



Delivering the type of quality customer service that your best friend would recommend

LEARN HOW FORESEE HELPED STREAM:

- ▶ Increase satisfaction by double-digit percentages
- ▶ Identify the key drivers that really mattered to customers, such as “customer connection”
- ▶ Revamp agent training to include “empathy” modules that empower agents to engage off script

Creating Personal Connections with Customers

Organizations pour considerable resources into branding strategies designed to distinguish their products and services from the competition. But despite all of the effort and expense put into carefully crafted marketing and advertising efforts, when it comes to advice on what to buy or which companies to do business with, research has shown that consumers turn first to their friends and family. According to Nielson’s 2013 “Global Survey of Trust in Advertising” report, 84% of consumers worldwide say they trust word-of-mouth recommendations from their friends and families more than any other brand messaging or communication.

The credibility that those types of personal endorsements carry is what Stream Energy has depended upon to

successfully build its business. Since its launch, the Dallas-based power provider has generated more than \$5 billion in profits and is now the largest direct-selling energy service provider in the world. Stream Energy, which refers to itself as “Your Best Friend’s Energy Company,” is a direct-selling company in which associates sell the energy services to their friends, families and neighbors. Building a loyal customer base through personal connections calls for a strong support organization. Stream Energy’s leadership has made it a priority to develop a service experience that reflects the value and trust that customers have in their sales associates. As Quality Manager Joseph Fitzgerald puts it, “We want to make sure that we echo ‘being your best friend’ in the call center.”

Gathering Real-Time Customer Insights

How can a call center deliver the type of service that your best friend would recommend? It starts with the ability to collect useful data about the customer experience and delivering those insights to the frontline. Stream Energy has a couple of survey tools in place to do that.

While in the IVR, callers can opt to take a post-call survey before speaking with an agent. Once the call is completed, customers receive a follow-up call with a short three-question survey to gauge their satisfaction with the agent who handled the call. If there is negative feedback, the agent receives immediate coaching while the interaction is still fresh. **The goal for its post-call surveys is to coach 90% of the agents within a 24-hour period**, Fitzgerald says.

Customers who contact the call center are also sent a follow-up email survey. Fitzgerald's team of quality analysts monitor and evaluate the feedback. Surveys with low ratings are immediately reviewed. The QA team analyzes the call and reviews the account to see if there was anything that the agent could have done to improve the experience. That feedback is sent to the agent's supervisor who then provides one-on-one coaching.

Coaching is conducted by both the call center supervisors and by members of the quality team, however, it is the supervisors' main responsibility. "The supervisors have a daily action plan that they follow, and in that daily action plan, they're coaching 80% of the time," Fitzgerald says.

Feedback Analysis Can Identify Surprising Improvement Nuggets

Stream Energy began working with ForeSee to improve the energy provider's ability to measure and drive agent performance improvements in the contact center. ForeSee provides Fitzgerald's QA team with **24/7 access to an analytics hub that allows them to compare customer data by segment, view trends, analyze verbatim comments, and perform analysis** on the data.

The analytics hub has been invaluable, Fitzgerald says, and has provided the quality team with **"insight into how agent and overall contact center activity can impact future purchases, purchase intent, loyalty and retention"**. Based on this information, we can develop an action plan for improvements."

The ability to take a deeper dive into customer feedback data sometimes turns up unexpected issues. One of the biggest early surprises for Stream Energy was finding that some customers were experiencing poor sound quality when calling the center. "We saw 'sound quality' show up repeatedly in the comments," Fitzgerald recalls. "We were a little shocked that something like this would surface from the customer feedback."

The team immediately engaged the telecommunications department to look into the issue and to work with its vendors to improve the sound quality. Agents' headsets were also upgraded. "Over the course of six months, we made dramatic improvements in the quality of the sound to ensure that we are providing a better experience for our customers," he says.

Improving Performance on the Front Lines

ForeSee insights also highlighted several improvement opportunities for frontline agents. Early feedback suggested that the call script was hindering the agent's ability to develop a genuine relationship with customers.

"Removing the scripting has allowed agents to sound less robotic and to be more personable with customers, which helps them to make better connections," Fitzgerald says. "We saw an overall bump in satisfaction because of that."

Issues impacting call time presented another performance improvement opportunity. Analysis of the customer feedback indicated a need to improve the speed at which agents can access relevant data so that customers didn't have to wait while agents located and pulled up information.

The center began by consolidating several widely distributed information sources into one knowledge management tool. Next, improvements to agents' computer systems ensured that they could access information quicker and that systems load faster, Fitzgerald says.

Additional improvements to streamline calls included revising the IVR greeting so that customers can get to popular options like making payments much quicker.

Going Unscripted: Support Agents with Training and Empowerment

While getting rid of call center scripts is a viable way to improve customer and employee satisfaction, it's not a step to take lightly. Unscripted interactions call for a certain level of empowerment at the agent level, and additional training is generally needed.

Stream Energy's contact center leaders felt that a better customer experience would be one in which agents have the freedom (and time) to "do simple things like ask customers about their day, be empathetic to their concerns and offer different types of payment assistance," Fitzgerald explains. To do that, "we realized that we would need to provide agents with better access to knowledge and ensure that our training provides them with the appropriate skills to handle various types of calls."

After evaluating the training program that had been in place since the call center's launch, Fitzgerald and his team decided to scrap it and make a fresh start. "We realized that it had become stagnant," he says. "We revamped the training using the Kirkpatrick model, and split it up into different modules." The Kirkpatrick model (www.kirkpatrickpartners.com) defines a training program's desired business results and return on expectations at the beginning stage, and then incorporates those goals into every step of the training's design, delivery and measurement.

Stream Energy's revised call center training includes "empathy and engagement" modules from external training providers. "We know that to make a personal connection on the phone call, you have to be genuinely empathetic with the customers — and that's a reflection

on how we want to be your best friend's energy company," Fitzgerald explains. "We want our agents to make a personal connection with the caller, because the person who is calling is a friend or a family member of somebody else who has sold them Stream Energy. We want that to be represented in the call."

So far the center has provided agents with two versions of the empathy and engagement training, and is about to launch a third. The training acts as "a constant reminder that [agents] need to be engaged on the calls with customers and continue to be empathetic," he says. "It's a learned behavior, and we just have to make sure that they retain that knowledge and continually use it."

Along with the enhanced training, the center has examined and revised certain policies and procedures to help agents provide a better customer experience, Fitzgerald says. One example is a newly expanded payment assistance program. "Sometimes customers need help paying an invoice. Just as we would help our friends or family members in hard times, we've expanded our payment assistance program to make more customers eligible and enable our agents to provide better service."

Measuring the Agent-Customer Connection

Besides highlighting opportunities for individual agent and overall call center performance improvements, ForeSee helped Stream identify key insights about the center's performance metrics. For instance, Stream Energy "found that first-call resolution isn't the be-all and end-all measure of satisfaction for the company," Fitzgerald says. "In fact, ForeSee's data showed that, even if an issue was resolved on the first call, satisfaction was still low if the agent and customer weren't 'connecting.' Thus, a big priority is forging a customer connection, which is one of the reasons why we provided empathy training and did away with robotic scripted messaging."

The quality team then revised the quality scorecard "to better reflect customer priorities and focuses" by mirroring the attributes by which calls are graded to various questions in the customer survey. For example,

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Joseph Fitzgerald, Quality Manager

“we added a ‘clear and simple’ category so that when we’re grading the calls, we make sure the agents are providing an explanation to the customer that’s both clear and simple.” Monitoring and coaching agents to improve in this category resulted in an increase in satisfaction, Fitzgerald adds. Aligning the quality scorecard attributes with the customer survey also provides agents with a more customer-centric view of interactions instead of an all-too-typical inside-out perspective. “Quality standards often oppose customer satisfaction objectives — especially those that direct agents to handle calls how the business thinks that the call should be handled. We’ve turned that around to handle calls the way that our customers want the call handled,” he says.

Improved Customer Alignment and Satisfaction

In addition to boosting customer satisfaction with the contact center, Stream Energy uses real-time customer feedback collected internally and by ForeSee to share learning across departments, Fitzgerald says. During these cross-functional meetings, “different department heads can see and understand what changes are being made and how that aligns with their specific business unit,” he explains.

In just over a year, the energy provider reported an increase in customer satisfaction in three key call types:

- ▶ Customers calling to make payments (+17%)
- ▶ Customers calling to get payment assistance (+19%)
- ▶ Customers calling to transfer service (+21%)

Importantly, agents are happier with the increased ability to take ownership of their calls and build stronger relationships with customers. Although average handle times have not decreased, Fitzgerald points out that overall customer satisfaction has improved and Stream Energy has been able to reduce inbound call volume — “all factors that significantly outweigh the costs and help to ensure high-quality service.”

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BRING CERTAINTY TO CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE

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