

Blending Contact Centres INBOUND / OUTBOUND

Blending seemed like a good idea on paper. Since an unpredictable fraction of staff time in every inbound center is spent waiting for the phone to ring, why not have your agents fill up their dead time with outbound calls, or get them to answer the e-mail? After all, why should the company subsidize their solitaire games?

The idea makes sense. Unfortunately, some experts say that in practice it's usually not so simple to execute. For one thing, blending inbound with outbound can sometimes cut your center's revenue as well as its costs. "It works great in theory, and you can run the numbers and prove it, but what people are finding — and why you don't really see a lot of true inbound — outbound blending — **is that the skill set of a person doing an inbound call is often very different than that of a person doing an outbound call,**" says Nathan Stearns, director of training and consulting services for IEX, a Richardson, TX-based workforce management software provider.

"I'm not so sure it always works in management of personnel," agrees Basil Bennett, president and CEO of WillowCSN, a call center outsource agency headquartered in Miramar, FL. "Not everybody is set up psychologically, emotionally, and also from a competency point of view to do both inbound and outbound."

Even modest experiments in inbound — outbound blending have run into trouble. In one recent study of 20 different companies, Service Quality Measurement Group Inc., a Vernon, BC-based consultancy that benchmarks customer and employee satisfaction at customer contact centers, found that after companies tried introducing cross-selling pitches to their inbound calls, customer satisfaction dropped from an average of **67% to 59%**.

At the same time, these cross-selling experimenters saw their employee satisfaction drop even more after their campaign was introduced — **from 37% job satisfaction down to 27%**, according to Sarah Kennedy, an SQM partner.

Sometimes service-oriented reps find themselves depressed at being suddenly evaluated for their sales skills, Kennedy says. The agent begins thinking, "**I was hired for service, valued for my service skills, now if I don't meet target, I'm worthless**"

At the same time, blending can lead hard-charging, sales-oriented reps to hurt the cause as well. For instance, according to Kennedy, sales-oriented agents have been known to hang up on a caller who's looking for service but doesn't sound like a revenue opportunity.

However, there are still some true believers in the virtues of blending. Gary B. Cohen of ACI Telecentrics in Minneapolis, a call center outsourcing firm, says that he believes blending inbound and outbound can save companies a great deal of money.

So why aren't more companies doing it? "I think it's a structural issue more than anything," Cohen says. His reasoning: Inbound calls are generally directed by operations departments, while outbound calls are supervised by marketing. "It's a really difficult thing for their department heads to say they're going to work together on this," he says.

Different skills sets:

Inbound	Outbound
Service orientated	Target / goal orientated (usually money)
Caring with high empathy levels	Interested in sales / outcomes
Willingness to assist and help	Highly self driven
More reactive to calls	Less micro management required
Takes rejection personally	Thicker skinned; able to take rejection
More collaborative approach	More self directed approach
More willing to go the extra mile	Want to get onto the next call
Will be frustrated if seen as not caring	Will be frustrated if held back
Thinks: How can I help?	Thinks: What can I sell?

SUMMARY

There is a temptation for centres to use the staff available to make outbound calls and it can be done successfully if the following points are observed:

- Understand clearly what the new skills will be – Sales, debt collection, research, follow up and checking? Each will have its own training requirements and processes.

- Full explanation to the staff as to the changes and why
- Obtain staff buy in to the process and sell it to them
- Remove the fears that the word 'sales' creates for service orientated staff
- If attempting to move customer service staff to a sales role then the pitch needs to be on how the sales service make life better for the customer as opposed to 'hard sales' not selling them something they don't need
- Ensure full soft skills training is given to enable staff to have the skill sets required for the new role
- Ensure full systems and processes are in place before launching
- Train staff on new systems and processes
- Ensure ongoing coaching and support
- Celebrate successes
- Continually monitor staff input / buy in to the new process

There are some roles where both inbound and outbound will work and these are usually where the role / task is the same, for example debt collection, catalogue sales etc.

Where it falls down is if you want an inbound agent to make cold calls but if you want them to make customer relationship calls to build rapport then it will be easier for them as the role is still one of 'assisting or helping' the customer.