5 Tips to Avoid the Customer Service Holiday Hangover

The holidays are a crazy time. Many businesses are understaffed, underprepared and must fight out of the weeds after the holidays with high-call volumes, backlogs and an influx of gift returns.

Most brands typically wish they were just a little more proactive in getting their processes and systems in order before the holiday rush to eliminate that post-holiday hangover.

If this sounds familiar, this might be the year for your team to get ahead of the curve and solve any issues that usually arise in your post-holiday retrospective.

Here are 5 tips to help you avoid some of the biggest challenges this holiday season.

1 Get Your Help Center in Order

Not only does your help center give your customers access to easy, quick information, the benefits of a well-oiled help center machine to the business itself are equally as important. If set up correctly before the holidays, your help center can lower inbound requests and increase efficiency, all while keeping customers happy during the holiday rush and improving overall satisfaction. Not to mention, a solid help center will improve overall website SEO.

Ideas:

Try and get your help center performing on all cylinders before the holiday season by creating a hierarchy of answers, making sure your search function is working properly and ensuring your FAQ's and help center are easily accessible on your website.

Check out these other tips and tricks to optimize your help center ahead of the holiday season.

2 Update Your IVR

High call volumes are a common reality for brands, especially during holiday sales. When it comes to getting answers for current questions, it's the phone that customers typically turn to first. The unfortunate side effect is a long wait time for customers on the phone, while your other channels lay (relatively) idle.

If you're like many retail brands it might be time to go past the 'Dial #0 for customer support' and investigate updating your IVR (Interactive Voice Response). IVRs usually provide generic information that apply to any customer—like store locations or opening hours. But taking your IVR further, so it provides information specific to the customer calling in, means they can get their questions answered themselves, without having to speak to an agent at all.

If set up correctly, an IVR has the potential to save your company money and delight customers, by lowering inbound requests, increase agent efficiency and keep up with customers' expectations.

Ideas:

Try personalizing your customers' IVR journey based on the information you have on their purchase history. For the best IVR experience, give customers the option to switch between channels from voice to chat without losing the conversation. And if all else fails, consider migrating to a customer-centric support platform like Gladly.

Check out this blog post to see the many ways you can create a modern IVR experience this holiday season.

3 Get Your Agents Thinking Revenue

Customer experience teams are typically so focused around resolving issues during the holidays that they sometimes forget it is also the best time to sell. Not only are customers shopping for others, they are also shopping for themselves which can lead to an even greater revenue generation opportunity.

The idea of closing sales over your support channels may seem impossible, but it can be done. You'll just need to make sure you've put in the work before the thick of the holidays to make sure your agents are on board. See how a well-known retail brand was able to turn their contact center team into a revenue-generating one and how you can too.

Ideas:
Try giving your contact center sales training before the holidays so they know their options for upselling during their customers interactions. You can also structure incentives around sales or make checkout that much easier for customers.

Here are more ideas if you're looking into turning your contact center into a revenue generator this season.

4 Turn Gift Returns into Natural Exchanges

We all know that gift returns take a lot of time to process after the holidays. When you know a customer's purchase history and preferences you can help mitigate lost revenue from returns. By understanding their likes and dislikes, your agents can suggest alternative products they know your customers will love while in the middle of processing a return. That way, instead of paying the costs of shipping the return box, you can put that towards the costs of shipping a new item.

Ideas:
Returns after the holidays can be a nightmare and not to mention, a revenue killer. When a customer reaches out looking to make a return for winter coat they purchased, and it didn't work out for them, your agents can offer a similar style from the winter sale that they know the customer will love—even offering a discount for the replacement item to make the idea of an exchange a no-brainer.

⑤ Make Sure You Are Forecasting Staffing Needs

As the holidays get closer you may be already thinking about staffing needs. You'll most likely need a lot more agents than you currently have, and you'll want them to be trained and up to speed to support ecommerce over the holidays.

Just keep in mind that ticket-based customer service platforms typically artificially inflate the work that needs to be done for customer service agents, which can artificially inflate your staffing needs. With a more customer-centric approach, you'll (most likely) need less staff which, in turn, saves your team money.

Ideas:

Look through last year's data and get a sense of what days and times you should be overstaffed vs understaffed. Also, keep in mind that when 3 different agents are handling 3 different tickets, you're effectively tripling the time it would take the one agent to handle all 3 questions in one go— that's three agents having to read the customer's email (or gather information from the phone call), provide three separate responses, and take any follow-up action needed (eg. checking with the warehouse team for inventory). A customer-centric approach here will make your agents much more efficient and reduce your staffing needs.

For today's companies, being able to move the needle from satisfied customers to loyal ones is going to be key to long-term survival— especially during the holidays. And it all comes down to building connections and relationships with your customers that makes them choose you over everyone else, every time.

Interested in more information about creating a great customer service experience over the holidays? Check out our guide, 4 Steps to Unwrapping an Online Experience that Rivals In-store and blog, 5 Ways to Create an Unforgettable Holiday Experience for Your Customers.