

Answering Government's Call: How Outsourced Customer Care Centers Improve Service, Reduce Costs and Deliver Taxpayer Value

An ACS: Expertise In Action™
White Paper



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Government entities are constantly challenged to do more with less. They have to run programs on a lean budget but still provide the information their constituents need. For that reason, agencies on the local, state and federal levels are turning to outsourced customer care centers for the ultimate win-win: high service levels at reduced costs, plus the flexibility to scale up and down as requirements demand.

An effective customer care center goes well beyond answering the call on the first ring. The best programs are designed to meet the specific needs of the program and its participants. They offer self-service options for constituents who want to answer their own questions. Most importantly, they enable callers to get the information they need on the first call or interaction. All while reducing costs.

To clearly realize the benefits of outsourced customer care, it's essential to understand its components for success: people, processes and technology. It's the skillful integration of these three elements that drives results.



What Do They Say After They Say “Hello”?

Whether they're answering a question about a Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program or providing technical assistance to a government employee, customer care center representatives have some characteristics in common. They have to be congenial, service-oriented, easily understood and have a true affinity for service.

But, hiring the best individuals isn't enough. Training is critical. With an inbound calling environment, one never knows what the next call will bring. ACS has deployed a sophisticated training process that prepares each representative for the breadth of calls he or she may receive. We create a call flow, called a tree structure, specific to each client, enabling each customer care center employee to conduct a call and answer an inquiry in the most effective way possible. Sometimes that involves asking probing questions to ensure that the problem the caller identifies is the actual problem he or she is experiencing. Other times, it's a matter of stopping and repeating information to ensure the caller understands.

If the program involves more mature callers, a representative, for example, may have to speak a little slower, a little louder or spend more time on the call. If a program requires personnel with security clearances, these can be obtained.

Some programs, like the Denver County Human Services customer care center, have a walk-in option. In addition to fielding close to 30,000 calls each month, its lobby staff



has helped 5,000 walk-in clients get answers on food stamp, Medicaid and TANF programs — ranging from accounting of benefits to program requirements. Since 2006, this group has successfully responded to 900,000 inquiries, freeing government staff to concentrate on the more complex aspects of their jobs.

Dialed in to Technology

The fact is, programs change, and human beings can only absorb so much data. That's why the third prong of a successful customer care center environment — technology — is so crucial.

ACS employs automated call distribution (ACD) technology with routing capabilities, ensuring that each call goes to the customer service agent with the right level of expertise. This same technology enables us to identify “gold customers,” or those requiring a different level of assistance.

Each desktop is equipped with customer relationship management (CRM) software that enables representatives to interact with the database, create tickets and activities, as well as electronically send brochures or other information. This software is extremely user-friendly, enabling the representative to ask questions and listen to the answer, instead of focusing on navigating from screen to screen. Each representative is guided directly to the screen that matches his or her specific inquiry or situation and is provided with step-by-step directions on the subsequent actions to take to resolve the issue at hand.



In addition, Knowledge Management tools provide a robust, online help resource for customer service agents. These automated tools can be easily updated as program information changes, so agents always have the most up-to-the-minute information at their fingertips, without paging through a printed manual or putting callers on hold. Instead of retraining representatives every time a nuance of a program or a piece of information changes, they are trained to use these tools as their guide. The result is more accurate, more consistent service.

With this technology in place, ACS customer care eases the pain of parking tickets for Los Angeles residents, while effectively collecting fees for the city. The 78-representative center assists residents with nearly 60,000 parking citation inquiries a month, including payment options, investigations, initial hearings, reviews and general information. In addition, four ACS-run public service centers assist customers with citation payments, impounded vehicles, initial review requests and overnight parking permit sales.

ACS also is at the ready to provide technical know-how. Our technical help desk call centers are staffed with highly trained experts who walk callers through steps to both troubleshoot and ultimately resolve hardware and software issues. These centers handle more than 1 million technical inquiries a month, and save clients countless hours in downtime.

Power to the People

Some constituents would rather forego the human interaction and find the information themselves. These individuals can access the same Knowledge Management tools the customer care representatives use online. ACS can set up this option on a separate



Web site or provide access directly through the agency site. If the user runs into a snag during the online interaction, he or she can hit the “chat” button online and have an online conversation with a customer care representative. The goal is to ensure the user gets the information on his or her first try, without having to log off and dial in.

ACS also offers a comprehensive integrated voice response, or IVR, option. This option is particularly useful for simple inquiries, like the available balance on an electronic payment card. ACS' IVR program doesn't require multiple key presses and wait times to navigate. Instead, it takes constituents directly to their specific information, quickly and efficiently.

Customer self-service not only provides citizens with the inquiry option that suits them best, but every interaction routed away from the customer care center actually saves the government money. Making this technology convenient to use means more people choose these options. And, because ACS has the ability to leverage this established technology across multiple programs, agencies realize an economy of scale that results in further cost reductions.

Smooth Operations

ACS customer care center engagements can range from handling social service requests to fee collection to troubleshooting software and involve anywhere from dozens to hundreds of representatives. We operate 30 customer care centers nationwide, specifically for health-care clients, answering close to 45 million calls annually from recipients, providers and other stakeholders participating in Medicaid, Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) and Pharmacy Benefits Management programs.



For example, ACS manages all the provider relations functions for the New Mexico MMIS and Fiscal Agent Services, answering more than 250,000 provider phone calls a year and supplying all provider relationship services requested by the state for its Medicaid program. In addition, ACS provides an electronic hotline for client enrollment, staffed by representatives who are trained to explain client options and provide answers to questions concerning managed care.

Another center responds to inquiries about Texas Debit Cards used for electronic disbursement of child-support payments. The center is open around the clock in order to be convenient for parents who work nights or unusual hours. Callers can get general program information, find out their card balances or initiate disputes.

On the Federal level, ACS supports the federal employees' Workers' Compensation program and the Black Lung Benefits program for the Coal Mine Workers' compensation division. This solution includes enhanced IVR and web-based self-serve options, a provider outreach department and a paperless environment to speed authorizations. Although claims increased 9 percent between 2005 and 2007, call volume decreased 17 percent as a result of self service options and improved processes ACS implemented, saving cost while improving customer satisfaction.

One of ACS' most well-publicized success stories is its work with New Jersey *E-ZPasssm*, which involved the consolidation of operations, the expansion of services and, because we were taking over the business from two failed vendors, an accelerated timeframe. In only eight months, the state's consolidated customer care center was open for business — handling 27,000 calls that first day alone.



In addition to providing exceptional customer service, these centers are outstanding sources of information. If the program has an issue, or if a certain component requires more clarification, the customer care center personnel are typically the first to know. By analyzing data, including type and volume of calls, ACS can provide valuable feedback to government agencies.

Agencies can also use the customer care centers to proactively convey information to their program recipients. An outbound IVR solution can be used to alert individuals about low EBT card balances or to let Social Security recipients know that funds have been added to their cards. This process not only provides more personalized service to constituents, but it also works to reduce the number of calls into the center, which ultimately reduces costs.

When Emergency Calls

By working with an established customer care center provider, government agencies can quickly scale up and down as needs demand. Experienced customer care center personnel, already familiar with the technology and resources available, can be leveraged to answer calls during peak periods, like open enrollment, and then transitioned back to other accounts.

This quick response and scalability is particularly valuable in case of disaster.

When Hurricane Katrina hit, the citizens of Louisiana needed help fast. On September 1, 2005, ACS received a call from the American Red Cross, asking if we could implement and operate a contact center for its Family Assistance Hotline. On



September 10, 2005, ACS CSRs in our California location began answering these calls. While, under normal circumstances, a customer care center of this size would take three to six months to begin operations, we were able to draw on existing CSRs and managers from several other established centers to build a workforce of 900 CSRs in just 10 days. In the first two weeks of operations, our CSRs helped 57,000 people. As a result of our efforts, the Red Cross disbursed \$1.4 billion in needed funds to affected families.

At the same time, we worked with Louisiana's Department of Social Services to establish a disaster-support customer care center to direct citizens to the information and resources they needed. This Louisiana Disaster Support Services Call Center, which used the toll-free number 1-888-LA-HELP-U, was operational in fewer than six hours following the initial request. In that time, ACS identified and trained available CSRs, developed and revised automated and CSR scripts, provided real-time training and generated a feedback loop for relaying information about callers' needs to the state. All this was accomplished between 9:00 a.m. and 3:00 p.m. on September 2, 2005.

Reliable, Safe and Secure

Any time one deals with personal information, security is a concern. All ACS customer care centers have multiple layers of security built in to prevent theft or loss of confidential customer data. Each is protected by a well-tested disaster recovery and business continuity plan to ensure constituents are always served, especially when they need help the most.



Today, government agencies on the local, state and federal levels are seeking new ways to improve programs, reduce costs and better support the citizens they serve. Many are finding that an answer to those challenges is only a phone call away — with outsourced customer care centers.

J. MARK TOBIN

Mark Tobin has more than twenty years experience in operations management and strategic planning, predominantly in managing inbound and outbound contact centers, including all aspects of personnel, processes and contact center technologies design and the implementation of training and quality assurance programs. Presently he is ACS program director in pursuit of Federal Government contracts and is based in Atlanta, Georgia. Mr. Tobin has an M.B.A. in Operations Management from the University of Missouri and B.S. degrees in biology and secondary education from Northwest Missouri State University.

