

How Do Your Customers Rate Your Call Center?

Is the experience of dealing with your company a one-star failure or a five-star winner?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

New customers are good. Long-term loyal customers who buy again and again are even better. And your best tool for winning customer loyalty—or losing it—is your call center. Every time a phone rings in your call center, a competition begins—the competition to determine whether the caller rates your customer service above or below the service of other companies. Lose the competition, and you risk losing the customer.

To a large extent, the quality of the customer experience depends on the call-routing systems and strategies that support your customer service operations. Companies today use a wide range of call-handling systems, some as simple as PBXs and others as complex as advanced automatic call distributors (ACDs) integrated with customer databases using computer-telephony integration (CTI).

This white paper uses customer service scenarios to demonstrate the quality of the customer service these various systems can yield and the business impact of customer response. As you read it, try to place your contact center on the customer service scale, and when you're done, use the questionnaire at the end to get a rough assessment of the quality of your customers' experiences.

How Do Your Customers Rate Your Call Center?

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Ever wonder what it would be like to be a movie producer reading the first reviews after opening night?

Of course, you can't pick up the morning paper and flip to the call center page and see what kind of review you got. Thumbs up or thumbs down. A star and a half or five stars.

But your call center is being reviewed, every time one of your customers picks up the telephone to contact you. Customers compare the experience of dealing with your company to the experience they have with other companies—companies that aren't even in your market space, for the most part.

Your company might sell high-end technology systems that require complex and time-consuming phone support, and within that context, your call center might be doing good work. But your customers could be comparing it to the experience they had when they ordered flowers for an anniversary—a much easier kind of support to provide. It's not fair, but that's the way it is.

Just to give you an idea of what we mean, let us take you through a day in the life of a typical call center critic (AKA customer).

Jan Bateman, call center critic

Let's follow one customer through one day of using the services of a variety of businesses. Her name is Jan Bateman. She's the events manager for a mid-sized technology company in the Research Triangle area of North Carolina.

She is highly accustomed to using telephones and computer systems to conduct business and take advantage of services, both as a private consumer and in the performance of her job. With a demanding career and two daughters, she leads a busy, active life. So prompt, efficient service is important to her.

And since many of the goods and services she buys are purchased with company funds that she is accountable for, she is a serious comparison shopper.

Here's how a typical day goes.

The one-star experience

Jan is up early.

Her company will host a booth at a trade show in Chicago, and she has a thousand things to do to get ready. But she has a life too, and before she goes to work, she has to contact the company that sells the accounting software she uses to manage her personal finances. The software is excellent, well designed and feature rich. But there are new tax regulations, and she needs the latest upgrade to prepare her tax return correctly.

The company is relatively new and has only a rudimentary Web site, which advertises the upgrade and confirms that it has the new features Jan needs. She calls the number listed on the Web page. She notes that the number is not toll-free and that she's paying for the call.

The company receptionist answers, and when Jan explains what she wants, the receptionist says he can't help, but he'll transfer the call. He puts Jan on hold, and she listens to two minutes of complete silence. She assumes she hasn't been disconnected, since she doesn't hear a dial tone, but she muses that it might be nice if they would play something like Bach's "Brandenburg Concerto No. 2" while she waits.

Finally, a technician at the company's help desk answers. He has no sales training and can't tell her how to request the upgrade. He transfers Jan back to the receptionist and tells her to ask the receptionist for the Sales department. The receptionist transfers the call again, but the lines are busy, and Jan listens to several more minutes of spooky silence and then hangs up.

She doesn't have time for this. She has to get to work.

One-star systems and strategies: This company is a new company with a good product, but it has not yet come to grips with the complexities of customer service. It uses a PBX to manually route incoming calls, but has no automatic call distribution capabilities. If the receptionist doesn't make the right guess about where the call should go, the caller is in for the old silent treatment while she waits on hold.

One-star business impact: Jan is frustrated and angry, and she's not the type to wait for the company to get its act together. She's aware that there are other, more established companies that sell similar software. Before she leaves for work, she does a quick Google search, picks a couple of companies that have toll-free numbers listed and mechanisms on their Web sites for purchasing software online, and adds them to her list of favorites for further exploration.

She will almost surely buy a new software package from a company with more responsive customer service. And over the fax machine at work, she'll tell some of her co-workers about the bad service she got.

The two-star experience

The day has started out badly, and when Jan gets to work, it doesn't get any better. Her docking laptop won't boot up. It's a high-end model—the same brand as the standard desktop computers her company uses, but with more memory, and she depends on the manufacturer's help desk rather than her company's IT department to maintain it.

She calls the help desk at the laptop manufacturer, and an interactive voice response (IVR) system offers her a menu.

"If you have the Model X680, press one. If you have the Model X1260, press two." And so forth.

Her laptop is an X1260, so she selects "two."

An agent answers and asks for her account number, which she gives him. He checks the account number and finds that she has a Model X1260d rather than an X1260 and tells her to try the main menu again. She does, and after waiting in queue (this time she does get her classical music—the closing movement of Vivaldi's "Spring" and part of a Mozart violin concerto), finally gets to talk to a tech rep. He asks for her account information again, and she has to repeat it.

Two-star systems and strategies: This company is using an automatic call distributor (ACD) to route calls to several agent groups, each trained in supporting a different product. It can play music on hold, which is preferable to dead silence.

The ACD also has basic IVR capability, so customers can direct their own calls. This would be a good strategy if it were more professionally implemented. But the company's IVR prompts and call flows are poorly designed. Similarity in model numbers causes a lot of callers to select the wrong department, and there is no provision for transferring information that the customer has already given when a call is redirected.

Two-star business impact: The good news is that the company probably hasn't lost a customer. Jan is frustrated and annoyed, but ultimately the tech rep told her how to get her computer to reboot. Since it's a company computer, she can't make the decision to switch products anyway.

The bad news is that inefficient call routing is costing the laptop manufacturer in ways it has not recognized. The company has thousands of customers, so PSTN costs for support calls are a major expense, and that expense is much greater than it should be because customers spend almost as much time talking to the wrong agents as they do to the right ones.

And, of course, the company is not getting as much as it should out of its staffing expenses because agents spend time routing misdirected calls. There are less-quantifiable disadvantages too. Agent morale is low because they have to deal with frustrated customers so often. Frustrated agents and frustrated customers make for tense interactions, and turnover is high, agents with costly training leaving the company and in many cases using their training and experience to get jobs with direct competitors.

To all of that, add one more piece of bad news. Jan, who has been shopping for a personal computer for her high-school-age daughter, just decided where she's *not* going to buy it.

The three-star experience

By lunchtime, Jan has accomplished a lot but can't take the time to sit down in the cafeteria for lunch. She brings a cup of soup to her desk, and while she eats, takes a few minutes for personal business. A medical lab recently billed her for some allergy tests for her younger daughter. She thinks the tests are covered by her health plan.

She calls the toll-free number on her health plan ID card, enters the account number on the card in response to a voice prompt, and waits in queue (not quite long enough to tell whether the baroque concerto she's listening to is Telemann or Handel) before an agent answers.

The agent asks for the account number—a minor annoyance, since she has already entered it once—and calls up her account records. Jan asks about the bill for the allergy tests, and the agent confirms that they are covered and tells her where to send the bill so that it will be paid properly.

Jan is done with the call before she finishes her soup.

Three-star systems and strategies: As many healthcare providers do, this company has more advanced call-routing capabilities. Its call center system can identify the number a caller is dialing from and the number that was dialed. The IVR prompts are simple and intuitive, and once callers enter their account numbers, advanced skills-based routing gets their calls to agents with the right skills to address their issues.

The contact center has other advantages that the customers don't experience directly, but that nonetheless contribute to the quality of the customer experience. Easy-to-use development and administration tools, for instance, allow the healthcare provider to keep its system working at peak efficiency. And detailed historical and real-time reports, using data generated by the call-handling system, help contact center managers streamline operations and healthcare managers understand customer needs.

Three-star business impact: In spite of high call volumes, PSTN and staffing costs are kept to a minimum in this contact center. Employee turnover is low and morale is high because skilled agents can take pride in how well they are serving customers. Interactions are pleasant. In agent groups that generate revenue, such as new accounts, operational efficiencies result in more transactions and therefore more revenue. And most important, customer satisfaction is high.

The four-star experience

By 7:30 p.m., Jan is working on what she hopes is her last work task of the day. She has to purchase some gifts for customers and partners who have agreed to help with demos in her company's booth. She finds a Web site with office accessories for sale, sees some very nice canvas computer carrying cases, and fires off an e-mail asking whether they come with shoulder straps.

That's enough for one day, she thinks, as she shuts down her computer.

But as it turns out, Jan's workday isn't over yet. On the way home, she stops to shop for dinner. As she puts her groceries in the trunk of her BMW, she remembers that she intended to check the corporate rates for rooms at the hotel where the trade show will be held. Her company has attended events there before, but rates change, and she has to submit estimates to Finance first thing the next day.

Using her cell phone (before she leaves the parking lot and pulls back into traffic—she's as safety-conscious as she is efficient), she calls the hotel's toll-free number. A voice prompt asks for her account number, and as soon as she enters it—even though it is nearly 8:00 p.m.—an agent answers.

The agent has the records of Jan's previous transactions with the hotel ready at hand and knows the current corporate discount rate, which has in fact changed since the last time Jan's company attended an event at the hotel.

The agent also knows about an additional discount available to participants in the trade show, which will help Jan keep expenses within her tight budget. The agent faxes the rates to Jan's work and home fax numbers. Jan's off the phone and on the way home, listening to Jeremiah Clarke's "Trumpet Voluntary" on the CD player, and it sounds much better over the Harman Kardon speakers in her BMW than it would over her cell phone.

Four-star systems and strategies: The hotel operates three contact centers, one in Atlanta, one in Chicago, and one in Seattle. Jan got an instant live response because the three centers are networked and operated as a single virtual contact center. She called from Raleigh, North Carolina, in the middle of the evening, but the agent who answered her call was working a regular day shift in Seattle.

Another factor in the satisfactory experience was computer-telephony integration. By integrating its call-routing system with customer databases, the hotel is able to bring information on Jan's account and her history with the company to the agent desktop at the same instant the call is connected. The agent also has access to relevant data such as room rates, discounts, special promotions, and so forth.

Four-star business impact: In addition to the obvious advantages of extending business hours without overtime staffing and of reducing PSTN costs because the call is connected and wrapped up quickly, the hotel has created a memorable customer experience that will ensure Jan's continued business.

Because the contact center has helped her do her job conveniently and successfully, she will become its advocate within her company, recommending that her company use other hotels in the same chain in other cities. And if she moves to a new company, she'll probably be the hotel's advocate there as well.

The five-star experience

We'd like to tell you that Jan can forget about work and concentrate on getting dinner for her daughters.

But while the pasta is cooking, she makes the mistake of checking her voicemail and finds that the vice president of Marketing wants the company logo on the gifts she is giving to the demo participants. Leaving her older daughter to tend the pasta, she logs on to the office accessories Web site, gets the toll-free number, and calls them.

The phone rings, and it's almost as if the contact center knows she's had a bad day.

The voice prompt asks her to enter her name and e-mail address—not using the keypad, but by simply speaking—and an agent answers instantly.

The agent confirms Jan's account information and then says, "I see you sent us an e-mail today, and we haven't answered it yet." He reads the e-mail and assures her that the computer carrying cases do indeed have detachable shoulder straps. He also points out that the cases are part of an ensemble that includes a matching day planner, pen, and notebook.

Jan likes the ensemble idea, but the cases have to have the company logo. Can it be done?

Yes, the agent tells her. It will take two days, and she'll have to send a digital version of the logo along with her order.

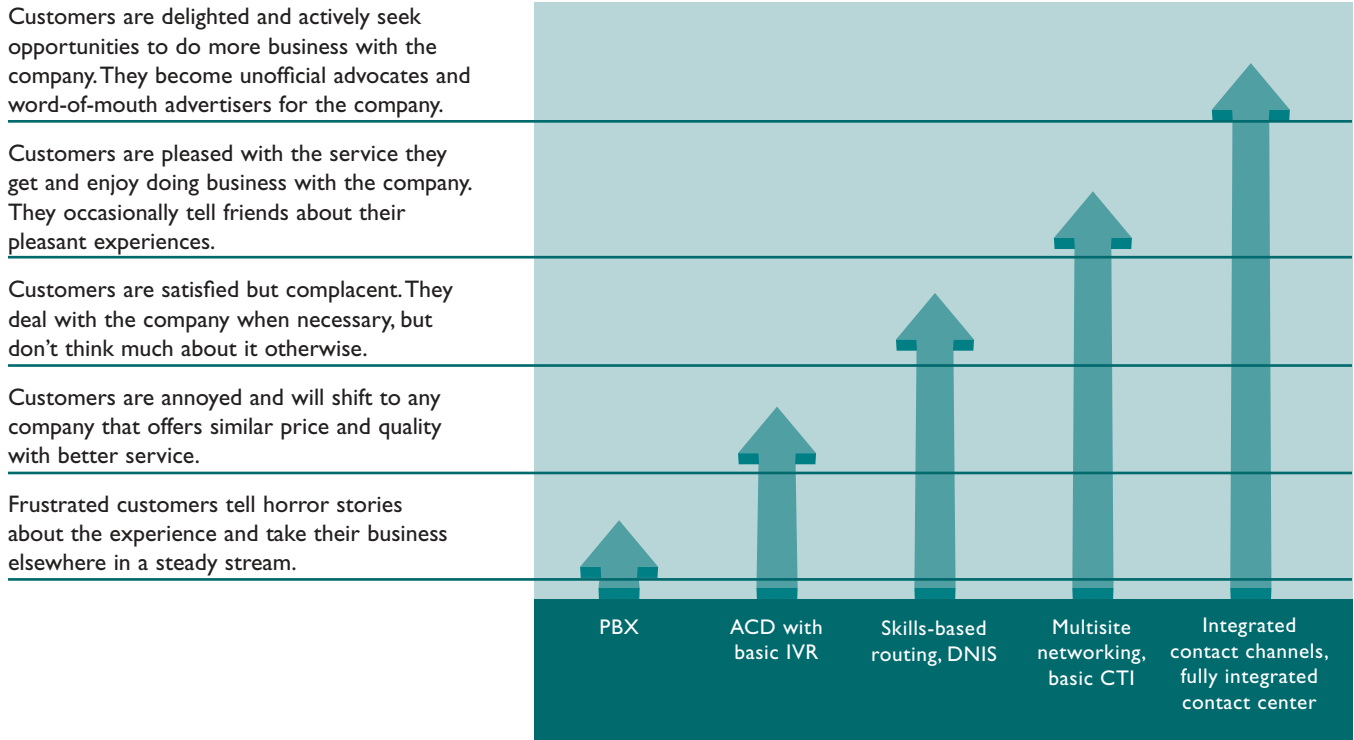
She completes the order on the spot, downloads the digital logo from the company intranet and e-mails it, and goes back to the pasta. Dinner is a success. The daughters get busy on their homework. And Jan decides that instead of listening to classical music after dinner as she often does, she'll watch some television instead.

As she sits down to relax, she makes a mental note to add the office accessories Web site to her list of favorites and do some personal shopping there come Christmas time. She'll tell others about her positive experience, and she'll talk about how great the company is, not about how great its contact center is.

Five-star systems and strategies: This company is masterful in its use of contact center technology. Like the hotel, it operates a multisite contact center so that Jan gets a live response no matter when she calls. All its contact channels—telephone, e-mail, and the Web site—are integrated, so that customers get the same high-quality experience no matter how they get in touch.

Agents, no matter what type of contact they are responding to, have access to customer information as well as product information, so they can deliver personalized service. And—something that is transparent to customers but that means a great deal to the company's bottom line—it routes calls internally using VoIP to take advantage of cost-effective, easily administered IP networks.

Five-star business impact: If there were Academy Awards for customer experiences, this business would win one. Since there aren't, it will have to settle for some five-star business benefits: customer loyalty, effective cross-selling, word-of-mouth advertising from a highly satisfied customer, and reduced infrastructure and PSTN costs.



Call-routing capabilities drive the customer experience, and the customer experience drives loyalty, repeat business, and revenue.

How does *your* call routing system rate?

How many stars does your contact center deserve? The best way to know, of course, is by conducting frequent customer surveys to ask the real critics what they think. But here's a quick way to get a rough idea of where you stand. Select the most appropriate answer for each question below and record your score in the space provided.

Your abandoned call rate is: _____

- 5 % (5 points)
- 10 % (4 points)
- 15% (3 points)
- Higher (2 points)
- Don't track this (1 point)

Customers are segmented before their calls are connected: _____

- Automatically based on DNIS (3 points)
- By information they enter in response to prompts (2 points)
- Not at all (1 point)

While on hold, callers hear: _____

- Music plus informative messages (4 points)
- Music (3 points)
- Silence, then music (2 points)
- Eerie, unbroken silence (1 point)

You meet your service levels: _____

- Consistently (5 points)
- Sometimes (4 points)
- Hardly ever (3 points)
- Never (2 points)
- Don't track them (1 point)

Agents have access to customer information: _____

- Automatically, as soon as a call is connected or transferred, including information on contacts using other channels (4 points)
- Automatically, as soon as a call is connected or transferred, but only information collected during telephone transactions (3 points)
- Quickly and easily after the customers identify themselves (2 points)
- Not always (1 point)

Calls are routed according to: _____

- Combinations of agent skills, such as language + product knowledge + sales training, regardless of location or group (4 points)
- Limited sets of agent skills, regardless of location or group (3 points)
- First available agent in a specified group (2 points)
- First available agent across the entire agent pool (1 point)

Your customers have access to live agents: _____

- Around the clock (4 points)
- 12 hours a day (3 points)
- 8 hours a day (2 points)
- Sporadically (1 point)

Your first-call resolution rate is: _____

- 90 % (5 points)
- 80 % (4 points)
- 70% (3 points)
- 60 % (2 points)
- Worse (1 point)

Your agents: _____

- Cross-sell and up-sell customers (4 points)
- Review related account information with customers (3 points)
- Answer questions and ask customers whether they have other issues (2 points)
- Answer questions and get off the phone as quickly as possible (1 point)

Your customers deal with agents who: _____

- Take pride in winning customer satisfaction, enjoy their work, and feel successful at it (4 points)
- Enjoy their work and feel successful at it (3 points)
- Grumble and complain a lot (2 points)
- Quit at the first opportunity (1 point)

Your IVR prompts are: _____

- Designed from the caller's point of view and user tested (4 points)
- Arranged in logical order based on user needs (3 points)
- Designed primarily to reduce the need for live agents (2 points)
- Easily misunderstood, frustrating (1 point)

You review your call flows and adjust them to customer needs: _____

- Frequently in response to real-time conditions (4 points)
- Whenever major changes in business conditions occur (3 points)
- Only at set intervals (2 points)
- Never (1 point)

Total _____

Now add up your points and divide by 10 to see how many stars your contact center rates.

Contact Aspect if you want to raise your rating

If we've taken a somewhat light-hearted approach to this white paper, it's because we know that you know how important your customers' opinions of your service and support are. If you believe that the experience of dealing with your company can and should be improved, then contact an Aspect Sales representative. Aspect has marketed the industry's best automatic call distributor—the Aspect® Call Center—for nearly two decades, and is the largest vendor focused exclusively on contact center solutions.

In addition to the Aspect Call Center, our solutions portfolio includes every essential component of a complete contact center solution, from our advanced interactive voice response system to award-winning workforce management software to a business communications platform that integrates contact center resources and simplifies contact center application development.

So give us a call. We can help your contact center earn rave reviews that turn into customer loyalty and increased revenue.



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