

contact

MANAGEMENT

Executives in contact centres, customer service, CRM & site selection

[Home](#)

[Advertising](#)

[Subscriptions](#)

[Articles](#)

[Directory](#)

[About Us](#)

[Contact Us](#)

[Media Partners](#)



Giving ownership to the front lines boosts customer service

» *By Graham Kingma*

The Shopping Channel is a 24-hour, seven day per week broadcast retailer available on a variety of cable channels as well as Star Choice, ExpressVu and Look TV satellite throughout Canada. It employs over 500 people. More than three million calls a year are handled by 135 in-house staff and 120 home-based agents. The Shopping Channel recently achieved Gold Certification from the Call Centre Employer of Choice Inc.

Graham Kingma joined The Shopping Channel in 2001 and now, as vice-president of Customer Experience, he is responsible for all aspects of customer satisfaction for the Rogers Media division. Significant projects include one of Canada's first voice activated automated ordering systems, the home-based agent program and the creation of an online customer feedback panel.

Kingma, who is also vice-chair of the Canadian Marketing Association's Contact Centre Council, offers the following insight into how empowering front line staff can help larger centres provide the high level of customer service more often delivered by smaller centres – with the added bonus of agents feeling more engaged in their jobs.

Why is it that the larger the organization, the harder it is to provide good customer service? While there are exceptions, there seems to be an inverse relationship between the size of the organization and the level of customer service offered to its customers.

If you've ever worked in a small contact centre you know that everyone knows everything about what everyone else is doing. By sharing their experiences, and sharing their method of resolution, the whole group gets an understanding of what the policies are of the organization in different scenarios. More importantly, the leader can take the extra time to ensure each person understands the meaning behind the direction or policy.

Another advantage is that the leader is close to the front lines and can quickly react if a new issue arises. The leader can make decisions on the new issue and share the direction with everyone almost instantaneously.

One leader can also react when someone is offering poor customer service. The leader will hear it from customers, co-workers and most likely even while walking by the agent. Another advantage is the fact that those in a small contact centre may believe their actions have a significant effect on the entire organization. An agent that feels a personal responsibility toward helping a customer may be more inclined to fight to keep that customer satisfied. We are making the assumption that the small contact centre has an effective leader overlooking the operation.

Large centre disadvantages

In a contact centre with hundreds of agents, the leader of the contact centre may be three to four levels above the front line agent. Sharing information personally with each person becomes impossible. As the leader, you rely on sending direction to your team leaders, or posting something on an intranet. Most importantly, you cannot spend the time to ensure each person understands the direction. You may communicate the direction perfectly to your team leaders, but "broken telephone" is sure to set in at

some point along the way. If you accurately describe the policy or direction through an intranet, you are still faced with hundreds of interpretations of how that message is understood. This results in mixed messages to customers and a failure to execute your vision.

It is very difficult to get a handle on what the agents are doing at any given time when you are responsible for hundreds of people. Usually large inbound contact centres are slow to react to significant issues because multiple people from multiple teams do not converse with each other as often as in small contact centres. In many cases you rely on a few astute people who will share their experiences with those at a senior level.

When one agent among hundreds is providing poor customer service, it may be a while before you find out. You rely on your team leaders to provide live listening, which can be difficult to achieve at all times throughout the month. You also may rely on select call quality monitoring or direct customer feedback. Again, it can take some time to get to the source of the problem. While you do drill down, your customers are getting frustrated.

The larger the contact centre gets, the less connected to the organization an agent feels. Large inbound centres tend to respond to the above challenges with very tight controls. Training provides for specific expectations on calls, communication and behaviour. Large centres tend to have a considerable number of rules to attempt to ensure everyone provides the exact same level of service to every customer. These rules are enforced with a methodical approach to discipline. Unfortunately by creating all of these rules, we tend to take away the agents' responsibility for their actions as well. They may start to feel like a robot. Their personal level of satisfaction for their contributions may be minimal or disappear altogether. When this happens, they may stop caring about the customer.

Changing the approach

So how does a large contact centre create the same level of individual commitment and care that a small centre inherently has? The secret may lie in the level of responsibility you offer your contact centre agents.

The more personal responsibility an agent feels toward their obligations, the better the service they provide. How do we make agents in large centres feel like their contributions count? We know that the actions of large centres can take individual responsibility away with their strict rules, policies and procedures. The solution is to give some of that responsibility back.

Many of us feel helpless when we call a large customer service organization. One of the reasons is that we expect our problem will be met with policies, procedures and strict rules as a response to our issue. If issue X happens, then the contact centres' standard response is Y. This is an efficient way to deal with the issue, but the personal service is lost. Many times our issue doesn't fit into problem X, but is close enough. The Y response only takes care of part of the problem.

What would happen if you gave each agent the ability to take care of any issue on their own without holding any strict rules or policies over their heads? The solution to any customer issue could be resolved at the sole discretion of the agent. For many who have run contact centres, this sounds like a very scary scenario. You imagine agents giving away the "farm" to please customers and total chaos as each customer receives a different level of service depending on who they talk to.

The fact is, this scenario works quite well once you let go of the idea that this will turn into a disaster. My experience in allowing the agents to decide for themselves what the solution should be has been more successful than even I had hoped. Each of our agents has the ability to fix any issue any way they deem necessary. Agents also have the ability and freedom to call any customer about any issue at any time.

This wasn't always the case. We used to be that centre with strict rules, procedures and policies. After we decided to change direction, we spent some time carefully preparing ourselves for the day we would unleash this freedom.

Each representative went through some very detailed training on what their new powers were. The ongoing theme was that each representative had the power to make decisions on what was best for the

customer. No longer would the agents have to ask permission if they wanted to do something out of the ordinary. Individual coaching was required to ensure each agent clearly understood the change in direction. It was critical that each agent clearly understood their new responsibilities and how to use them. Follow-up call monitoring was required to ensure the new powers were being used appropriately.

One of our agents created an “iResolve” poster for us with a logo that represents the new and improved approach we took to giving individuals the power to creatively take care of customers. To each person, iResolve means “taking care of the customer myself”.

The result? Agents feel more connected because they have the same power as an owner would have to resolve an issue. The number of customers requesting an escalation has been significantly reduced, first call resolution has increased, and customer satisfaction has increased as a result. When an issue arises, the agent does not need to quote the policy or wait for the “memo” to arrive on how to deal with the issue. They just decide what to do in the best interest of the customer, and just do it.

Today I hear stories of agents sending flowers to customers when we were late with an anniversary gift. And calling a customer back to find out if an order arrived, just to make sure everything is ok. Stories of sending a gift card in the mail with a personal note of apology for more serious issues are common now. Agents brag to each other about how creative they have been, and the pride in their work shines through.

Responses to customer issues are more closely tied to the needs of the customer, not the need to meet a certain procedure or policy. When we’re given ultimate power we tend to act ultimately responsible. Sure, we have the odd person who is more generous than they should have been. But this is rare.

So what happened to the very scary scenario of agents giving away the “farm” to please customers? This hasn’t been our problem at all. The reality is that because of this new freedom, our agents are more careful with how they apply their power. The hardest part of the ongoing plan is to convince agents to be more generous with our customers. I assumed I would have to rein people in so that our bottom line was protected. As it turns out, the more responsibility we gave, the more careful people have been with that responsibility.

If you find your contact centre is too policy driven, and your agents are lacking personal responsibility for their actions, it may be time to give up the control. Your agents will be more engaged in their jobs, morale will improve and, ultimately, your customers will reap all the benefits of the personal attention they receive.

[Home](#) | [Advertising](#) | [Subscriptions](#) | [Articles](#) | [Directory](#) | [About Us](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Media Partners](#)

© 2008-2009 Lloydmedia, Inc.
302-137 Main Street North
Markham, ON L3P 1Y2 Canada
905-201-6600/1-800-668-1838