

Prolog creates a Top Ten of Peak Management

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For Immediate release

It's every call centre's challenge – the seasonal peak, the bad forecast or the unannounced marketing plan which results in an avalanche of work. With good preparation these can be energy-filled, exhilarating experiences which make recruitment easier, and which give a great boost to morale. Without good planning they can make everyone's working life a misery and result in increased sickness, attrition for the call centre and a terrible experience for the customers.

Prolog recently crowdsourced the problem with Social Media discussions, input from customers and staff to produce a Top Ten of Peak Management:

1. Hunt down the root causes. The hardest challenges are the ones that come out of the blue. The best way to deal with peaks is to understand them. You can't rely on the other departments to realise the implications of their actions for the contact centre. Go out there regularly and explain your strategy so that other departments can help with the forecast. It's amazing how much comes out of these conversations.
2. Spend time on forecasting. All recruitment and, importantly, budget is triggered by a forecast. Review historical performance and then sense check it against the current landscape. If it doesn't look right don't be afraid to challenge.
3. Plan for the worst. There is no point wishing the peak wasn't going to come. Far better to assume the forecast is correct and then think about how you can react if it doesn't materialize. The key is communication. Explain to your team well in advance what the peak will be like, what you expect of them and how important the period will be. This gives everyone the chance to prepare themselves and visualise it. A proper project plan will reveal the difficulties in the basic logistics – IT infrastructure, induction, training, screening, password generation, capacity in canteens, parking, headset availability, security passes etc. This will also ensure an all-inclusive budget for the project can be created with no hidden surprises.
4. Maximise your own resource. It makes sense that most of the solution could come from your own team. You have to prepare them for the unexpected because peaks will test flexibility to the limit. Implement contracts and working patterns which build flexibility into agents and managers even though you may not need it most of the time. Examples include annualised hours, flexible working, the balance of casual and permanent staff, overtime and shift rotation. Importantly, find ways to test that they still work before you need them.

More follows.../

5. Use the whole team. The obvious first call will be to the existing team but think about all the receptionists, sales team, administrative staff that could be brought into play with a little training and support from the wider business.
6. Work with agencies throughout the year. Agencies are far more likely to respond to people they have a relationship with. They are more likely to find the right kind of people if they have sufficient notice. If you only call on agencies at the last minute when your own plans have failed expect it to be expensive and unreliable.
7. Don't forget the customer! It's easy to ignore how it will feel to the caller. They don't realise they are one of many and rightly expect a first class service. You can make their journey better by having a part to play in the design of any call to action advertising. You can also think how to manage the flow of contact across multiple channels. If IVR can answer questions well for the caller before they need to speak to an agent, use it. If the answer to most questions can be found on a website – make sure you let the customer know this.
8. Keep your head. It will be very busy at peak and it can very easy to be busy fools. You still need to stay calm and make decisions based on facts. There is no point throwing undertrained and underskilled agents into the call centre if all it does is reduce customer and agent satisfaction and means every customer needs to call in twice. The good practice that has stood you in good stead through the year is even more important at peak. There is no place for hotheaded snap decisions
9. Concentrate on the hygiene factors. Team managers need to focus on Average Handle Times, call control technique, and adherence to schedule. Anything you can do to get more from the team during the peak will lessen the impact.
10. Always review performance. After everything has died down again take the time to review the engagement in detail. What went well, what went badly and how could we make the experience better. Most importantly, document it in a format that can be easily retrieved for next time.

Number 11 on the Top Ten of Peak Management is to consider outsourcing. Outsourcers have inherent advantages in dealing with peaks. They have multiple clients which means that one client's peak is another client's quiet time, they should have experience of dealing with similar situations and they should have the technical infrastructure to deal with even the largest rise in demand.

Prolog sells young plants in response to catalogues and weekend newspaper inserts, manages enquiries from teachers at the start of new school terms, provides short term overflow support with up to 100 agents handling gifts for Christmas, Valentine's Day and Mothers Day, as well as offering DRTV call handling. The team is well-versed in the drills of scaling up and scaling down at short notice and would welcome the opportunity to show you how they work.

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For further information contact: Paul Miller
paul.miller@prolog.co.uk Tel 01623 724 186

Notes for editors overleaf

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Prolog is one of the few UK companies to offer a totally comprehensive range of integrated outsourcing solution services. Underpinned by a huge storage and distribution infrastructure and advanced systems technology, Prolog provides everything that commercial and public sector clients need to support marketing and communications campaigns, including POS handling and distribution, bulk literature storage and distribution, mailing services, bulk collation and packing and database management.

Prolog also provides inbound/outbound telephone marketing and customer service and specialises in national and international supply chain solutions.

With more than 25 years' experience in outsourcing support services, Prolog employs over 1200 people in East Anglia, the East Midlands, Merseyside and London. Flexibility, scalability and massive capacity characterise the Prolog service, which stands out for its adaptable storage and fulfilment solutions and high quality customer care and customer communications.