

KenCall

First call for outsourcing



Rapid transition

Scaling customer service under pressure

Introduction

Major reputation-threatening crises rarely affect organisations, but when do occur they can lead to severe brand damage and customer loss. In the modern business world, a strong brand is an invaluable asset on the balance sheet and something organisations should be loath to lose. The average company spends up to six per cent of gross sales on brand building each year, allowing a crisis to damage or destroy it is a true waste of resources. Yet, so many companies become 'stuck in the headlights' when affected by crises, unable to placate customers and provide clear information when it is most needed.

There are also those organisations that miss business opportunities for similar reasons; floundering when they should be closing new sales. Generating interest in a new product or service is often done very well but businesses can find themselves unable to deal with demand. Developing the capacity to deal with inbound customer enquiries is where many fall down, with websites failing, phone lines jammed and sales missed.

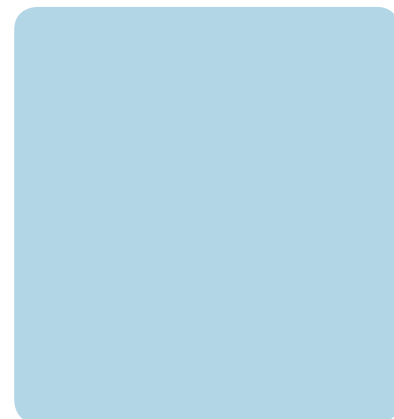
In good and bad times, organisations must be able to react efficiently and effectively to whatever customer challenges may face them. A minimum expectation is being able to provide someone to talk to or email who is able to provide relevant and timely information to customers and organisational stakeholders. To do this, organisations must plan effectively in advance and be able to rapidly scale-up their customer services at the shortest notice. This whitepaper details the background, the case studies and the key steps organisations can follow to make sure they achieve customer service success whatever may occur.

Background

The need to rollout extra capacity in an organisation's customer service operations can occur for any number of reasons, positive and negative. Some of the most frequent are:

- To support mass advertising/marketing campaigns
- To support product/service launches
- To handle product recalls
- To communicate service line issues
- To support crises and emergencies, such as:
 - Rail / airline disasters
 - Major incidents / accidents
 - Handling calls for public support / donations
 - Major humanitarian crises
 - Major disease outbreaks

Whether good or bad, the result of the occurrence is usually the same: a large number of customers will call, email or visit a company's website to get the information they require. The interaction could be as simple as an information exchange through to something very important like a medical consultation. Either way, an organisation needs to be prepared to limit damage or seize success when the time comes. The following case studies cover the response to three crisis situations where customer service capacity was needed rapidly.



Case studies

Issue: City of London Police – the London bombings
Timescale: Two hour response. 24 hour peak. Service ongoing for several weeks following the incident
Numbers: 31,000 calls in first hour. 40,000 within 24 hours

The City of London Police (CLP) was one of the emergency services responsible for responding to the 07/07/2005 London bombings. The emergency services quickly went to work coordinating rescue, helping survivors and working to make the city safe again. Part of the CLP's responsibility also involved handling enquiries from thousands of worried citizens. Calls would range from witness reports and worried relatives to simple information enquiries about what had occurred. Police phone numbers recorded 31,000 incoming calls in the first hour after the bombings and over 40,000 within 24 hours.

In planning for possible occurrences, those in charge decided to delay the contact centre opening for two hours after the incident. The preparation time allowed the contact centre to gather as much information as possible about what had happened. The time also served as a 'cool down' period, reducing the number of inbound callers as many initial queries would have been resolved in the interim. In addition, the phone networks would have returned to normal, isolated people would have informed loved ones of their safety and news reports filled the information vacuum. Extensive pre-planning and the two hour preparation period meant that when the call centre did go live it was more than ready to help.

Key success factors:

- Preparing fully in the two-hour window
- Call handling facility to manage and distribute large volumes of inbound calls
- The ability to link up Police contact centres around the UK using the National Mutual Aid Telephony (NMAT) network. This system allows call handling resources to be pooled across the country
- Training from the Casualty Bureau and National Call Handling Training, allowing agents to effectively and sensitively deal with enquiries
- The ability to take 500 calls at the same time
- By working with Cable and Wireless, all calls could be successfully fielded to the next available agent wherever they were in the UK
- Extensive prior training allowed agents to effectively deal with emotional calls

Issue: NHS Direct – Swine Flu
Timescale: Two hour response. 24 hour peak. Service ongoing for several weeks following event.
Numbers: 6,000 calls in three days. 1,000,000 website visits.

NHS Direct is the central service that any UK resident can call to receive taxpayer-funded medical consultancy and advice. The service is staffed by basically-trained medical staff with the ability to direct calls to nurses and doctors where necessary. At normal levels NHS Direct takes over 9,000,000 calls a year, has over 750,000 people access its website, over 1,000,000 use its online self-assessment form and it deals with over 30,000 emails a year. To manage this the organisation uses 35 contact centres in the UK.

Through extensive planning NHS Direct prepares for large public health emergencies so it is ready to answer questions and advise people even in the toughest of circumstances. The outbreak of Swine Flu around the world is a key example. Even before the virus surfaced in Mexico, NHS Direct was ready with the information and rollout strategy to react to such a crisis. When the virus did occur they knew it could only be a matter of time before it spread around the world and could prepare more fully in the intervening time.

As soon as the news broke the NHS Direct team split three ways, into dealing with the 'here and now', what happens when the pandemic hits and how will NHS Direct function if the pandemic hits. The contact centres took an unprecedented 6,000 calls in three days in mid 2009 and routed all the calls in the most appropriate way: 15% to GP, 45% given homecare advice and 40% just given information. NHS Direct also used their website to cut the number of necessary inbound calls and reduce the load on the contact centres. The website received 1,000,000 visits in three days and 30,000 of these visitors completed a dedicated self-assessment form. 30,000 also called a recorded information line which gave direct information on the spread of the virus and advice on protecting oneself.

Key success factors:

- Extensive preparation and scale of existing operation
- Effective technology (National Mutual Aid Telephony – NMAT) allowing all agents access to current data
- Working with Cable and Wireless to arrange appropriate phone numbers and call-fielding
- Use of website and recorded information line to reduce contact centre load
- Regular in-depth staff training prepared them for difficult calls

Issue: KenCall – Famine Relief Call Centre
Timescale: Weekend setup. Ongoing response.
Numbers: 4,000 calls first day. Up to 12,000 per day for ten weeks. Currently takes 4,000 calls a day.

Early on Friday 16th of January 2009 Nicholas Nesbitt, Managing Director of KenCall, Kenya's largest contact centre was told that the President of Kenya, Mwai Kibaki, would announce an official famine in four hours time over the radio. KenCall was asked what it could do to help and responded with a centralised three digit phone number (109) and information centre for famine victims. It set up the centre ready for launch within 48 hours to support the famine and held a press conference on Monday morning. By preparing the centre so rapidly it was able to make its 109 number synonymous with the crisis and help more people in trouble. At the end of each day, KenCall collates and issues an extensive report to the government's National Disaster Operations Centre (NDOC) on the location, type and scale of problems. The NDOC uses this data to coordinate its aid efforts across the country.

Key success factors:

- Well trained-management team to ensure the staff were trained and the CRM and telecommunications infrastructure were ready for the announcement
- Good relationships with the telecommunications operators who set-up dedicated E1 lines in a very short period
- Specialised application development team drove the rapid development of systems to capture and organize information relating to the famine and victims of famine
- Rapid rollout allowed phone number to be effectively communicated at famine announcement
- Pre and post call briefings and counselling allowed agents to deal with calls that are frequently emotionally challenging
- Extensive database to ensure rapid recruitment of the right people to answer the phones

Lessons Learned

The organisation that successfully surmounts sudden challenges is one that has considered and prepared fully for all likely eventualities. Some of the important common factors across the case studies include:

- **Planning:** Is central to everything. No one knows exactly what will happen, but the likely 'shape' of a crisis or opportunity can and should be thought through. The most likely occurrences are usually fairly easy to determine. It is these that should be planned for.
- **Technological infrastructure:** Having technology in place that allows all agents access to real-time information was vital in keeping all messages consistent and ensuring a successful rapid response. A close relationship with the telecommunications companies that carry incoming calls was also crucial.
- **Training:** Should be part of the initial plan. Skeleton training plans can be prepared in advance ready to 'cascade' down to those that need it. In most cases prior and ongoing training can also be implemented in order to fully prepare all those involved.
- **People:** Making sure technology is ready for rapid roll-out is only one side of the rapid transition challenge. The success or failure of a rapid roll-out rests largely on the staff's ability to cope with calls. Success lies in the number of people that can be dedicated to manning a centre and their training. If representatives are to deal with potentially difficult calls, their customer service skills must be well honed. Likewise, if calls will be emotionally distressing, representatives must be fully trained and remain psychologically prepared.



How to plan

No matter what the crisis or business opportunity, there are certain core stages that can allow an organisation to effectively plan, prepare and rollout customer service strategies. At its most basic level, the model has eight key stages.

- **Force the organisation out of its "comfort zone" to prepare for the best and worst**
'What if an organization has planned for a 50% jump in calls in response to a marketing initiative but it rises by 100%? Likewise what if a small product recall turns into a full range recall, affecting many thousands of people? Organisations must leave their comfort zones to consider what is really possible. Preparing for conservative estimates or dismissing something that will 'never happen' is not a good place to start'
- **Pre-select a partner and have them retained on standby**
 - With a dedicated telephone number (series of) for inbound crises/campaigns
 - Have a team briefed in company branding in preparation'If you plan to outsource capacity to handle excessive call volume, it makes sense to identify preferred partners/partner from the start. This enables you to access extra expertise in planning, ensure the partner has appropriate redundancy and determine what must be in place to 'switch on' capacity when needed.'
- **Develop and rehearse messaging and approve any documentation**
'Preparation of messaging and approval of any documentation is important whether for a marketing campaign or as part of a crisis plan. Work with the provider to create the most effective data bank and the easiest way of accessing it. It is also beneficial to stage mock events to test out the provider.'



- **Prepare technology**

'Technology comes out as the keystone in most situations. If the tools are not there for accessing, organising and storing information, a call centre can do nothing. Likewise if the telecommunications provider is not fully briefed and included in planning, a sudden peak in inbound calls could cause unnecessary surprise and technical problems.'

- **Create an intelligent communications strategy**

'Part of a well-functioning plan is that it reduces load on the call centre to the greatest possible extent. The phone is not a lone communications channel and must be complemented. Consider all the different ways a customer will look for information and determine how they will be used to aid the contact centre. Obvious areas include, the news media, the company website and the web in general.'

- **Staff flexibly**

'A viable contact centre should maintain sufficient redundancy to easily staff your call needs should the necessity arise. Hiring of new staff is simply not an option in such short timescales.'

- **Document**

'Someone should be responsible for rolling out the stages needed in rapid deployment but they cannot be available 24/7/365. Documentation of the entire process from top to bottom ensures an 'understudy' could enact plans if necessary. That the document is easily available also means all those involved can be completely apprised of their own important tasks.'

- **Practice**

'The only thing that will enable rapid rollout when the need for call capacity does occur is practice. Stage drills at appropriate intervals to keep your supplier on its feet. This will also help refine the rollout plan as any difficulties will be uncovered during these exercises.'

Conclusion

Too frequently large organisations are seen failing to effectively react when faced with a need to communicate clearly, in high volumes and at rapid speed. In other cases, organisations are stuck by the need to communicate well with the press but fail to replicate their proactivity in direct customer contact. It is all too apparent how quickly reputations can be destroyed and customers lost when this happens. But, even with the lessons of the past to guide them, organisations continue to fall foul of poor preparation and are caught unawares when it matters the most.

Bad planning and preparation also reduces the value of high profile marketing initiatives. Too frequently customer contact is left too late or not considered at all in the planning process. Yet with an amount of forethought, marketers can ensure they are fully prepared to deal with customers if they do start flooding in.

It is clear that planning and preparing for customer contact needs to be taken into higher regard by senior managers across all types of organisation. By firstly recognising the need to plan in this respect and secondly following the steps outlined in this document, organisations can ensure they are prepared to react positively to both the worst and best of occurrences.

