

# Exposing the Six Myths of Call Center Sales:

How to Turn Your Call Center Into a Profit Center

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Aslan  
Getting at the heart of change.

## **Congratulations, Your Responsibilities Just Doubled.**

If you're responsible for a call center, you know how hard it is to deliver excellent customer service consistently, while at the same time continually reducing costs. The last thing you need is a whole new set of demands and challenges. But you've got them anyway: you're now being asked to generate new revenue in addition to providing great customer service. Chances are, you're already taking some steps to incorporate a sales element into your call center. But it's not an easy transition.

## **Now It's Time To Learn The Truth About Call Center Sales.**

In this white paper, we will expose six common myths about call center selling - and show you what it really takes to make your call center a profit center. You'll learn how to avoid the pitfalls that can wreak havoc in your call center when you try to mix sales and service. Some of the issues we'll cover include:

- What's the secret to motivating call center reps to sell?
- How do you identify the best candidates, and should you change your recruitment strategy?
- Which behaviors really drive results, and how do you assess them?
- How should you reward your reps - even when it is difficult to measure their individual performance?
- How can you coach your employees through this transition and help them improve their performance?
- What type of sales training is most beneficial in a call center environment?

Since the early 1990s, our team here at Aslan has been helping call centers sell and serve more effectively. By taking a more strategic approach to call center sales, we've seen outstanding results at some of the largest, most successful customer service organizations in the nation. Now we want to share what we've learned along the way, identifying the best practices that will help you make the transition from call center to profit center....

## Exposing the Six Myths of Call Center Sales

By Tom Stanfill, Founding Partner and CEO; Firas Obeidat, Partner;  
and Marc Lamson, Senior Consultant, Aslan Training and Development

### Myth #1

**The motivation myth: Your CSRs are really going to be excited by this opportunity to get into sales.**

You know better. CSRs are not sales reps. And it's not only because they have little training or experience in selling. It's because they never wanted to be sales reps in the first place. You hired them for a customer service role, and that's what motivates them. To them, "sell" is just a bad four-letter word that keeps them from doing what matters most: helping the customer. Force your CSRs into a traditional sales role, and morale will suffer, attrition will go up, customers will complain, and you may not even see the sales bump you were looking for. So before you even think about adding sales to your CSRs' responsibilities, you have to address the question of motivation. Why would a CSR want to sell?

It's all about personal values. The CSRs' emotional resistance to selling is based on their belief that selling is a form of manipulation. In other words, selling (as they understand it) doesn't align with their value system. You can overcome this by showing them how your new strategy is designed to enhance the customer experience by meeting all the customer's needs – both stated and unstated. When you take a more customer-centric approach to sales, one that focuses entirely on meeting customer needs, you address the CSRs' fundamental misconceptions about their new role.

This lets your CSRs do what they do best: serve the customer. Instead of trying to manipulate customers into purchasing things they don't need, your CSRs will learn to ask questions, uncover customer needs, and recommend solutions that meet those needs. When the motive is to help the customer, sales are often simply a natural extension of good customer service. By giving your CSRs a new way to offer real solutions to real needs, you're creating a more proactive, comprehensive service model. Then, your customers, CSRs, and managers will all be happier...and you'll finally see the hidden profits you've been looking for.

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## **Myth #2**

### **The recruitment myth: You can build your team by hiring people the same way you always have.**

You know how to find great customer service reps. But now, you're looking for something different. You're looking for those unique individuals who can do everything a great CSR does, plus sell over the phone. That's a game changer. And it means that you're going to have to reconsider your approach to recruitment. At first, you'll be tempted just to look for people with sales experience. You'll ask questions such as, "Have you sold anything before" or "Do you enjoy selling?" But even if you get the right answers from your applicants, they still may not be the right people for the job. Why? Because candidates with successful outside sales experience may not be able to repeat that success when their entire customer relationship is tied to a phone call. What's more, traditional salespeople rarely thrive in the highly controlled environment of a call center – spending all day, everyday, at the same desk.

So what traits are you looking for in a sales/service candidate? It all comes down to fit: career fit, cultural fit, competency fit, and character fit. We call these The Four Cs, and they raise critical questions you must consider before hiring any candidate:

#### ***Career fit – Is this really what's best for the candidate?***

Does this job really fit the candidate's career goals, or is it just a paycheck? Will the candidate feel fulfilled in this role? Can he sit at a desk all day doing repetitive work? Is this a step forward in her career? Can he handle 50+ calls a day? Is the compensation enough to meet her financial obligations? Will he have to commute from a long distance?

#### ***Cultural fit – Is this really what's best for your team?***

Even if this is a good career move for the candidate, will he fit in well with your team? What is your organizational culture and how will she handle it? Will he get along well with co-workers? Managers? Customers? Does she have the right sense of professionalism? Does his view of customer service reflect yours? Do you share similar values and sales/service philosophy? What if the role requires a lot of flexibility, will she respond well to constant changes?

#### ***Competency fit – Does the candidate have talent, skills, and knowledge to achieve the desired results?***

You're not just looking for someone who can sell; you want someone who can consult with your customers – handling both service and sales. As you're evaluating competency levels, remember that you can teach new skills and knowledge, but you can't teach someone how to have natural talent. So, hire for talent, then teach skills – it rarely works the other way around.

When you build your profile of the ideal candidate, look for these critical talents:

- Desire to lead vs. simply reacting to the customer's stated need
- Versatility vs. responding the same way to every customer
- Ability to proactively build relationships vs. trying to memorize what to say to enhance customer intimacy
- Persuasive delivery of a message vs. delivery that sounds bored, monotone, scripted, and/or insincere
- Sensitivity to subtle customer communications vs. only hearing the spoken words and interpreting them very literally

### ***Character fit – Is this candidate a person of integrity?***

Does he have the genuine, honest character that your customers expect from a CSR? Will she communicate a sense of trust and assurance over the phone? Does he have the necessary work ethic and willingness to learn? Will his bad attitude or her self-centeredness undermine the harmony of your team? Does she have the confidence to deal with rejection from difficult customers and the honesty to accept responsibility for her own mistakes? Does he really reflect and convey the values of your organization?

Once you have built your profile, you can use every available methodology to determine whether the candidate has the necessary characteristics. Just remember that The Four Cs are your target. It doesn't matter whether you're conducting simulations, assessments, or standard interviews, you have to keep your target in mind. The methods you use to assess candidates are simply the tools that help you figure out whether the candidate fits your target. So remember, to find the right fit, identify the target first – don't just depend on the tool. We have seen far too many organizations miss their target simply because it wasn't clearly defined in the first place.

### **Myth #3**

#### **The metrics myth: You'll be successful when you get quality control and assessments down to a science.**

Okay, so you're getting the right people in place, and you're showing them new ways to meet real customer needs. Now, how do you measure their performance? You can get quality control and assessments down to a science by measuring factors such as abandonment rates or whether the CSR used the customer's name in conversation; but until you also deal with the art of the call, you will not see the results you want.

When it comes to assessments, we've all seen great reps get bad scores (and bad reps get good ones). What's going on? Too often, these assessments aren't focused on identifying the key success behaviors. For example, it's easy to ask if a CSR used the customer's name during a call. But what if the customer was annoyed by this constant

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use of his name? An assessment may indicate that the CSR “built rapport with the customer,” but what if that particular caller simply wanted a quick answer instead of having to make small talk about her recent vacation? The rep will score well on his assessment, even though the call didn't score with the customer.

There's an art to handling calls effectively, and it's more than simply saying the right words and checking them off. It has to do with interpersonal skills, the ability to listen, and knowing how to respond to subtle clues in a customer's manner or tone of voice. If your assessments aren't picking up these underlying factors, then you may be measuring (and rewarding) the wrong behaviors.

To assess the art of the call, you need to focus on key customer outcomes. Did the customer:

- Allow the CSR to lead?
- Agree to a discovery of needs?
- Reveal stated and unstated needs?
- Embrace the CSR's recommendation?
- Honestly communicate concerns?
- Commit?

When you're defining the critical milestones of the call, base them on the customer's behavior and not the rep's. This not only ensures better performance, but it will also improve your relationships with your top reps. Instead of arguing about scores, you're focusing on outcomes. This frees your most talented reps to quit “counting the dance steps” and lets them use their own expertise to achieve the desired outcomes.

If the critical milestones are not met, then the coach or quality team needs to determine which talents, skills, or knowledge gaps are preventing the rep from achieving the desired results.

The good news is that once you also start identifying the more artful success factors, you may find that the science improves, too. For example, when CSRs master the art of leading the call, they're able to identify customer needs faster. As a result, call times are reduced. Assess both the art and the science of the call, and you'll soon see better results.

#### **Myth #4**

**The incentives myth: Monetary incentives are the most effective way to reward your teams.**

Once you've identified the key behaviors for sales/service success, you'll need to develop a reward system that reinforces those behaviors. But remember, different people respond to different rewards. For some, money can be a strong incentive, but

for others, it isn't always the best reward. That's because small monetary incentives may not mean much to an employee – especially after taxes are taken out. Instead, a point system can be more effective. These systems let employees save up reward points for things that really do mean a lot to them (travel, higher-dollar items, etc.).

Don't forget the value of emotional rewards either. CSRs desperately need to know how they're doing – especially in the unfamiliar world of sales. For them, an encouraging "pat on the back" can make all the difference in the world. Always look for opportunities to give kudos and recognition to team members in front of their peers. You should also send short, handwritten notes to acknowledge an employee's accomplishments. Such notes can be incredibly meaningful and motivational for your employees.

What if you're in a situation where it's hard to track individual performance? Don't let this stop you from offering incentives. Instead, consider team-based incentives. You can either reward your entire call center or single out smaller work groups.

#### **Myth #5**

#### **The management myth: If your managers measure performance, behavior will change.**

Management just ran their monthly metrics and didn't see the performance they were looking for. So they call a meeting and tell everyone to do better. Now your CSRs really feel uncomfortable. They don't know how to change and probably don't even want to change under this kind of management. Next month, the same scenario is played out all over again. How do you break the pattern? It all comes down to good coaching and role modeling.

If your managers merely measure performance and tell their teams to do better, little will change. That's because CSRs not only need to know how they're doing, they also need to be taught how to do better. They must be coached and mentored by role models who can consistently, successfully demonstrate the desired behavior.

The problem is, most call center managers are former CSRs themselves. They know as little about selling as the rest of the team. Because they're out of their comfort zone, they'll stick to the roles they're most familiar with – staying in their offices and burying their heads in the numbers. The only way you can change this is by taking the time to train, equip, and certify your managers as coaches. When you do, you'll see great results. Research shows that when training is complemented with in-field coaching and reinforcement, productivity is quadrupled – it jumps from 22% to 88%. You can change the entire dynamic of your call center, just by training your managers to do a better job as coaches.

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### Myth #6

#### The training myth: If you deliver a sales training program, your CSRs will learn the skills needed to sell over the phone.

Sure, training is essential. But traditional sales training won't get the job done, because it's almost always built on and adapted from field sales strategies. Such training doesn't address the unique competencies required in a sales/service environment that's conducted over the phone. In situations like this, the customer is a stranger, there's no face-to-face dialog, time is limited, and the focus is on service. This type of sales relationship calls for 12 unique competencies:

1. Transitioning from a service call to a sales call (learning to gain a leadership position when the customer calls with their agenda)
2. Neutralizing an emotional, unreceptive customer over the phone
3. Delivering an appropriate meta-message (the underlying message conveyed by your tone of voice)
4. Assessing and responding to the customer's meta-message
5. Creating an environment where the customer feels comfortable and relaxed, even though the customer was expecting a confrontation (dropping the rope instead of getting into a tug-of-war)
6. Discerning how the customer prefers to relate and adjusting your approach to fit that style (recognizing the difference between task-oriented callers and relational callers)
7. Knowing how to pick up on the subtleties of each customer's preferences and meet their greatest emotional need – the need to be treated as someone special and unique
8. Expanding the customer's comfort zone during the discovery phase of the call to make sure that the customer will reveal needs honestly and openly
9. Building value without any additional visual props and ensuring the customer not only believes in the benefits presented, but emotionally embraces the recommendations
10. Delivering a scripted, memorized message in a non-scripted and natural way
11. Picking up on the customer's verbal clues (or drawing them out) to identify concerns or barriers
12. Bridging from a typical service call to a discovery of the customer's additional needs

Only Aslan Training is specifically designed to equip your team with these 12 competencies. Instead of trying to adapt outside sales methods to inside sales realities, Aslan Training programs were built from the ground up to address the unique needs and opportunities of call centers.

## How Do We Know All This? We Learned It The Hard Way.

In 1989, we became one of the first organizations to specialize in sales training for companies engaged in prospecting and selling over the phone. Since then, we have successfully trained over 10,000 reps and consulted with 100s of call centers. It's how we came to be recognized as the thought leader in this industry. And it's why so many other industry leaders and Fortune 500s turn to us for help as they transition their call centers into profit centers.

## Author Bios

### Tom Stanfill, Founding Partner and CEO

Tom has focused the last 14 years on consulting with some of the largest call center organizations in world. He has helped companies such as *FedEx, AAA, US Bank, National Geographic, Apple, Merck, MetLife, Deluxe Corporation, Blue Cross Blue Shield, Tyco, and Wesco* improve their ability to drive customer loyalty while simultaneously growing revenue. Tom has published numerous articles on the subject of selling in a call center and is a frequent speaker at the most prestigious industry shows.

Prior to starting Aslan, Tom gained hands-on experience leading a call center service bureau called eS2 – recognized by *Call Center Magazine* as the *4th fastest growing* service bureau in the country. With his combination of extensive consulting and call center management experience, Tom is well positioned as head of content development and call center practice leader.

### Firas Obeidat, Partner

Firas has over 17 years of experience in call center sales. He spent over 14 years at MCI and held a number of positions there – including sales and customer service management, marketing, training, and training development. When he left MCI, he was Director of Sales and Customer Service Operations for the largest and most successful direct sales division – a division with 1,500 sales reps. His expertise includes team and leadership training, field sales management, project management, inbound and outbound call center management, quality assurance, and business process improvement.

As a partner, Firas has led multiple projects and been instrumental in transforming service cultures into thriving sales organizations. His clients include: *GMAC Insurance, Fischer Scientific, Oracle Small Business, Hoovers - a Dun & Bradstreet Company, and ScanSource.*

### **Marc Lamson, Senior Consultant**

Marc has 15 years of experience in sales, service, and management. In his 13 years with APC, a leading F1000 company, he held various sales management positions, including Director of Customer Solutions for North America and Europe. In this role, he had responsibility for all aspects of managing 250 agents that worked with customers around the globe. Marc's intense focus on hiring, training, and development helped his team produce outstanding results while keeping turnover rates in the call centers below 12% yearly. Marc worked to effectively create a blended culture of sales and service. As a result of his efforts, customer satisfaction rose to an all-time high, while call center revenue grew from \$2 to \$30 million over a 5-year period. His organization won the "Channel Champs" Award from CRN Magazine by earning the highest satisfaction score in customer support from an independent survey by over 3,000 IT resellers. Marc has been a speaker for various organizations including the Institute for International Research, the Help Desk Institute, and the Massachusetts Bankers Association.

As a senior consultant, Marc has consulted with organizations that include: *APC, Bliss Spa - a Starwood Hotel company, Merck & Company, Tech Data, and Wells Fargo.*

### **Say Hello To New Sales Without Putting Your Call Center On Hold.**

Give us a call today, or send us an email to learn how Aslan can help your call center become the new profit center in your organization.

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