

Sales, Service, or Efficiency?

Rethink this marketing triangle at your call center.

By Ron Volper

Sales, customer service, or efficiency: Your hotel company may have established its call center to accomplish only one of these goals and may be needlessly excluding the other two. Perhaps your company has emphasized one or another of these goals at different times. You may have variously instructed your call center agents to handle calls quickly, and, therefore, it is presumed, efficiently. Later, you may have directed them to "sell" all callers; at another time, you may have emphasized customer service as the priority.

The truth is that the distinction between sales, service, and efficiency is an artificial one. Customers don't think in those terms, and neither should reservation agents. Effective call centers should be geared to identifying and successfully meeting the needs of different types of callers. The key is to provide reservation agents with the skills to identify the caller who is shopping for lodging services. These are the ones to convert into actual customers, instead of callers who are simply on the line to request information—"Does your hotel have a sauna?"

Call center agents, who have undergone an effective training program, are able to select and employ successfully a

series of communication and sales skills to do this. The premise behind such training is simple: Study the behaviors of top-performing salespeople, break down their content, and then teach those behaviors to call center agents, using the most stimulating, informative, and memorable training methods possible.

Needs-Oriented Selling

A training program to improve performance at your call center should be comprehensive and designed to develop agents' abilities to increase conversions,

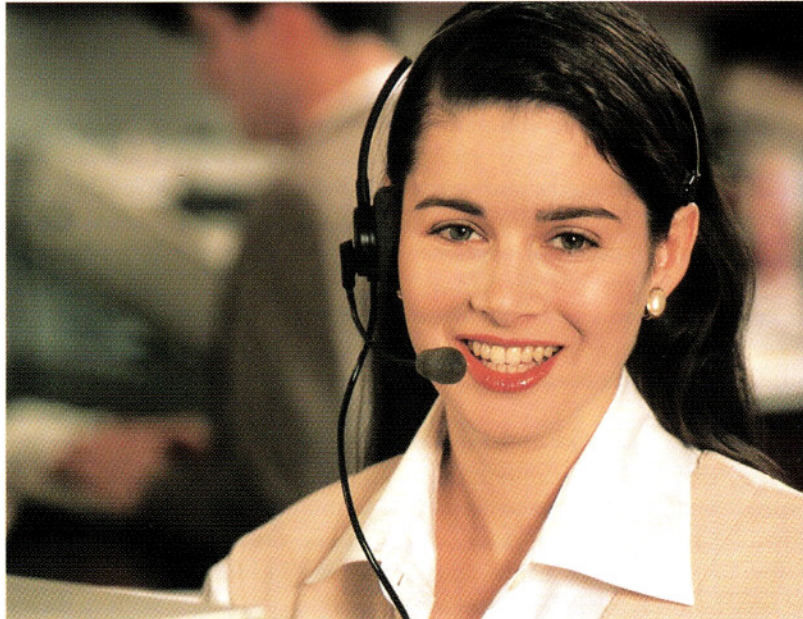
should hinge on helping agents develop the communications and sales skills required to accomplish this objective.

Agent "Deprogramming"

Before agents can learn new skills, they often must unlearn elements of previous training. For example, agents have often been told to stay "productive" by keeping call-processing time down to around 180 seconds. They may have also been urged to keep to tightly controlled scripts. These directives keep agents focused on sticking to procedures, rather than encouraging them to focus on callers and to use their judgment to identify and meet customer needs. In this environment, too little effort may have been spent on developing the communication skills that are at the heart of successful agent/customer interactions.

Robots or Humans?

Information technology has enabled industries of all types to streamline and automate many of their processes, and to do far more with fewer employees. In particular, high-technology has challenged service industries to think through the trade-off that comes from sacrificing human contact for automation. Automatic check in and check out; voice mail, electronic message centers, and phone trees; computerized call centers: All enable agents to log and process calls rapidly: All these advances improve productivity, but they sometimes run the risk of dehumanizing what is supposed to be, by definition, a hospitable and human interaction. Competitive hospitality companies are achieving the balance between employing enabling tech-



and to provide the highest levels of service and efficiency. The results will be improved productivity in the form of increased sales, happier customers, and high call productivity that does not sacrifice quality. Better trained, more skilled agents will experience less tedium and increased job satisfaction. To achieve these benefits, the central goal of the training program should be to focus call center employees on the purpose of the center, which is needs-oriented selling. This means developing the capability to identify and satisfy the different needs of various callers. The rest of the training