

Bad line on customer service

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By Lesley Parker

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Complaints about call centres can only worsen as businesses cut customer-service costs.

Call centres are back in the bad books. The Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman has reported the biggest rise in complaints in 10 years and singled out for mention basic failures in customer service such as the dreaded call centre "runaround".

At the same time, a phone company fined nearly \$150,000 for contacting people on the Government's Do Not Call Register blamed an offshore call centre it was using.

This comes at a time when an economic downturn could prompt businesses to outsource to cheap overseas call centres or lay off in-house staff.

The ombudsman received almost 150,000 complaints in 2007-08, a 50 per cent increase on a year earlier.

Customer-service complaints led the landline and mobile-phone categories and were second only to billing problems in the internet category.

"I'm dismayed that complaints that could easily be resolved by providers are ending up with us," ombudsman Deirdre O'Donnell said when releasing the TIO's annual report.

"Many complaints are caused by basic customer-care failures, such as providers giving callers the runaround through multiple transfers and hold queues, not responding to inquiries or simply failing to apologise for errors."

If call centres are meant to be about convenience and better service for customers - as well as cutting costs for businesses - what's going wrong?

ATTITUDE TO SERVICE

Adam Goodvach, chief executive of research group Global Reviews, which benchmarks things such as call centres and websites, says businesses fall into two camps when it comes to call centres.

"Some companies see the call centre as a 'cost centre' and some see it as a 'profit centre'," Goodvach says. "You can view a call centre as a cost to your business or you can view it as an opportunity and that's key because it ... has a massive impact on the way customers are treated."

For example, a business that regards its call centre as a cost centre is more likely to want to get a high volume of calls through in the shortest possible time.

Customer-service "agents" - as they're called in the industry - may even earn commission on the basis of calls handled. So the shorter each call, the more calls they get through, the greater the commission they earn.

However, quick calls don't necessarily add up to good service. One of the things Global Reviews looks at when scoring call centres is whether the agent asks questions to find out what the caller really needs.

The caller might think he or she needs a high-interest online account when a few questions might reveal a term deposit is a better option, for example.

Another issue is call-centre staff aren't always given sufficient power to solve a problem, Goodvach says.

In that case, call centres should "manage expectations" - in other words, be honest with the customer about what they can expect to happen.

TELCOS WORST

The managing director of researcher and publisher Callcentres.net, Catriona Wallace, says not all call centres should be tarred with the same brush.

"By and large [customers] have a reasonable experience," she says. In a recent Callcentres.net survey, four out of five people reported being "satisfied" or better. Wallace says one in five people unhappy with the experience isn't out of line with the results for other forms of customer service, including face to face.

However, she acknowledges there are problems in the telecommunications sector. "What the ombudsman is saying is consistent with what we have found," she says, referring to the annual Callcentres.net Australia & New Zealand Contact Centre Industry Benchmarking Study.

In that study, the government-education-health segment topped a league table of 10 sectors, followed by the hospitality, IT and financial services industries, while the telcos-utilities sector came last in 10th place.

The main causes of dissatisfaction with any call centre are not having your problem resolved on the first call, being kept on hold and being transferred from one person to another, Wallace says.

Behind this may be the fact that the call-centre industry experiences very high staff turnover. On average, half the staff leave in any one year, she says.

"It means that keeping knowledge at the front line becomes difficult," she says.

"The people you're speaking to have perhaps worked there six to 12 months ... they may have to [transfer] you to another person."

BEST FOR BUSINESS

A senior lecturer in organisational behaviour with the Australian School of Business at the University of NSW, Markus Groth, says businesses often are unable to see the process from the customer's perspective.

"A lot of the time they don't have the customer's best interests in mind but see things from an organisational procedure perspective - 'what's going to work best for us' or 'that's how the technology or systems are set up'," he says.

Call-centre staff can be just as frustrated as customers when they can't move beyond the "script" they're

given, he says. "We found employees are really out to help customers and do a good job ... they're simply not well equipped to deal with a customer's queries," Groth says.

"They're very confined by the scripts that they have to follow. They have to escalate anything out of the ordinary and the customer ends up getting handed around to different people."

So how can you improve your chances of having your needs met by a call centre?

KEEP NOTES

Goodvach says: "If you want to work out whether you're going to have a good experience with a call centre, when you're looking at buying a product consider whether they're asking you questions. If they are, they're likely to have a good service culture."

When contacting a call centre, get your story straight and make it simple. "Think about how you want your problem resolved. Don't just give the agent the problem, give them the solution," he says.

Keep notes, including the time and date of the call, the name of the agent, the contact details (which may not be provided) and the agreed action.

If you're not getting anywhere, specifically ask to speak to the team leader, supervisor or manager and make sure you get the name of the manager.

It's a common trick for an operator to ask the agent next to them to pretend to be the manager, just to get you off their back, he says.

They'll be caught out when you ring back to check their status.

Using words such as "complaint" also can encourage action.

If all else fails, go to the ombudsman. Once a complaint is registered, the business has two weeks to fix the problem.

A spokesman says 93 per cent of complaints are resolved at this point.

CALL US IF THEY CALL YOU

The Australian Communications and Media Authority deals with complaints about calls from telemarketers and oversees the Do Not Call Register, launched last year. Manager of its investigations branch, Jane Cole, says it received 28,000 complaints last year, most of which were about calls to people on the register or calls that breached the rules about when and how telemarketing can be done.

Telemarketers can call only between certain hours and must provide information on request, including their name, contact details, the business they're acting for and how they got your number.

"A consumer's first instinct is to say: 'I'm on the Do Not Call Register' and hang up," Cole says. "Unfortunately for us that means the consumer isn't able to identify the company that's called them."

ACMA encourages people to keep a record of the date and time of the call and the name of the Australian company that has contracted the local or overseas call centre.

"If a company is using a third party we expect them to take steps to make sure they're doing the right thing. It's most effective if we go back to that company and change their behaviour," she says.

ACMA recently fined phone company Dodo \$147,500 for contacting people on the Do Not Call Register via overseas call centres.

There are 2.6 million phone numbers on the register. Register at <http://www.donotcall.gov.au>.

WHAT TO EXPECT FROM A CALL CENTRE

The service agent should:

- * Ask for your name.
- * Provide their name.
- * Ask questions to understand the issue at hand.
- * Not try to dump unwanted products on you.
- * Check that you understand the information provided.
- * Acknowledge and empathise with complaints you have.
- * Seek your permission if you need to be transferred or placed on hold.
- * Summarise important outcomes and next steps.
- * Ask if you have any further issues to discuss.

Source: Global Reviews