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STRATEGIES

Answering the call

AVS' 'mystery callers' help rate customer service

Added Value Services tests, grades companies' responses to queries for information from customers

BY ADAM GOLDSTEIN
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A mystery caller phoned a service center with a simple question: "Do you offer discounts?"

According to the company's guidelines, the service rep was required to ask the caller follow-up questions and give related info, such as how to find the Web site, how to view an account online, how to set up a password, etc.

But the discussion didn't go well. The caller — an auditor for Added Value Services Inc. (AVS) in Parker — got only "yes" or "no" responses to her questions, an unenthusiastic tone of voice and no follow-up to her query.

Thus, the auditor slapped the service center rep with a poor grade of 60 percent — which would get back to her superiors and figure into her promotion chances.

AVS auditors act in such roles as "mystery caller" and "mystery driver." Their job

is to research and grade the customer-service practices of small businesses — and sometimes tell their clients harsh truths.

"People refer to us as 'mystery shoppers,' but I actually like to call us 'auditors,'" said Sylvie Harvey, president and client liaison of AVS.

Since 2000, AVS has provided a third-person perspective for companies seeking to assess the effectiveness and quality of their customer service. Posing as customers, AVS auditors will call or drop into customer-service centers, then later



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Sylvie Harvey, president of Added Value Services, with some of her "auditors" or "mystery callers." From left: Aurora Barich, David Lewin, Heidi Plummer and George Begnaud.

provide an assessment based on their experience and the employer's standards.

It's frustrating for callers to get an apathetic response from a service center rep. According to Harvey, avoiding these incidents is the key to maintaining customers.

"Preventing another callback is really important," Harvey said. "How can you make your call center different from others? How about being proactive? Delight your customers so they hang up the phone and say, 'Wow, that was impressive.' They don't want them to just answer, they want them to be the *crème de la crème*."

With a team of approximately 20 employees, AVS has a large pool of scenarios and conducts frequent audits, which are relayed to the client within 48 hours. For less than \$20,000 a year, AVS clients receive 50 audits per month. They include the reports, narratives and monthly summaries.

The evaluative guidelines are designed in cooperation with the client for the company's specific needs and goals.

"We don't tell clients how to run their business," Harvey said. "Every score sheet is specifically tailored for each client; they are all different."

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DETAILS

Company: Added Value Services

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Website:

www.addedvalueservices.org

Employees: 21

President: Sylvie Harvey

One of Harvey's major services is a standardization of expectations for a company's management and employees.

Influenced by her studies in Japan and her work with ISO 9000, Harvey's methodologies are based on the philosophy of consistent and clear goals.

"Everybody needs measurement tools," she said. "The only way you're going to improve is if you know where you're starting and where you want to be. I think coming into work and knowing what is expected of you helps a lot. Then, everybody is consistent."

The company's approach gives managers and executives the opportunity to address specific issues and concerns.

David Kristick, director of operations for the E-470 Public Highway Authority, has used AVS auditors to gauge the effectiveness of its tollbooths and courtesy patrol as well as the company's telephone services. Auditors will pose as stranded drivers as well as curious callers.

"We have a standardized and uniform method of gauging the quality of the services we provide to our customers," he said. "The structure is there, which is the beauty of the program. If I were the call agent, it's as simple as refreshing yourself on what you have to say, how you have to open, how you have to close."

Even the smallest details can make a difference. A tollbooth worker who neglected to state the amount of the toll and didn't offer a simple "thank you" to a mystery driver was docked 20 percent from his score.

With AVS' input, Kristick has added a more proactive and personal touch to E-470's customer service. Now, callers always are asked for their name and any updates to their accounts during calls.

The audits also have become a yardstick for advancement within the company. Employees are ranked according to the monthly assessments, and awarded pay raises and promotions based on consistently strong performances.

Kristick also implemented an all-or-nothing scoring system. An employee can earn only two grades: 100 percent if they follow specific guidelines — or zero if they fail.

Jeanne O'Brien is director of customer service for Product Development Corp., a distribution and invoicing company in Aurora that has used AVS's input to streamline call-center standards.

O'Brien now requires that employees ask for each caller's name and account updates. She's made customer-service skills a major requirement for new employees.

"We added call evaluation to our initial hiring

assessment process and the testing process of our training program," O'Brien said. "We have been able to select candidates who project a professional and caring image on the telephone, and have reduced time spent in training on basic customer-service skills."

Laura Moody, director of business development for First Revenue Assurance, a Denver collection agency, sees the value of an outside perspective.

"Sometimes it can be difficult for even the most rational of people inside a situation to be objective," she said. "[AVS's] unbiased input is invaluable."

Harvey sees AVS as a coaching tool, an anonymous and unbiased way to get a realistic view of the way in which customers are being treated.

"With each client, there is the surprise element when reading the audits at first," she said. "We all assume that they are doing it the way we told them to do it ... Until you read exactly what is being said to customers, you don't know exactly if they follow everything they're supposed to."

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