



Building Trust in the Workplace

With more companies using contact centres for front-end customer engagement than ever before (it is estimated that there are between 3 and 4 million call centre workers in North America alone¹), the relationship between clients and their customers is increasingly dependent on the capacity of the call centre to respond to customer needs efficiently, informatively and professionally.

With an increasing focus today on personalised service, there is much scope, then, to not only take and deliver information efficiently, but also to build a brand's relationship with its customers on an individual basis. Friendly, efficient and informative customer service will ensure long-term brand loyalty and encourage word-of-mouth recommendation. So how can contact centres improve their reputation and increase customer loyalty by building meaningful rapport with customers?

Have attitudes to customer service changed?

The most important factor is a committed, well-informed and professional tone on the phone, which comes from long-term, happy and motivated employees. But are contact centres and their technology vendors delivering a working environment that sustains the levels of employee satisfaction required to drive productive, long term relationships? Employee absence and attrition levels are a good indicator of wellbeing and satisfaction within contact centres.

Industry research over the last few years has shown that agent attrition and absenteeism remains high in the outsourcing industry. A recent report from ContactBabel shows that there is a very wide spread of attrition rates across the industry, with almost one third having to manage attrition in excess of 30 percent.

If staff turnover and absenteeism is this high across all markets (and increasing), this suggests a lack of commitment in the workplace, translating to a lack of trust between agent

and customer, employee and agent. This is supported by a recent report, 'American Express Global Customer Service Barometer' conducted by Ebiquity for American Express² which measured customer satisfaction levels and opinions worldwide. Internationally, the study shows that despite the fact that brands increasingly rely on contact centres to engage with their customers, the majority of consumers in many western cultures (particularly France, the Netherlands, Germany and Canada) believe that company attitudes to customer services have not changed at all, and in the USA, 68% of consumers feel that either companies' attitudes to customer service have not changed, or that they actually pay less attention to customer service than they used to.

Furthermore, 68% of consumers globally believe companies don't do anything to keep their business.

Too often customer service agents convey a tone that can mean they simply do not care about the customer or their issue. Centre managers know it, agents know it and the customer knows it too. Many steps have been taken to improve employee motivation and customer satisfaction: "fun" themed days for employees, customer satisfaction surveys, the changing of account managers and stringent VoE monitoring.

I wonder, though, whether we are missing the single most important part of any productive and successful relationship. TRUST.



How do you build confidence and loyalty?

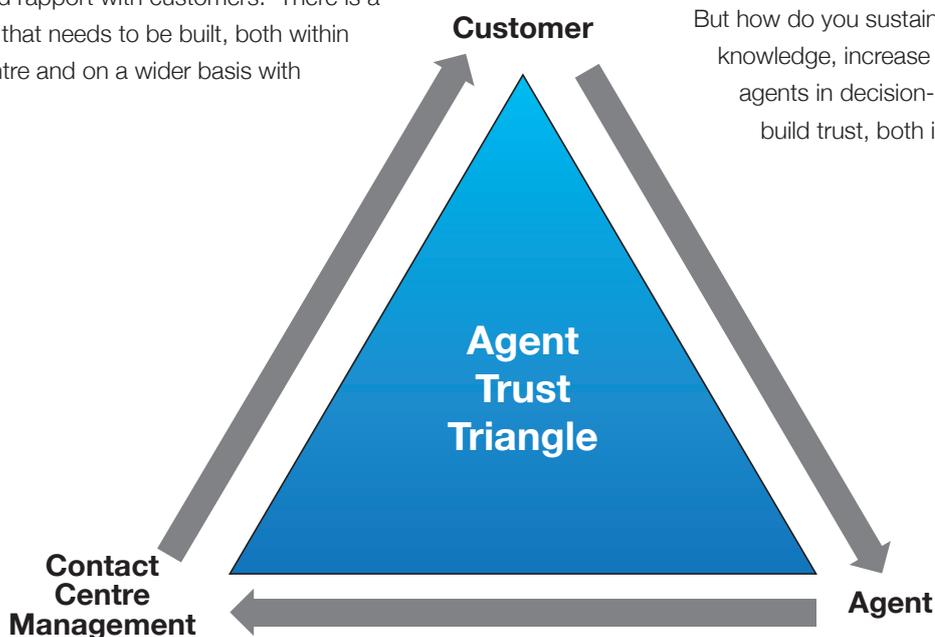
If you look at what makes a great marriage or friendship it boils down to one thing, TRUST. If you doubt your partner or friends and are uncertain they are being honest or feel they care less for you than you care for them, trust is lost and the relationship is dysfunctional. Dysfunctional relationships outside of work cause a huge amount of disruption, heartache and bring out the worst in us; this is the same at work. It does not matter how professional you are, if you do not trust your boss, or believe in the policies of the company you work for you are never going to reach your true potential.

It has been proven that increased agent autonomy and transparency within the contact centre reduces agent stress, empowers individuals to deliver based on a fully-informed and holistic approach, and ultimately delivers a more engaged rapport with customers. There is a triangle of trust that needs to be built, both within the contact centre and on a wider basis with the client.

But how can you build these triangles of trust? Demonstrating confidence in your agents, leading with transparency, and motivating them to improve their brand knowledge is essential, says Stephen Pace, CEO of SJS solutions Ltd.

"Your agents are the voice of your brand. Just as confidence builds trust that in turn encourages loyalty, lack of confidence breeds doubt and doubt results in customer attrition and lower buy frequency. Doubt and distrust also result in higher agent attrition which leads to increased costs and less experienced agents in contact with your customers. These agents are often less confident and so the circle of customer disloyalty erodes profits. Ensuring agents have instant access to the knowledge they need plus a strong connection to your brand is essential."

But how do you sustain high levels of agent knowledge, increase transparency, include agents in decision-making processes and build trust, both internally and externally?



Develop a culture of trust

Here are five practical steps that can be taken immediately to sow the seeds for a culture of trust in your call centre:

- **Give your agents full access to the knowledge and information they need to answer questions with confidence.**

Things change second by second and time is precious to us all. No matter how well you recruit and train agents, giving them instant access to significant, easy to use information, tips, advice and reminders is the only way to continuously and cost effectively build their confidence not only in their ability to answer questions but in their ability to rely on the technology you deploy to support them.

- **Regularly perform light-hearted product, service and company based quizzes.**

This is a great way to keep agents motivated and focused, as well as reinforcing company knowledge and providing incentive to learn and take an interest in the brand they represent.

- **Encourage brand ownership by using all visual communications tools to reinforce key company messages and mantras.**

This reduces stress in the workplace as it removes the necessity for team leaders and floor managers to repeatedly remind agents of these messages and mantras, relying instead on a process of osmosis. This demonstrates trust in the agents to communicate the philosophies of the company when on a call, and frees up time for group leaders and floor managers to give more bespoke, on-the-job training.

- **Ensure technology does not hinder your agents' ability to quickly answer questions with confidence.**

A slow screen response, poorly configured ACD and slow transfer of information can instantly kill customer trust in a brand. Ensure your systems are top of the range, and reflect your pride in your agents and in your brand.

- **Support agents by replacing emails, whiteboards and other non real-time, non-branded communication methods with engaging real-time visual communications.**

Consolidating all your messaging in one place gives agents a point of focus and increases the ease with which agents can draw on information, giving them the confidence and tools they need to be able to carry out their job with more autonomy. This instills two-way trust, motivates agents to build good rapport with customers in keeping with the company philosophies, and reduces stress, thereby cutting out one of the biggest causes of contact centre attrition.

Practical steps such as these ensure that agents have the tools and access to information to make informed decisions when on the phone to customers.

They empower and inspire agents to work more autonomously, which in turn generates trust between agents and call centre management. Ultimately, the combination of this trust and an increased level of news and information about the client instills a desire in agents to take ownership and pride not only in their job, but with time, in the brand that they represent.

This naturally leads to a two-tier bonus for clients. On a practical level, agents are able to deliver on customers' needs to a higher and more efficient standard. Almost more importantly however, they will also feel more inclined to respond compassionately to customers' needs, creating that all-important emotional trigger, and building with every contact an emotional rapport between the brand and its customers.



Stephen Pace, CEO SJS Solutions, has spent the last 20 years working in the area of customer excellence and contact centre technology. 2001 saw Stephen start SJS Solutions which has been successfully developing contact centre technology for the last 14 years. Stephen remains involved in the day-to-day running of SJS and has a passion for helping companies improve customer care.

EMEA: +44 (0)203 642 1842

US: +1-866-412-5265 (Toll Free)

E-mail: stephen.pace@sjssolutions.com

Web: www.sjssolutions.com

About SJS Solutions

Founded in 2001, SJS Solutions develops innovative, affordable, easy to deploy employee engagement and communications solutions suitable for contact centres, support desks, sales teams, healthcare providers, logistic operations and more. The SJS range of solutions are the result of over 15 years working with, and listening to customers ranging from multi-billion dollar health care enterprises to insurance and automotive companies with small teams of people striving to deliver the best service and customer care possible. In the last 5 years, SJS became a global leader in creating the most flexible, easy to deploy visual communications products for companies of all sizes with diverse needs. The SJS API now ensures customers can display any information from their enterprise, anywhere, any time.

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Further reading:

1. *The Contact Centre Decision-Makers' Guides:* www.contactbabel.com
2. *The American Express® Global Customer Service Barometer is a study conducted by American Express and Ebiquity, exploring customer attitudes and preferences around customer service.*

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