

ASSURING QUALITY AND LOYALTY IN THE AI AGE

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ILLUSTRATION PROVIDED BY ADOBE IMAGES

Delivering high-quality customer experiences (CXs), regardless of the interaction's purpose, who initiates it or on which channels, is the core mission of contact centers. The goal is to foster profitable customer relationships and, ideally, turn customers into brand advocates.

Achieving this goal has always been challenging for several reasons, such as but not limited to:

- Managing customer demands and issues that can be highly complex and emotionally charged.
- Ensuring the timely availability of qualified, well-trained agents who are effectively supervised and coached.

LAURA SIKORSKI



- Coping with external factors beyond customers' and agents' control, like network issues and disaster disruptions (on both ends).

Moreover, the goalposts are always shifting because of economic pressures, social changes (including customer and employee attitudes), technology developments, innovations, and new practices.

To find out how contact center leaders can best seek, and ideally ensure, high-quality, loyalty-building CXs in an ever-changing environment, we had a virtual conversation with consultant and Advisory Board member Laura Sikorski.

Q WHAT DEVELOPMENTS AND TRENDS ARE YOU SEEING IN ENSURING QUALITY, E.G., QUALITY ASSURANCE (QA) THROUGH THE CONTACT CENTER, AND WHAT ARE THEIR DRIVERS?

A: Quality assurance (QA) scoring is the assessment of empathy, accuracy, and compliance for interactions. High performance and productivity should be based on results achieved from procedural updates and targeted training/coaching.

Individual performance evaluations and productivity enhancements are still priority measurements, regardless of how many agent seats/shifts are available to answer interactions. This should *never* change in the contact center. Mentoring and coaching are the drivers here.

Achievable scores for service level, adherence, Net Promoter, first contact resolution (FCR), and customer effort should be realistic and produce a culture of continuous improvement and high performance.

However, let us not forget that staff empowerment must be reviewed and adjusted regularly. Fortunately, I am seeing more QA programs focusing on team performance.

Team peer pressure can be a powerful influence. And it may help reduce turnover by encouraging open communication, celebrating successes, supporting flexible scheduling, and promoting wellbeing. A team-based approach strengthens support and fosters a positive, collaborative environment.

Remember your Contact Center IS the heartbeat of your company and it directly influences customer and employee satisfaction as well as profits. Happy Employees mean Happy Customers.

Service level, average speed of answer, and abandon rate are the key drivers that will create meaningful customer connections and retention.

Q ARE CUSTOMERS' QUALITY EXPECTATIONS RISING AND IF SO, WHY? ARE CONTACT CENTERS MEETING THEM, AND IF SO, HOW, AND IF NOT, WHY NOT?

A: I have said this many times in *Contact Center Pipeline* articles: customers expect and demand excellent and consistent service. But customer loyalty is not what it used to be. From my own experiences, I no longer tolerate mistakes in shipping, incorrect delivery time quotes, price inconsistencies, and inconsiderate/rude agents. Unfortunately, I do find the latter increasing and I am shocked.

Budget cuts are causing short staffing and longer wait times are prevalent. I too am not as loyal as I used to be. Are you?

What happened to telephone etiquette training and the three most important words: PLEASE and THANK YOU? I'm not sure that this even exists in training programs. There is now less servicing of phone calls while researching information and agents forgetting to use the HOLD button.

"WHAT HAPPENED TO TELEPHONE ETIQUETTE TRAINING AND THE THREE MOST IMPORTANT WORDS: 'PLEASE' AND 'THANK YOU'?"

-- LAURA SIKORSKI

So, if your contact center — and, most importantly, your company/brand — wants to retain the loyalty of customers like me, do your initial and continuous training courses include the following?

- Telephone voice
- Telephone answering
- Controlling the call
- Power talking for results
- Telephone call handling, in particular:
 - Dealing with angry/irate customers
 - Diffusing difficult customers
 - Active listening
 - Successful communications
 - Keys to customer service
 - Practical steps to problem-solving
 - The "deadly sins" of customer service
 - Customer service survival skills

Also, I'm not sure why, but I do think many companies think noise-canceling headsets are outdated and too expensive. I *really* dislike hearing other agents speaking to their customers and my concentration to listen to my agent wavers. And I'm sure many other customers feel and are reacting the same way.

Moreover, chat used to be the best way to communicate with a human and was always fast and accurate despite an agent managing four to five customers at one time.

Now AI is doing the chatting and many times it (notice I said IT!) just does not react with accuracy to a question. I type fast and still have a hard time with AI understanding what is needed to help me.



Yes, I realize programming is critical to AI performance. And I think more time needs to be spent on correct answers to most of what you teach in your trainings.

Finally, how about fixing the "Press 1, Press 2, Press 3", etc. and using the KISS method for the IVR? Like "Press 1 to speak with a live agent, Press 2 to use our automated systems."

"GENERATIVE AI IS EXPENSIVE. IT TAKES TIME TO IMPLEMENT AND I DO NOT FEEL OUR SOCIETY IS READY FOR IT."

Q YOU MENTIONED AI. THERE HAS BEEN MUCH DISCUSSION ABOUT (AND INVESTMENT IN) AI AGENTS. BUT ARE AI AGENTS DELIVERING ON THEIR PROMISES? ARE THEY ENABLING IMPROVED HIGH-QUALITY CXS?

A: Generative AI is EXPENSIVE.

It takes time to implement and I do not feel our society is ready for it. Its core components are powerful algorithms, pattern recognition, and prompt-driven outputs.

But I'm not sure taking the time to get it right is a priority in many development and implementation projects. There is so much hype about AI and companies feel they must get on the bandwagon as soon as possible.

Implementing AI software that YOU think the customer wants is dangerous and can cause you to lose them. So why not invest in technology that will streamline operational efficiencies, have personalization capabilities, and integrate your customer service support channels into one platform?

Also, how about better collaboration with other departments that support customers' orders, issues, and resolution? I do think this will improve resolution speed, enhance agent confidence, and ensure consistent, high-quality experiences for every customer and staff member.

Q CUSTOMERS ARE BEING INUNDATED WITH FEEDBACK REQUESTS, I.E., SURVEY FATIGUE, SO ARE THEY SKIPPING THEM, OR WORSE YET, DELIBERATELY GIVING WRONG ANSWERS? IF SO, IS THIS TREND ACCELERATING, AND HOW DOES THIS AFFECT QA AND CORPORATE DECISIONS?

A: Feedback is necessary even if you think customers will deliberately give wrong answers. How are you going to know what your customers really want and need if you do not ask them?

Have you forgotten about the VOICE OF THE CUSTOMER as a component of your customer service philosophy?

Usually, a 5% response rate is normal, but be satisfied with 1%. How about the old-fashioned focus groups? Ask how they feel about automation and what they think AI can help with.

You do not need 20 questions. So, review your "wrap-up" code reports to identify the reasons your customers contact you and develop questions based on them.

Q WHAT ARE YOUR RECOMMENDATIONS TO CONTACT CENTER LEADERS TO HELP THEM PROVIDE A HIGH-QUALITY CX?

A: Take a deep breath and do your own internal audit to find out your center's strengths and weaknesses. Here are some thoughts on what to look for (see FIGURE).

WHAT YOUR CONTACT CENTER AUDIT SHOULD INCLUDE

OPERATIONS

- Mission Statement and department goals
- Current performance objectives
- Organization chart
- Job assignments and workflow
- Job descriptions
- Office standards

STRUCTURE

- Operational goals of the agents
- Supervisor-to-agent ratio
- Reference materials
- Types/amount of meetings
- Interaction volumes: calls, emails, chats, etc.
- Service level objectives
- Customer-based demographics and services offered
- Customer interaction types
- Call processing standards
- Current staffing and scheduling procedures
- New hire training programs/manuals/schedule
- Continuous training programs
- Intra- and inter-departmental interactions and responsibilities
- ACD reports
- Technology systems used

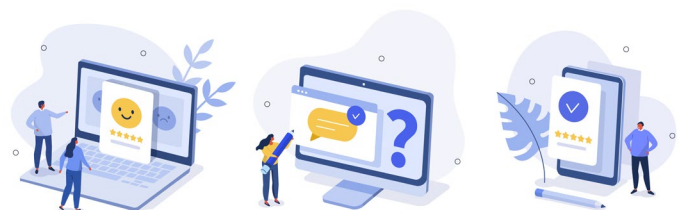


FIGURE

When I do audits, executive and middle management staff are surprised at what I find. Be sure you interview new and senior staff to find out what they really see, especially if you let them know the conversation is TOTALLY CONFIDENTIAL.



Brendan Read is Editor of Contact Center Pipeline. He has been covering and working in customer service and sales and for contact center companies for most of his career. Brendan has edited and written for leading industry publications and has been an industry analyst. He also has authored and co-authored books on contact center design, customer support, and working from home. Brendan can be reached at brendan@contactcenterpipeline.com.



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