

THE CALL CENTER ACT III

As price becomes “table stakes,” companies are now looking to their call center outsourcers for service, flexibility, and even revenue generation.



When Hurricane Charley hit the Florida Gulf Coast earlier this year, it knocked out the phones at the Fort Myers office of Brown & Brown, a nationwide insurance intermediary. "We were isolated from the outside world—and being in the insurance business, lots of people wanted to talk with us," says Ed Jasudowich, manager of operations at the office.

Jasudowich contacted Afni, an outsourcing vendor that was providing a backup call service covering off hours. Although it was not part of the two companies' contract, Afni quickly routed Brown & Brown's calls to one of its centers in Kentucky and handled incoming customer calls for the next five days. "Afni was very flexible, and this allowed us to keep providing customers with continuous service in the days after the storm," says Jasudowich.

That flexibility reflects a fundamental change in the nature of call center outsourcing. As call centers have grown into sophisticated customer-care functions, companies have come to expect more than low costs from outsourcers. "Today, price is just the tables stakes," says Mitch Goldstein, director of consulting services for The Outsourcing Institute. "Our research shows that companies are looking for factors such as flexibility, cultural compatibility, and relationship governance."

More of a Partnership

Call center outsourcing "has evolved into more of a partnership—that's where we're seeing the greatest success," says Roger Nunley, managing director of the Customer Care Institute in Atlanta. That approach lets companies tap into the expertise needed to turn the center into a powerful tool for solidifying relationships with customers. For example, leading outsourcers can bring that expertise to bear in areas such as:

Training. When customers call a company, "they want quick answers, and they want to get somebody who knows what they're talking about," says Nunley. That makes the right approach to training key. Afni, for example, not only gives reps thorough training up front, it also tracks how well they are using what they've learned, based on customer feedback. "If the training's not constantly reinforced, people fall back on bad habits," says Mike Garner, Afni's vice president of Call Center Services. "This follow-up allows us to isolate and address training and coaching needs."

Measurement. Today's performance metrics focus on quality, rather than quantity. To that end, some outsourcers work collaboratively with clients to moni-

tor and assess sample calls. Increasingly, Afni enables clients to tap directly into what customers themselves think by letting callers take automated phone surveys after they are finished speaking to a rep. "That allows us to catch immediate customer feedback," says Garner. "It's non-biased, and the high volume of feedback lets you pay the individual reps based on the quality of service they are providing, which helps drive the behaviors you want."

Innovation: Some outsourcers can provide the knowledge and technology needed to improve processes and boost call center performance dramatically. For example, Afni often overlays software applications on top of the client's technologies, making it possible to drive rapid process improvements without the need for changing the client's systems.

Becoming a Revenue Generator

Increasingly, the outsourcer's expertise is being called on to help customer service reps market and sell, allowing companies to turn a traditional cost center into a revenue generator. "We typically train and enable people to listen to the customer, resolve the issue, and then see if we can help them with additional products and services," says Mike Buttitta, director of client communications at Afni. To support such efforts, his company offers a system that automatically gives callers with technical problems the option of signing up for service contracts on third-party products not covered by a company—thereby giving the company a new revenue source without asking technical support people to sell.

Overall, says Buttitta, leading outsourcers today understand a fundamental rule: "You have to look beyond the basic tasks and try to understand the client's business to come up with a real solution—and be ready to adjust when their needs change."

That's a formula that Brown & Brown has come to appreciate. "The flexibility and responsiveness have been important for us," says Jasudowich. "This has proven to be a business relationship that has paid big dividends."

This article has been excerpted from a white paper published by The Outsourcing Institute in association with Afni, Inc. For a copy of the full white paper, which looks at a range of critical innovations that are transforming call center outsourcing, call The Outsourcing Institute at 1-516-681-0066 x109 or write mwettengel@outsourcing.com.

For more information about outsourcing call centers, visit Afni at www.afnioutsourcing.com.

UPSOURCING® Nine Core Values



What are the keys to satisfying a client's quality and expertise needs while meeting bottom line demands? Afni believes there are nine core values at the heart of any successful sourcing solution:

- Uncompromised Integrity
- Unexpected Quality
- Measurable Value
- Lasting Relationships
- Ease of Doing Business
- Exceptional Responsiveness
- Proactive Creativity
- Extreme Flexibility
- Specialized Expertise

