



Why call centers continue to frustrate customers



Introduction

Call centers are the mainstays of customer service, handling thousands of customer interactions on a daily basis. It is no surprise that companies want to ensure their call centers are working as efficiently as possible whilst meeting expected quality standards. This paper discusses the measurement of call center performance, and why call center interactions continue to be a source of frustration for customers.

Measuring call center performance

Most call center metrics fall into one of two categories – efficiency or quality. Efficiency metrics are typically both objective and quantitative in nature, and allow companies to maximise the accessibility of call centers for customers. Examples of efficiency metrics are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1

Example call center efficiency metrics¹

Metric	Description	Rationale for metric
First Call Resolution	Number of calls resolved first time	Resolving a call first time decreases future load on the call center
Service Level	% of contacts resolved in given period, e.g. 100% of contacts resolved within 48 hours	Allows accessibility of call center to customers to be assessed
Response Time	% of contacts resolved in given period, e.g. 100% of contacts resolved within 48 hours	Measures how quickly customers are getting resolution to a problem
Abandon Rate	No. of calls abandoned before being answered	If abandon rate is high, then no matter how good service is, call center is ineffective
Adherence to Schedule	Actual agent operational time vs Assumed agent available time	Call center staffing based on agent availability assumption. If operational falls below assumed, then service levels will fall
Forecasting Accuracy	Inbound calls forecast vs inbound calls received	Call center staffing requires accurate forecasts if desired service level to be achieved
Self-Service Efficacy	Inbound calls forecast vs inbound calls received	Used to identify and improve where gaps in self-service functionality occur
Average Handling Time	Average length of time taken to handle a call	Although variance in call time will exist, average times allow operational time of agents to be forecast

1. Adapted from ICMI (2011) Seven metrics to watch for call center success. (<http://www.icmi.com/Resources/Metrics/2011/02/Seven-Metrics-to-Watch-for-Call-Center-Success>)

The limitation of efficiency metrics is that they do not capture quality – as noted in a previous ContactEngine study, it is entirely possible for a call center to be operating efficiently, but not effectively, due to issues with the quality of service provided to the customer.² Example quality metrics are outlined in Table 2.

Table 2
Example call center quality metrics³

Metric	Description	Rationale for metric
Adherence to Standards	Adherence of agent to standards, such as use of correct scripts, grammar, professionalism, accuracy of advice, etc.	Reduces risk by ensuring a standardised experience for customers
Customer Satisfaction	How satisfied customer was with interaction outcome, as well as particular aspects of it e.g. professionalism of agent, speed of response	Can help to identify the drivers and inhibitors of customer satisfaction
Net Promoter Score	Whether individual is likely to provide positive recommendation of company to others	Net Promoter Score considered a proxy for customer loyalty

The combination of efficiency and quality metrics should theoretically ensure maximum call center efficacy. However, a recent Mattersight study found that 75% of customers leave call center interactions frustrated, even if their problem was resolved.⁴ This would imply the existence of a significant deficiency in call center performance that current metrics are unable to identify.

The same Mattersight study provides insight as to the possible source of that deficiency, finding that the biggest frustration for customers after waiting time is customer service agents not understanding their needs, a problem exacerbated by the fact that 66% of customers are frustrated before even talking to customer services.^{5,6} Whilst waiting time is clearly not the source of deficiency – it is captured in existing performance metrics and is the result of a conscious trade-off between operational expense and waiting time reduction - the fact that customers feel their needs are not being met is.⁷

2. See ContactEngine (2017) Curating Customer Loyalty. (insert link)

3. Adapted from ICMI (2011) Seven metrics to watch for call center success.

(<http://www.icmi.com/Resources/Metrics/2011/02/Seven-Metrics-to-Watch-for-Call-Center-Success>)

4. Mattersight (2015) Please hold for a reality check: the real reason consumers are fed up with call centers.

(<http://www.mattersight.com/resource/please-hold-for-a-reality-check-real-reasons-consumers-are-fed-up-with-call-centers/>)

5. Ibid.

6. Sources of frustration include the complexity in navigating options to find the right department/person to speak to.

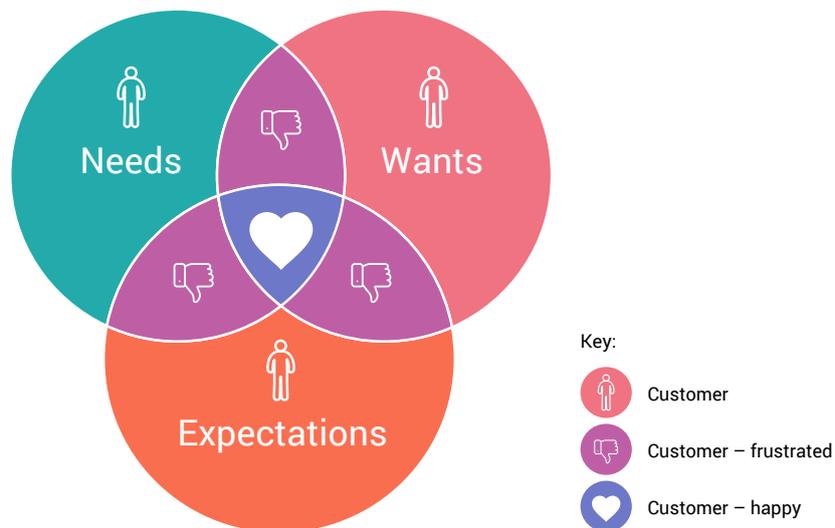
7. The more call center agents available, the shorter the waiting time will be, but more agents result in higher operational expenses.

The deficiency in call centers

By definition, customers need something when they call customer services, be it resolution to a problem, technical support, change of details, etc. If that need is successfully met, then it would appear paradoxical that the customer could leave the experience feeling like their needs have not been met.

This paradox can in part be explained when the difference between a customer's needs, wants and expectations are considered. For example, a customer may need a fault resolved, want to feel like a valued customer and expect a call center agent to empathise with the frustration of the fault occurring. If the call center agent resolves the fault, but fails to empathise with the customer, make them feel valued, or both, then the resulting dissonance will likely result in frustration for the customer. To avoid customers leaving frustrated, the role of customer services is to ensure that each of a customer's wants, needs and expectations are met, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1
Needs, wants, expectations



Meeting wants and expectations

A significant limitation of existing call center metrics, be they efficiency or quality metrics, is that they are focused primarily on ensuring the direct customer need is met, and do not effectively capture the meeting of customer wants or expectations - the closest metrics are NPS and customer satisfaction, but these are at best a proxy for the meeting of wants and expectations.

The lack of metrics to capture wants and expectations is not surprising. Unlike the homogeneity of customer needs, the heterogeneity that naturally exists in customer wants and expectations makes it impractical to design processes and procedures around them, or to develop standardised metrics to capture performance relative to them. Companies must therefore rely on call center agents to decipher and then meet each individual customer's wants and expectations, which requires agents to be afforded the additional time and skills to do so.

Building time

A company could create more time for call center agents to speak to customers simply by increasing the number of call center agents available, but this is likely an unappealing prospect given the long-term cost implications. An alternative way is to invest in technology, such as introducing automated self-service for customers to handle the more standard aspects of customer service and reduce call volumes.⁸

Although technological solutions are often seen as a way to reduce operational expense over the long-term through headcount reduction, this is arguably myopic given the findings discussed in this paper – the remaining agents would not be afforded any more time than before the technology was implemented, as shown in Option 1 of Table 3. A better course of action is arguably to balance headcount reduction with an increase in the time remaining agents have to handle a call, such that they have time to not only fulfil the immediate need of a customer, but do so in a way that meets their wants and expectations, as per Option 2 of Table 3.

Table 3
Using technology to build time⁹

						
Before Technology	7 hours / 420 minutes	6,000	7 minutes	0 minutes	100	KEY:  Working Time Per Day  Calls Per Day  Time Needed to Resolve Immediate Issues  Additional Time Per Call  Number of Agents Required
Option 1	7 hours / 420 minutes	4,000	7 minutes	0 minutes	67	
Option 2	7 hours / 420 minutes	4,000	7 minutes	2 minutes	86	

Building skills

There are two non-mutually exclusive approaches a company could take to building skills to decipher and meet customer wants and expectations. The first is to update recruitment processes to include a focus on hiring people with the required communication and people skills. The second is to upskill existing staff through training, a convenient upside to which is that it will build the workplace self-worth of agents, which research has been shown to increase overall performance.¹⁰ Investing in training could therefore not only improve the customer experience, but also the performance of those agents in delivering that experience.

8. Providing that such technologies are simple, reliable, and intuitive for customers.
 9. Numbers presented in table are for illustrative purposes only. Balancing of resource need not be immediate, i.e. headcount could be reduced over time to optimise balance of operational headcount expense with observed benefit of additional time to serve customers.
 10. See www.burford-partners.com/wsw



Conclusion

Call centers play a vital role in customer service, which in turn plays a vital role in the overall customer experience. Improving call center performance can therefore provide significant benefit for companies, but this does not simply mean improving existing efficiency and quality metrics – companies must also look to improve the meeting of customer wants and expectations. Apart from building time and skills, there are several approaches companies could take to doing so:

- **Update employee performance measures that are explicitly linked to efficiency metrics to include measures of how well they have met customer wants and expectations.¹¹**
- **Afford agents more flexibility in how they speak with customers, whilst maintaining adherence to minimum standards.**
- **Empower agents to improve – encourage them to identify aspects of the customer's call center experience that can be improved, and involve them in designing the improvement.**

Fundamentally, meeting a customer's wants, needs and expectations requires having a call center that is accessible to customers, makes it quick and easy for them to speak to the right person, and for that person to have sufficient time and skills to do so.

11. Would require quality-assurance to assess performance relative to measure.



Visit [contactengine.com](https://www.contactengine.com)
Follow [@contactengine](https://twitter.com/contactengine)
Email info@contactengine.com
Contact +44 20 33 940 840

About

The report is published by ContactEngine Limited

Registered Office: The Clergy House, Mark Square, London EC2A 4ER

ContactEngine is the next generation Customer Engagement Hub technology that enables brands to proactively engage customers in AI-driven conversations to fulfil business objectives. ContactEngine automates outbound customer engagement across all channels and generates unique insights into the changing patterns of communication by applying demographic and intent analysis, linguistics and ground-breaking artificial intelligence principles to millions of raw data. ContactEngine transforms the way global brands engage with their customers - saving brands millions and making their customers happier.

For more information, visit www.contactengine.com