

HOW TO SHOP FOR A CALL CENTER QUALITY-MONITORING COMPANY

The idea of outsourcing quality monitoring of call-center agents is an increasingly popular one, and dozens of competitors have sprung up hoping to capture this growing business niche. There's several reasons that call centers are increasingly seeking a third party to handle their call monitoring.

Some third-party call centers are getting pressure from their clients to provide independent proof that their agents are effective and complying with all required policies and procedures. The fox-watching-the-henhouse scenario is increasingly falling out of favor with corporations that entrust their customer service to outside providers.

Other call-center managers are simply finding nobody in-house has the time to listen to, score, and track trends in call data. They often find having a center manager screen calls can lead to hurt feelings around the call center, if agents feel the manager is letting their personal feelings about individual agents influence their evaluations.

Once you've decided your center needs to outsource its quality monitoring, the next question is: **How do I pick a third-party provider?** There are competitors of every size and shape, based around the globe, literally from A to Z – from India's Allsec Technologies Ltd. to Zero Variance in Minnesota.

To sort through the options, a trio of call-center industry experts provide their tips below on how to choose a quality-monitoring company.

Dr. Jon Anton is the director of benchmark research at the Center for Customer-Driven Quality at Purdue University. Tom Rocca is president of KPI Group LLC in Atlanta, and has over 25 years of call-center industry customer-service and technology experience. Esteban Kolsky is a research director with Gartner Research, based in Reno, Nev., specializing in customer relationship management, customer service, and e-business.

While Kolsky generally advises caution when outsourcing business processes, he's an advocate of farming out quality monitoring.

"It's not a core function," he says. "This takes a huge headache and cost away from the organization, and you know what it's going to cost."

A few questions to ask yourself, and your prospective quality-monitoring provider:

1. How much monitoring will you do? Kolsky notes that call center managers need a large amount of monitoring data to glean useful information on individual agents' performance. Many companies only

monitor one or two calls per month per agent, but Rocca says ten calls a week per agent yields much more usable data.

2. How fast can you gear up? Nobody wants to wait around while an outsourcer hires a team to work your account, Anton notes. Be sure to get specifics on whether your prospective outsourcer has the resources to handle your business.

3. Are we compatible? Most call centers already have some call-monitoring equipment, which they've purchased at no small expense, notes Anton. So you'll want to find an outsourcer that can scoop up your recordings via the Internet from your existing equipment, evaluate them, and then easily return the evaluation scores to you.

4. How long will it take to see my data? How fast can the outsourcer turn your evaluations around? The ideal is 24 hours. If your outsourcer uses India-based workers, for example, they could be evaluating your agent's calls while you sleep, and have a report waiting when you come in the next day. Anton says faster turnaround time is crucial because agent coaching sessions are more effective when the agent can still readily recall the conversation being critiqued.

5. Where is your workforce based? While India-based workers might offer quick turnaround, some companies have a policy of not outsourcing work overseas. Others have doubts that foreign workers listening to calls in what for them is a second language can't do as good a job as English-speaking workers. If you're using foreign workers, make sure a strong training program is in place to keep workers up to speed on the programs and lingo they'll encounter in your calls.

6. Is this all you do? Some quality monitoring companies are essentially a side business for a big call-center industry conglomerate. Others are start-ups dedicated to quality monitoring only. Depending on your situation, Rocca notes, it might be more advantageous to use a company focused only on call evaluations...or a multifaceted company might offer other services you desire as well. If you're small, you might get more individual attention at a smaller company. Rocca recently worked with one credit-verification company that specifically wanted to avoid the largest outsourcers, as they felt their needs might not get top priority.

7. Can you compare performance levels across several call centers? The so-called "calibration" problem is a big one in the call-center industry – evaluating whether a 100-seat center in the U.S. is as effective as another 300-seat center you have overseas. Rocca recommends making sure your outsourcer has a plan for measuring and cross-comparing metrics between centers.

8. How hard will it be to change my program? Change is constant in the call-center industry, so you'll want to pick an outsourcer that offers a simple, preferably Web-based, way for you to alter your call-monitoring parameters, Rocca says. There should be an easy way to drop evaluation questions and add new ones, change the frequency of monitoring, and fiddle with other variables in your program.

9. How will you deliver my evaluations? The best is a Web-based delivery where both the agent and call-center managers can view the results through a password system that keeps the data confidential. Anton says letting agents view their own data helps demystify the process and reassures them that you're not fudging their results.

10. Can I do a short trial? Good outsourcers will offer a chance to try out their program for one to three months before committing to a lengthier relationship, notes Anton. They're confident that once you try the service, you'll be won over.

--Carol Tice