

## **How Career Development Protects Your Greatest Asset** *A Study in Building a Top Performing Call Center*

*By Brian Geery and Sally Sweeney*

What's the greatest asset in your call center? Before you start tallying the value of your phone equipment or sizing up the effectiveness of your database, stop and listen. If you can hear the sound of call center representatives making calls, your answer should be simple. It's your tele-sales/telemarketing team.

### **An Asset Worth Protecting**

Think about it. Nothing happens at your company, until somebody picks up the phone and calls a customer or prospect. The efforts of your call center employees grow your customer base, and that's what generates revenue. Without revenue, nothing else can happen. Materials cannot be bought, employees cannot get paid, operating expenses cannot be met, until customers are found and sales are made.

Other positions within your company exist because of the customer base your call center generates. The accounting staff bills customers. Customer service and support staff solves customer problems. Development staff designs products and services for customers. And, so on. In essence, your call center staff makes things happen.

With all this in mind, doesn't it make sense to do everything possible to ensure you attract, hire and retain quality call center representatives? Unfortunately, there are still tele-sales and telemarketing operations that subscribe to the *churn and burn* theory of call center management. These companies view their call center staff as dispensable and ignore high turnover while focusing on keeping payroll expenses low. However, this management style loses more money than it saves because it creates a high stress and low morale environment. Call center staff who don't feel appreciated are hardly motivated to perform well. The result is ineffective tele-sales and telemarketing. An ineffective call center equates to low sales revenue and low profit margins, both have clear and negative implications for every other department in your company.

As a sales consultant, I observe and survey tele-sales and telemarketing teams at a wide range of companies. Each experience gives me the unique opportunity to shine flashlights into the corners of each call center to identify issues that enable top performance and those that have a negative impact on performance. A common element I find in top performing call centers is the great value placed on their call center staff. These companies treat their tele-sales and telemarketing teams as an asset by providing:

- Accessible Career Paths
- Ongoing Skill Development
- Employee Recognition Programs.

### **Accessible Career Paths:**

Call centers that offer career paths increase their chances of attracting and retaining top performers. Job definitions should be designed to allow representatives to grow with the company. For example, one call center manager divides his customer service representative (CSR) positions into three levels: Associate CSR, CSR, and Senior CSR. Each level of the position provides increased levels of responsibility and earning potential.

When drafting job definitions, management should articulate the following:

- The responsibilities each job entails
- The result anticipated from each responsibility.
- The time frame for completion of each responsibility.

The following example is for an entry level position at a call center.

*Position:* Telesales Assistant, part-time

*Main Responsibility:* Telephone prospecting using an internal database to qualify sales leads and update the database for five account executives.

*Results Anticipated:* Connecting with a minimum of 40 prospects per day and pass over 10 “qualified” leads per month. “Qualified” means you have had at least one conversation with an influencer or primary decision maker, they have agreed they have a need for our product, and would like to be contacted by a sales person.

*Time Frame for Completion:* Three to four hours uninterrupted phone time should be scheduled everyday to perform prospecting tasks.

It’s important to clearly define expectations by giving representatives a clear target. A carefully detailed job definition lets call center representatives know what tasks they must master to succeed in the position and what they must accomplish to be eligible to advance in their career.

Job definitions also assist call center management in the task of evaluating performance. The definitions of each responsibility, result, and timeframe provides a pre-agreed upon standard of performance.

### **Skill Development**

I remember the introductory training session given to me at my first tele-sales job. In fact, I can repeat to you verbatim. It went like this, “Here is your desk. The phone is there, and your call list is there. If you need anything I’ll be in my office. Good Luck.”

Needless to say, that company experienced extremely high turnover. The management at that company just assumed that all you needed to succeed at tele-sales was a pulse and a good voice.

Professionals in our business know that assumption is a mistake. Tele-sales and telemarketing require a lot of skill. In fact, there are over 40 skills necessary to perform the act of selling. Fortunately, many top performing call centers recognize this by providing ongoing skill development for their staff.

The key word here is *on-going*. To enable top performance, skills need to be honed regularly. It's important that skill development be viewed as a process, not as an event. Training is not an end to itself. The best tele-sales and telemarketing representatives know their skills need to be continually refined.

The benefits of ongoing skill development sessions are two fold; not only will they enable representatives to perform their jobs better, but they also send the message that the company wants the call center staff to excel. This message generates loyalty to the company.

Essentially, skill development is asking your team to change or modify their current behavior, so it's important that new skills be reinforced. The best way to ensure the behavior change occurs is to assign specific activities to your call center staff after training. Three to four weeks later, hold an open session to discuss what worked and what didn't. This gives the entire staff a chance to learn from the experiences of others in the group and a chance to brainstorm solutions.

Sales contests are also an effective way to reinforce new skills within your call center. A little friendly spirit of competition makes learning new skills more enjoyable and work more fun.

It's important that contests be structured in a way that enables everyone to have a chance win. For example, *any* team member that achieves a specific benchmark gets rewarded. The team member who achieves the most gets the largest reward.

### **Employee Recognition Programs**

A sales manager at a high growth software company in Framingham, MA keeps the turnover levels at her call center very low. She achieves this by recognizing and rewarding the success of her team members regularly and often.

Call center members need to be caught doing things right. Being recognized and rewarded for a task well done perpetuates top performance. Recognition programs do not necessarily require monetary rewards. Plaques, trophies, prime parking spots, or memo's that outline how a representative closed a sale all work very well as recognition programs. Whatever you choose a non-monetary reward should have an acknowledged value to the call center staff.

Non-monetary rewards are also very useful. The prizes last longer than money and serve a continual reminder of the staff member's accomplishment. Also, displaying a non-monetary reward (such as, bookends, a travel bag, or a television) in the call center provides a visual incentive to call center staff.

Monetary rewards are just that; money as a reward for performance. This is money given to team members above and beyond their salary and commission.

Both monetary and non-monetary rewards should be used for employee recognition. This recognition should be for sales results as well as achievement of benchmarks in both skill improvement or activity levels.

If you are running a contest, having a scoreboard is an excellent way to provide employee recognition. Prominently displaying the results of each staff member allows the call center, as well as the entire company, to recognize and support the achievements of each team member. It also provides an incentive for call center staff to perform well because no one wants to see their name at the bottom of the list! Most importantly, scoreboards work well because they don't limit performance. Each sale made 'raises the bar' for the next level of excellence.

### **Make the Commitment**

Instituting career development in your call center is a commitment. It takes time, resources, and money. Career paths need to be continually refined. Skill development and employee recognition programs require ongoing revision to be effective. If the thought spending the time and money on career development center seems unnecessary, think of the ways your company protects its other assets. Who would think twice about purchasing a maintenance agreement for a copier, upgrading outdated computer equipment, or insuring a building against fire? Then, why not protect the asset in your company that generates revenue? Investing in career development at your call center protects your company against high turnover and low productivity and ensures long term growth. It's a worthwhile investment!

## **About the Authors**

### **Sally Sweeney, Managing Partner, Quota, Inc.**

A proven top performing sales professional, Sally knows what it takes to build a solid team of top performing technology sales professionals. As a sales professional, before founding Quota, Inc., Sally earned numerous top performer awards, consecutive President's club trips and regularly brought in sales above quota.

During her more than ten years in sales and sales management positions, Sally developed a successful track record in driving the sales of intangible services and enterprise wide software.

In the recruiting field, contract, contingency and executive search work all fall under Sally's repertoire. She has helped fill positions that included administrators, technologists, service representatives and executives. Through this experience, Sally found her passion – building technology sales teams. Sally has followed her passion and placed innumerable quota achieving sales professionals.

Sally is an avid student of sales strategies. In addition to being trained in the most popular sales methodologies, Sally stays current on new literature and trends in the profession of selling.

An enthusiast for matching people to companies, Sally is the coauthor of *Buy Me, I'm Worth It*, a book that enables job seekers to apply sales and marketing principles to their job search.

As the leader of the recruiting team at Quota, Inc., Sally ensures clients and candidates receive unparalleled service. Her team goal is to enable clients to expeditiously hire technology sales professionals who will achieve or exceed their quota, quarter after quarter *and* help create a dynamic and cohesive corporate culture.

### **Brian Geery, Senior Partner, Quota, Inc.**

Brian knows what it takes to build world-class sales organizations. He began consulting with technology companies in 1991 and has since worked with some of the most explosive growth technology companies to structure and develop their sales organizations.

Brian consulted with Cambridge Technology Partners when their annual revenues were \$20 million with 125 employees – when revenues topped \$580 million and with 3,500+ employees, CTP was acquired by Novell in 2001. He has consulted on sales strategy with CEOs or Sales Executives at Intel, HP Invent, Nortel Networks, Thomson Investment Software and over 100 other companies.

Before joining Quota, Inc., Brian was hitting his numbers for 15 years as a salesperson, sales manager and branch manager at three 'underdog' technology companies – now they are top dogs.

Brian's strategies for sales success have appeared in numerous publications, including the Wall Street Journal and regular appearances in Sales and Marketing Management Magazine. Brian has appeared on radio and television and has been a featured speaker at business conferences throughout the country including Inc. World, The International Quality and Productivity Conference and MIT.

Brian is former founder and president of the Sales and Marketing Toastmasters Association and former vice president of the Sales and Marketing Executives Association.