

Savvy Support:

Blazing a New Trail in Call Center Effectiveness

In today's call center, the "savvy support" model tips the scales over tiered support on so many levels—a huge "win-win" for both customers and the support team. Discover the prerequisites to making this model work for you.

By Phil Verghis



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Is there any part of the service experience that is more reviled by savvy customers or by upwardly mobile support staff than the dreaded tiered model of support? When we first built these models, we put friendly but inexperienced support people on the front line to protect expensive resources from having to address simple questions. It made sense back when our customers didn't know much about technol-

ogy and we knew best. Times have changed, but our support model hasn't.

From a customer's point of view, the tiered model is less than ideal. In this model, the customer is forced to start at the bottom of the skill stack, answering basic questions before his issue is deemed difficult enough to escalate to the next tier. There is no acknowledgment of the caller's expertise or the

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context of his query. (All too often, the support tech does not have any understanding of the caller's business.) Every caller has to jump through the same hoops as his problem is escalated to subsequent tiers of expertise until someone determines the context and urgency of his issue.

From the staff's point of view, the tiered model is a necessary rite of passage. Traditionally, rookies spent a certain amount of time dealing with repetitive, low-level questions. They then either defect to another support group at the first opportunity, or if they survive, they moved up to Tier 2, which offers less repetitive work.

Emerging Best Practice in Support: The Savvy Support Model

One of the emerging best practices in support involves the elimination of tiered support for live calls. In this model, called "savvy support," a caller who needs assistance is connected with a highly skilled generalist, someone who understands both the business and technical context of the call. The generalists receive the same pay as the experts on the next escalation level because their skills are equally valued by customers. These professionals are empowered and trusted to have the right resources to resolve a particular issue, regardless of hierarchy or silo.

This model works both for the customer and the support team. Customers get a knowledgeable advocate who can help them resolve issues on the first call, instead of

being bounced around from department to department. At the same time, support staff enjoy the satisfaction of personally solving each customer's unique problem, rather than mindlessly repeating the same basic answers over and over again. Surprisingly, if the total cost of this support model is examined, savvy support can be less expensive than the tiered model.

There are, however, prerequisites for the savvy support model to work effectively.

- The first prerequisite relates to the company's culture. The organization as a whole has to be truly focused on the customer. Incorporating this mindset into the marketing slogan is smart; incorporating it into the corporate culture is an imperative.
- The second prerequisite revolves around leadership, because the conventional support model must be turned on its head. Management will need to put some of its best generalists on the front line. Leaders will need to work with HR and other departments to implement changes in compensation, reward, and metrics that foster collaboration, not the hoarding of knowledge.
- The third prerequisite is the adoption of a robust knowledge management methodology. One of the key assumptions underpinning the savvy support model is that the easy and known issues are taken care of by self-service (eliminating these requests from coming in to a call center agent), while new and complex issues are resolved by talking to a human.

Who Excels at Savvy Support?

Perhaps the best way to describe the type of people needed to staff a savvy support environment is with a medical analogy. A good doctor takes the time to learn more about you, your prior medical history, and your family history. She will listen carefully to your symptoms and ask pertinent questions that help her quickly narrow down the infinite number of possible issues to a few likely root causes. She will then combine her personalized knowledge of you with her knowledge of medicine (with additional expertise just a keyboard away) to quickly see if this is a known or unknown ailment. If needed, she will engage specialists and collaborate with them on your treatment options. The faster she can correlate your ailment to a known ailment, the faster treatment can begin.

Imagine how irritating it would be if all your primary doctor did was go through a standard script of basic questions, at the end of which she referred you to a series of completely unrelated specialists for additional tests. Yet this is how we treat most of our customers with our standard tiered support model.

The kind of person you want on your savvy support team is someone who relishes solving new problems rather than being comfortable dealing with only repetitive or known issues. He or she must have excellent people skills coupled with a very good understanding of who knows what within the organization and the larger support ecosystem.

Are soft skills really going to be that important? To put it under-

statedly, yes. If anything, they are going to take on an even larger role. Researchers in a Harvard Medical School study¹ were studying to ascertain if there was a correlation between a surgeon's tone of voice and his malpractice history. The researchers found that the manner or tone of a surgeon's voice may be as important as the content of what he communicates. In fact, it was discovered that tone plays an important role in outcomes such as patient dissatisfaction, surgeon

shopping, poor adherence to medical directions, and poor health outcomes. It is suspected that since the medical encounter is often emotionally stressful, patients may be especially sensitive to the emotion communicated by subtle cues such as tone of voice. Simply substitute "support person" for "surgeon" in this example for an understanding of how relevant this is to support.

There you have it. Savvy support may seem like Utopia, but a few leading-edge organizations are

starting to move to this new support model and experiencing real success. Isn't it time you started getting ready for it, too? *S*

Reference

1. Ambady, Ph.D., Nalini, Debi LaPlante, M.A., Thai Nguyen, B.A., Robert Rosenthal, Ph.D., Nigel Chaumeton, Ph.D., and Wendy Levinson, M.D. 2002. Surgeons' tone of voice: A clue to malpractice history. Surgical outcomes research. Department of Psychology, Harvard University. Boston, MA (March 11).

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