jobs of some 600 people who work at the Egg call centre.

Egg, which has 1.15m UK credit card holders, was acquired earlier this year by Barclaycard. Call centre work is set to be transferred to Barclaycards' own sites.

Marketing Derby said it hoped to emulate the successful sale of the Goldfish contact centre in North Lanarkshire to Scottish and Southern Energy (SSE) in 2008 under similar circumstances, which

secured the future of 800 employees.

The MD of Marketing Derby, John Forkin, said: "The economics of operating contact centres have dramatically shifted in the UK's favour over the past 12 months, and the opportunity to secure a world class workforce should not be underestimated. Derby is an ideal city for inward investment thanks to its central location and highly skilled workforce and we're confident we will attract a new business eager to take up this great opportunity."

Marketing Derby points out that the Egg customer service centre is one of the largest purpose-designed contact centres ever completed in the UK and is within minutes of the train station. At 120,000 sq ft, (11,150 m²), it can accommodate up to 1,250 workstations and ancillary support facilities.