

You Can Out-Source To Out-Perform

MSOs spearheaded the creation of service bureaus; now, equipped with great software to report customer actions and desires, these bureaus are ready to work for you.

By Bryan Rader ■ *Bandwidth Consulting LLC*

What do you think about outsourcing? How do you feel about letting workers from another firm speak to your customers and make decisions that directly impact those customers' impression of you?

Some say you can outsource a lot of things – IT, customer installs, door-to-door marketing – but you should never “outsource” your customer care. This is the key area for private cable operators, which drives an opportunity to be different and shine compared to our “10 minute hold time” franchise cable friends.

I always felt we should never outsource customer service. The biggest complaint we heard from customers who, for instance, called their credit card companies with outsourced call-centers is that the customer service rep seemed distant, not empathetic, even robotic.

It was a feeling of helplessness even when personnel were well trained. And that's one feeling we could never leave our PCO customer with. So, we must keep control of our customer care capabilities, right? We must manage as closely as we can all of the interactions between our call center and customer.

NEW PLAYERS TO HIRE

But things have changed. Companies that created third-party support centers for franchise cable have finally developed the tools, the technologies and the management skills to make “outsourcing” a real possibility for many PCOs.

“That's the biggest difference these days from outsourcing customer care in the past,” reports Josh Thackery, CEO of NorthStar TeleSolutions, a 13-year-old third-party call center solutions company. “Several years ago, PCOs were reluctant to outsource their call center. They questioned how they could man-

age what was said, what actions were taken, how subscribers were treated. We had to give PCOs the data to feel comfortable with how their subscribers are being treated.”

They still do, but today things are much different. Companies like NorthStar have developed sophisticated billing and customer-care operating platforms to support PCOs of all sizes. There are others, too, such as Element Customer Care (a new firm) and Multiband, that have recently jumped into this arena.

GREAT REPORTS – BUT YOU HAVE TO READ THEM

“We've gone through a real transformation over the past couple of years,” says Multiband's CIO, Dave Ekman. “We used to be one of the largest PCOs in the country. To support our own operating business, we developed an integrated billing system that supports DIRECTV. Now any of our PCO affiliates can offer DIRECTV alongside their other broadband services and issue a single bill.”

Multiband has shifted its business toward a third-party customer care company supporting PCOs who primarily use DIRECTV as their video solution. “We've developed specialized management reports for each of our accounts that allow them to access call volume, resolution issues, product adds,” Ekman says.

Thackery also notes “the reports we generate for each of our clients are very important to our success. They can see everything happening in real time in our call center and make decisions based on this data. It's as if the call center is right down the hall from management. We even customize the reports to present the information in a specific requested way.”

And that's exactly what held us back from outsourcing years ago. Obtaining

real-time data on dispatch, upsells, disconnects, or payment activity was not possible. So, we had to keep it in-house.

Most PCOs now are faced with strict performance standards outlined in their right-of-entry agreement. These standards include 24-by-7 support, online bill pay, bilingual CSRs. “That's a difficult task for a typical PCO with less than 5,000 subs,” Thackery says.

But the key to successful outsourcing is to never assume that someone else is managing your customer care. Someone in your organization must be looking at the key reports daily, weekly, monthly. They must be on the phone with the call center frequently to avoid “communication” gaps. It is still the PCO's responsibility to make sure that customers are handled correctly.

“It's still the PCO's customer. They are not outsourcing the problem to us. We are only one part of the process,” Ekman explains. You can outsource customer care but you cannot outsource the “management” of customer care.

Now there are affordable options for PCOs to offer world-class customer service: third-party customer care companies that specialize in the PCO business. And that can be a great feature for a young start-up or a long-time player in this business. Take a closer look and see if it works for your business. **BBP**

About the Author

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