

Pacific Gas & Electric

BY GREG LEVIN

Highly satisfied customers and fully engaged agents — a coveted, though elusive, combination at most contact centers — is the norm at Pacific Gas & Electric's (PG&E) four California contact centers. Driving such satisfaction among callers and staffers alike are holistic quality assurance practices, dynamic new-hire and ongoing training, and a new agent rewards and recognition program.

"Our strategy is to motivate, educate and reward employees who, in turn, are focused and committed to improving the experience of each and every customer they have contact with," says Phil Balistrieri, director of contact center operations at PG&E. "Since 2004, this strategy has proven effective, with a consistent improvement in both customer satisfaction scores and employee perception surveys."

Even PG&E's technology is, in a large part, customer-centric. The center's powerful speech-enabled IVR system has won over some of the staunchest anti-automation critics, and the center's virtual queuing tool has done wonders for reducing caller frustration — and company costs — during peak periods.

Pacific Gas & Electric may be dedicated to turning the lights on in northern and central California, but in the competitive customer contact arena, PG&E is shooting the lights out.

AIMING HIGH

When it comes to quality, PG&E "AIMS" high. The center's comprehensive quality program, called Quality AIM, focuses not only on ensuring stellar agent performance, but a stellar customer experience, as well. As Balistrieri explains, "Each assessment is approached from both a foundational (basic transaction accuracy) and finesse (how the call was handled, from the customer's view) perspective."

An independent quality assurance team monitors three calls per agent each month, and then provides feedback to both the agent and his or her direct supervisor. The focus of the feedback, says Balistrieri, is on encouraging "optimum accountability" and on "opportunities for performance management improvement."

In addition to these formal monitoring sessions, the center surveys a random sample of customers via a post-call IVR survey

and incorporates their comments into agent coaching and feedback.

One could argue that PG&E's new-hire training program is part of the center's quality assurance program — after all, with nine weeks of didactic

▶ AT A GLANCE

LOCATION: Four California sites: Sacramento, San Jose, Fresno and Stockton

HOURS OF OPERATION: Sacramento, 24 x 7; San Jose, 7:30 a.m. to 7:30 p.m., Mon.-Fri.; Fresno, 7 a.m. to 9 p.m., Mon.-Sat.; Stockton, 4:30 p.m. to 9 p.m., Mon.-Fri., and 11:30 a.m. to 9 p.m., Sat.

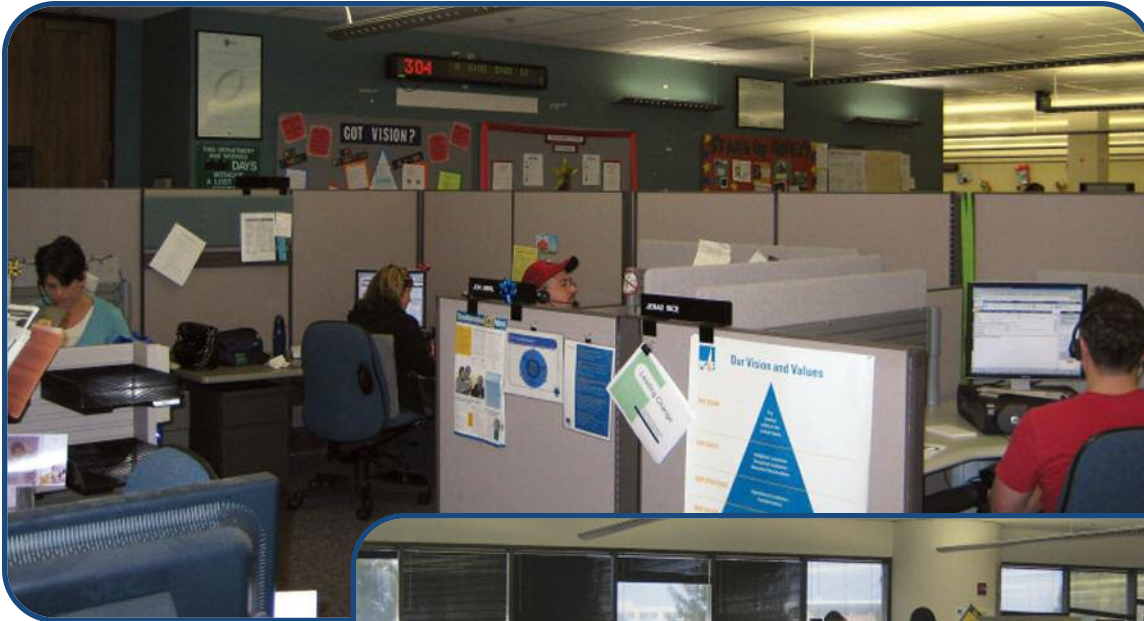
FTEs: 497, plus 353 part-time

SERVICES PROVIDED: Handle all contacts from PG&E residential and business customers

CHANNELS HANDLED: Phone, IVR, email, chat, Web self-service

NUMBER OF CONTACTS HANDLED: 20 million on average

NOTABLE: Consistently achieves elite levels of customer satisfaction and employee satisfaction, in large part, due to comprehensive quality assurance, training and incentive programs, as well as highly effective customer-facing technologies.



Engaged agents handling happy customers at PG&E's contact center.



instruction, role-plays, live-call handling, mentoring and both written and practical tests, new-hires aren't likely to make many mistakes once they graduate to the phone floor.

During the intensive, hands-on training program, trainees are taught every aspect of the contact center and the agent position, with a particular emphasis on how each agent "contributes to the goal of 'delighting our customers,'" says Balistrieri. In addition to being assessed regularly after each training module, all trainees must pass a final examination with a grade of no less than 70 percent. Not a problem: "Success rates average between 95

percent to 100 percent," says Balistrieri — a testament to the very thorough training provided, and a hint of why PG&E customers are so content.

COMMUNICATION AND MOTIVATION

Initial training may end after nine weeks, but agents continue to receive key information and feedback long after they leave the training confines. The contact center's Quality Assurance team and training specialists work together to "keep all agents informed of technical issues, process changes and all information required to support

customer contact work responsibilities," Balistrieri explains.

This is done via a variety of methods, including:

- > Weekly "Read and Learn" time — agents are given time off the phones to read about what's new as it relates to work processes, new programs and services, as well as general information required to do their jobs effectively.

- > Monthly team meetings — facilitated by frontline team leaders as a face-to-face channel for sharing experiences, having discussions and soliciting employee feedback.

- > General Reference — an online reference guide that pro-

vides all staff with step-by-step instructions on how to work procedure guides.

> Contact Center Operations Web Site — designed as a single site where all employees can access information related to company programs, employee benefits, job opportunities, advertising updates and all other vital non-work related communications.

Where such constant communication empowers agents; the center's rewards and recognition program inspires them. The program — developed via a collaborative effort by both PG&E and its union team members

— rewards agents for meeting or exceeding goals related to customer-focused performance, operational efficiency and safety. Rewards are both individual and team-based, with agents eligible to earn up to \$200 per quarter.

Agents hold the program in high regard — not just because of the money and recognition they receive, but because the program was, in essence, their idea. “Using data provided via an annual employee opinion survey,” explains Balistrieri, “it was determined that employees identified a need to improve the company's ability to provide regular employee rewards and recognition.”

HIGH-TECH WITH A HUMAN TOUCH

Agents aren't the only ones deserving of accolades for providing solid customer support; PG&E's IVR system — powered by advanced speech recognition — does its fair share of effective call-

handling, as well.

The speech solution frees callers of awkward menus and enables them to do such things as pay or ask a question about a bill; stop, start or transfer service; receive an outage report; or report an outage

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— all by speaking in a natural, conversational tone.

Prior to implementing its speech-enabled IVR system a few years ago, several of the aforementioned call types required live-agent assistance, as the center's previous IVR app — a traditional touch-tone system — wasn't able to process alphanumeric input, as well as other information, from the caller. The new system, however, is able to handle such specific requests as, “I would like to stop service for account number XXX and pay my bill for \$XXX.”

Not only has the increased functionality of the center's IVR helped to reduce operating costs, agents are now able to focus on customers' more complex issues, resulting in both better service and lower agent burnout (since staff no longer must contend with so many repetitive, routine transactions).

Since deploying the speech-enabled system, overall IVR completion rates have increased, and

customer satisfaction rates have risen significantly. To ensure that such success continues, PG&E carefully monitors the IVR application and customers' experiences by evaluating detailed call records from the IVR, listening to actual call recordings, reading ACD reports, gathering agent feedback and conducting caller surveys.

For those customers who prefer to speak to a live agent, the center uses an automated queuing tool from Virtual Hold Technology to help manage queues and put customers in more control. This app enables callers to request a callback from

a PG&E agent without losing their place in the phone queue. In addition to freeing up callers, the system reduces the toll charges that come with keeping customers on hold.

“Customers have responded enthusiastically to Virtual Hold,” says Balistrieri. “The customer experience is enhanced because they can choose to stay on hold or not, when to be called back, and what number they want to be called back on.”

Balistrieri acknowledges that it can be a challenge to integrate the virtual queuing tool with the center's routing information and technology to recognize when agents are becoming available in real time, but says that this challenge is minimal when compared to the potential benefits of the system.

“PG&E would highly recommend this technology to any company that desires high customer satisfaction.” ●