

How to Ensure International Call Center Success Through Best Practices in Hiring, Training and Management

By Mark W. Brodsky and Dina Vance, Ulysses Learning

With today's uncertain economic forecast and the constant pressure to reduce costs, many companies have outsourced their call center operations to off-shore or "near-shore" facilities. By off-shoring, these companies can save money and find a highly educated – and frequently, a highly technology-skilled – workforce. However, cultural differences, heavy accents, inadequate training and insufficient hiring practices can lead to poor customer satisfaction experiences, causing a loss of customer loyalty and ultimately, a loss in sales.

This best-practices article focuses on the issues faced by companies who currently have international call center operations or are considering it in the near future – as well as what can be done to address those issues. It discusses how to improve the customer experience and thus customer loyalty through better hiring, management and especially, training practices.

When it comes to customer service, U.S.-based customers expect a certain level of customer experience. When they make a call to handle a denied credit card, dispute a discrepancy on a bill, solve a computer problem or make a change to an already-booked airline ticket, they are often frustrated before they even pick up the phone. So when they reach a customer service representative with an indecipherable accent who can't even solve their problem – requiring them to speak to a supervisor or worse, call back a second, third or fourth time – these customers are justifiably angry at the entire corporation. And the next time they have to make a purchasing decision, it's likely they won't choose you.

If your organization has sent your call centers abroad –or plan on doing so to contain costs – how can you ensure your call center operations maintain a level of service consistent with your brand and message?

Why some international call centers have failed

To begin, it helps to understand why some off-shore call centers have failed. The most obvious issue is customer service reps with heavy accents and hard-to-understand names. Through accent neutralization training and by issuing easier-to-understand monikers, those challenges can be readily solved. Also, we've recently found that customers are more forgiving of foreign accents when a rep is confident, competent and able to manage requests. Simply put, there is more to a successful international call center than just focusing on accents.

Frieda Barry, President and Chairman of the Board at the Call Center Industry Advisory Council (CIAC) concurs. "We've all heard complaints and remarks about the accents of offshore agents. Interestingly, it's been our observation at the CIAC that when the agent creates a connection with a customer, the accent is irrelevant – it's a total non-issue. Regardless of where they're located in the world, most agents are smart and if properly trained and empowered, they can deliver a successful customer experience."

The deeper challenge is cultural. Many of the behaviors that Americans intuitively expect from a customer service representative are literally and figuratively foreign to international reps. U.S.-based customers expect a rep to offer empathy, ask

thoughtful questions, use strong word choices and take control of the situation. However, in other countries, some of those traits are deemed offensive, which means that you can't expect an overseas rep to instinctively employ them.

In some countries, especially those in the Asia and Pacific regions, reps innately lean more towards sympathy, rather than empathy. While American customers want their situation to be acknowledged, they don't want sympathy or an "I'm so sorry", which is overused and can seem insincere. Instead, customers want to feel confident that the customer service rep understands their issues and is able to solve it. By giving your customer service reps different word choices and a roadmap of ways to move the conversation forward, they can continue to feel like they are providing sincere responses in a way that resonates with your customer base.

Barry added, "Customers want to interact with agents in a way that is consistent with their values and expectations – they want an interaction that goes according to what's normal for them and having to deviate from their norm can be difficult and cause them to perceive quality issues. This means agents need to be able to empathize with customers and respond in a culture-appropriate manner. This is difficult to do if the agents don't understand the customer's culture and perspective; they may have the best of intentions but come across to the customer as inappropriate and disconnected – creating an instant negativity."

At one international call center, a customer service rep was ending each call with "I love you." When asked why he chose those words, he said that he wanted to show the customer that he cared – not realizing the inappropriateness of the phrase in a business setting. By showing this rep different ways to respond, he was able to provide empathetic service without shocking or putting-off the customers.

Or, you might find that the rep isn't asking enough questions. Some cultures believe that asking questions is intrusive, which can lead to critical aspects of the customer's problem remaining unsolved.

Also, the foreign representative might not understand why the caller has the problem in the first place. For example, in India, until recently only the poor bought items on credit – so representatives were baffled why an affluent American would be calling about a credit card issue in the first place. If reps lack a general understanding of the customer's issue at hand, they are less likely to be able to solve it effectively.

"Near-shoring" alleviates cultural and management hurdles

Some organizations have bridged the cultural divide by "near-shoring" – rather than off-shoring – call centers in locations such as Guatemala, Mexico and Canada. In general, countries that are in or closer to North America tend to be culturally more similar to us than those in Asia and the Pacific Rim, which means there is less of a cultural leap to overcome when training. Other advantages of "near-shoring" are shorter travel distances and smaller time zone differences, making it easier for U.S.-based executives to oversee and manage those call centers on a daily basis.

The key elements to successful internationally-based call centers

There are four key aspects to consider when creating the foundation for a successful off-shore call center.

They include:

1. Brand consistency
2. Hiring and recruiting practices
3. Training
4. Management

First, ensuring brand consistency

Whether a call center is U.S.-based or off-shored, the average customer service rep typically handles 100 or more different customer calls per day. These reps are on the front lines of extending your organization's image and message – and have enormous influence around delivering your company's brand as well as creating a relationship with your customer. If you're going to entrust this to an off-shore or near-shore call center, you need to make sure they are managing your customers in an effective way that fully supports your brand. The good news is that this can be accomplished through training.

Second, hiring and recruiting practices

Before staffing a call center, it's important to consider the profile of the type of representative you want to hire. In order to meet your customers' service expectations, what traits are needed in a rep? While customer service skills such as empathy, questioning, listening, and confidence can be learned in training, the right recruiting practices help ensure that your call center's reps have the core competency to deliver service and are more likely to "get" both the product and service skill cultural training.

Third, training

The key areas that training should cover are product knowledge, technology and soft skills. With the right tools and learning skills, most customer service reps can readily learn a company's product.

Technology training is another consideration. Depending on your product and actual call center tools, your reps will need a certain level of comfort and proficiency with technology and software. Again, this is where call center location may play a factor, since some locales – especially India, other regions in Asia and Canada – are further along the technology curve than others.

Another crucial aspect of training is the focus on the customer service skills and culturalization. It examines how a country's cultural differences and an individual's cultural interpretation is crucial to your customer's experience.

Sometimes, the individual customer service rep has the right knowledge but simply needs to work on delivery. At one international call center, there was a long-term rep who had the most extensive product knowledge in the department. However, he consistently received the worst customer service ratings. It turns out that his conversations were peppered with "ums" and "ers" and other phrases that made him sound un-confident and unknowledgeable. When he was trained on different, more positive ways to carry on a conversation, his customer ratings soared.

Barry gave another example. "The customers of a technology company were up-in-arms about the service provided by offshore agents, citing the agents' lack of technical skills. Turns out, the agents were near experts in their technical capability, the real issue was that customers were frustrated by the agents' relentless tendency to stick rigidly to scripted responses. We hear of incidents like this on a routine basis at CIAC."

Last but not least, management

A key benefit of off-shoring is that an organization can significantly increase its staff- to manager-ratio because labor is dramatically less expensive overseas. Typically, domestic call centers will have a manager-

to-staff ratio of 1 to 15 or 1 to 20. In off-shore call centers, a 1 to 5 or 1 to 10 ratio is readily affordable. With extra management on hand, customer service representatives can receive more feedback more quickly. Plus, if these managers are trained in coaching techniques, the reps will receive the ongoing mentoring they need to retain their training and improve their performance faster.

Experience shows that training the management is crucial. A highly regarded Fortune 100 company had a 1 to 5 manager/rep ratio in its international call center, but this call center's performance was worse than the company's call centers in the U.S. with a 1 to 20 ratio. It turns out that the international call center managers had no idea how to coach their staff on how to provide high quality customer service. Instead, the management focused on their own job security by "reporting up" to the upper management. The company was able to turn the situation – and the call center's effectiveness – around by training the call center managers on how to provide effective coaching to the reps and then holding them accountable for consistently delivering the coaching.

Training best practices

When it comes to training, every organization's call center wants to improve first call resolution, reduce escalated calls, decrease callbacks and increase overall customer satisfaction. With well-thought out training practices, your organization can accomplish those business goals along with creating a culture of customer service that reinforces your company's brand and image – a crucial objective when off-shoring your customer's first line of contact. At Ulysses Learning, we recommend a combination of simulation-based e-Learning, facilitation, and coaching. At too many international call centers, the reps are learning along with the customers – a situation fraught with the risk of alienating those customers and harming the company's brand. Instead, training should focus on four key components.

1. Content – This aspect of training shows the reps the nuances of the products they handle, enabling them to become proficient in discussing and supporting those products. It also focuses on building confidence, taking ownership of each call, using the right word choices and bridging the differences between their culture and ours. All of this helps breed corporate brand consistency. But, the type of content you use makes the difference between success and failure, because your training is only as good as the content you use. Ulysses Learning uses content that has been validated by evaluating 70,000-plus customer interactions. This validation shows the impact of applying discrete customer service skills and behaviors on the overall outcome of the call, so the organization gets proven results.

2. The delivery method – In order to learn the content, reps need to be able to practice handling calls in a safe, simulated environment. The training method enables the participants to go through most of the prevailing circumstances they could potentially encounter. For example, a credit card company would cover areas such as errors on a customer's bill, rejected credit cards and how to clarify statements. This training method also enables reps to become comfortable handling various customer emotions such as anger, frustration, and confusion. A simulation-based e-Learning environment allows individuals to learn by doing, make mistakes, get feedback, learn the impact of their effective or ineffective use of the skills and then try again. Using this learning method, they can develop both the competence and confidence needed to deliver

consistent quality service without jeopardizing valuable customer relationships.

3. Gaining a U.S. perspective – To fully understand U.S.-based customers, international reps need to understand our regional dialects, twists on phrases and slang as well as speech patterns that differ based on a caller's age, gender and ethnicity.

4. On-going coaching – Coaching and mentoring has been proven to increase reps' performance – and equally as important, help them sustain what they have learned. At Ulysses Learning, we train managers to provide timely coaching immediately after the call. In 60 seconds or less, manager-coaches are able to focus on one pivotal behavior that will provide the greatest impact, doing so in a constructive way that the rep will readily accept and apply. With this four-pronged approach to training, your international customer service representatives will be able to take control of the call regardless of the customer's situation or emotion. The rep can get to the root of the issue by asking thoughtful questions, listening and responding appropriately. They are empowered with the ability to come up with solutions that solve the issue in a way that makes the customer feel good while meeting your organization's needs. When the call ends, the customer feels good about your rep and your company as a whole, resulting in first-call resolution and ultimately, customer satisfaction and loyalty. And that means your off-shore call center operation not only has saved your organization money, it has protected your image as well – which, to quote a credit card company, is "priceless."

About the Authors

Mark W. Brodsky (mbrodsky@ulysseslearning.com; 800.662.4066) is President and CEO of Ulysses Learning. He has over thirty years experience as a senior executive and consultant for international consulting and training firms and has focused the past ten years on helping good contact centers become great contact centers. He is a widely recognized thought leader in the areas of service, sales, management and organizational development. A popular speaker and author, Mr. Brodsky is highly regarded for his straight talk and keen insight. He has a unique ability to separate fact from fiction and provide fresh, innovative solutions for improving sales, service, and organizational profitability and growth.

Dina Vance (dvance@ulysseslearning.com; 800.662.4066) is a widely respected thought leader on developing and leading contact center staff and a pioneer in improving performance of contact centers. Ms. Vance was responsible for the ground-level start up of two contact centers before managing the call center division for an international consulting and training organization. She has worked with Fortune 100 companies to optimize their call center performance through focus on results, people and process. As Ulysses Learning's Senior Vice President, she has served on the executive and advisory board of the Call Center Industry Advisory Council (CIAC), American Bankers Association (ABA), and Contact Professional Magazine.

About Ulysses Learning

Ulysses Learning (www.ulysseslearning.com; 800.662.4066), a global learning and performance improvement company, is the leader and pioneer in the use of simulation-based e-Learning to improve service, sales and coaching performance. The company is known for building Judgment@Work™ skills – decision making and advanced customer interaction skills – in call centers for financial services, insurance and telecommunications leaders. Ulysses Learning is the most recognized training provider in the call center industry. Its CallMentor® Learning and Performance Improvement System has won product of the year for the past ten years, among other industry

awards and recognition including the recently announced, 2007 Product of the Year Award from Technology Marketing Corporation's (TMC®) Customer Interaction Solutions magazine.