Telecoms and utilities: who comes out on top?

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

This month we called the sales and enquiry lines of some major broadband, fixed line, and mobile telephone companies, as well as gas and electricity providers, to evaluate the way in which they sell themselves, their brands, and of course their products and services.

The telecoms and utilities marketplace is probably one of the most competitive in which to do business today. The privatisations and deregulations of the 1980s and 1990s led to the end of the government-run monopolies which provided our gas, electricity and telephone services, and gave birth to a multitude of alternative suppliers for these services. Consumers have undoubtedly benefited from the changes, and the main players now find themselves fighting for high volumes of price-savvy consumers who have very little brand loyalty. In this competitive marketplace, there is a seemingly never-ending downward pressure on margins on products and services that we view as 'unit priced' commodities.

So what do we, the consumer, look for in our

Welcome – Industry score 65%

TELECOMS AND utilities companies don't waste time shunting us around unwieldy IVR menus. The industry scored 68 per cent for the ease with which we got to speak to an appropriate agent and 73 per cent for the time it took to get through. These kinds of scores suggest an industry which knows what its customers need and wants to talk to them about it. As ever, dynamism and enthusiasm were the key areas for improvement and 40 per cent did not give their name as part of the introduction.

Find out – Industry score 51%

THIS SECTION proved to be the biggest challenge for telecoms and utilities companies. Agents' questioning skills put them on the border between a 'functional' and a 'good' score at 50 per cent, as did their listening skills. We found the agents to be friendly, and reasonably aware of our emotional markers, but they failed to follow up on the information we gave them to build any real rapport. There were many missed opportunities to talk to our young shoppers about their mobile and Internet downloads.

Show how – Industry score 54%

TELECOMS AND utilities agents clearly know what they're talking about. The agents scored 67 per cent for product knowledge and 58 per cent for the clarity of information about what are quite a complex set of products .

However, an average score for finding out led to an average score for tailoring the product to our customer's needs (53 per cent). Agents had a tendency to tell rather than sell in many cases. An industry score of only 22 per cent for exploring other product needs was surprising in these days of 'bundling' fixed line, mobile, and utilities services.

Close – Industry score 64%

OVERALL, A good score for the close of the call. The agents seemed to accept the fact that we would want to call around and find the best prices and tried hard to ensure that the call ended on a positive note (59 per cent). Three quarters of the agents we spoke to agreed a course of action with us, usually offering their name and extension and sometimes a reference number as a way of easily accessing the quotes and prices we had discussed. They could improve by asking whether any more assistance is required before closing the call.

Customer experience

Position	Organisation	Overall experience (%)	Welcome (%)	Find out (%)	Show how (%)	Close (%)
1	nPower	72.67	70.18	71.30	73.68	80.95
2	British Gas	70.67	71.93	68.52	69.30	85.71
3	Orange	67.33	68.42	67.59	66.67	66.67
4	Carphone Warehouse*	66.33	73.68	58.33	65.79	90.48
5	O2	62.67	57.89	65.74	61.40	66.67
6	Homeserve	61.67	75.44	57.41	58.77	61.90
7	T-Mobile	61.00	75.44	51.85	57.89	85.71
8	Scottish Power	60.33	59.65	55.56	64.91	61.90
9	Scottish and Southern	59.67	61.40	56.48	60.53	66.67
10	BT	58.67	64.91	51.85	58.77	76.19
11	3	56.33	73.68	50.93	50.00	71.43
12	Powergen	55.00	70.18	55.56	50.00	38.10
13	Vodaphone	54.84	76.00	50.00	50.49	50.00
14	AOL	51.33	68.42	42.59	49.12	61.90
15	Virgin	50.33	68.42	40.74	49.12	57.14
16	Toucan	49.00	63.16	38.89	49.12	61.90
17	The Link	41.67	42.11	42.59	37.72	57.14
18	EDF	39.00	38.60	38.89	36.84	52.38
19	Tiscali	38.67	68.42	22.22	39.47	38.10
20	NTL	38.33	59.65	30.56	34.21	42.86

Overall league table

Position	Organisation	Sector	Overall score
1	Thomas Cook	Leisure and tourism	75.6
2	N Power	Telecoms and utilities	72.7
3	First Direct	Financial services	70.7
4	esure	Financial services	70.7
5	British Gas	Telecoms and utilities	70.7
6	Thompson	Leisure and tourism	69.5
7	Butlins	Leisure and tourism	69.0
8	HSBC	Financial services	67.7
9	Orange	Telecoms and utilities	67.3
10	Red Letter Days	Leisure and tourism	66.4
11	Carphone Warehouse*	Telecoms and utilities	66.3
12	Avis	Leisure and tourism	64.6
13	o2	Telecoms and utilities	62.7
14	Hertz	Leisure and tourism	62.3
15	Homeserve	Telecoms and utilities	61.7
16	More than	Financial services	61.0
17	Directline	Financial services	61.0
18	T-Mobile	Telecoms and utilities	61.0
19	Scottish Power	Telecoms and utilities	60.3
20	Admiral Insurance	Financial services	60.0

*Talk Talk

telecoms and utilities providers? Price is obviously important, and the companies we called this month seemed to believe that it was our key motivating factor. The agents we spoke to almost all assumed that we would be looking for the 'best deal' possible and this seemed to affect the way in which our enquiries were handled. Broadband providers offered up to four different price packages, which left our shoppers in a state of complete confusion. Call handling was quick and to the point — not unfriendly, but hardly leaving us glowing with enthusiasm for the brand.

Agents assumed correctly that we were looking for the 'best deal', but also made assumptions about what constituted the 'best deal', which weren't so accurate. Although price is important, price and features together do not equal the 'best deal'. What we were looking for was a slightly more personal approach, and this can only be achieved by finding out more about your customers and personalising the call by using benefits that are relevant to them.

Every customer is looking for value for money, but we can only ever know what 'value' means if we ask them what they need and then demonstrate that value by personalising our approach. Giving the customer the feeling that they are getting true value for money will enable telecoms and utilities companies to differentiate themselves from their competitors and gradually move us as customers away from buying units of a commodity towards buying the brand and its associated service.

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.

maia consulting

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