

IN THE CENTER

Achieving Excellence by Listening to Customers

Yokohama Tire's Consumer Affairs Contact Center attained world-class performance through excellent relationships with its customers and being very receptive to their changing needs. Manager Karen Simmons recounts the steps involved.

BY KAREN SIMMONS

A Yokohama tire may appear to be a simple product, but it is not. Everyone who has seen them performing on the world's top car racing circuits and rally venues knows that these tires are a stellar union of creativity, technology and experience. Creating them requires expertise, advanced materials, thorough testing and careful production to ensure that they perform as specified.

Producing world-class tires requires applying the most advanced technologies, materials and production techniques. As important as these ingredients are, listening to our customers' reactions to our tires is essential to our success as we create products that embody a shared vision of a quality experience that satisfies — even exceeds — expectations.

EMBRACING OUR VISION TO EXCEED EXPECTATIONS

To ensure that Yokohama is maintaining excellent relationships with and listening to its customers, five years ago we reviewed our Consumer Affairs practices to determine what gaps there might be between our actual

practices and the world's best. Soon we began adjusting our contact center operations to improve how we respond to customer inquiries. We recognized that we needed to embrace better ways to monitor and measure customer satisfaction. Adopting contemporary best practices would enable us to better measure our performance and our contribution to Yokohama's success.

At that time, the Consumer Affairs group applied only basic quality standards to our replies to consumer and customer inquiries. We didn't record calls because we didn't have the capability. Nor did we use a dedicated contact management system for Consumer Affairs. Rather, we were using a basic, out-of-the-box database program that proved awkward to use and difficult to maintain for our purposes. Moreover, the program offered restricted reporting capabilities. So we were at a crossroads. The time had come to embrace a new vision of how we should best contribute to Yokohama's future.

Our technical service manager, Daniel M. Guiney, explains our situation this way: "When I became account-



able for Consumer Affairs in 2002, I posed a few key questions that focused on establishing a compass for our future work. What measurements do we use? What do they say about how well we are serving customers via our call center? How do we rank in our tire industry and against best-in-class automotive, retail or travel services call centers? Karen's response was clear. She said, 'Customers tell us we do well. But if you help me obtain some key resources, then we can be best-in-class. We need a consumer relationship system, digital call recording and professional call coaching.'

IDENTIFYING PRIME OBJECTIVES

In undertaking the initiative to revamp our center operations, we set two prime objectives: 1) to improve customers' satisfaction with our products and service, including their experience with us; and 2) to realize benefits from listening to their experiences with our tires. We felt Yokohama could derive value from customers' reactions to our tires and that the center could better capture and report consumers' insights that could be used to improve our tires. How well we listen and act on their insights ultimately flows back to them as increased value for their investment in our tires.

Today we run an efficient, effective and state-of-the-art Consumer Affairs contact center supported by contemporary contact management technology that includes a Web-based consumer relationship system (CRS) integrated with digital call recording. Our contact center representatives are organized now into two teams. Our core group handles regular customer inquiries and consumer response. A second team is dedicated to our new ADVAN premium customer care services.

The ADVAN offering is a prestigious, premium, relationship-building service for automobile dealers and their customers who own the world's fastest, most powerful luxury vehicles — Bentley, Lexus, Lotus, Audi and Porsche — which come equipped with Yokohama's ultra-high performance iconic brand. This premium service is also offered to consumers who own ADVAN brand tires and to our tire dealers that sell the ADVAN brand.

SETTING WORLD-CLASS PERFORMANCE STANDARDS

At the outset of our upgrade project, we referred to the Society of Consumer Affairs Professionals Inter-

national's (SOCAP) member resources to identify a well-respected contact center management consultancy, Network Direct, with whom we soon engaged for ongoing guidance in setting up world-class quality assurance and performance standards.

Network Direct has become our call center quality consultant for service improvement. We worked with Network Direct to emulate the best practices of best-in-class call centers. Today we use the group to assess call quality and calibrate our reps' performance. Network Direct monitors each rep's calls and gives coaching feedback for improvement within 24 hours.

Our reps must meet a weekly performance standard for their contacts according to our Quality Assurance Guideline. With Network Direct we developed a call performance scorecard that provides the call monitors with set criteria for assessing the quality components of calls. Score components measure how well a rep performs in such dimensions as active listening, engaging with the caller, articulating courtesy ("virtual handshake") and etiquette, conveying tone and enthusiasm, building rapport, answering questions, and expressing Yokohama's policies and procedures correctly.

When a rep's weekly performance falls below the standard, we provide one-on-one coaching and refresher training sessions. Once a month, we also hold "calibration" group sessions in a roundtable format to reinforce the standards. The group monitors several calls and scores them. As a group, we review the scoring to educate on what master and consensus scores are and what quality satisfies each performance standard component.

In addition, in 2007, we will extract a representative set of contacts from the CRS quarterly, and the Network Direct quality-on-call group will call these contacts and conduct in-depth interviews to precisely measure customer satisfaction and verify our service quality.

RAISING THE BAR WITH ADVAN PREMIUM SERVICE

In 2006, we launched our new ADVAN customer care service with high anticipation. Our most experienced and skilled representatives began interacting with ADVAN dealers and tire owners about their situations, needs and expectations. The service addresses each customer's situation, providing added-value designed to surpass customer expectations. We make post-service calls to customers to confirm satisfactory resolu-

tion and to measure their service experience.

ADVAN Premium Service representatives are held to the highest standard. They must consistently handle demanding customers extremely well and must articulate and confidently dialogue with each customer. They must be able to quickly establish their credibility and rapport. On the telephone, they have just seconds to “shake hands” effectively and address issues well.

Our ADVAN Premium Service goal is to establish and maintain strong relationships with the manufacturers who distribute their new cars equipped with Yokohama ADVAN tires, with their dealers, and with car owners who use these tires. In providing customer care beyond expectations, we convey a passion for excellence in service and product knowledge that will make us stand out in the marketplace.

HEARING THE VOICE OF THE CUSTOMER

A key challenge we faced in moving to contemporary best practices has been to provide better consumer response reporting to our management. Our specialized CRS provides a catalog of reports, including Early Warning Alerts that help us quickly detect product issues in the marketplace. Early awareness of potential marketplace issues enables the company to take corrective actions quickly to avert negative impacts.

“Effective response to customer concerns, avoidance of dissatisfaction, proactive service and preventive design are major challenges for companies. Having fact-based customer satisfaction information is critical. Often the ‘voice of the customer’ speaking inside the company is what focuses attention on the key facts and provides us with the breakthrough moments for which we all strive,” explains Technical Service Manager Guiney.

Our CRS reporting enables us to provide the current status of such typical issues as product performance, as well as to convey customer compliments. “Voice of the Customer” reports are distributed routinely to marketing, product development and quality assurance groups. Now Yokohama executives and managers quickly and clearly hear the expectations of our customers. CRS information complements our warranty information.

The digital voice logger captures customer calls, and CRS enables the recordings to be attached to contact records. Issue subject codes and verbatim response data collection help contact records match

with and augment our reports. CRS reporting has sufficiently enhanced our customer satisfaction knowledge and is directly impacting our growth and expertise within Consumer Affairs and Yokohama Tire.

SELECTING THE BEST CRS FOR YOKOHAMA

Before we chose our CRS vendor, we had been considering potential solutions for years by visiting vendor exhibits at SOCAP International’s national meetings. We developed a good sense of what we most needed in a CRS for our particular operation. In assessing vendor options, key factors were system functionality and the character and quality of the vendor’s staff. We were attracted to staff that communicated well, showed helpfulness and understood our operating needs. Eventually, we invited the preferred vendor to give our senior management their CRS overview and capabilities demonstration.

Also of critical importance was that the selected CRS enables our product liability administrator to track issues and comply with NHTSA reporting. The tire industry is regulated for product safety, and NHTSA requires quarterly status reports. Our early warning alerts and status reports may be downloaded from the CRS as soon as they are available.

Our key CRS selection criteria focused on how well the offering met the needs of our contact center representatives. We had to have a specialized system that meets the demands of their daily workflow. Since we knew that the transition from our previous handling to the new approach would be huge, we decided the representatives should “road test” any new system. Acceptance of the selected new CRS was great. Reps liked the contact entry and processing flow and quickly bought into the Rep Desktop interface to our online CRS that they access through their Internet browsers.

The implementation went well. As group manager, I oversaw the project, working closely with our CRS vendor’s consultant. The administrator of our product liability group participated in visits to the vendor during evaluation and selection. We worked with the CRS consultant to develop our application tailoring (configuration settings) needed to meet Yokohama’s unique workflow and reporting requirements.

Implementation entailed a multi-month effort that involved: 1) analyzing and building our hierarchy of products, plant and dealer locations, and customer issue subjects; 2) training frontline reps in operations;

3) defining reports; and 4) field testing. Our “Go Live” day went smoothly and was perceived as very successful. In the first months of operation with CRS and practicing the new standard guidelines, morale and performance noticeably improved.

REALIZING BENEFITS FROM USING CRS

Our representatives quickly decided that they liked using the new system, and senior management liked the system’s reports. Within weeks, staff began showing productivity gains, even with an increase in call volume. Reps are now completing contact processing cycles more quickly and accurately, which frees them to do other tasks.

Soon senior management wanted to know what else the CRS could do to produce more operational benefits and generate more useful customer insights. New inquiry demographics gained the attention of the sales organization, providing details about where consumers and customers were interested in purchasing our products, giving sales management indicators to help determine where new dealerships are likely needed.

As our CRS administrator, I make adjustments to our product, location and subject hierarchy when new Yokohama products are available, when product items change, and when new issue subjects arise. I also keep abreast of new CRS capabilities so that I’ll be ready to apply them when changes in operations indicate that they can benefit Yokohama.

PAPERLESS WORKFLOW IMPROVES PRODUCTIVITY

Our daily contact processing is paperless now. Contact center reps are no longer failing to process contacts that formerly might have gotten lost in the shuffle of files. Our CRS’ automatic reminder messages help reps get more work done more accurately in less time. Reminders are color-coded in a set priority. Highest priority items are indicted sooner, helping guide reps to meet their 24-hour reply target. We’ve seen cost savings from this productivity improvement alone. Our consultant performed a time-series study to quantify the gain which enabled us to plan our work schedule better.

Contact center staff now work on a staggered schedule that they like better and that enables the company to handle contacts economically. Using CRS reporting enables us to verify fulfillment. The CRS sys-

tem enforces the quality of our replies to contacts by eliminating the manual error that occurred previously.

ADVICE TO MANAGERS

Our Consumer Affairs initiative with the CRS solution and professional call consulting to apply best practices is a “first” for Yokohama Tire. We are sensing now that our consumers have a rising expectation for customer care in our industry and that is a great opportunity for us. We will continue calibrating our Consumer Affairs performance and do what is indicated to maintain and increase — by exceeding — our customers’ expectations. We have no doubt that adopting our specialized CRS and applying best practices, guided by an expert and accomplished by diligent effort, have created bottomline benefit for Yokohama.

Smaller Consumer Affairs contact centers that want to advance quickly and efficiently will benefit from working with experts in applying current technology support systems and implementing best practice operations. Every contact center should monitor its reps’ calls and provide them with quick, constructive feedback. They should also provide tailored training that reinforces desired performance through coaching, education and incentives.

As Daniel Guiney sums up, “We all hear a lot about the importance of being easy to do business with — of having ‘easy buttons’ — because our lives and the lives of customers become more hurried and complicated each day. Do yourself a favor: Ask for help from those who have pioneered and accomplished something good and are willing to share their path to the easy buttons. Managers need to concentrate on the hard teamwork required to create and push the right easy buttons for their customers each day. Using a CRS with digital call recording and professional call coaching can be very effective to guide you to your company’s particular customer care easy buttons.” ●



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