

Running a Small Call Center

Launching a Call Center

Big businesses establish call centers to manage their customer contacts, give support, handle orders, drum up new business and retain customers by providing good service. Those are the same compelling reasons why small and midsize businesses start call centers. Outsourcing your call center needs is one option, but many businesses are choosing to keep it in-house to keep a close eye on training and quality.

Calling on Technology

You don't need an office the size of a football field and heaps of complex equipment to launch your call center operations. Technology geared for growing companies is both powerful and affordable. Toshiba's Strata CIX solution is an example of what to look for in a contact center application. It runs on a network server and features advanced Automatic Call Distribution, PC and CRM integration, call recording and skills-based routing to get the call to the person who can handle it best. A Strata CIX system can accommodate call centers with just a few agents with plenty of scalability for growth, and can also handle larger operations.

Call center equipment includes software, hardware, desktop applications, and lots of options that let you customize the way you want your call center to work. You can save some headaches when shopping for gear by purchasing a complete call center solution from the same vendor. Besides advanced contact center software, Toshiba also offers IP telephones, desktop call control applications, video collaboration tools, voice mail systems and servers designed to work flawlessly with its call center applications. A virtual call center is another option that can work well for small and midsize businesses. This solution uses unified customer communications to route calls and let employees access specific customer information. You provide computers and telephone equipment, while the call center application is delivered over the Web. A virtual call center frees you from the restraints of maintaining a central physical location; workers can be anywhere and still handle their calls.

Training Wheels

Your first step to happy customers is having well-trained call center employees. Training involves learning the technology tools, understanding the goals of your business, and honing customer interaction skills. Arrange clearly scheduled training times for your workers and don't rush the process. You may find that traditional classroom-style training works best or that e-learning delivered through the Web or from your internal server resonates well with younger employees. Training doesn't end when an employee takes his or her first live call. Employee monitoring can help you pinpoint future training needs and provide ongoing coaching to improve the call center experience. Put your workers in a position to succeed and keep customer service levels high even as new employees join the call center.

Employee Retention

Employee turnover is the bane of any call center's existence. Follow these tips to keep your valuable call center employees happy, motivated and productive.

- Flexible scheduling is an important perk that your workers will appreciate. This is especially key for call centers that work around the clock or through weekends and holidays.
- Nobody wants to feel like fodder for a job mill. Invest time in building up your workers by emphasizing employee growth, teamwork, performance bonuses and opportunities to move up the ladder.
- Welcome employee feedback and give feedback in return. Let your workers know that you appreciate them by listening to (and acting on) their concerns. Give regular performance evaluations and make time to interact with your employees on a personal level.
- Allowing call center agents to work from home can be a smart way to attract and retain skilled workers. This can be an especially powerful recruiting tool when you need to hire technically knowledgeable workers for customer support positions.