

Improving Customer Contact Quality

An Extract from Call Quality Practices 2009

Call quality monitoring is one of the most effective methods for improving the level of service you provide to your customers. Call quality monitoring refers to the process of listening to or observing an agent's phone conversations or other multi-media contacts with customers.

While companies can measure customer satisfaction through customer focus groups, customer contact follow-up telephone surveys, and written satisfaction surveys, the results are often not timely enough or detailed enough to help individual agents understand their impact or contribution. A call monitoring session on the other hand, if done correctly, can instantly deliver a wealth of customer information, gauge individual agent performance and reveal a lot about your business processes and policies. Not only can it improve the customer experience, it can also improve overall call center performance, reduce callbacks, focus training efforts, identify process improvement opportunities, and facilitate employee development.

The industry has witnessed a proliferation of call-monitoring technology, as companies search for ways to make the call monitoring process more efficient. Industry consolidation has reconfigured vendor offerings and combined technologies to provide more robust solutions. Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) is also opening new doors. Recent incarnations include technologies that mine call data for keywords and others that interpret speech patterns and evaluate calls without human intervention. More features are being incorporated into technology solutions for call monitoring, making these systems more attractive to call center management and more challenging to implement.

Many companies have created specialized Quality Assurance groups to monitoring agent performance, in an effort to supplement supervisory effort or offload some of the burden. There are advantages and disadvantages that must be understood.

New technology and dedicated QA groups have made it possible to conduct more monitoring sessions per month per employee than were possible in the past. Has this led to higher customer satisfaction, improved call center performance, or more effective agents? Our survey reveals that there are no guarantees. Some companies have experienced great success while others are struggling. As most have found, call quality assurance is a highly complex process—from both a people and technology standpoint.

Quality Monitoring programs can be challenged by many factors, including:

- Difficulty in designing evaluation criteria
- Lack of buy-in or credibility
- Insufficient resources or time
- Lack of automation or poor system reliability or support
- Inadequate training for coaches and supervisors
- Inconsistent evaluation results

- Lack of support from management

Study Findings & Observations

With all this in mind, the Ascent Group's conducted research during mid 2009 to better understand how companies are monitoring the quality of customer calls and other customer transactions. We asked companies to share their call monitoring experiences to help us identify the practices that make or break a quality monitoring process. We also asked them to provide their plans moving forward as well as lessons learned along the way. The Ascent Group received 102 valid survey responses from a diverse group of companies representing 14 industries and 19 countries. The results of this research are contained in our latest report, *Call Quality Practices 2009*. For more information about this report, visit our website www.ascentgroup.com.

Companies who have implemented call quality programs have realized significant improvement in call quality, customer satisfaction, employee performance, and overall call center performance. Companies report specific improvement in call quality ranging from two-to-six percent. Attributed gains in customer satisfaction ranged from five to twelve percent. Some report significant reduction in failure rates, handle time, and callbacks. Other improvements mentioned included: higher first call resolution, fewer customer complaints, fewer errors, improved overall call quality, improved service level, reduced turnover, and higher employee morale.

Emphasize the Customer Experience

Call quality monitoring must be reflective of customer value and expectations—it must truly measure the customer experience. Measuring the customer experience is the primary purpose of a call quality monitoring process. Do you know what your customers' expect? If you don't then find out through customer research—interviews, focus groups, expectations surveys, or even calibration sessions—take the time and spend the money to understand how customers' want to be served. Keep in mind that expectations vary from segment to segment and that expectations change over time. Calibrating your call quality program with customer expectations is an ongoing effort.

Call quality monitoring is a performance measurement tool. Like any measurement tool, you have to be careful about what you are measuring. While the measurement process in and of itself produces change, you'll also want to make sure you're measuring the right behaviors.

What are the right behaviors?

If call quality is intended to measure the customer experience, make sure your evaluation measures represent your customers' expectations, not what you think is important to your customers. This is one of the biggest mistakes made. Measuring call quality through call monitoring is a labor-intensive process; it's also high risk, in terms of human factors. Call monitoring is a key determinant of stress in call centers—especially if it's perceived as being inaccurate, untimely, too frequent, or too intense. So in other words, if you're not truly measuring what customers' value then you might just be wasting your time (and money) and placing your agents under undue stress.

Don't just guess. Find out what your customers' expect through customer research—interviews, focus groups, expectations surveys, or even calibration sessions—take the time and spend the money to understand how customers want to be served. Keep in mind that expectations vary from segment to segment and that expectations change over time.

Take this a step further to make sure your evaluation form is consistent with your routine customer satisfaction research. If possible monitor the same calls that are surveyed by your customer satisfaction surveys. While this may be cost prohibitive to gain enough sample points to measure to the agent level, it's possible to survey and monitor enough calls to measure the consistency of your center.

Consider tracking first call resolution through your call quality evaluations as well as your customer satisfaction surveys. First call resolution may be one of the best predictors of customer satisfaction. First call resolution is most simply what the customer wants—to have the problem or question resolved satisfactorily on the first try, if possible. Achieving high first call resolution is a wonderful scenario—customers are happier, employees are happier, and management is happier. Why? Repeat calls are down, rework is minimized, employees are talking to happy customers, and operating costs are lower. Find out if your customers think their issues and questions are being resolved on the first contact by asking them on your customer satisfaction surveys and at the end of your phone conversations.

When first call resolution is measured through customer survey and call quality forms you can get a better understanding of your service delivery performance—from the customer's viewpoint. It's a way to take your call quality program to the next level.

Calibrating your call quality program with customer expectations is an ongoing effort. In a perfect world, CRM (Customer Relationship Management) and mass customization techniques should keep close tabs on customer service quality expectations.

How Many Calls?

Most companies have no basis for the number of calls monitored per agent, rather relying on a set number of calls to monitor, per employee, as determined by management or past history. Other companies determine the sample size based on the number of available call monitoring resources—i.e. number of calls that can be monitored based on existing call monitoring personnel. Fifteen percent of participants have selected sample size based on industry or “best practice” research. While another 15 percent determine sample size from traditional statistical tables, such that the results are statistically significant and within a set confidence level.

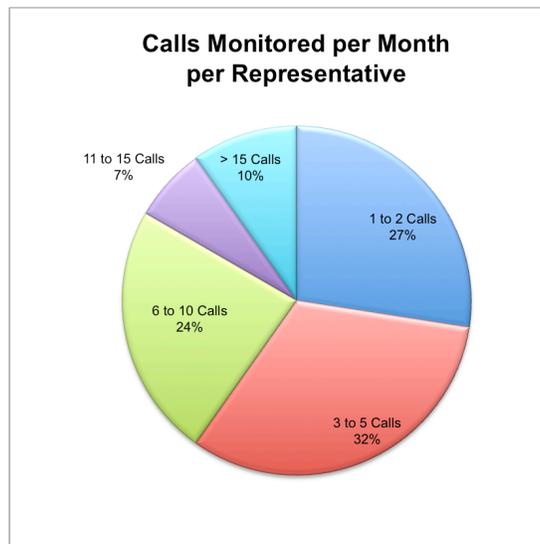
How frequently should call quality be measured? The answer depends upon a lot of factors:

- How well is the employee prepared to do the job?
- How well do your agents understand the process and the measurements?
- How calibrated are your evaluators? Measuring consistently? Fairly? Capturing performance?
- How good is your feedback? Can employees relate and have faith in the scoring? See how they can change their behavior to improve?

- Does regulation or a bargaining unit agreement restrict your organization? Make sure you comply with your labor contract or local legislation.
- How many can you do? Do you have a system to help record calls? Track performance?
- How close are employees to standard? How far does their behavior have to change to meet expectations?

Call quality monitoring is all about changing behavior. Studies have shown there is little correlation between employee tenure and quality scores. Behavior varies based on employee skill level, experiences, and motivation. The goal is to help employees achieve a level of “unconscious competence” in their customer interactions through training, measurement, feedback, and rewards.

Study participants vary widely on the number of calls monitored per month per representative. As a group, participants average 6.3 monitoring sessions per month per agent.



Respondents with dedicated Quality Assurance (QA) resources monitor two to three more calls per month per agent than companies that do not. Participants that rely on call monitoring software, on average, monitor about two more calls per month than those without such systems, indicating an advantage to both QA groups and specialized software, in terms of increasing the volume of calls monitored per month.

No single call monitoring technique will always meet the needs of your agents or your operation. Participants in our research reported using a combination of side-by-side monitoring and silent or remote monitoring through live or recorded calls. Several stressed the need to keep in touch with employees through side-by-side sessions. QA groups tend to rely on remote monitoring using recorded voice and data while supervisors conduct more traditional live monitoring sessions—using silent and side-by-side techniques.

Use a combination of techniques and let the technology assist you where it can. Technology isn't the solution to these challenges—it's only an enabler. Your call quality process must be sound with or without the technology.

Enforce Desired Behaviors

Routinely communicate performance expectations and results—Do as much as possible to relay performance expectations to employees. The more an employee understands about the job, the work environment, performance expectations, and culture, the better they will be able to achieve or exceed standard. Revise new employee training content so the appropriate performance expectations are conveyed from the start. Communicate performance routinely and look for ways to make your performance results more accessible to employees and supervisors, through daily reporting, performance dashboards, or DIY reporting.

Online performance measurement tools and dashboards improve communications of performance results to front-line employees. Online, browser-based graphical comparisons make it easy for employees, supervisors, and management to gauge performance. Keeping performance results visible highlights importance and encourages commitment.

Recognize the right behaviors and communicate such that the employee's behavior becomes a model within the work group. Sharing information on expected behaviors and rewards will establish trust. Employees will be able to understand what they need to do to be similarly recognized. Reward these behaviors so other employees are inclined to follow suit. Rewards are a better reinforcement of learning and risk-taking than punishment is for failure.

Recognition is about acknowledgement and appreciation for a contribution, improvement, innovation, or excellence—a message to employees that they are valued. The act of recognizing an employee affirms the values and spirit underlying the achievement. It's also about reinforcing desired behaviors and increasing their occurrence. Attitude and performance are closely linked; the appropriate recognition at the appropriate moment will create a positive attitude that, in turn, will lead to improved performance.

Match the reward to the person and the achievement. Talk to employees at all levels, in all job categories, to understand expectations and drivers of performance. Identify meaningful rewards for each employee. One size does not fit all in employee rewards and recognition. Provide a choice of rewards to accommodate all employees. Also make sure the reward is appropriate for the deed that the evaluation process is fair and objective.

Nearly all participants are including monitoring performance as a component in the annual review process. This practice emphasizes the importance of good monitoring performance to employees. Incorporate Call Quality Results into Employee Compensation and Incentive Plans. Include agent call quality performance as a component in the annual review process—as a basis for compensation and rewards. As with any measure, be careful to balance with other measures to make sure all around good performance is delivered and service isn't compromised in the pursuit of the best measure. Make sure your evaluation criteria are flexible enough that agents can make the right decisions for each caller.

Utilize Call Quality results to drive improvement at all levels. Measure call quality by call type, by agent, by team, by work group to gather as much information about your customer service delivery as possible. Examine process flow, technologies, work rules, and policy to highlight roadblocks, hurdles, and other quality of service deterrents. Look at trends to identify training opportunities for the group and individual.

Prepare Your Coaches

Are you providing timely, consistent, and constructive feedback to your call center representatives? You may have customer-driven evaluation criteria and a jam-up call monitoring and reporting system, but your supervisors are not adequately prepared to deliver the message.

Our survey indicated that nearly thirty percent of our participants do not measure coaching performance. Even fewer participants have coaching certification programs, formal or even informal coaching training, or even assessment tools to identify prospective coaches from the ranks. The process of selecting a coach appears to be largely the process of promoting representatives with the best performance statistics, attendance, and attitude.

Are you sure you're selecting the right employees to become coaches? Are your supervisors or coaches prepared to deliver your call quality results, in such a manner to effect positive change? Once again, there is a lot at stake—not only time and money, but also the respect of your front-line. Teach your supervisors how to coach and reinforce your commitment by evaluating coaching performance. Ask their team members about their coaching skills, it's one more evaluation perspective, encourages employee involvement, and an easy way to keep the lines of communication open between employees and management.

Proper coaching training is critical to the success of your call-monitoring program. A quality monitoring program is only as good as the feedback provided to representatives. Without good feedback, there is little point in monitoring call performance. Relaying feedback during a coaching session is an excellent approach, provided the coaching is constructive, timely, and relevant to results. Not all employees have the inherent skills to become good coaches. Time and experience as a representative does not necessarily develop the required coaching skills—employees must be trained. If you are going to take the time to monitor call quality, take the time to develop and implement a proper training program to ensure that your supervisors, trainers, managers, and QA personnel are equipped to provide constructive feedback and developmental guidance.

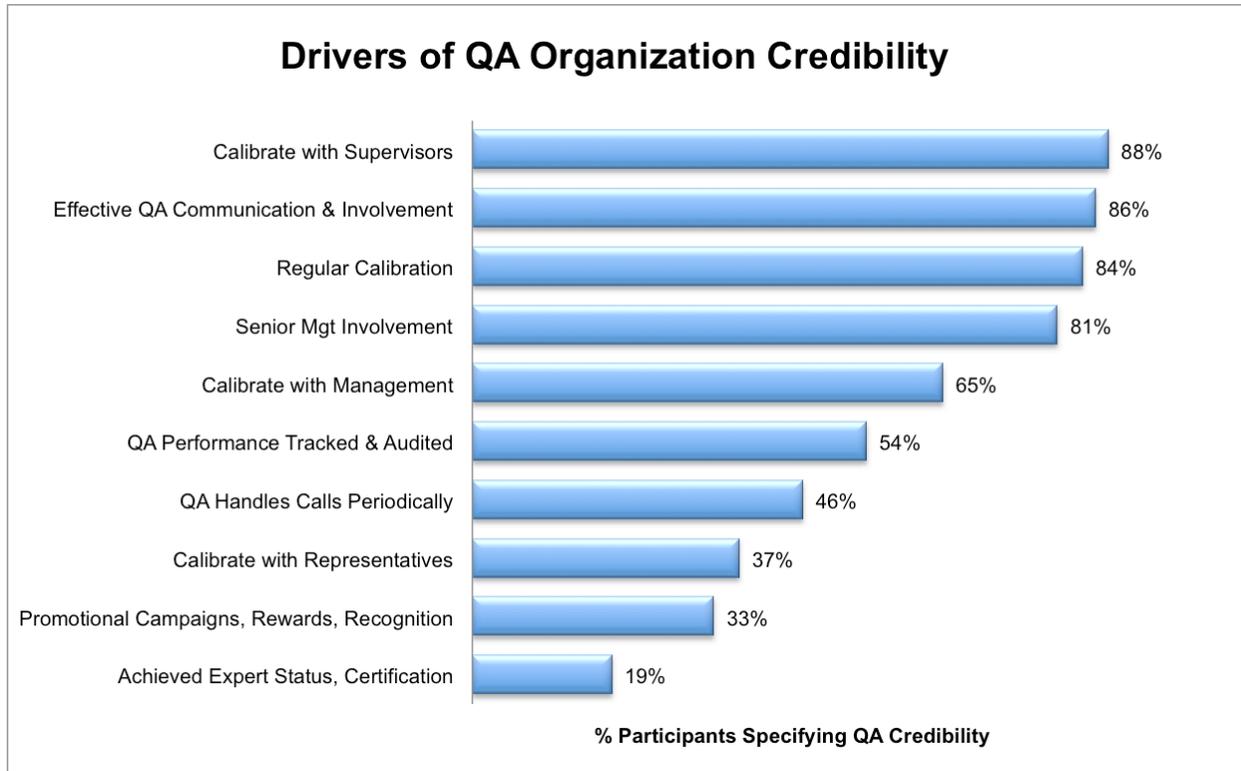
Develop and evaluate coaching performance. To get the most out of your monitoring results, ensure that your coaches are adequately coaching employees. Time and experience as a representative does not necessarily develop coaching skills—employees who want to move into supervision must be developed.

Many customer service organizations have not taken the time to establish a formal supervisory (coach) training program. As a result, employee development, performance and morale suffer. Our research shows that many companies have no process in place for training and developing coaches or supervisors. To make matters worse, forty-percent of our participants do not measure supervisory performance.

Customer service leaders take the time to develop and implement a proper training program to ensure that supervisors, trainers, managers, and QA personnel are equipped to provide constructive feedback and developmental guidance. Develop and evaluate coaching performance, including performance measures to track team progress and performance and hold coaches and supervisors accountable for their team's improvement.

Keys to Credibility

Calibration with Supervisors and effective QA communication and involvement are the top two key drivers of QA organization credibility.



Other drivers mentioned frequently: regular calibration, senior management involvement, calibration with management, and the auditing and tracking of QA group performance.

Some companies reported that they require QA employees to spend time answering incoming calls each week or periodically, in order to keep them in tune with the front-line's perspective. Others calibrate periodically with representatives or rotate representatives into the Quality organization as both a development tool and to foster a hands-on understanding of the monitoring process.

Calibration is essential to ensure consistency and build confidence in call monitoring results. The best way to gain consensus on a call is to design the proper review criteria and then test it over and over. These new systems facilitate this process by streamlining the selection, capture, and presentation of calls and data. Group discussions comparing and discussing results help to focus and clarify the not so easy task of judging performance, and they also build confidence and consistency. Calibrate until all members conform to standard.

Monitor the call monitors routinely to build consistency, confidence, and monitoring skills. One sure way to improve monitoring skills and bolster confidence is to monitor the individuals responsible for call monitoring—listen to the calls they evaluate, compare evaluations, and coach. This technique instills accountability and offers the opportunity for continual improvement.

Be sure to educate agents on the monitoring processes—especially how calibration sessions develop consistency and how monitors are held accountable for the evaluations they render. The measures and the measurement process must be meaningful to employees so they are encouraged to change their behaviors. Consider rotating seasoned representatives into a monitoring role to cross-train and provide first-hand experience with the process. Include representatives and supervisors in calibration sessions to further educate them on the process. Track and promote the successes you've achieved as a result of your monitoring efforts.

Commit to Your Program

Commit the resources to adequately monitor, evaluate, and discuss results. Effective call monitoring is all about commitment of resources. If providing regular, fair, and timely feedback is a challenge for your organization or if your supervisors are always pressed for time, consider setting up an in-house quality assurance group. There are also outsourcing options available—companies that specialize in call quality monitoring. Contracted monitoring services can be provided on-site or remotely, based on your specifications and standards.

The latest generation of automated monitoring solutions offers tremendous advantages over traditional live monitoring or analog recording. While prices are quite hefty for these systems, increased supervisor productivity, shortened talk times, better customer system usage, more targeted training, higher quality service, and elimination of analog tapes and tape storage concerns are pretty strong payback arguments. Keep in mind that this is just another tool for your call center's toolbox. As with any system, it has to be supported by sound management and effective work practices. It should be implemented as a tool and not as a weapon. The most wonderful monitoring system in the world will do no good without agent buy-in and supervisor coaching. If agents are involved in the selection, design, and implementation of the system, the monitoring process will be much more successful and less stressful.

All in all, the opportunities presented through effective call monitoring make it an essential management technique for today's call center organizations. Make sure you do it right. If you don't, the impact could be much worse than if you hadn't attempted it in the first place.

About The Ascent Group, Inc.

The Ascent Group, Inc. is a management-consulting firm that specializes in customer service operations and improvement, performance benchmarking, competitive benchmarking, work management, and industry research.

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The Ascent Group is currently researching Billing & Payment Programs and Credit & Collection Practices. If you are interested in participating in our research, please contact Christine Kozlosky at ckk@ascentgroup.com or (888) 749-0001.

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