

The authority
on managing
the customer
contact center

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Customer Service

NEWSLETTER

Staff Management

Create a culture in which CSRs want to stay

Customer service managers in many organizations are constantly battling rep turnover and the attendant costs of that turnover. Part of the reason for that turnover is the that the culture of many customer service departments and call centers is fast-paced, high-pressure, and performance-oriented, with little time or thought given to making reps feel valued.

But according to Bob Furniss, president of consulting firm Touchpoint Associates Inc., if a company wants to build long-lasting relationships with customers, it has to start by building long-lasting and mutually respectful relationships with its reps. Here are six strategies he suggests for making your service culture one that will encourage reps to stick with you for the long term:

- *Cast a vision and communicate it.*

What is your mission as a customer service or contact center? Have you tied your mission to your objectives? Do your objectives focus on the customer or on internal expectations or metrics? Walk through your department tomorrow

and ask your agents to tell you two of the center's most important responsibilities, and hope that one of them has something to do with taking care of the customer.

- *Understand what makes your reps happy.*

As a first step, create an employee survey. Let reps know that you're looking for honest feedback on basic issues like morale, benefits, and recognition. Include questions about management and communication processes. Then use the data to develop ways of improving those things that can be changed. Follow-up with employees on a specific schedule (quarterly, every six months, annually) and let them see the effect their feedback can have on the workplace environment.

- *Communicate on a personal level.*

"We often neglect to take the time to make reps — especially new reps — feel like members of the 'family' because we're too busy

dealing with more pressing issues in the hectic environment of a customer service department or call center," says Furniss. "This is a mistake. Make it a priority to welcome new reps into the center and introduce them to others." In addition, he says, when communicating to reps "begin on a personal note, then wherever the discussion leads, make sure you end on a personal note. Show you've been listening to the whole conversation by connecting back to something said earlier outside of office-related talk."

- *Coach for a change in behavior.*

When coaching, says Furniss: "Coach for the purpose of improving behavior, not just to get one more monitoring session on the books for reporting purposes. The next time you have

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a coaching opportunity, ask the agent for his or her feedback first, which may have an impact on what you were planning to say. And as a last step, make sure the agent understands your expectations and has an action plan to make any necessary performance adjustments according to an agreed-upon timeline."

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- *Create a model for team meetings.*

Team meetings should be a time when reps feel free to communicate their problems and get their issues resolved. One way to do this is to create a meeting model for supervisors and team leaders to use that includes recognition and builds in opportunities for feedback and open communications. Your model agenda, for example might be: A) Discuss changes in policy and new procedures; B) Recognize individual and group achievement (quality scores, commendation letters, improvements in specific areas, etc.); C) Discuss metrics and how they relate to the company, to the group, and to the reps; D) Discuss what is planned for the next month in terms of special programs, special schedules, etc., and how they relate to the reps; E) Ask for reps' feedback on the meeting items discussed and anything else they want to have addressed. (After the meeting, find out the answers to their questions and be sure to follow up with them individually or at the next meeting.)

- *Lead with your heart.*

Recent research suggests that 65 percent of the people who leave a job don't leave the company, but leave their manager. On the other hand, employees will often stick with a difficult or high-pressure job if they have a strong relationship with their manager or supervisor. To build relationships with your team, Furniss suggests you get to know them. Find out about their careers and their families. Ask them about

significant personal and professional achievements. Learn about their hobbies and outside interests.

"You'll be surprised at what you don't know about your reps," Furniss says, "and what you learn will be a step toward building the long-lasting relationships that aid in rep retention."

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Communicating to strengthen relationships

Communicating changes in policies and procedures, and other demands on reps, is an important part of the manager's job. Here are some basic communication recommendations from Bob Furniss of Touchpoint Associates that will help you communicate change in a way that doesn't undermine your relationships with reps.

Communicate the "why" with the "what." According to Furniss, "If reps understand why there is a change or why a new policy is implemented, they will be empowered to make good decisions and better resolve customer issues."

Acknowledge reps' concerns about changes. "Actively listen and show reps that you really hear what they are saying, and that their input has validity. Then summarize the change you're proposing and tie it into the current needs of the business."

Verify understanding. "Ensure that reps understand the next steps and how to implement what you have discussed and agreed upon. This is often the missing part of the equation," Furniss says.