

Smaller Companies Get Big Solutions Too

Call Center – these words put together can incite either a positive or negative response. Simply put by Wiki— *“ A call centre or call center (see spelling differences) is a centralized office used for the purpose of receiving and transmitting a large volume of requests by telephone.*

A call centre is operated by a company to administer incoming product support or information inquiries from consumers. Outgoing calls for telemarketing, clientele, and debt collection are also made. In addition to a call centre, collective handling of letters, faxes, and e-mails at one location is known as a contact centre.

A call centre is often operated through an extensive open workspace, with work stations that include a computer, a telephone set/headset connected to a telecom switch, and one or more supervisor stations. It can be independently operated or networked with additional centres, often linked to a corporate computer network, including mainframes, microcomputers and LANs. Increasingly, the voice and data pathways into the centre are linked through a set of new technologies called computer telephony integration (CTI).

Most major businesses use call centres to interact with their customers. Examples include utility companies, mail order catalogue firms, and customer support for computer hardware and software. Some businesses even service internal functions through call centres. Examples of this include help desks and sales support.”

This Wikipedia definition suggests what many people assume - that call centers are for large companies with extensive groups of people. However, due to changes in technology call centers are not just for large companies. In the smaller telephone systems the technology may also be called ACD or UCD depending upon the manufacturer.

Call center technology can be used by managers of small to medium businesses (SMBs). While SMBs have different needs than the large companies, the same basic technology can be applied on a small scale. Those SMBs can benefit from the technology that has been used for years to control phone calls in large customer service departments. Some vertical markets that have utilized this technology are medical practices, commercial businesses with small customer service departments, as well as small manufacturing or distribution centers. These companies, while vastly different in their function to the community, share common call flow and productivity struggles.

1. Overloading workers trying to keep up with ringing telephones.
2. Customers complaining that calls are not being answered or that they are being transferred to many different individuals before end result can be attained.
3. Guess work in scheduling and evaluation of employee productivity.

Taking each struggle individually we are able to dissect how call centers can be used to aid the SMB marketplace.

1. Overloading workers trying to keep up with ringing telephones – without a call center or a means of answering and holding an incoming call, a manager would be forced to hire another operator to keep up with incoming call traffic. While it

- does assist in the unemployment rate, it also causes a small business expense in another salary, benefits and various other fees. Further, this additional coverage may only be needed at certain times of the day or certain days of the week. If another person was hired they may only receive part time work or the business may not be able to find someone to assist in those specific hours of need. By using additional software and/or programming within the telephone system, the SMB manager is able to assist the operator. The telephone system answers the call after a pre-programmed amount of rings, plays a greeting letting the caller know they have reached the proper destination, then puts the caller on hold until the operator becomes available. Most often operators are used predominately for transferring of calls and not assisting with the provision of information, which ensures callers are not holding for long periods of time.
2. Customers complaining that calls are not being answered or that they are being transferred to many different individuals before end result can be attained – Some SMB call center programs can be used to identify incoming calls based upon caller I.D. or number dialed. This allows calls to be routed to certain individuals and assist in achieving first point of contact through pre-programmed call routes. This is generally a more costly solution than simple call queue programs which put incoming callers on hold. There is also some coordination work to be done in programming to ensure that the incoming phone number information can be captured correctly to assist in the proper routing scheme. This technology is widely used in the customer service and help desk arenas of the Fortune 500 companies. However, some of the same program options are available on a smaller scale to assist the small company clientele.
 3. Guess work in scheduling and evaluation of employee productivity – While a manager may be receiving complaints of long hold times, unanswered calls, or improper balance of employee call flow there is often no tool available to assist in solving the problems. When a call center is installed and reporting tools are available to identify agent productivity, the manager is now equipped to make educated decisions. By using real-time statistics or historical reports a manager can look at each “agent” or worker’s call volume throughout a given day or week, identify busy times for each worker or department, assess problematic hold times or abandoned calls (calls that are lost when a disgruntled customer becomes tired of the process and hangs up). This information often aids the manager in planned coverage of busy times and improvement in customer service processes to decrease holds times where-ever possible.

As technology marches on, innovations that were previously the domain of large, multi-state corporations become readily accessible to small and medium-sized businesses. This progression makes it possible for even a 10-20 person office to effectively utilize call center technology. Many of our local vendors represent manufacturers, whose products can be configured to meet specific needs. You may already have the basics installed and simply need an upgrade. Educate yourself about your options before making a hasty change in your existing infrastructure.