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### Leadership Q&A

## A Frontline-Driven Approach to Service

An interview with Cooney Solutions Group's Tim Montgomery.

Cooney Solutions Group's goal is to revolutionize the business process outsourcing industry. How? By providing worldclass quality and a "Service 1st" experience for its customers. Founded by two pioneers in customer service and contact center management—Bill Cooney, a former NATO representative and retired president/deputy CEO of USAA; and Tim Montgomery, founder of The Service Level Group and 20-year veteran of the call center and customer service industry—the solutions provided by CSG are focused on helping companies improve the entire customer experience and find value in areas that are typically viewed as costs.

This month, CSG's Montgomery gives *Pipeline* readers an inside look at his organization's values and mission, as well as his views on top challenges facing the contact center industry, and the role that a customer-centric culture plays in improving performance while keeping a handle on operational costs.

### What are the most pressing issues facing today's contact centers?

Not a lot has changed in the last 10 years—we're still seeing many of the same challenges with numbers being misunderstood, not measured correctly or simply given lip service. A great example is first-contact resolutions (FCR), and it's on the top of most call centers' list of vital measures. Improvements in FCR rates can be directly correlated to gains in customer satisfaction/loyalty, employee delight, operational efficiencies and sales growth. In other words, FCR hits both the top and bottom line. Some companies struggle with FCR measurement because they say it's hard to get the real numbers. Not so—all you need to do is ask your customers who have called if their issue has been fully resolved. This can be done via post-contact IVR surveys, email surveys and/or phone surveys. Make it simple by just asking them if they got what they needed the first time they

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requested it.

More important than the FCR metric itself is understanding the success drivers and foundational elements that must be in place. If you're not meeting your service level on a regular basis (by interval), you'll never see improvements in FCR, as frustrated callers will hang up and call back later. They'll rate you poorly because you didn't solve the issue on their first call to you. Even if you get the service level part right, if you're not providing quality, customers will be forced to call back because they don't feel comfortable with the resolution, or because what was promised didn't happen. Ultimately, the lack of quality will negatively impact service level and vice versa—resulting in no actual FCR improvement. We see many clients still struggling with the basics—accessibility and quality—it's just masked in new metrics like FCR.

### **How can a contact center improve overall service performance while optimizing operational costs?**

The best call centers understand that every contact is an opportunity to improve future customer experiences. At CSG, our value is based on the fact that we don't see calls as just a transaction or number—we see every contact as an opportunity to gather intelligence. From Day 1, our frontline agents are taught to think of their role as "process engineers" and to look for ways to help the company they're supporting get more out of every contact. This is done using a proprietary feedback system that is outside of the client's CRM system. Our feedback system allows us to look at transactions from a different perspective and provide feedback on ways to improve the process for future customers. By focusing on the total cost of ownership, our clients will realize lower support cost (less calls) and improved customer loyalty (less defects).

### **What are the benefits to outsourcing parts or all of a contact center's processes? How have outsourcing options changed over the past few years?**

Economic change often drives a company to consider outsourcing, or to increase the amount of work they already outsource. One of the main reasons that companies outsource is to reduce expenses—people, dollars, time, etc. From a corporate perspective, the call center is a prime outsourcing candidate. Most companies don't

consider the call center a core function; many see it as a necessary evil. That the call center is challenging to manage only adds to a company's desire to outsource call center functions

Beginning about 10 years ago, there was rapid movement to find cheap alternatives to service, with many companies searching for offshore alternatives. As with domestic outsourcing, some offshore initiatives succeeded, while others failed. We've found that, in most cases, outsourcing failure isn't due to geographic location; rather, it's the result of companies not fully understanding and appreciating their customer service processes—and, the direct link of those processes to revenue generation and customer satisfaction. The outsourcing industry has evolved, and many of the call center-focused providers are known for delivering excellent service—sometimes even better service than that provided by the client company's inhouse call centers. Call center outsourcers that excel recognize that they have to be "the experts" in contact center operations. They work very hard to ensure that all of their leaders are prepared to execute in this challenging environment. Top outsourcers also understand the real value of the call center. They know that it goes far beyond processing transactions, and that they must be focused on delighting customers and getting a real ROI out of every interaction.

### **What role does the workplace culture play in contact center performance and bottomline results? Can you discuss a few best practices for developing a customer-centric culture?**

Developing the right "culture of innovation, change and intense customer service" is a key enabler and foundation to creating a worldclass integrated operation. Everyone in an organization needs to have a good picture of where it's going and a strong understanding of why they are going there. Once everyone in the organization is connected to the customer, the decisions become easier and roadblocks less painful. Moving too fast when the foundation isn't prepared can create more pain than good. Plan for quick wins and communicate throughout the organization. Help everyone to be involved with the change by clearly articulating their roles. In today's competitive market, companies known for providing worldclass service develop formal strategies to

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**Tim Montgomery**  
Cooney Solutions Group

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keep pace with an increasingly demanding consumer.

But even before creating a specific plan, a company must have a culture in place that emphasizes the customer as the key to success. In the companies that we've worked with, there are several key ingredients that are missing at this step of improvement. Those include:

**Culture isn't part of the daily discussion at any level of the organization.** In fact, it's often missed altogether as leaders jump directly into trying to improve customer satisfaction by making changes with regard to people and processes. While such changes can provide short-term improvements, those improvements will never be sustained without developing a culture that is focused on service, and until everyone in the organization understands what it means to serve. Developing and sustaining a culture of service starts at the top of the organization and finds its way to the front line. Unfortunately, most companies try to make this happen in the reverse direction.

**Too much focus and reaction to the daily metrics.** The numbers are tied to actions, and depending on what the metrics look like at the beginning of the day, leaders and employees at every level will refocus their efforts. While on the surface this doesn't sound all that bad, but we forget that the customer is caught in the middle of the change. If we're continuously refocusing our efforts throughout the day, the customer's experience will never be consistent, thus causing them to question the competence of the organization and whether the organization values them. The key is to ensure

that everyone understands what the metrics really mean from the customer's perspective, and making improvements that are transparent to the customer.

**Financials get more attention than service.** Most organizations pride themselves on growing their revenue, income or stock price. A negative swing in any of these become immediate motivators for improving customer service. Unfortunately, the financials alone don't really indicate whether you're providing great service, and they often put additional pressure on those tasked with providing customer service. The best companies focus on service first, with profits following.

Bottom line—begin with the basics, ensuring that everyone will be given the opportunity to succeed. It all starts and ends with culture.

**You list a guiding principle of service first at CSG. How do you define a service-first culture?**

Driving improvement from the front line is the foundation of a worldclass organization, and CSG's founders and advisors have decades of experience as architects of world-class contact center services. This frontline-driven approach allows us to provide continuous feedback to our clients to adjust areas of their organization that may be driving unnecessary customer contacts. This approach not only saves money, but also directly impacts the customer's perception of the organization. Our goal at CSG is to help our clients continually reduce operational defects and we do this one call at a time by focusing on "Service First." ⓘ

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## ABOUT US

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**Contact Center Pipeline** is a monthly instructional journal focused on driving business success through effective contact center direction and decisions. Each issue contains informative articles, case studies, best practices, research and coverage of trends that impact the customer experience. Our writers and contributors are well-known industry experts with a unique understanding of how to optimize resources and maximize the value the organization provides to its customers.

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