

Preparing for holiday customer care



By [Megan Webb-Morgan](#)

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According to the National Retail Foundation's retail sales forecast for 2012, holiday sales this year will reach approximately US\$586.1 billion, an increase of 4.1% over last year. This increase in sales means that your call centre should have an influx of customer contacts over the course of the holiday season.

In order to handle this increased volume of sales, support requests, and questions, your call centre needs to prepare its employees through the use of special training, communication, and technology.

Technology

Now is the time to make sure that your call centre technology is up to the task of handling holiday call volume. Not only should your call centre software be up to date, but IVR systems and call-back will be important as well.

- Test your IVR and switchboard systems for errors, inconsistencies, or misinformation.
- Consider utilising callback technology to let customers choose what time an agent can call them back to answer their question. This helps your agents to spread out call volume throughout the day, rather than in spikes during peak times, and helps customers to be more satisfied by minimizing hold times.

Training

Your call centre representatives are used to the regular, everyday types of questions they receive throughout the year - but the needs of customers change during holiday season and your employees need to anticipate those new needs.

Brainstorm what kinds of questions your agents are likely to hear during the holiday season - such as those regarding specific product information, shipping and gift wrap inquiries, and holiday promotions. Create a list of holiday FAQ's and distribute it on your website and amongst your employees.

- Regular employees: To help out with increased call volume, you can cross-train your employees to handle holiday-related questions, escalating customers to dedicated call agents only when additional steps or expertise necessary.
- Seasonal employees: Make sure that any temporary employees you hire to handle the holiday rush are put through a rigorous training process before manning the phones. The quality of your customer service is especially important during the holidays, so don't skimp on training.
- Home agents: An alternative to hiring new seasonal workers is to hire professional home agents with more experience with call centre operations. Keep the quality of your customer care high by preventing the errors and unprofessional

mistakes caused by unskilled agents.

Communication

Communication is an integral part of not only training, but managing your call centre and customers as a whole. Effective communication to your employees keeps them abreast of special product promotions, special information, and anticipated customer needs.

- You should also have a plan in place for proactively communicating with your customers when an issue with your products or services is identified. Rather than waiting for confused customers to call in an issue, cut them off at the pass by posting information on your website, in your email marketing blasts, and even in your IVR system. The better you communicate with your customers, the faster they will be satisfied and the easier it will be to manage call spikes.
- Make sure that your customers know if and when your call centre will be unavailable during the holidays. Anticipate last-minute callers by extending your hours and services during the holidays.

The holiday season produces a perfect storm of issues for your call centre: not only does the volume of calls drastically increase, but so does the importance of maintaining quality customer service. Falling flat on holiday customer service can negatively impact your entire year.

Make sure that your agents are trained for the holiday rush, that you have procedures in place to effectively communicate, and that your technology is ready for the seasonal call volume.

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