ETHICAL COMMUNICATION IN A RETAIL BANKING CALL CENTER SALES POSITION

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Abstract
The communication problem call center salespersons in retail banking are facing does not understand what ethical communication is or why it is important. Without this knowledge, they do not have the ability to use ethics when selling products to customers such as a home equity line of credit. This is a detailed product and requires the salesperson to have specific knowledge and skills to properly sell it. These skills include the ability to provide quality customer service, correctly use empathy to build long term relationships with management and customers alike, the ability to adapt and cooperate with change to policies, procedures, and possible changes in their current role, and most importantly the ability to use ethics when making decisions. In other words, for a call center salesperson to be successful they must understand how to ethically communicate while providing a specific sale or service to a customer. The best way to achieve this is through education and training.

Keywords: Call Center; Salespersons; Retail Banking; Banking

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INTRODUCTION

While conducting research on this topic, there was a common theme, few people are comfortable with the banking salesperson they currently work with. For many, this individual is viewed as more driven by making a sale than understanding how to use ethics when communicating. As consumers, they have a right to feel trusted and valued by the salesperson they conduct business with, especially in retail banking. Because of this many customers are looking to do their everyday banking transactions through electronic options instead of the traditional face to face interactions that have occurred with branch personnel. This change in business is alerting banking institutions that they should utilize call center salespersons more. This shift helps to ensure the employees are using ethics in current practices.

Because consumers do not currently feel confident in the banking institutions they choose to work with, the focus must be changed to assisting customers. While providing quality customer service to these consumers it is also important that ethics is used in all decisions made. However, many of the individuals who are currently in banking sales positions are reluctant to make changes to how they perform their role. The companies within the banking industry are also reluctant to change the policies and procedures they currently have to ensure they can attract and retain long term customers and employees in the future. The key to enforcing these necessary changes is to educate all individuals in the banking industry through training of the positives that will arise from evolving.

Background/Problem

Sales executives participated in studies that resulted in half believing that the salespersons working in the banking industry are deceiving customers while trying to sell them a product and service such as a home equity line of credit. Thirty four percent reveal that salespersons are making promises they are unable to follow through with and twenty two percent feel they are selling products to customers who don't want or need them. Customer's response to salesperson ethical service behaviors is determined by the customer's perception of the salesperson [1]. The above results are startling to both individuals in sales roles and companies in the banking industry. There are obvious changes that need to be made. However, before the quality of customer service can be increased, the sales position itself must be reevaluated to make sure individuals in these roles understand what is expected of them and the future of the position.

It is hard to analyze what specific needs and concerns customers have. There are too many different types of customers with different perceptions of how things should be handled. It is therefore critical to hire and retain individuals who can evolve and change to provide the best quality of service to all customer needs. One way to determine if an individual has the right qualities to be successful in a sales position is to understand the personality characteristics of the desired salesperson for the role [2].
There are two types of salespersons, selling orientated and customer orientated. What type of salesperson style was used depends on how the customer's feel after the interaction has taken place [1]. Meaning did the salesperson act ethically during the call or were they pretending to care about the customer to fulfill their own self-interests? Per studies performed, it has been uncovered that individuals who are sales orientated are concerned about the short term while customer orientated salespersons are more interested in building a relationship with long term customers. The latter is one of the reasons retail banking wants to shift to call centers. Because call centers are becoming more utilized, they need to evolve as well to be more efficient and speedy for the customer [2]. It is further revealed that most individuals have a mixture of both customer and sales orientated behaviors. This could be a result of consumers having a higher level of trust in salespersons who appear to care more about them as individuals instead of only trying to close a sale and make a profit [1].

The way a salesperson behaves during an interaction with a customer directly relates to the customer's perception of that salesperson and the company. This can be positively impacted by whether the customer feels they can trust the salesperson. Companies are shifting the focus from short term to long term relationships to retain the customers to better track the use of ethical behaviors within the company. To make sure the latter is happening; the salespersons must use ethics in all their customer interactions. If the customer feels trust that they are being treating ethically than it is easier to build a long-term relationship with them [3].

Not only does providing quality customer service help to retain existing customers for longer periods of time, but it improves the company’s image as well. The customer’s perception of how they were treated by a salesperson is related to the way they view the company. Successful call centers can build relationships with customers while helping to keep the brand image positive. The call center employees themselves need to be open to change as well as agreeable to changes that take place [2].

Data from a Gallup poll that was taken over the last thirty years shows that once an industry has a negative view it is hard to change a customer's view back to a positive one. In two thousand and ten the least trusted position within the banking industry was bankers. The main reasons this occurred was due to bad behavior and poor reputation. The bankers were observed behaving unethically which dropped the consumers trust in them by nineteen percent. Then in two thousand twelve another poll was completed but the level of trust in bankers was only twenty one percent. A Harvard professor states the reason they are viewed so poorly, is due to a lack of a banking industry spokesperson who can explain the positive changes within the industry to the public [4].

**Solution**

After the mortgage crisis occurred, trust in the banking industry declined. It has since been discovered that a positive image can be achieved by the banks choosing to perform ethically to provide the best service to customers. For banks to successfully achieve the change to ethical behavior, they must incorporate a more responsible attitude when lending. This idea ensures that banks will hold themselves and their
employees accountable for mistakes that are made. This can be achieved by looking first at how the company is communicating with their clients. Understanding who they work with such as third parties and what those partners represent also will reflect positively on the company’s image. How a company conducts business has become more important that what is verbally communicated to the public. The focus has shifted from how to fix the problem to how to stop the problem from occurring in the first place. Ethical banks are known for taking on low risk instead of looking at how much profit can be made. Including how the decisions they make may impact the community [5].

The employee’s ethical behavior on a sales call with customers will directly relate to the customer’s perception of how ethical the company [6]. For employees to use ethics in their policies and procedures, they must understand they are responsible for the decisions they make. They must be able to focus on the wellbeing of not only themselves but the customers they interact with, the company they work for and their peers and managers. The ability to continually evolve is an important trait for a salesperson to have. It motivates them to stay ethical and willing to change their practices [7]. This can be achieved if the salesperson understands what it means to behave ethically. As a salesperson, the call center employee must have the ability to use the right emotions while giving quality customer service [2].

A sales individual must understand that ethics is tied to emotions, specifically empathy. For the customer’s perception of the salesperson intentions to be sincere or ethical, the salespersons must understand and exhibit empathy behaviors [1]. When the salesperson uses empathy while communicating with the customer, both individuals will feel more involved in the interaction. If an employee has trust in management than they will is more willing to adapt their current skills to the needs of customers. They will also hold themselves accountable for any mistakes made. Which will then enable them to learn from their mistakes to make sure they do not occur in the future? Because sales positions are evolving, the building of relationships with customers while using ethical behaviors is important to stay competitive. Many call center sales positions within a company interact with customers one on one. Therefore, the interactions between salespersons and customers are important to retain the customers long term [8].

For a business to maintain long term relationships with their customers, they must be able to use ethics in their everyday business practices. Ethics shape how an individual makes decisions. Practicing ethics will help the company’s image stay positive. Most customers take a company’s image into consideration when deciding who they go to for products. Trust helps a company have more efficient and effective processes. This can be achieved through honesty. Which is especially important in sales positions as customer trust is directly related to customer loyalty. Meaning if a customer feels valued by a company they will continue to make future purchases with them. Per studies it is six times costlier to acquire new customers than it is to retain those that already purchase products or services from the company [9].

For a salesperson to be successful they must understand how to also adapt to customer needs. This can be achieved through listening. By listening to what the customer is saying it is easier to find the correct solution for them. Because there is no face to face
customer interaction in a call center it is especially important to listen while selling a product or service to the customer. Most calls center salespersons handle calls simultaneously without breaks in between because it is important that they stay efficient. They then must stay focused and listen to what each caller is saying. The use of empathy is the easiest way to build a trusting relationship \[10\]. Call centers are said to grow in two thousand eighteen by eighteen percent. It is then important to make sure to retain talented individuals who can successfully sell products or services to customers while using ethics. A good way to make sure the salespersons are using ethical behaviors is to record all calls inbound and outbound \[11\].

As call center positions evolve so should the role expectations. To reduce customer’s wait times when trying to reach a live individual, different types of technology have been incorporated into the call center environment. Such as automated options and self-service information. An example of self service is asking for the next payment amount after selecting an automated option. Even with these new technologies, customers still prefer to talk to a real-time person. A possible reason for this is that customers feel that a real person will be able to resolve their issues faster than other types of technology \[11\].

The sales positions will continue to evolve and so the salespersons must be able to continue learning new things instead of relying on what they already know. Because of this a successful salesperson must be able to self-motivate. The advancement in technology and the increased use of social media is changing the way society communicates. Communication skills of individuals in sales positions are evolving as well. Thus, the salespersons also need to understand how to control their emotions while interacting with customers to ensure the customer knows they are cared for \[12\]. The best way to achieve the ideas mentioned is to educate the employees and their management through ethical training. Already stated above, as technology advances so does a customer’s idea of how they would like to conduct their financial/banking needs. With this idea sales importance also increases resulting in the need for a high trust relationship between a customer and the salesperson \[13\].

Improving the training that salespersons receive is important not only to the employees themselves but the company as well. Research has resulted in many salespersons stating that they do not feel engaged in their current training programs. Proper training will help to develop talented individuals that understand how to use ethics while interacting with customers in a call center setting. The idea is that if an employee enjoys the training they receive than they will be more willing to actively participate in future trainings. Ethics training should become incorporated in all training programs as it is usually the time the companies’ rules and expectations are discussed. This would also be a good time for salespersons to practice using ethics in difficult situations that way they are better equipped to handle calls and will also understand what acceptable behavior is Fischbach \[6\].

Ethical leaders are those that can convey ethical behavior policies and procedures to those working under them through example. The salesperson needs to feel that they are assisting customers. This will result in giving the customers a feeling that they are
also involved in the interaction which will greatly increase their satisfaction with the company. This means that some sales organizations may need to reevaluate and change some of the current processes to remain focused on the customers. Many customers believe that the company and salesperson must go out of their way to earn new business and retain existing customers. Realizing this perception would help to understand how to easily transition from short term to long term customers. Salespersons need to rely on providing ethical communication to their customers throughout the sales interaction. This will also help them feel involved in the process which will make building a trusting and lasting relationship easier. The key is to create and maintain a long term ethical climate within the company. Which will make ethical decision making and problem solving easier for the salespersons to achieve? [14].

CONCLUSION

As discussed working in an ethical environment is vital for call center customer service positions, especially where sales are concerned. There is a correlation between a salesperson manager’s sense of ethics and the salespersons themselves. The level of trust between a manager and an employee is related to how ethical that individual is. Successful employees are those that are committed not only to the company but to the relationship with customers as well. The salespersons should possess the ability to make decisions while using ethics as guidance [14].

Studies show there is a link between ethics, the ability to properly make decisions and communicate. If salespersons feel loyalty and trust in the company, then they will naturally use ethics in their customer interactions. Feedback is also important to improve policies and practices. This includes receiving feedback not only from customers but peers and managers as well. An employee’s perception of the company they work for and represent is just as important as how the customer views them. If the company can include ethics in all their business decisions than they would be able to represent themselves as ethical to the public as well [15].

It is important to understand that even if the sales call did not end in a sale, the real focus should be on whether a relationship was built. If the salesperson exhibits ethical behaviors, then the customer will perceive them less as selling orientated and more as customer orientated. If the company creates an ethical environment within the company than the employees will act ethically as well. Having a way for customers to provide feedback after their interaction with a salesperson will help them feel that they are considered valued by the company which will increase their level of satisfaction [3].

In conclusion, there are many things that factor into how to make a retail banking salesperson behave ethically. They first need to understand their role, have trust in management, the ability to sell products and services while maintaining a relationship with the customers, the ability to adapt to different changes within their industry and their role and understand how empathy can positively impact their interactions with customers.
REFERENCES


