

The Virtual Travel Agency

Many call centre managers have dismissed teleworking as 'great in theory but unworkable in practice'. This is the story of how a call centre operation can work entirely with agents working from their homes.

At On-Line Travel, there are 40 travel consultants handling between 400 and 1000 calls per day, mostly from people responding to Teletext advertisements. There is no difference between this and most other travel agencies, except this one has no retail shop and no visible call centre. On-Line Travel is a 'virtual' travel agency, founded in 1997 and flourishing.

In fact, this innovative agency was cited as the fourth fastest growing company in the UK and, competing with 100 other Fast Track companies, won the *Sunday Times/Virgin Atlantic Award for Customer Service*. A similar list compiled 17 years ago in the USA included Microsoft.

Recruitment

David Speakman, chief executive of On-Line Travel. Only employs ABTA-qualified travel consultants. Advertisements are placed in the trade press and applicants are invited to send in their CV's. At this stage a specially adapted psychometric test is completed. "This," states David, "gives us a guide to their personality and offers an insight into their skills, whether they are sales-orientated, team players and/or well disciplined and it flags possible problems that may be financial or personal.

David's objective is to offer the customer an exceptionally high service level, and to boast a zero abandon rate

"We look for people who want to work independently from home for a better quality of life, who enjoy speaking to customers and selling travel, who are disciplined enough to work to schedule and to adhere to our procedures, whilst working within a virtual team."

At this stage issues may be spotted which can then be discussed in detail at a face-to-face interview. The interview also allows the applicants the opportunity to determine the amount of support they will need, and to gain confidence with the company.

Pay and Conditions

Successful consultants need only a telephone. On-Line Travel provides them with all the equipment they need, including a PC and headset. However, as assuery for all the equipment installed in their home, each consultant must pay a £1000 deposit to the company, which is fully refundable when they leave – subject to safe return of the equipment.

The consultants are all full-time and work a minimum number of hours per week. David explained, "They must be professionals, working at least 35 hours per week, as all our posts are full time. This is the ethos of the business – the employees must be fully committed." They are paid monthly, commission only. The consultants are free to choose their own working time, but the company does reserve the right to override their wishes if operational requirements need to be met. However, it is in the consultants' best interests to spread themselves as the number of calls they handle effectively determines their pay. The company advises each new consultant about the best times available.

However, there are no guarantees. And, if a call goes unanswered for 15 seconds, the consultant is automatically barred from receiving another call for a pre-programmed amount of time —say an hour. With commission-only pay, you don't want to risk losing an hour of opportunities by being unavailable for less than a minute.

Events are organised twice a year so everyone can meet up and get to know each other. The main conference last year was part of a three-night cruise. For a small sum, an employee can also bring their spouse. David feels it is important to include spouses, as their support can be so valuable to the employee.

Training and Coaching

All employees are experienced ABTA consultants before they join. Training, therefore focuses on the ethos of the business, customer service, sales techniques and administration procedures. All consultants are given one day's training during the first month, and a second day during the next.

Following this, training is on a needs basis only. There are refresher courses and, if a consultant is experiencing difficulties with conversions, a personal trainer will go out to their home and work with them to resolve the problem.

The consultants are not monitored at the moment, but this facility is available on the system and it is David's intention to use it in the future. At the moment, quality is measured through customer surveys which are sent out regularly.

David is aware that the consultants need daily contact and need strict guidelines. "We impose our standards on the consultants, telling them what we expect. It is more difficult in remote telesales, so the supervisor does a lot of stroking."

Whilst there is no career progression, David believes people join his virtual agency because they want to work from home, but perhaps don't have the right skills to be able to build their own business.

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Many people do want to work from home and for some, it is not the thought of earning buckets of money that motivates them. Some agents, once they have earned the amount they desire in any one month, ask to be taken off the rota.

Obviously the call volume dictates whether or not this is viable. But it proves the point that motivation, for some agents is the better quality of life they can achieve by working from home. Home can be anywhere in the UK.

There is a relatively low drop-out rate – it is mainly those consultants who are unsuccessful with conversions who leave. David is pragmatic: "Not everyone can do telesales. Although training helps, some will never made the grade. Also, when stressed, people become unfocused which adds to the pressure so they do less and less business.

"We try to offer solutions but there is only so much you can do when you are not party to the problem. Because of the distance, we place emphasis on person stroking."

David continued, "You develop a much more personal relationship than in a conventional call centre, you are creating extra bonds because you need to impose yourself more and bring discipline and friendship on a one-to-one basis. They have no other colleagues they only have you to talk with. You can't give their arm a squeeze so it becomes more important to be 'touchy feely' through building a rapport with each one.

David added, "We try to build mutual respect."

At the moment the business is expanding and David is recruiting six new consultants every month. The current profile mix is approximately 60% female, 40% male.

The business is fully covered with blanket insurance and David expects his employees, who are intelligent and fair minded, to be sensible. Homes are not inspected before employment but if there were to be a concern, the personal trainer would visit the consultant.

Technology

The potential customer is attracted by a holiday advertisement on a Teletext page which has its own 0800 number. The caller dials, and on arrival at the call server, is identified and placed in the appropriate queue. The system, GemaTech's 'Remote Service Manager (RSM)' automatically dials up the next available

consultant with appropriate skill sets. The call is programmed to wait in queue for an appropriate agent for a maximum of 15 seconds, at which point it seeks another consultant in that same group. If all such agents are busy, it will overflow to a consultant in another group of skill sets. During this time there is an intercept and music is played to the customer.

However, few customers ever need to wait. David's objective is to offer the customer an exceptionally high service level, and to boast a zero abandon rate. With no fixed labour costs, he can ensure there is always an agent waiting for a call, rather than customer waiting to be answered.

For customers, this is Nirvana. The transfer of calls to the remote agent is seamless and the customer believes they are speaking to an agent with a standard centralised call centre.

Further flexibility is built-in to this system. New consultants can be placed on a lower priority scheduling so that they receive fewer calls during their training period. If desired, calls can also be routed to each customer's own geographical area, to provide the benefit of local knowledge.

RSM can support up to 2048 home workers per unit and receive up to 120 simultaneous calls. It is Windows NT –based with high-speed resource scanning, enabling 100 database look-ups per second and up to 2048 on-call look-ups per second. As the business grows, 255 units can be linked, offering consolidated reporting.

RSM can also work in tandem with existing call centre equipment, and offers unified handling of voice, data, fax, video and ISDN. However, ISDN lines are not mandatory, and remote access diagnostics and configuration further reduce the costs of the company's geographical distribution.

Management Reports

Easy-to-use screens, with colour-coded icons, enable David to monitor the whole system. He finds the system easy to configure and modify, and changes can be made dynamically.

Management data is presented in Excel spreadsheet format and can be manipulated into any design of report for full analysis. Data, such as length of call, etc. is linked to the in-house computer which automatically calculates conversion rates for each agent, together with system averages. The number the customer has called from is stored so the On-Line Travel can contact prospects who are cut off, or who fail to book.

RSM has been in operation at On-Line Travel for one year now. David advises it has exceeded his expectations and yet he knows he is not yet using it to its full potential. It can create workforce schedules, which are currently produced manually. Using the system, agents would be able to complete their own rosters remotely and add them into the system, which would save time and improve efficiency.

With solid support from GemaTech who sold, installed and continue to maintain the equipment, David is happy that RSM, which enabled him to set up his virtual business, will now help him to grow it.

***Report by Janette Menday,
Editor Call Centre Focus***

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