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First Call Resolution
Its Impact and Measurement

What Every Manager Should Know About
Hiring Agents

One-and-Done Customer Service E-mail:
Ending the E-mail Loops

By Marilynne Rudick and Leslie O'Flahavan

When communications consultant Gabe Goldberg found he could pay three cents a minute for long distance with a Costco calling card, he e-mailed MCI, his long distance carrier: "When I can pay three cents a minute, why should I pay you nine cents for weekday calls and five cents on weekends?" An endless round of e-mails ensued. MCI's responses, said Goldberg, "were obviously boiler plate and utterly unresponsive."

Eventually, MCI offered Goldberg a better rate—seven cents a minute. Goldberg e-mailed back, pointing out that this rate was actually higher than the five cents on weekends MCI was currently charging him. "Your rates aren't competitive. Tell me why I should remain an MCI customer." MCI's response: "Because we have such great customer service." Goldberg switched to Verizon.

Goldberg said it wasn't the higher rates that caused him to leave MCI, but the frustration of endless e-mails that made him feel like he wasn't being heard. Goldberg said his e-mail to MCI required only one human response: "We're sorry, but we can't give you those rates. It's a great deal and we can't compete." A quick, frank response would have kept him with MCI.

Endless customer service e-mail loops are frustrating for customers and costly for companies. Dissatisfied customers take their business elsewhere. With the average cost of an e-mail response at $10, spiraling to $20 for complex technical queries, first contact resolution is a must. But how do you achieve it? These best practices, culled from the College Board, Carfax, RightNow Technologies and eGain, will show you how.

Reduce E-Mail Volume with Self-Service

One critical strategy for avoiding e-mail loops is simply reducing the number of e-mails your company has to answer by making self-service the cornerstone of online customer service. That means making sure "a majority of visitors to a website can find their answer and don't have to e-mail," says Greg Gianforte, CEO of RightNow Technologies, a leader in customer service solutions and support.

Proactive self-service includes well-written FAQs, a robust and accurate knowledge base, and giving customers access to their accounts so that they can manage their interactions—check order status, bills and balances. "No one goes to a website hoping to send the company an e-mail," explains Gianforte. "It's the support method of last resort."

Brenda Davenport, Manager of PROFILE and IDOC Vendor Relations for the College Board, found self-service was key to lowering customer service costs. "The more we put online, the lower our costs," she explains. "We have FAQs and Help all over" the PROFILE web pages to enable students to file financial aid applications online, as well as on the IDOC pages to enable colleges to access the financial reports of applicants. "Applicants can go online and see if we've received their forms. That's really a cost-savings," says Davenport, explaining that a typical e-mail response costs $8-$9.

David Silversmith, CTO of Carfax, a company that sells history reports for used cars, said that implementing self-service was a hard sell. "Agents and managers were reluctant to believe that self-service help would be effective," he says.

But now Carfax agents and managers are true believers. Carfax implemented self-service as part of RightNow's customer support systems. "We saw a 50 percent reduction in e-mails overnight," Silversmith explains. But a key benefit of self-service, says Silversmith, is "freeing reps from answering basic questions. That gives the staff time to focus on the really difficult questions."

Use "Contact Us" Forms for Customer Inquiries

"Some customers go immediately to e-mail," says Gianforte. "They don't want to self-serve." Other customers e-mail when they can't find their answer on the website. For these customers, the key to first contact resolution is the "Contact Us" form that elicits relevant information. "Forms are the number one best practice for one-and-done e-mail," says Anand Subramanian, vice president of marketing for eGain, a leading provider of customer service and contact center software and services.

Requiring customers to use e-mail forms rather than allowing them to send free-form e-mail enables you to collect the information you need: model number, date of service, warranty information and accurate contact information. "Structured e-mail response forms allow you to parse, categorize, and route e-mails," explains Subramanian.

Silversmith says Carfax has made it a priority to "enforce the form"—make sure that customers use the web form to submit information via e-mail. Before Carfax developed a response form, e-mail loops often resulted because the customer service agents needed "one more piece of information" before they could resolve the problem. Carfax's product, a report on a used car, sells for $20. "If we send more than two e-mails," explains Silversmith, "it's costing us more than we're making."

Route E-mails to the Right Person

Besides helping you collect necessary information, forms enable you to "put the e-mail on the desktop of the right person"—a subject matter expert, a more experienced agent, or one with good writing skills, says Gianforte. "Free-form e-mails are very hard to route. Customers should be able to categorize their inquiry. Make your categories meaningful and don't offer too many. If people are offered too many options, they click anything."

Using forms also enables you to route the e-mail to the agent who has had previous contact with the customer. If each time he sends an e-mail it goes to a different person, the customer has to get the agent up to speed on the problem. Gianforte recommends that companies establish routing rules for e-mail from their best customers. "Inquiries from customer A always go to Sally. This gives the customer a higher level of service and cuts the company's cost, because not so much interaction is required. Routing rules dramatically increase one-and-done rates," he says.

Equip Your Agents with Good Writing Skills

Forms, systems and routing rules can't help if the customer service agent doesn't have the writing skills needed to answer customers' questions quickly and accurately. "We found out that good phone skills don't translate to good e-mail writing," says Davenport.

Writing e-mail requires special skills. In a phone call, an agent can ask follow-up questions to get more information or determine how to resolve the problem. With e-mail, the customers' questions might be unclear, or they may ask the wrong question. The agent has to read between the lines to know what the customer is asking and what information to provide to solve the customer's problem. That means knowing that if a student asks whether he can file an application online, he also needs to know how to do it and the deadline for doing it, explains Davenport.

Agents have to "answer not just the question, but the hidden question," says Silversmith. That requires experience and training. To get their agents attuned to customer needs, Carfax has agents act as customers, and "send in their questions and see how the engagement works." They learn that "when a customer asks X, they also need Y."

But finding the question is only one part of the equation for writing one-and-done e-mail. Answering the question quickly and accurately is the other part. Davenport brought in an outside writing consultant "that knew more about e-mail than we did," to teach agents to write concise and accurate e-mail responses. Agents were taught how to structure an e-mail response, how to write for online readers, and how to write mechanically correct e-mail. "We're College Board and writing skills are important. A missed comma or incorrect word reflects badly on College Board."

Davenport found that well-written e-mail responses had to "empower" customers. The agent had to provide enough information so customers could complete the application process themselves, but not offer too much handholding, which encouraged customers to become dependent on agents for assistance—and send another e-mail.

Have an Accurate and Well-Written Knowledge Base

The foundation of all "best practices" for one-and-done e-mail—whether using systems or humans to handle e-mail responses—is a well-written and accurate knowledge base. The knowledge base should power both self-service and agent responses. "A shared knowledge base means consistent customer service across agents, geography and channels—e-mail, phone or chat," says Subramanian.

Because the knowledge base will be used throughout the organization and by the customer, it's important that input be well-written. Davenport makes sure the knowledge base that fuels the PROFILE and IDOC programs consist of short, concise chunks. Procedures are broken down into easy-to-follow steps.

Gianforte emphasizes that the knowledge base should be kept up-to-date. "When a customer submits a question, it goes to a human who answers the question and then the answer gets added to the knowledge base."

One-and-Done: The Impossible Dream?

Implementing self-service, soliciting inquiries with forms, and good writing has helped College Board's PROFILE and IDOC's programs achieve one-and-done. "Only one in 200 e-mails requires a second response, and a third is very rare," says Davenport.

You might never achieve this metric, but with more customers going online for information it's a worthwhile goal that will save your contact center big dollars and help you retain your customers. CP

Techniques for Writing One-and-Done E-Mail

1. Restate the customer's question in the opening paragraph of the e-mail. This technique helps the CSR focus on the customer's question and gather all necessary information. Seeing his question restated reassures the customer that he's getting the information he needs.

2. Use headings to organize the e-mail. Many customers send complex e-mail inquiries that include several questions, or require several actions for resolution. Headings allow the CSR to highlight the answer to each question or the action the customer must take. Headings make scanning easier so customers can find the answers they need.

3. Make the e-mail brief, but link to detailed information online. Write e-mail that is as brief as possible. Provide links to detailed information online, such as FAQs and knowledge base articles. This lets the CSR write a concise answer while providing access to the details that the customer may need.

4. Use consistent formatting to indicate procedures or instructions. Make it easy for customers to follow instructions or procedures by breaking them down into short, easy-to-do steps. Use numbers to indicate ordered steps in procedure; use bullets to highlight non-sequential points.

5. Write for easy reading and comprehension. Write and format e-mails so that customers—reading online—can easily understand them. That means writing short sentences and paragraphs, and using bullets instead of dense paragraphs.