

Customer Service NEWSLETTER

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28 West 25th Street — 8th Floor
New York, NY 10010-2705
Telephone: (212) 228-0246 • Fax: (212) 228-0376
Email: info@CustomerServiceGroup.com
Website: www.CustomerServiceGroup.com

Editor:

Bill Keenan, (908) 276-0474
bkeen@CustomerServiceGroup.com

Customer Service:

Mary Pagliaroli, ext. 101
mpagliaroli@CustomerServiceGroup.com

Reprints and Permissions:

Mary Dalessandro, ext. 103
mdalessandro@CustomerServiceGroup.com

Publisher:

Margaret DeWitt, ext. 106
msdewitt@CustomerServiceGroup.com

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Motivating Employees

Call center succeeds by putting customers last

AnswerPlus Inc., a third-party call center based in Hamilton, Ontario, that handles emergency response, reservation, helpdesk, and order-taking calls for a variety of clients, literally tells those clients that they come last — behind AnswerPlus's own employees and behind their clients' customers. That gets the company some funny looks at first, but once clients understand the concept they're okay with it, says Barbara Bradbury, Answer-Plus's vice president of operations.

"We're here to interact with our clients' customers," Bradbury says, "but to make that work we have to focus our attention on our employees — to make sure that they care about the clients' customers, that they know how to deal with the customer, and that they have the training they need to look after

the customer. We have to make sure that they have a clean, safe, and orderly workplace, and that they are compensated well. So it may all be about the caller, but it has to start with our people."

That philosophy must be working. AnswerPlus's call center employees were just awarded the Call Centre Award of Distinction — based on a measure of call-handling skills, courtesy, etiquette, use of proper call techniques, response time, and accuracy — from the Association of Teleservices International (ASTI).

Putting service employees first

Bradbury says that rather than telling call center employees that they are part of the company, AnswerPlus is out to convince them that they are the company in both large and small

ways.

One of the large ways is through a bonus plan that can mean an extra \$2,000 per year in service employees' paychecks.

"We have a bonus plan in place that is based on roughly the same criteria that the ASTI award was based on," says Bradbury. "Every quarter, we start each employee off with 100 points — equal to a percentage of the total possible bonus. But every time they make a mistake or don't do something that they're supposed to, they lose 10 percent of that. If they do well, they can earn an extra \$1

per hour for every hour that they've worked during the quarter."

Performance for call center reps is evaluated based on call monitoring — but the company monitors only one call per rep per

month. And since the bonus is paid out quarterly, that means evaluations are based on three phone calls. "So if you want to do well, the key is to be consistent," says Bradbury.

She adds that the call monitoring criteria are as objective as possible, even to the point that the company has eliminated a one-through-five rating scale. "It's got to be Yes or No, black or white" Bradbury says. "Did they ask the person to spell their name or didn't they? Did they repeat the phone number back to the person — all the digits — or didn't they? Did they control the call or did they let the caller run away with them? And we try to stay away from more subjective questions like, 'Did they sound professional?'"

Besides being objective, Bradbury argues that a successful incentive plan

— whether it's profit-sharing, bonuses, or some other type of incentive — has to involve something that the rep feels he or she has some control over. "If they think it depends on what the company is doing or what somebody else is doing, they may not appreciate themselves for all the hard work they've done, and if they don't get as much out of it as they thought they would, there might even be some finger-pointing, and that can be very negative."

Celebrating successes

In addition to the bonus plan, "I doubt if there is a month of the year that goes by without a celebration of some kind," Bradbury says. "For instance, there's a dinner cruise in the offing for winning the ASTI award. And we try to reward them for the little things too."

Bradbury says that when a heavy snow caused a huge peak in the company's call volume last year, "that was a pretty tough day for our folks." So the next day, the company hired a massage therapist to come in to give them all a massage, "because they had earned it."

"Sometimes we'll throw a barbecue, and other times we've gone out for an evening at the races," Bradbury says. "One time we had a breakfast barbecue in which all of the managers — with white towels draped over our arms — literally waited on the reps. They got a huge kick out of that."

AnswerPlus is also initiating service awards this year, to reward and encourage long-term employees. "We'll be holding a cocktail party this fall and presenting a recognition award to anyone with five or more years of service. This is the kind of business where people just don't stick around, and we want to recog-

nize those who do. They're really the backbone of this company."

One of the most successful things the company has done is to set up a big corkboard that it calls its "You're Doing Something Great" Board. It's for peer-to-peer recognition, says

Bradbury. "We put out some paper stars and said, 'OK, anytime you catch each other doing something that you like, you put up a star for

them.' It could be a call that was handled really well, or that a rep really extended himself to a new employee, or had a particularly nice way of training somebody a new skill. We said: 'Anything that you see that you really like and think that person should be rewarded for it, write it up on a star and put it on the board.'" And she adds, "Reps seem to like the recognition and appreciation from each other even more than they do when it's coming from a manager."

Letting reps in on company secrets

There are no secrets at AnswerPlus, says Bradbury. "Reps have to

know where we're going, because they are how we're going to get there. So they are welcome in all of our meetings, including financial meetings, and regardless of the level. They sit in on our management meetings. We have no secrets from them."

Bradbury adds: "They have to feel free to be able to make suggestions. And we don't do new things, we don't put new things into place, without sitting down with them and asking, 'What do you think? How would this work? How can you help me make this better?'"

Bradbury admits that she resisted offering that level of empowerment to employees early on in her career, but "when I finally understood what it meant, my job got so much easier. There are a lot of really bright people out there, and they know a lot more than I do. Collectively, their ideas are so much greater than any individual's. So if you just give them a platform and encourage them to share, you can only get better."

Contact: Barbara Bradbury, AnswerPlus Inc., barbara@password.com, www.answerplus.ca. ■

Call center offers in-service R&R

It takes more than money to create the kind of corporate culture that AnswerPlus enjoys. The emergency response call center has a culture in which "reps really get it — to the point that it seems inbred — that our purpose is to enhance the image of our customers through a warm greeting and a professional telephone personality," says Barbara Bradbury, vice president of operations.

"It's a very high-stress job, so we've provided them with a few things around the office that help alleviate the stress," she says. "The lunch room is decorated like a Parisian cafe, with little bistro tables, for instance. We'll even take our clients in there sometimes because it's a nice place to sit and have a coffee."

Reps can also take time out in "Tranquility Base." According to Bradbury, "It's a small room with an aquarium, one of those therapeutic waterfalls, and an oversized recliner with a massage pad. If somebody is reaching their breaking point on the phone, or gets a headache, they can go in that room for 15 or 20 minutes, and they come out right as rain and go back to work. In the past, that person might have suffered for as long as she could and then would have gone home."

