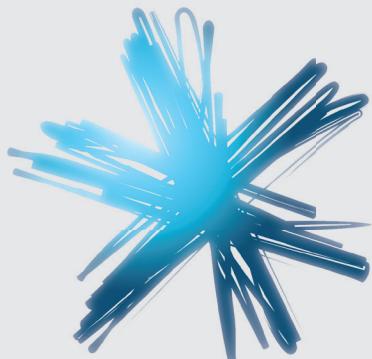




CASE STUDY



telecom^{nz}

CASE STUDY: Increasing Call Center Efficiency & Customer Loyalty

How Telecom New Zealand's initiative to align communication approaches with customer thinking preferences generated a 12x return on the investment.

OBJECTIVE:

To increase call center efficiency and customer loyalty by reducing call-back rates.

Telecom New Zealand is New Zealand's largest provider of Information and Communications Technology, delivering a range of internet, data, voice, mobile and fixed-line calling services throughout Australasia. Like other telcos the world over, Telecom New Zealand relies on call centers to support customers, introduce them to new offerings and generate leads.

With call centers playing such a crucial role in the overall business's success, Telecom New Zealand continually works to find new and better ways to improve call center operating efficiency and deliver better customer service. One issue the company began focusing on is customer call backs, or subsequent calls, which occur when a customer who has dealt with one person and had their problem "resolved" then calls back to talk further with another person. Ultimately, these calls can have a major impact on call center costs and usually indicate a process or communication breakdown.

Call center efficiency and customer satisfaction are closely intertwined. Research suggests that customers whose needs have been well met by call center operatives are better satisfied with their experience of the company and, ultimately, cost the company less. This applies even if the call takes longer: While average call times matter, it's not time on the call that counts; it's finding the best way of closing out the customer's question while they are on that initial call. It's this focus on assessing call center performance from the customer's perspective, rather than simply measuring call times, that Telecom New Zealand believes puts it ahead of the competition and will keep it there.

With call center efficiency and customer satisfaction so closely connected, management projected that a 20% reduction in call-backs in one year, followed by increased reductions in subsequent years, would raise customer loyalty by approximately 28 percent. Ultimately, Telecom New Zealand identified three goals for the initiative:

- lift the capability of center operatives
- reduce call-back rates
- improve customer satisfaction



CHALLENGES:

To help call center operatives address customers' emotional as well as technical needs.

In tracking customer call-backs, Telecom New Zealand found that the root of the problem wasn't always immediately clear.

"Our people were doing all we expected from them," says Helen Stockdale, a project manager for the call center team. "They were meeting their performance goals. They were following scripts prepared for them. They were reading through the checklists and achieving their KPIs. But the feedback from customers was not what we expected."

In many instances, it wasn't a technical issue that prompted the call-back. In fact, the company's research showed that 24 percent of subsequent calls (representing many hundreds of thousands of calls each year) are made because customers somehow did not feel that their emotional needs were being met.

This disconnect was affecting internal morale as well. "These were people who wanted to do well and tried really hard," says Jenny McGregor, another call center project manager, "but they just weren't making the connection with some people."

As part of the planning process, the company focused on developing measures to reduce the reasons customers have to call, reducing the call-back rate and reducing the overall time spent on calls. Learning to give each customer the right amount of time would be particularly important. In all, thirteen initiatives were identified to reduce call volume.

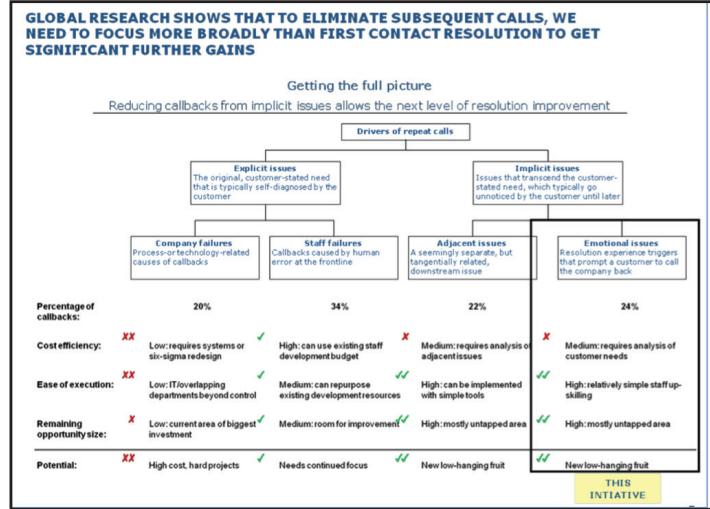


SOLUTIONS:

Giving staff the awareness, tools, skills and coaching to identify and align their communication approaches with customer thinking preferences.

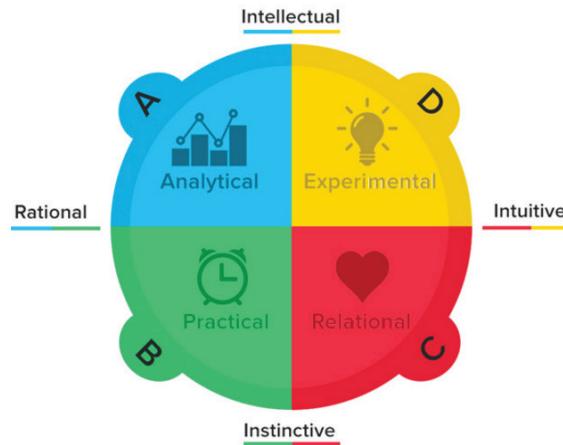
"We can embed Whole Brain® Thinking into our business—in business planning, performance measurement, training, coaching, agent materials and problem solving. That's what ensures the long-term sustainability of our investment."
— Sue Atkins, Project Sponsor, Telecom New Zealand

Following a model used by the international Call Center industry body, the Contact Center Council, and based on global call center research data (see figure 1), the management team analyzed possible options, from technology solutions to process reengineering. They rapidly came to the conclusion that resolving the customer's emotional issues was a clear winner in terms of cost implications, ease of execution, opportunity size and overall potential. This decision was reinforced by the findings of a study by UK insurer Bradford and Bingley, which found that by up-skilling agents to understand different personality profiles, repeat calls were reduced and customer loyalty increased without affecting call handle times.



*Source:
Breaking the Issue Resolution Barrier: Shifting from First Contact Resolution to Next Issue Avoidance. Contact Center Council, October 2007

From this perspective, Herrmann International's Whole Brain® Model was identified as the ideal solution. The company would start by helping call center operatives understand their own thinking preferences, via the Herrmann Brain Dominance Instrument® (HBDI®) assessment, which defines and describes a person's preferences for thinking across each of the four quadrants of the Whole Brain® Model.



The four-color, four-quadrant graphic and Whole Brain® are registered trademarks of Herrmann Global, LLC. © 2015 Herrmann Global, LLC

The Herrmann Whole Brain Model

They would learn how thinking preferences influence needs and expectations as well as the most effective ways of communicating with people based on their preferences. Using the skill of Whole Brain® Thinking, call center staff would then be able to tailor their interactions to better meet each customer's emotional needs.

Telecom New Zealand also understood the full potential of Whole Brain® Thinking as a business transformation solution. The project's sponsor, Sue Atkins, a certified Herrmann Practitioner, described the Whole Brain® Model to her colleagues as a learning and development tool centered around accelerating the quality of thinking and communications to improve business performance. This aligns perfectly with the outcomes we want to drive through this initiative," she says.

Moreover, the company recognized that through Herrmann International's network, it would have access to global experience, thought leadership and extensive tools and materials to assist in shaping its ongoing management programs and initiatives.

"We can embed Whole Brain® Thinking into our business—in business planning, performance measurement, training, coaching, agent materials and problem solving," says Atkins. "That's what ensures the long-term sustainability of our investment."

Using Whole Brain® Thinking to Find Common Ground

Lindsey Marshall, Sales and Marketing Manager for Herrmann International Asia, was tasked with facilitating training to address the fundamental disconnect between those who contact a call center and those who work there. Because the thinking preferences of callers are often diametrically opposed to the preferences of those answering the call (who are typically more technically inclined and analytical in their approach than the callers themselves), Marshall worked with the operatives to help them use Whole Brain® Thinking to cross that divide.

During the training, staff learned how to identify thinking preferences over the phone through the caller's choice of language and sentence structure as well as the tonality they use.

"Because call center operatives can't see the people they are speaking with, auditory and linguistic cues take on far greater importance," Marshall says. "Often, you only get a single cue as to how the caller prefers to think and be spoken to. If you're not prepared, you may miss it."



Prior to the introduction of the Whole Brain® approach, staff paid less attention to the caller's language use and tonality and more to a canned script. Learning to listen more acutely and apply Whole Brain® Thinking would allow them to provide better responses that aligned more with the customer's emotional needs and thinking preferences as opposed to just responding with a pre-determined answer in a script.

Herrmann International also examined and analyzed transcripts of successful and less successful calls using the HBDI® Text Profile. This data revealed that successful calls tended to be those in which the operative shared at least one thinking preference with the caller. It quickly became clear that it wasn't necessary to achieve complete congruence between caller and operative; rather, establishing common "linguistic" ground through a shared preference was all that was necessary.

Building on this initial research, Marshall and his team developed a Whole Brain® tonal checklist, designed specifically for use in Telecom New Zealand's call centers, and a set of resource materials to help call center staff learn how to modulate their own voices and expressions in response to what they hear from the customer.

Rapid Rollout

Once the basic tools had been created Telecom New Zealand worked on a rapid rollout plan, initially in its primary outbound call center. From there, the program was transferred across to other call centers, including 123 (residential and mobile support), Broadband Support, New and Move, and Complex Technical Support.

The company applied Herrmann International's Whole Brain® transformation approach to increase the rollout's effectiveness:

Stage I was implementation of the HBDI® Certification process to certify the company's internal facilitators to deliver Whole Brain® Thinking solutions.

A customized final day was added to teach them how to facilitate the new auditory and linguistic model.

Stage II included engaging internal business leaders to champion the change.

Leaders attended a workshop to learn how Whole Brain® Thinking applies to group dynamics and their leadership.

Stage III involved educating team leaders about the ways in which Whole Brain® Thinking can drive team performance and build morale. This included helping them understand their individual thinking preferences and use the Whole Brain® Model to improve communications. This also included planning sessions for how to up-skill their own teams.

Stage IV introduced front-line staff to Whole Brain® Thinking.

The aim was to energize them by helping them learn more about themselves and discover ways of enriching their conversations with customers. This was accomplished through use of the Whole Brain® Tonal Checklist and learning to modify their language to better match that of their customers.

Stage V is ongoing and includes coaching and reinforcement of the Whole Brain® program throughout Telecom New Zealand.

This ensures Whole Brain® Thinking is an integral part of the way the company does business.

RESULTS:

Whole Brain® Thinking as the foundation for service differentiation, leading to dramatic improvement in customer satisfaction, call-back rates and sales, along with a 12x return on the initiative's investment.

"Whole Brain® Thinking equips our people to tailor their language and tonality to complement the customer's preferred way of processing information. It helps our people better understand the customer's emotional state and respond appropriately, thereby reducing the opportunity for talking at cross purposes."

– Sue Atkins, Project Sponsor, Telecom New Zealand

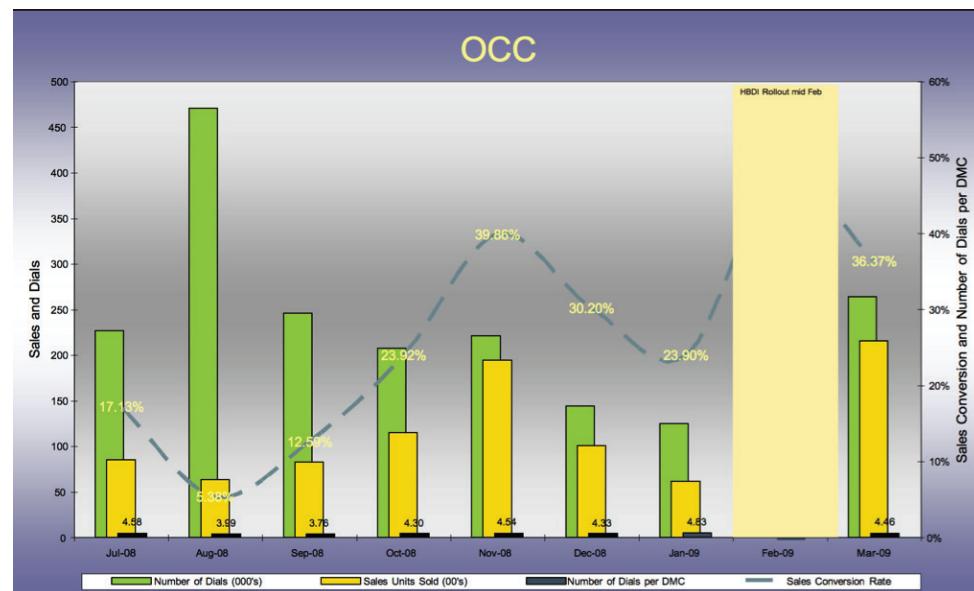
Results of the initiative were quickly apparent and have included such outcomes as:

- Dramatic improvement in post-call surveys
- Team customer satisfaction scores rating 4 out of 4
- Scores increasing within weeks of undertaking the program
- Increased dials-to-calls-completed
- Improved sales results
- A \$12 return for every dollar invested in Whole Brain® Thinking during the first year, according to the company's independent auditors

Brian Wilkinson, Director of Operations for Bradford and Bingley, notes that the initiative has made a difference in how call center staff approach each customer, contributing to greater overall efficiency and satisfaction.

"In the past all customers received the same amount of time from us, leaving some feeling rushed while others [felt] short changed," he says. "Now we provide the 'right' amount of time for each caller."

Implementing the program in the Outbound Call Center (OCC) required significant changes to be made in how staff introduced calls and in the overall call script. These changes have paid huge dividends in terms of dials-to-calls-completed and improved sales results (see Figure 2).



While the numbers confirm the success of the initiative, there are additional benefits that don't show up on a chart.

"Introducing the Whole Brain® Model and the HBDI® started a journey of personal growth for our people and has been hugely beneficial for overall engagement with the company," says Atkins. "It has created better conversations between team leaders and agents and has provided a common language to help us challenge the way we do things. Moreover, it has created greater consciousness of communication styles, and, as a result, our communications and conversations are now far more meaningful and effective."

From the customer's perspective, Telecom New Zealand is now meeting each customer on his or her terms, and that's what will continue to fuel customer loyalty.

"Whole Brain® Thinking equips our people to tailor their language and tonality to complement the customer's preferred way of processing information," she says. "It helps our people better understand the customer's emotional state and respond appropriately, thereby reducing the opportunity for talking at cross purposes."

Now that the program is under way, the pace has picked up. The company has rolled out the Whole Brain® program to all front-line customer service people as a foundation for creating service differentiation and is now talking with Herrmann International about moving the program into international call centers based offshore.

UNLEASH THINKING POTENTIAL

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