

Financial services: who comes out on top?

maia consulting presents the first edition of CCF's new benchmarking feature, highlighting customer service quality across the UK sector by sector

WELCOME TO the first customer experience spotlight, produced by maia consulting. This month, we cast the customer experience spotlight on the financial services industry. We called the sales and enquiry lines of some major banks, building societies, insurers and credit card providers to evaluate the way in which the organisation sells itself — its brand, its products and services. We hope you enjoy the results and we welcome your feedback.

The first customer experience spotlight on the financial services industry is now complete, and the results are revealing. The overriding themes to come out of our evaluations this month are that customer needs and wants are not being explored and that benefits are not being effectively used to sell products and services. As anyone who has ever sold anything will know, these are two essential components of any sale. So, has the financial services

Welcome – Sector score 66%

FIRST IMPRESSIONS count, and the financial services industry clearly understands this. Agents were easily accessible and they greeted us with a well-structured and polite call opening. Where they were used, automated menus were clear and efficient, and queuing times were minimal.

As ever, the challenge is to convey warmth, dynamism and a willingness to help on every call. It may be the 20th time you've spoken to a customer today, but it's the first time the customer has spoken to you — make it count.

Show How – Sector score 54%

IN GENERAL, product information was delivered in a clear, well-paced and courteous manner. But, as you might expect, the low 'find out' score is having a negative effect on the 'show how' section of the call. Whilst agents were very knowledgeable and good at answering customers' questions, they fared much worse when it came to using relevant benefits to pitch in appropriate products. Agents simply do not know enough about their customer.

Clarifying phrase of the month — "Have I explained everything to you clearly?" - Esure

Find Out – Sector score 45%

THIS WAS the weakest stage of the call for the industry. Agents listened to the customer reasonably well, but the area in which real improvements need to be made is in the appropriate use of questioning techniques — very few agents used open questions to get the customer talking.

Agents are simply not finding out enough about their customers to be able to build good relationships.

Open question of the month: "What's important to you in a bank?" — HSBC

Close – Sector score 60%

MOST AGENTS agreed some course of action with the customer and almost all waited for the customer to hang up before ending the call.

One area for improvement is in offering the customer the chance to talk about something other than their main enquiry. "Is there anything else I can help you with?" may sound more appropriate for customer services than sales, but not asking risks leaving the customer's enquiry partially unresolved. Overall, a well structured close, but the industry as a whole could look at enhancing this final impression.

industry forgotten how to sell and, if so, why?

The answer to the second question may lie within the answer to the first. The industry has not forgotten how to sell, but has perhaps become slightly nervous of doing so. This nervousness could be due to the stricter regulatory environment brought about when the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000 (FSMA) came into force in December 2001, as well as the increase in scope of the Financial Services Authority's (FSA) activities over the past three years.

The FSA requires that all communications, including those over the telephone, are 'clear, fair, and not misleading' and that 'adequate risk management systems' are in place within organisations selling financial services. This presents a particular challenge for agents, whose real-time communications cannot easily be approved and vetted before reaching the customer, and has led the industry down the road of more heavily structured, scripted calls and water-tight systems of self-monitoring and self-regulation.

What's more, many organisations selling over the telephone undertake 'non-advised' sales, where the agent is not allowed to make recommendations. Taken together, these developments have left many agents, in a very real sense, tongue tied.

Of course, the FSA rules were brought in to protect the customer and it is fantastic to see the call centre industry putting its house in order. However, we need to remember that the spirit of the FSA rules is that 'firms pay due regard to the interests of their customers and treat them fairly'. Not exploring customer needs adequately does not serve their interests. Often, the service we as customers receive from an agent does not differ from the service we receive on the web, as agents are reduced to 'data capturing', and then feeding product information back in a uniform manner. ■



Gordon Hannah,
esure's head of
operations &
claims

Sector soundbyte

"Today's regulatory regime with its focus on the fair treatment of customers and demonstrable high standards creates challenge for any customer-facing financial services company - and the systems they use. Successful companies need to combine strong compliance with a quality of service that handles the public's aversion to calls that sound overly scripted. This is a balance that the whole industry is working hard to strike."

Customer experience

Position	Organisation	Overall experience (%)	Welcome (%)	Find out (%)	Show How (%)	Close (%)
=1	First Direct	70.7	80.7	56.5	76.3	85.7
=1	esure	70.7	82.5	65.7	69.3	71.4
3	HSBC	67.7	63.2	63.9	70.2	85.7
4	More than	61.2	73.7	54.6	60.5	61.9
5	Directline	61.0	68.4	54.6	63.2	61.9
6	Admiral Insurance	60.0	70.2	51.9	60.5	71.4
7	Natwest	57.3	82.5	47.2	53.5	61.9
8	Zurich	56.7	59.6	55.6	51.8	81.0
9	Churchill	56.0	73.7	51.9	50.0	61.9
10	Nationwide	55.7	45.6	58.3	57.9	57.1
11	Alliance & Leicester	52.7	61.4	39.8	57.9	66.7
12	Halifax/HBOS FS	51.7	50.9	42.6	58.8	61.9
13	Norwich Union Direct	49.7	70.2	42.6	46.5	47.6
14	Lloyds TSB	47.1	63.2	36.1	47.4	57.1
15	MBNA	47.0	77.2	31.5	48.2	38.1
16	Royal Bank of Scotland	46.7	68.4	31.5	52.6	33.3
17	Abbey	46.3	63.2	28.7	49.1	76.2
18	Capital One	39.3	64.9	32.4	35.1	28.6
19	American Express	38.3	43.9	26.9	42.1	61.9
20	Barclays	31.7	64.9	25.0	21.1	33.3

Under 25% = Poor customer experience. Urgent investigation and appropriate action required.

25-50% = Functional level of customer experience offered. Improvement recommended.

50-75% = Good level of customer experience is being attained. Although certain elements may need review and enhancement.

Over 75% = Excellent levels of customer experience being offered. Focus on continuous business improvement.

Please note that the above figures represent the view of our customer experience assessors and are based on a sample of calls assessed using a consistent point system. All comments and scores represent the opinions of the maia spotlight team.

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Any questions or comments regarding the customer experience spotlight may be addressed to the spotlight team at maia on +44 870 7744220 or by email to spotlight@maiaconsulting.co.uk