

ABBEY NAVIGATES AROUND THE JARGON THANKS TO GAZING

Most business observers would smile at the thought of banks being considered ‘victims of their own success’, but the ease with which UK banks persuaded their customers to embrace the internet as a primary communication tool has created its own customer service headache, namely how to rebuild a closer personal relationship with their customers, many of whom may now feel disinclined to ‘re-engage’ with their banks.

For Abbey, the biggest UK bank focusing exclusively on personal financial services, and which adopted as part of its 2003 relaunch, a determination to ‘turn banking on its head’, this problem became of crucial concern, as it went to the heart of what they wanted to achieve, namely, to offer the highest level of customer service and advice to UK customers.

It was an easy task, therefore, for the bank to decide last year to build and staff its own dedicated 100-seat call centre in Belfast. It was a less easy task, however, to give the call centre staff the requisite skills that would allow them to deal efficiently and confidently with the more complex telephone conversations that now form part of the new heightened relationship between the bank and its 18 million customers.

Abbey therefore turned to specialist sales training company Gazing Performance Ltd to help them develop these skills and the results speak for themselves: uplift in sales conversion ratios, a reduced staff churn and a more confident workforce.

For Carol York, Abbey’s Head of Customer Outreach and the manager tasked with ensuring that the Belfast call centre facility helped the company to deliver on its promise to ‘get rid of financial jargon’, the main issue she faced was centred around getting the structure of the call right.

As she says, “During a call, customers want us to get to the crux of their issue quickly and with the minimum of fuss and pain. They want us to talk to them in plain English, i.e. no financial gobbledegook. And yet the level of complexity involved in selling personal financial products is now very high. This presented us with a problem. How do we reconcile the two? We felt that we needed to focus on what we called the ‘call framework’ itself”.



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Carol and her team felt that they didn't have the skills needed in-house to provide this level of specialist training to their staff and so called in a number of candidate suppliers to pitch for their business.

Carol's decision to award the training contract to Gazing was based on two factors: the more formulaic approach offered by most of Gazing's competitors and the opportunity that Gazing's approach offered to be used as a coaching tool, rather than a sales tool.

Gazing's 'Selling Under Pressure' approach, however, offered a better insight into the mindset of the customer and would help equip the operator with a set of tools that would help them 'navigate' their way around the call. Of no less importance, was the fact that only Gazing could substantiate what they claimed!"

Using a deceptively simple training technique, the company's training programmes provide a 'map-based structure' around which delegates can learn new skills and cope with being put 'under pressure'.

Ian Cochrane, Gazing's project leader who works closely with Abbey believes that few commercial environments are more pressurised than today's call centres. He says, **"Call centres are one of the few service industries that can accurately measure worker productivity. As such, there is constant pressure on the staff to raise the bar. Yet few call centres equip their staff with the mental tools required to deal with this pressure to succeed. We have found that this skill is more highly prized by our call centre customers than the more traditional skills that are focused on 'technical' elements such as overcoming objections"**.

It was this apparent simplicity, yet highly focused approach that appealed to Carol. She said: "we wanted to give the operators increased confidence whilst on a call. They immediately identified with the Gazing approach, which gave them a navigational aid, but without being too prescriptive".

Carol appointed Gazing last January to carry out an initial pilot programme built around a 'seasonal borrowing campaign'. Using internally devised metrics which themselves focused on conversion ratios, Carol was sufficiently impressed by the results of the pilot to offer Gazing a more comprehensive assignment: a full roll-out of this new sales approach to all 120 staff including call operators, campaign managers and senior management.

Commenting on this decision, Carol said: "there was a language building up around Gazing and we felt it important to involve others. We therefore extended the programme to embrace non-frontline staff. This has helped consolidate the effects of the training and again, we saw uplift in our conversion rates as a result. Put in plain English, it works!"

She said, "most of the sales training available to us was very linear, which, if implemented, would have made the call sound very scripted. Given our determination to demonstrate to our customers that a 'radical shift' had taken place in our approach to customer service, this was not acceptable.



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