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Tough times, thoughtful solutions

Increasing sales has become a priority for banks in the current climate, bringing the role of customer service to the fore

By Adam Goodvach

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There's never been a more crucial time to convert every possible prospect into a sale. The increased cost pressures facing banks have resulted in changed spending behaviour, and core services are being impacted as infrastructure investment is slashed and fears of staff cuts emerge. However, maintaining your quality of customer experience can translate prospects into sales.

This article will provide some suggestions on key customer experience impacts that will affect sales targets.

This is not just a general rant about customer experience. The precise aspect of experience this article refers to is the interaction between the bank and the customer that directly impacts their propensity to purchase. After working with banks for seven years to improve their conversion rates by delivering better customer experiences, we have proven the correlation between the method of selling to customers and conversion rates. It's a matter of consumer buyer behaviour, and much of it happens at the subconscious level.

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I had thought that times had changed. Twenty years ago, my grandfather recommended that I keep my money under the mattress rather than in a bank. I thought he was quaint. However, we've entered a period when unthinkable financial disasters have occurred and terms such as CDOs, sub-prime mortgages and interbank loans are commonly understood. Consumer confidence in the banking system is low and consumers fear for their savings.

Right now, customers are looking for reassurances about the financial stability of the banks they are dealing with. They are alert to any sign of weakness, so every interaction they have with their bank needs to project confidence at every opportunity.

Banks should bring messages of financial stability forward but not make them the key point of information. A line on the IVR or a note at the bottom of a statement is appropriate. There may be a little more focus on this for non-top tier banks or those that have had particularly bad press regarding write-downs or overseas losses. However, this shouldn't be the only or main message. Banks still have attractive products and their USPs should be promoted. Reassurances are a necessary but secondary focus of the message.

Greater uncertainty may encourage more customers to contact the call centre before they purchase a product making the ability of the operator to project strength essential. Given the spontaneous and transparent nature of the interaction customers and prospects have on the phone, it's important to ensure the call centre team is happy. Tension may be coming from the bank seeking to reduce costs or the operator may have personal financial problems.

There are two negative effects of a poor customer experience caused by poor morale: Firstly, the poor experience is perceived to result from instability and uncertainty within the bank. Secondly, sales conversion rates decrease as apathetic contact centre operators fail to apply the customer experience principles which are most likely to lead to a sale.

Maintaining enthusiasm in a contact centre when sales targets are being missed and operators face personal financial challenges is difficult. Common practice sees some of the small perks in a contact centre cut at these times (for example, cookies, chilled water, fun activities). These changes contribute to creating a negative sentiment around the company which may be interpreted as resulting from the company's financial distress.

Maintaining these small expenses can have a very positive effect on the sentiment projected to customers.

Reassuring the operators is the first step to reassuring the customers. Simple, positive messages should be communicated to the operators so they understand about the banks financial position. The messages can be tweaked into key, single sentences that operators can pepper throughout their calls. They should be factual and tailored so that they can be added into different types of conversations. If they don't fit into the conversation fairly naturally, they will sound absurd but if they are well crafted, they will help both the operators and customers feel more secure.

Reducing numbers in a call centre can be a tempting way to reduce costs but it also impacts the customer experience and, in turn, conversion rates. Reduced staff numbers will result in longer hold times or more rushed conversations as less operators seek to serve the same, or more, customer queries. Customers receive a lesser degree of care and attention and operators a lower degree of job satisfaction. Ensure that any reduction in staff numbers is a response to lower call volumes rather than cost cutting.

Our benchmarking of contact centres is based on the application of a needs-based selling model. This requires the operator to listen, consider and respond, and takes a greater effort than simply pitching products based on the customer's initial enquiry. The operator needs to believe that they have a realistic chance of making a sale with every call because it will encourage them to make the effort to engage the customer. They need to ask the appropriate questions and go to the effort of matching those needs with the relevant product. Monitoring and rewarding this specific behaviour can encourage the application of the appropriate sales methodology under difficult circumstances.

While companies seek to cut costs, they should be wary of impacting the customer experience. Such decisions will create fear within the customer base and result in the operators providing a weaker sales process. Similar risks exist in other channels but they are beyond the scope of this article. Our clients have realised that they

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need to maintain an environment in which customer experience is given a priority when other things are cut because any alternative will hurt their sales prospects.

When banks are seeking all the good customers they can find, it would be a shame to lose good prospects because you were trying to cut costs.

Adam Goodvach is the chief executive officer of customer experience benchmarking company Global Reviews.



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