

BUSINESS OFFICE ACCESS

Introduction

The best measure of service quality associated with customer calls to the business office or repair center is whether service is delivered in a professional and satisfactory manner. Customers who spend a few minutes on hold, but are dealt with professionally and completely are still likely to be satisfied with the overall experience. On the other hand, a customer who is not completely satisfied with the result of the call is likely to be dissatisfied overall, even if the call was answered immediately.

Qwest's Washington customers appear to be overwhelmingly satisfied with their access to Qwest's Business Office. According to the FCC's 2003 ARMIS report, only 1.8 percent of Qwest customers in Washington were dissatisfied with their Business Office experience. This indicates that Washington customers are being served efficiently and professionally by Qwest's Business Offices.

Although the time customers spend on hold is not a measure of the complete customer experience, it is a definite, measurable indicator of one aspect of customer satisfaction. Qwest believes that if a business office access hold time measurement is to be meaningful for customers, it must reflect the customer experience of all customers. Furthermore, the metric should be designed such that it is easy to understand and administer so that, if needed, corrective action can be taken in a timely manner.

How Access Should be Measured

Qwest believes that average wait time is a better measurement than a percentage of calls answered in a certain amount of time; e.g., 80% in 30 seconds. This is because an average wait time gives a direct measurement of performance for all business office calls relative to an objective standard. More specifically, average wait time measures the average hold time for each business office call, where the 80/30 metric measures that percentage of calls with hold

times of greater or less than 30 seconds. Obviously, from an accountability perspective, the average wait time is affected by each and every call, while the 80/30 metric only addresses those calls that fall within the standard. For example, in one month Qwest might meet the 80/30 standard with an average wait time for all calls of 25 seconds and also meet the standard the next month with an average wait time of 35 seconds.¹ These results obviously reflect two very different customer experiences that are masked by the 80/30 metric. Finally, average wait time helps the company more effectively administer the business office in pursuit of the standard and also helps customers, regulators, and other interested parties more completely understand the results.

Factors to Consider in Measuring Access

The measurement of Business Office access into one “time-to-answer” measurement combines three major elements of providing customer service – call volume; call duration; and available personnel. Regarding the volume of calls, Qwest call centers receive approximately 2.5 million calls per month. Call duration is the length of time required to take care of customer issues, whether establishing new service or answering a billing question. Call duration has gotten longer over time as the number of services offered has increased and more complex technology has been introduced. The main element of managing customer service is the number of representatives available at any given time. The complexity here is anticipating the volume and duration of calls and then matching the number of representatives to this prediction.

On average, calls answered by the Business Office last about ten minutes. There is a wide range of topics handled, however, so this can vary significantly. Setting up new service, for example, may take 30 minutes, while answering a question about service availability may take only a few seconds. The availability of more sophisticated services has caused this average call

¹ Assuming 10 calls in each month:

- Month 1 - 8 calls have 22 sec. hold times; 2 calls have 37sec. hold times – avg. hold time = 25 sec.
- Month 2 - 8 calls have 30 sec. hold times; 2 calls have 55 sec. hold times – avg. hold time = 35 sec.

duration to increase over the last several years. For example, the need to establish preferred long distance carriers and explain such services as DSL has added to the time it takes to complete a customer contact. In addition to these service driven impacts on call duration, other factors have influence as well. Bill inserts, whether about billing issues or new services, typically create questions that service representatives must address. Newspaper articles relative to telecommunications may also trigger questions that extend call duration.

Matching the service representatives to the expected load is very difficult. Experience has shown that more customers tend to call Qwest's Business Offices on Mondays than any other day of the week. Volumes of calls on Monday far exceed the volume of any of the other days. This makes the four or five Mondays of the month the most challenging in terms of meeting customer needs. Since the call volume is so unbalanced toward Mondays, especially Monday mornings, it is almost impossible to schedule enough people to handle this load. It is not feasible for example, to hire and train people to work only Monday mornings totaling sixteen hours per month. It is likewise difficult to schedule people to work Monday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday.

Call Center work is demanding and the complexity of services makes training a major issue. Business Office representatives are not simply telemarketers. They must understand a very wide range of services and be able to explain them to customers. They do much much more than simply take orders. They need to be acquainted with several complex systems in order to access a customer's accounts, order new services, check the availability of facilities and establish billing. The training for these jobs takes many weeks and it is many months before new employees are up to speed.

Unfortunately, the turnover among service representatives is very high. In 2003, the average time in position in the Residence Business Office was less than one year. The turnover rate is about 40 percent for a variety of reasons. While there is opportunity for good pay, the stress level is high and the work is very fast paced. There is constant pressure to give complete

service so that customers are satisfied, but do it quickly so the next customer call can be answered.

Why Average Wait Time is Superior to an "80/30" Measurement

One reason average wait time is a superior measure is the Monday morning phenomenon; it creates a serious problem in an 80/30 environment. Achieving an 80/30 result on Monday morning is nearly impossible without serious overstaffing. Once Monday results are missed, the nature of the measurement makes it nearly impossible to achieve the monthly standard. Additionally, since the magnitude of the problem is not easily identified in terms of how the monthly objective might be achieved, it is difficult to address the issue directly and compensate for the Monday overload.²

In contrast, the average wait time measurement *does* provide information on the magnitude of the problem if one exists. For example, if the objective is to answer all calls in an average of 60 seconds and the manager is observing that the current workforce is producing an average wait time of 66 seconds, the magnitude of the problem is exactly ten percent. This means that the manager has the information necessary to address the problem. The manager may know that the work load is likely to drop by 10% or more the following day, or she or he may know that the current length of call has been increased because of some newspaper article that requires explanation to customers. The manager may also choose to rearrange work schedules to address the problem. In any case, with this type of measurement, it is easier for Qwest to address the workload for the month with a specific plan. Monday loads can be compensated for because the magnitude of the compensation is easily identified. For that matter, with average wait time

² This is because the 80/30 metric measures calls and not wait time. In an average wait time environment, high average wait time caused by the 'Monday Effect' can be corrected by scheduling additional representatives to reduce wait time on other days. In an 80/30 environment, once a certain threshold call volume is missed, due to the 'Monday Effect', no amount of wait time reduction can correct the deficiency. This also has a chilling affect on the incentive value of the metric.

data, the Commission and the Staff can also more easily see the magnitude of the deviation from the standard, whether it is positive or negative.

Conclusion

In today's environment calls to any business may result in being "put on hold" for some period of time. The advent of Call Waiting has created a situation where even calls to private parties may result in waiting "on hold" while the called party finishes the first call. Calls to airlines for reservations, to car dealers to schedule appointments, and any number of 800 numbers to order almost anything results in being "put on hold" for some period of time. While none of this is pleasant, it does change the perspective of what is a reasonable expectation when calling any centralized center.

In setting performance measurements, the Commission should consider customer expectations and then establish minimum acceptable standards in light of those expectations. Certainly, waiting on hold to address a customer issue, while not pleasant, is a common part of everyday life. A minimum standard of 60 seconds is a reasonable standard for telecommunications companies like Qwest. This is the standard that the Commission adopted in its current business office and repair center response time rules after considerable input from various providers in the industry.