

Theory of evolution

The call centre industry is changing dramatically, moving away from the traditional telesales and customer service to offer a more diverse range of outsourcing. Intellis details how Glasgow businesses are capitalising.

'Servin up Soul', a new advert promoting fast food, depicts two call centre agents stuffing their faces with food. Both agents mumble incoherently to each other and to callers, and this stereotypical image serves to strengthen an unappealing image of call centres and the outsourcing industry.

Such negative perceptions are distractions from the fact that today's call centre industry has evolved and moved on. With a dramatic increase in off-shore contact centres, Glasgow based companies – and those throughout the UK – are refining their services to offer clients more.

Most call centres have no desire to compete with the budget approach from overseas, and some have used their intrinsic and existing skills in looking for quality clients in the business-to-business sector.

"When the general populous thinks of call centres, they imagine the sweat shops of the 90's that have been so heavily criticised over the years," says Patrick Byrne, managing director of Glasgow-based outsourcing company Intellis. "They think of poor wages and colossal attrition rates. Reality, in the case of call centres, is not quite the same as perception."

The evolution of the call centre in recent years has witnessed many companies moving away from the traditional call centre offerings of telesales and customer services. Indeed, there is a growing tendency of call centres to adopt a more pro-active stance in outsourcing functions by working closely with clients, and creating new, innovative business strategies to increase client revenue.

These outsourcing companies, with their experience in the business world, see that understanding a client's business is a vital part of their role, regardless of whether they are involved in the set duration of a single campaign or as a retained partner who handles a number of different aspects of the client's business.

Intellis, for example, offers a diverse range of solutions, from data services, customer retention, lead generation and acquisition, to credit control, inbound support and customer service.

As well as researching knowledge of a client's marketplace, outsourcing demands more responsibility from the provider, as a good outsourcer will understand where they can add value to their client's bottom-line and is often prepared to share the risk.

The emphasis should be on integrating complimentary areas and running a set of small business units (SBU) within a site, rather than running one or more projects in an isolated fashion.

Business-to-business outsourcing usually involves a more intelligent approach to generating leads, as opposed to the 'badgering into submission' technique made famous (or infamous) by traditional

and offshore call centres.

In fact, it could be argued that this approach has damaged the industry in more than just reputation. Last year, the Corporate Telephone Preference Service (CTPS) was introduced, meaning that businesses sick of constantly being badgered by call centres could register to ensure they aren't contacted again. As a deterrent, calling a company registered on CTPS can result in a fine of up to £5,000.

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One key factor in ensuring you are not irritating potential customers is recruiting the right people. Outsourcing companies are employing skilled call centre personnel, experienced in working with a wide range of businesses that encompass a broad spectrum of sectors. A more subtle and controlled technique to approaching potential customers is employed to avoid negative perceptions of the client company. Combined with local knowledge of linguistic subtleties, tradition and culture, this provides a service that, in essence, can't be matched by call centre companies operating outside the UK.

"If an outsourcer puts a team of ten people on a small B2B project, and adopts an aggressive calling campaign, then the project may last a month, six weeks at best," says Greg Hine, who heads up business development at Intellis. "What do you do after that? The data is still viable, but if you call potential customers every month, they may become jaded with your company, and real opportunities can be missed. Put three or four agents on the project, adopt a quality business approach, and the data cycle is approximately three months, or quarterly. The cost is the same; however the project can build a pipeline, develop relationships with your target market and provide valuable feedback."

It's something the team at Intellis knows a lot about. Formed just over 3 years ago, Intellis initially specialised in the not-for-profit sector - where customer service is crucial - before gaining ground and experience in several different business sectors. Currently the company works for a range of clients including GS1 UK, Beattie Communications, Datafile, Commercial Decisions and SEPA.

Operating with the maxim 'simplicity in business', Intellis believes in working in partnership with its clients and promotes integrity in its ethos of being up-front and honest at every step of a project, exemplifying why it positions itself as much more than a traditional call centre.

Byrne says: "We don't over-complicate contracts. We just tell people how we're going to do it and then we do it."

"If you look at, say, the stereotypical car mechanic - he's telling you



Call centres have moved on somewhat from the old days...

that you need things replaced and you need things done and you don't know what they're talking about. That's something that we steer clear of. We don't go anywhere near that. We just tell people the facts, talk to them about what really does need to be done. If you treat a client fairly they'll keep coming back to you."

In Glasgow, a city rich with SME companies, the service offered by outsourcers such as Intellis can be invaluable to developing business. As well as offering a consultancy service on how to grow your business, the company can offer a more cost-effective alternative to recruiting a full-time sales team. Outsourcing the sales and new business function effectively leaves companies open to concentrate on running their core functions.

"The perception is that by outsourcing you're taking something away from the core of your business, whereas it's actually the exact opposite," remarks Byrne. "By outsourcing you're freeing up your own resources to concentrate more on your business."

Intellis has found that Glasgow is an ideal location for an outsourcing company to be based, from availability of affordable office space, an abundance of experienced and talented staff, to the city's networking business community and ease of access to southern cities via Glasgow Airport.

Byrne comments: "There's no real difference from commuting into London from Essex and commuting into London from Glasgow. I go down to London quite often to see clients and fly there in the morning

and back in the evening. It's quite easy to do."

Glasgow's other main advantage to outsourcing companies is its 'famous' accent. Whilst English outsourcers often find it hard to sell to Scots, Scottish-based operations enjoy a much larger cross-border appeal.

"A lot of our clients are south of the border, but one thing that has been proven time and time again over the years is that you cannot run an effective Scottish campaign from England. It doesn't work," states Hine. "You don't get the conversion rates, and you don't get the effectiveness. You might well have clients that use outsourcing and call centres down South, but they will come to Scotland for the Scottish campaign if they want results. It's a very difficult market. It has its own issues in terms of how many companies are here. It's a much smaller market, yet there is a much wider spread of companies. You have multi-million pound companies up in the Shetlands. How do you get accessibility to them? Over the years I've noticed that only a Scottish company understands how best to do that. You have to adopt a different approach, and that's another good thing about being based in Glasgow – you have access to a wide range of people. Glasgow has a real community of people that have come from all over Scotland and work in the city."

All of the above spells good news for outsourcing companies and businesses based in the city, as they move forward and look for growth and development for the future.