



The Silent Treatment

Bad press about presenting customers 'silent calls' has resulted in a call for best practice from many sources including software vendor Amcat.



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It's not hard to see why contact centres have been the focus of so much media attention over the last twelve months. Whether it's the Offshore debate or the issue of silent calls, both have grabbed their fair share of publicity and often for the wrong reasons. The question that contact centres need to ask is whether the criticism is justified and how can they help reverse some of the negative images that have crept into the public eye.

The adoption of Best Practice offers a more positive way forward for the industry and an opportunity to set the record straight. So in a climate where new directives are being introduced on a monthly basis, what constitutes Best Practice and how can contact centres both in-house and outsourced, assess the parts of their operation that need attention.

Although Best Practice applies to all elements of call management both inbound and outbound, the emphasis from a public perception perspective is focused on outbound contact. Like in the US which introduced its own 'Do Not Call' register last year, here in the UK we have the equivalent TPS (Telephone Preference Service) that enables unhappy consumers to 'opt-out' of receiving telesales calls. The concern for call centres is that the list is growing, which if it continues, can impact organisations that rely on outbound calling for their livelihood.

According to the DMA (Direct Marketing Association), as much as 37% of consumers that subscribe to TPS do so because of what are known as silent calls. Many contact centres use predictive dialing technology to maximise the productivity of their agents. This technology has proved to be highly successful in creating tremendous productivity gains for contact centres and businesses throughout the UK. However, if the product is not operated correctly or simply misused, it can result in an unacceptable quantity of dropped or silent calls, whereby the person picking up the phone is left with a dead tone, because there was not an agent

available to service the call. To reduce the incidence of dropped calls, the DMA has drawn up a number of guidelines for outbound calling (see diagram*), and it is in the interests of the call centre to adopt these guidelines, whether or not they are a member of the DMA.

Contact centres themselves need to embrace self-regulation for the sake of their future prosperity. Initiatives such as UK Data IT's Silent CallGard could help to reduce the numbers signing up to TPS. Rather than excluding themselves from *all* calls, those aggrieved by silent calls can just apply to be listed on CallGard instead. By adopting the CallGard product, call centres can screen out calls to numbers that have asked not to receive silent calls, in the same way as it works for TPS cleansing. This move helps to reduce further irritation to silent call victims and prevents them from taking the more drastic action of joining an already mushrooming TPS list. Call centres would be wise to ask their technology vendors if they support both TPS compliance and/or CallGard, because without this, they are in danger of malpractice, which is both bad news for the industry as well as for the reputation of the contact centre itself.

Not only does best practice preserve the future of the call centre industry, but it is also prompting call centres to shift the emphasis to quality rather than quantity of service. For example, with better planning and implementation of solid marketing practices that employ customer relationship management principles, companies are less likely to alienate the customer by making irrelevant calls about products or services that they do not want. By using integrated call management systems that draw on every piece of customer information from across the enterprise, the call centre can optimise results based on well-researched quality-driven campaigns that will be welcomed rather than rejected by consumers.