



Customer-Driven Coaching: Using the Voice of the Customer to Maximize your ROI

By Dr. Jodie Monger and Anne Nickerson

What do winners of the Super Bowl, the World Series and NCAA Final Four have in common? While they are all champions, not one of these groups, or individual players, was successful without a coach on the sidelines. Just because you win a championship does not mean you stop – practicing, coaching, or learning. So, if the very best athletes need continuous coaching, think about how important it is to each and every representative in your contact center.

In order to ensure that your coaching program is not scrutinized and sacrificed when cost-cutting occurs, you must be able to defend, measure and promote its value and calculate its ROI. Unfortunately, contact center leaders are not taught how to quantify the benefits of coaching and are therefore often unable to communicate its positive impacts on employee and customer retention. Inevitably, all contact centers will experience cost-cutting so you must make certain that when the time arises, the eyes of the CFO are not drawn to your contact center. Because if they are, and you are not prepared, your training and coaching efforts will most likely be at the top of his or her list.

So that you can anticipate the CFOs, or any other management member's questions, here are three ways to validate the ROI of a coaching program:

1. Customer value, or revenue generated by retaining customers vs. cost of marketing and sales to obtain a new customer
2. Savings as a result of minimizing attrition; many representatives leave a position for lack of development or communication with their supervisor
3. Savings accrued as a result of performance efficiency

A good coaching program will have positive impacts on all of the above. Engage your CFO to determine the value assigned to each area, the current baseline, and then measure the differences as coaching is implemented.

To be your sideline coach, Customer Relationship Metrics (Metrics) and Call Center Coach have come together to provide the necessary techniques to take customer insights and turn them into action. Almost all contact centers have some type of coaching program, but nearly all are missing the most important element in the game plan – the Voice of the Customer (VOC). Including the VOC element in your coaching process will provide the opportunity to be recognized as champions.

Monitoring is only a piece of the puzzle

The most successful contact center coaching programs are customer-driven. Unfortunately, most coaching programs are based solely on monitoring forms and how a representative scores on these internal evaluations. The problem is that quality monitoring is only part of the formula, and limited to an *internal* assessment. The items that are measured have been developed by what management has deemed important for the representative to do on a call, and often is outcome-based rather than behavior-based. While this approach offers internal measurements, it will never identify if the agents delivered a great experience for the customer. So, in fact, when you continually pursue a coaching program that helps representatives comply with internal expectations and criteria, an illusion is created regarding what really satisfies customers. The worst case scenario is that your monitoring form is loaded with subjective items the customer should be answering; you have no training for your coaches, and no way to

measure effectiveness or success. (For case study information refer to www.metrics.net articles section and read *Monitoring Isn't Enough to Answer the Quality Question.*)

The bottom line is the customer is the most qualified one to evaluate a representative's service delivery. Research Science has documented that it is best to offer customers an opportunity to immediately evaluate the service they receive on a particular call; delay is dangerous. Immediate feedback offers you the customers' perceptions of their *own* reality, one that you must deal with daily in contact centers. If your customers are not satisfied, all of your other metrics are virtually meaningless.

Build a game plan

So, let us begin to build a game plan for representatives, their coaches, and include the VOC as part of the strategy. We will show you how to take what customers are saying and allow that to guide the coaching for each representative. By including the VOC, you will have greater success at creating champions for your company. The best way to begin this is to capture the VOC with a real-time survey immediately after a customer's interaction with a representative.

Begin by creating an immediate post-call survey to measure multiple concepts, i.e. satisfaction with the company, the call, and the representative. This will provide a complete picture of the caller experience. You also need to provide customers an easy way to elaborate on their scores with comments to complement the quantitative part of your survey and describe their feelings behind their scores. This allows your scores to have meaning and to focus on specifics by which to train and coach your representatives.

It is also very helpful to have customer calls recorded. Often, a representative is not consciously aware of the words, pace or tone of voice they use. When you can match the actual call to customer comments, there is instant recognition (and little or no argument!) of the behaviors that need to be changed.

Good coaching shows you CARE

Changing behaviors takes a willingness to change, constant and consistent feedback, repetitive practice, and recognition when goals are accomplished. The role of the coach is to unlock the potential of each person they coach, while also giving very specific feedback on what is expected. Winners consider feedback a gift to improve their success. So, how does a coach give feedback that is welcomed, learned from, and, in fact, clamored for?

In the book, "*Not By The Seat of My Pants: Leadership Lessons for Call Center Supervisors*" by Anne Nickerson, Coach Stephanie shares this insight: "It's not always about being nice, but rather being clear and positioning information in such a way that the other person can hear the message's intent. When feedback is delivered with CARE, then feedback is received with care."

The **CARE** model is as follows:

- C**learly describe the behavior
- A**ddress reactions to the behavior
- R**ealistic examples are given
- E**xpected result identified

Let's take a look at some actual customer comments taken directly from the thousands Metrics collects every month. Call Center Coach will offer you tips on how to take these insights and turn them into coaching points for your representatives.

"...if the representative would try to not make the customer feel like what they are saying is completely wrong... be a little bit more sympathetic, or empathetic, to the situation..."

"... the representative needs to start showing empathy and listen to the questions that the customers had, and she needs to answer. She was very talkative, as though I was bothering her with my problem. It was like I was on her time. She didn't want to be bothered. She really needs to be re-trained, I think, on customer service skills."

"I had to repeat everything two or three times. He kept forgetting what I was saying. It was really frustrating after I called. It was unbelievable. It was the worst experience I have ever had."

Each of these comments point to two common behaviors lacking in many contact center representatives: listening skills and empathy. Both of these behaviors, when mastered, lead to a more satisfied customer. So how would the CARE feedback sound in this instance? Here is an example. As you read it, see if you can determine how this coach used each of the steps in the CARE model.

"Sue, I'd like to share a technique that helps a customer feel like you've heard and understood their concern. Try repeating in your own words what the customer has said, and how it is affecting them. In the call you just took, Mr. Smith was upset about receiving the incorrect product, which caused him embarrassment and delay in his ability to meet his customer's needs. Try saying something like, 'Mr. Smith, I see how not getting the product on time has caused you embarrassment with your customer. Let's determine how we can correct this immediately so you get what you need, and we can prevent this from happening in the future.' When you listen and empathize with the customer, he will calm down, and you can then focus on resolving the issue. I'd like you to use your own words in what the customer is saying, and how it is affecting them on every call today, and I'll listen in again at the end of the day to see how it's going, and help you with any questions you might have."

Using each step of the CARE model allows the coach to be specific, non-judgmental, immediate, and leaves the representative with a clear expectation of what to do differently. Note also the importance of the specific example and follow up indicated. When Call Center Coach has used this approach with representatives, behavior change happens, training needs are uncovered, and it's easy to measure coaching effectiveness.

Now let's take a look at a few other comments made by customers during the survey.

"I feel the employee answered the questions, but there were no feelings behind the answers. I asked a question and the answer was just 'no'. I think there could have been a little more feeling or 'I'm sorry, we don't offer that feature.' It was almost like I was speaking with a computer. Thank you."

"The operator that I spoke to was efficient but unemotional, and had no interaction as a human being. It might as well have been a machine that I was talking to. 'Thank you. It was my pleasure.' I didn't believe a word of it. I like real, live sincerity".

“Don't rush through the call. Help the customer with whatever they have. Answer the questions fully.”

“I just wanted to give a suggestion for that reservationist. If she could just be a little warmer; she was just very cold. I didn't really understand her... because she was speaking so quickly and just barking out things that she was saying...”

How many of us have heard these similar concerns from customers? Often, when representatives take call after call, the work does become monotonous, and sounding like an indifferent machine sneaks into their voice tone, pace and genuine interest in the caller's needs. Sometimes, we have not given representatives full ability to offer alternatives that will satisfy the customer.

Put a smile on the customer's face

Call Center Coach observed one representative at a client site who sounded professional, cheerful, helpful, and was often requested by name when customers called. When asked what she did to be successful, she said, “I always picture in my mind what my customer looks like, and how I could put a smile on their face. I learned that if I'm armed with different options, I can usually find one or two that will work for them. It's like a game or puzzle for me; I like to have a ‘can do’ approach as much as possible.” She added, “One time, my supervisor had us all record our voices, purposely sounding helpful, interested, etc. We then played them for each other and had to vote on which voice we'd like to hear on the phone. We were all surprised that it took us several tries before we liked what we heard. I always think about that exercise to check my voice.”

Call Center Coach has modified this exercise and used it successfully many times to engage representatives in understanding the impact of their voice on customers' perceptions (which as we know, is their reality) and helped them each discover and channel their “work” voice to positively impact their interactions.

The following VOC statements give us added insight to another common issue we hear frequently.

“She didn't seem to be knowledgeable. She didn't seem to care about what I wanted. It was just I am there to make my money and pick up my check, and the customer is the least important thing I have to concern myself with. That's not good service.”

“She wasn't willing to help. She was quick to send me to the local office here. She could have at least tried to assist me before she directed me elsewhere.”

“There was a lack of ownership for the call. If your computer is down, don't ask the customer to call back. Take the information down and take some initiative and get back to the customer.”

Each of these comments points to the question, “How do I coach my representatives to have a ‘can-do’ attitude and take ownership of the customer's needs?” There are three solutions that Call Center Coach has implemented effectively. First, using the CARE model, give feedback on what “can do” sounds like as you share “**R**ealistic Expectations.” For example, “I would be glad to look into this for you” or “Rest assured, I will help you get to the

bottom of this.” or “I would be happy to…”

Clarity eliminates confusion

Second, analyze your VOC and monitoring data to determine the most common instances when representatives have not taken ownership, not offered options, or are not knowledgeable about how to “wow” the customers, and then create some quick training on the standard you expect. In one instance, Call Center Coach did this, and determined that representatives thought their management did not want them to make call backs when computers were down, which was correct, but they missed the point to take the information from the customer manually to process later when systems were up, and only call back those customers when needing additional information. In another instance, representatives had no information about what other offices did, specific contact information, or that they were expected to do a warm transfer. Once each piece was provided, they easily adjusted to offering correct information.

When given the opportunity, customers are willing to help you coach your representatives, and when engaged, representatives will be open to change. The Voice of the Customer can be the most powerful element in your coaching program, if you allow it. With the VOC, you will be able to create the most effective coaching plans possible. Turning customer insights into actionable coaching plans is an emerging best practice that pays significant dividends. With game plan coaching strategies like this, the representative, the center, and the company will be champions in the eyes of your customers.

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Anne Nickerson is the Principal and Founder of Call Center Coach, LLC (www.callcentercoach.com), a firm focused on executive coaching, management development, and strategic human resources strategies. Her mission is to facilitate holistic and aligned human resource processes that support bottom line business results. She recently released her new book, *Not by the Seat of My Pants*, which is focused on individuals moving from the front-line into supervision and leadership roles.



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