

## Beam Me Out

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By Matt Brunk

I'm not alone in the characterization that I portrayed of North American Call Centers in my previous blog "Get Back In Queue." You've all been there too. Customers have said to me plenty of times "Matt, just work it out for us, call them—we'll gladly pay you for your time" ...and they mean it.



Sheila, my fellow blogger is right- I'm wasn't only stuck in a time warp, but I live in one daily with numerous others stuck in queue seeking support. Maybe it's isolated to tech support but I don't think so. It depends. Call Pre-Sales support for just about anything and any product- and you'll get help fast. So, in theory and practice- it depends.

But in fairness- as Sheila pointed out, there are of course call centers that do an exceptional job- **I know of one call center** that I'll never forget because it was such an exemplary exception to what I call "the rule of wearing down the callers." Now, without hesitation, you name three call centers that you feel the same way about.

On March 19th, **Dimension Data's annual Global Contact Center Benchmarking Report**, a survey of hundreds of contact centers across the globe, was released.

Here's a summary of the release:

As customers grapple with difficult-to-understand agents, excessive hold times and an absence of live agents, it's no wonder that satisfaction rates in North American contact centers took a nosedive – falling from 84% last year to 62.9% this year. Equally troubling is the fact that while most contact centers have clearly defined objectives, only 50% of agents know what they are.

Customer satisfaction levels decreased by 25% since last year, while the average hold time in North America skyrocketed: from 37 seconds last year to 64 seconds – roughly a 73% increase!

At the same time, contact centers are making some strides – for example, 53.4% of centers are using online self-service systems, and 12.5% are planning to install them.

Other highlights include:

- Agent attrition – The report noted a 24% annual turnover among agents – a 14% increase from last year's results
- Out of the loop – Although the majority of contact centers have clearly defined goals and targets, only 50% of agents can state what they are.
- Technology gap – While 75% of contact centers have a customer database system, only 53% have Computer Telephony Integration (CTI) – meaning that customer information is not always readily available to agents and there are often duplicate requests for information.

The report, which addresses everything from technology to HR practices to financial management, offers in-depth analysis, suggestions for improvement and forecasts for the future. Here's a sample:

- Going high tech – To ease wait times and improve customer service, 24.7% of contact centers are planning to install speech recognition software, and 18.6% plan to introduce text-to-speech solutions this year.
- Anticipating customer needs – 42.8% of contact centers are delivering personalized and segmented service to pinpoint and anticipate customer desires.
- Disaster-proof? Not yet – Despite an increasing focus on disaster recovery planning and business continuity in the workplace, just 49% of global contact centers report that they have a plan in place and test it. In North America, it's only 38%.

While these reports don't reflect the peachy day customers have when calling in- they do reflect the normal day that many folks do have and clearly being able to just understand the agent is among the top complaints. Other issues as I commented on before are also cited in the report. How I've come to feel is that it's customary, it's expected, and anticipated as part of the job- it's become the norm.

Still, Sheila is right on- there have been plenty of positive changes. I just think they are the exception and not the rule. While the router issue I mentioned in "**Get Back in Queue!**" killed any hopes for just two nines reliability in 2007; the support I did get- once I got it, was excellent, although I'm still waiting for a final resolution.

While I remain unconvinced of Sheila's argument, I think it gets down to if you're spending money or about too- then you'll get great service since you are calling into a revenue center. For those wanting service you're now on the expenditure side of the corporate call center and you get what you get. In the above report I think it's key for call center executives to understand that every call center is the window to their corporate

soul. What they say and do doesn't matter as much as "how" they do what they say. Customer experience isn't just about queue times and for those customers experiencing the call center- they can form strong opinions about the company they are dealing with.

Eric Krapf writes in "Improving Contact Centers" the experience at VoiceCon and the allure that IP telephony has in the call center market. He also cites the same metrics from Dimension Data's report including beneficial technology such as using CTI to improve the process. Sheila also mentioned her positive experience of CTI and inbound CLID routing. What I want to emphasize is what I said earlier. There's huge room for improvement in most North American Call Centers. The exception to the rule is when we can agree that when we do get lousy service that it should be a memorable event and not the common occurrence that we've come to expect.

**For More Info** on the Global Contact Centre Benchmarking Report: <http://www.ccbenchmarking.com/>

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