

Strengthen your positioning or be squeezed out!

By Giles Potter

Centre managers have to understand the positioning of their contact centre. It doesn't matter whether your centre is in a client organisation, an outsourced bureau, or a client helpdesk, your positioning matters. Are you actively delivering the organisation's strategy or awaiting it to come to you?



Take any Chief Executive's vision, and it's likely to be based on the expectation that the whole organisation will be driving towards one goal, with everyone making a meaningful difference. Every part of the company will be creating value for the customer, and if they're not, then what are they doing about it. This foundation belief can extend to suppliers when organisations create partnerships with companies who have the experience to contribute strategically, or better still, show leadership through specialist skills.

CENTRE MANAGERS CAN LEAD THE WAY

The contact centre channel cannot afford to be a passive unit in the drive to achieve the vision, strategy, and tactics. A core responsibility for all centre managers is to be able to articulate clearly the organisation's strategy and show a commercial approach to achieve it. Centre managers should ask the following questions of themselves and their centre leadership team, and be confident to manage the necessary changes these questions raise:

- What contribution will our centre make towards the organisation's strategy?
- What structure and resourcing do we need to put in place to deliver our contribution?
- How is our centre integrated with our internal business partners to work together, create teamwork, and a seamless service?
- What tools or skills do we lack and how can we get them (even with a limited budget)?
- How do our suppliers' specialist skills and resources directly benefit our strategic position?
- What should we be doing now to lead the achievement of the organisation's strategy e.g. altering our leader's roles to create an internal communicator, developing new skills to manage new channels, developing additional operational skills such as workforce management?
- What is the best way to communicate our positioning and get buy-in from our centre staff?
- How can we align the centre's and staff's individual key performance targets to meet the strategy?

ENABLE YOUR SUPPORTERS TO HELP YOU

Passive management is evident in various ways, such as when the centre is reactive to new developments, i.e. the new sales campaign is launched, and then huge peaks of unexpected calls land in the in-house centre creating stressed staff, unhappy customers, and disappointed internal customers. Passive centre managers complain about not being informed, and whilst often true, this can be turned around. Moving from being a passive centre leadership team to an active or dynamic team needs to be led by the Contact Centre Manager. This person does not have to take the load alone though. Start with actions such as:

- **Have a communications strategy for the centre, and live by it**
The communications program needs to ensure that the basics are met, such as weekly team meetings that all team members attend, internal briefings prior to major events.

Commit to communicating to your organisation to build understanding of how the centre operates, what your needs are, and encourage communication in return.

- **Allocate time to building relationships with internal customers and external suppliers**
Explain the capacity of your centre to handle business developments. If your resourcing doesn't support the direction the organisation is taking, then it's your responsibility to create the necessary changes. The centre staff relies on the Centre Manager not to overcommit them.
- **Be good at what you do**
Be very familiar with the functions in the centre and tools that can be used, e.g. workforce management systems – don't be vague about how to forecast your staffing needs to meet increased volumes.
- **Use your presentation skills to win support**
In Senior Management Meetings be articulate in explaining what you are doing and why. Use your communication skills to present the initiatives of the centre, without labouring the process you are going through.
- **Understand the brand experience your centre delivers**
As a key distribution channel, the centre needs to have information about what the customer experience is, and how aligned the experience is with other channels. Introducing a customer satisfaction monitor for the first time can be done very simply when your budget does not really stretch to regular surveys.

Ensure that you are capturing all contact points under your control in the satisfaction measure. If your centre has an outsourced operation for overnight service, include the service delivery provided after-hours. Capture the non-voice channels as well; email, fax response, coupon mailers.
- **Delegate**
Allocate these strategy-delivery responsibilities to the Leadership Team members, and let your team get on with it. Giving Operations Managers or Team Leaders the chance to show they can manage an aspect of the strategy is a great career development opportunity, and a confidence boost. Centre Managers should use their time and talents to provide guidance and support without delving into the day-to-day detail.
- **Be a Distribution Channel as well as a Contact Centre**
Most often the contact centre is the first interface that customers choose to interact with the company, but it's unlikely to be the only interface. Inbound centres should aim to make the transition from service calls to being able to extend the customer relationship. For companies that do not have a single interface system to record all customer interactions, you have to establish simple ways that you can assist with cultivating a stronger relationship with the customer, and how you can transfer this effort. Initially, capturing new contact details, address information or business development information for large accounts is one of the first steps to working more closely with the other distribution channels.

As Chief Executives and other Senior Managers become more familiar with the standards and operations of contact centres, there are opportunities for Centre Managers to take a greater role in the achievement of organisational growth.

Making the necessary changes in practice, structure and communicating the centre's approach will help Contact Centre Managers to further their level of respect and recognition in the Senior Team.



SUMMARY

Contact Centres are core distribution channels and can build respect and recognition through positioning the operation to deliver an organisation's strategy. To do this, Centre Managers and their Leadership teams need frank answers to questions about their centre's structure and management capability on:

- > The centre's internal integration
- > Resourcing
- > Tools and skills they have available
- > Supplier skills and contribution

A centre's positioning will be improved by taking actions such as:

- > Focussing on customer satisfaction results for the channel
- > Cultivating internal working partnerships
- > Giving clear, compelling presentations to the Executive team, and the centre staff about the centre's positioning
- > Sharing or delegating strategic responsibilities
- > Exchanging new customer information with other channels.

CONSIDERABLE DIPLOMATIC ABILITY

A recent study found that Team Leaders show considerable diplomatic ability to achieve management objectives whilst keeping the team motivated and supportive. The study's results also confirmed that a commitment to staff at both strategic and tactical levels directly impacts employee satisfaction (Sayers, Barney, Page and Naidoo, 2003)¹.

Contact Centre Managers looking for ways to reward Team Leaders could delegate internal business partner communications to Team Leaders who show good diplomatic skills. Turn the excellent diplomacy and tact that they have shown inside the centre to further uses, by creating regular meetings with Sales, Marketing, Operations, Dispatch or whomever you need to have regular communication with. Spend time with the Team Leader to reinforce just how this affects the centre's part in the organisation's strategy.

Photos: Helen Rudolf, DMA



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References: 1 Sayers, J, Barney, A, Page, C, and Naidoo, K. (2003). A provisional thumbs-up to New Zealand bank call centres. University of Auckland Business Review.