Operations Practice

Why are your customers calling you again?

Getting to the bottom of why customers keep calling your contact centers can generate significant savings. And result in happier customers.

by Guy Benjamin, Jeff Berg, Vinay Gupta, and Nimish Jain

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It’s long been a fact of life that call centers often receive multiple calls from the same customers. Yet despite the availability of call data, few organizations fully understand the reasons behind repeat calls, making them hard to reduce or eliminate.

There’s ample financial incentive to fix the problem, as illustrated by a large US-based energy producer’s $200 million-a-year call center. About 20 percent of the calls received were repeats. By simple arithmetic, eliminating the duplicates would yield annual savings of about $40 million.

In our experience working with companies across a wide range of sectors, these cost estimates are typical. Moreover, when the potential savings are combined with the reality that repeat callers are often unhappy callers, it’s worth finding out why your customers are calling you again.

So which reasons matter most: are your customers calling again because their bills are too hard to understand? Do they have multiple issues that can’t be resolved in one call? Or are they just checking on the progress of their orders?

The high-level customer satisfaction surveys that most companies are working from won’t provide an answer. They lack the detail needed for effective analysis, and are often based on small sample sizes that don’t offer any real insight. Instead, you’ll need to dig deeper to get to the root causes.

By using call-level analysis to capture repeat calls by time frame, product, and call type, the energy company built a large sample size to capture data at a low cost. On that foundation, it created a set of four hypotheses on why callers kept calling, each with a distinct solution: customer behavior, agent skills, resources and routing, and process gaps. Addressing all four reduced repeat calls by 25 to 50 percent, for total savings of $5 to $10 million.

Give customers new tools

Customer-driven reasons for repeat calls include non-digital usage: customers who don’t have—or are reluctant to use—online methods to manage their accounts are frequent repeat callers. Similarly, those with older accounts who began their relationship with an organization prior to digitization may be reluctant to switch to online communication.

By creating easy-to-use systems—along with coaching for customers as they switch to app, website, or automated-call services—more customers will be willing and able to move to self-care solutions, potentially eliminating the pain points that cause them to call again and again. Entire categories of repeat calls may practically disappear, such as for starting or stopping service, checking the status of a service outage, or confirming that payment has been received.

That was the experience of an Asia-Pacific telco whose customers had been calling repeatedly to book field technicians when moving their broadband service. The company implemented a simple online tool that let customers book and change appointments without calling, with agents providing coaching to the customers who needed help with the new system. Within a few months of rollout, the new tool virtually eliminated calls about appointment booking.

Find (and fill) agents’ skill gaps

At the energy company, repeat call rates didn’t change by agent tenure—but part-time agents were more likely to have a higher repeat call rate. The crucial difference? Part-time agents had less access to coaching and training. This conclusion was further reinforced by data showing that the more time a supervisor spent with an agent, the lower the agent’s repeat call rate.

Repeat-call issues related to agents can primarily be addressed by training. But since no company has inexhaustible training resources, targeting the training is essential. As we discussed in “Smarter call center coaching for the digital world,”[1] data from modeling can help to identify agent-specific training needs for both top and lower performers, and help managers allocate their time efficiently (Exhibit 1).

[1] Jeff Berg, Avinash Chandra Das, Vinay Gupta, and Paul Kline, “Smarter call center coaching for the digital world,” November 2018, McKinsey.com.

Exhibit 1

Modeling pinpoints agents' training needs so managers can allocate their time efficiently.

1 Top quartile 2 2nd quartile 3 3rd quartile 4 Bottom

Overall repeat-call performance	Agent ID	Call type A	Call type B	Call type C	Call type D	Call type E	Key coaching and training areas
1	Agent 1	1	4	1	1	2	Call type B
2	Agent 2	2	1	2	2	4	Call type E
3	Agent 3	3	2	4	3	3	General coaching
4	Agent 4	4	4	2	4	4	General coaching

One global service provider used a combination of technologies to develop an integrated coaching platform for a large contact center. The system used data from multiple sources, including the organization's systems for customer-relationship management (CRM), call routing, and interactive voice response (IVR). The coaching platform automatically calculated granular performance metrics for each agent and presented its results to team leaders as an "intelligent action board," which highlighted areas of concern and recommended specific coaching actions that could improve agent performance. Productivity at the contact center increased by 15 percent.

Remap the routing

As in many call centers, the energy company found that transferred calls were more likely to become repeat calls. That suggested a skills issue, but further review found that in many cases, the right skills were available on the team—the calls just weren't getting to the right people. Rather than reaching a fluent Spanish speaker, a customer might instead deal with an English speaker relying on a third-party translator. Revamping the routing system allowed calls to reach the right people the first time.

Another large company needed a deeper look into its data. The initial finding was puzzling: from 7 a.m. to 10 a.m., the repeat-call rate was generally 4 to 8 percent higher than during the rest of the day. But that time didn't necessarily correlate with a spike in call volume.

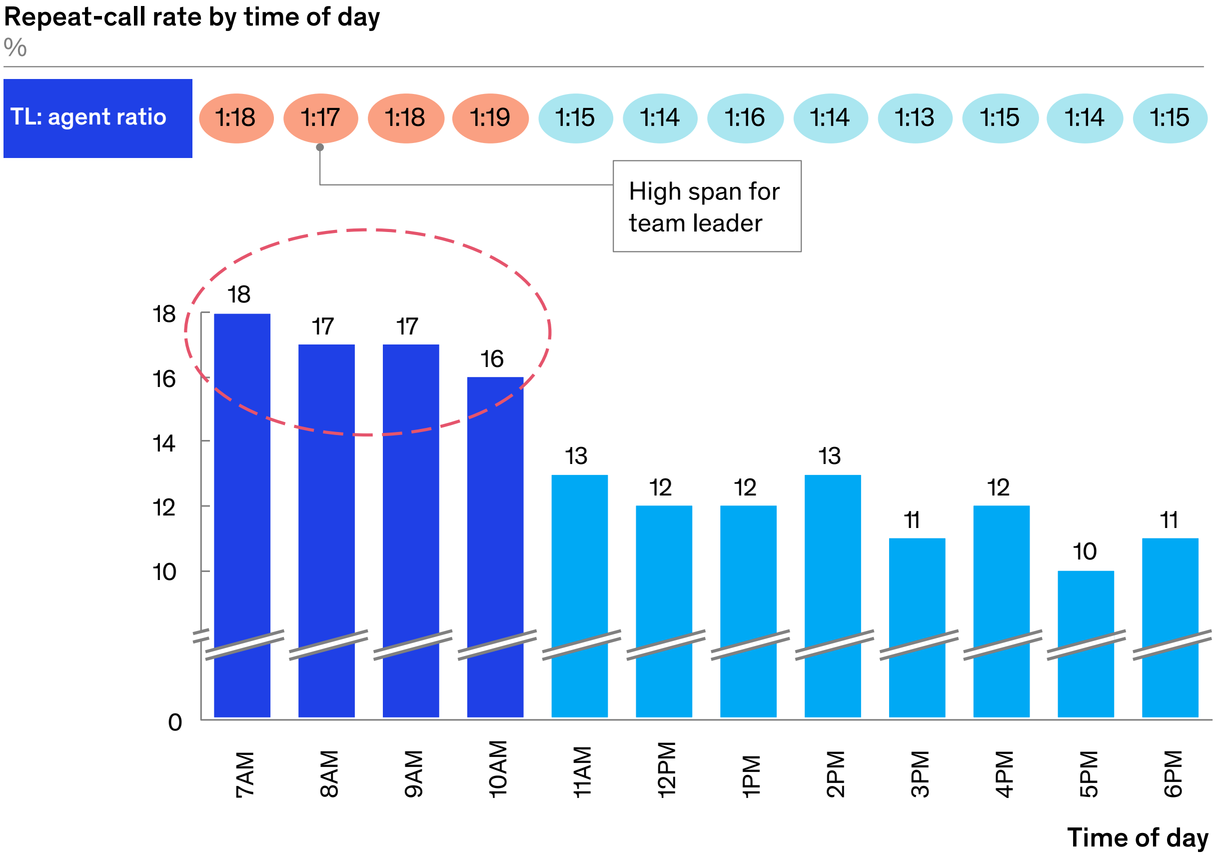
Examining its entire workforce schedule found a much tighter explanation: fewer team leaders worked early in the morning, making it hard for agents to escalate issues during the initial call. As a result, customers had to call back later in the day for a solution when more senior staff were available (Exhibit 2). A simple adjustment of team leader calendars helped to ensure sufficient coverage throughout the day.

Process gaps: Give processes

Process-related issues for repeat calls often relate to payment issues: explanation for an unexpectedly high bill, confirmation that payment

Exhibit 2

Repeat-call rate is highest in the morning, when fewest team leaders are working.



has been received, or information about enrollment in a direct-payment program.

Some issues can be addressed without need for customer to call at all: many utilities and financial institutions text customers as soon as payment has been received—often within seconds of the customer authorizing the payment. Other problems can be addressed by clearer, real-time client communication (Exhibit 3).

One North American utility reduced its repeat call rate just by communicating realistic timelines for problem resolution, such as to reconfirm meter readings or review outage records. Others have found that providing past consumption data on customers' monthly bills, along with suggestions on ways to reduce usage, can reduce calls by reducing the incidence of unpleasant billing surprises. And some regional utilities are rolling out technologies that let customers track their bills on a daily basis, giving customers even greater control over their consumption patterns.

Exhibit 3

Several steps can reduce repeat calls related to billing and payment.

Billing and payment breakdown, %		Description	Potential initiatives
High bill charges	29%	"Why is my bill so high?"	• Interactive bill on web or app explaining charges, usage, etc. • Real-time communication to customers on daily consumption
Payment confirmation	23%	"Did you receive my payment?"	• Real-time payment confirmation • Reduced time between payment and restoration of connection
Deferred payment	16%	"Can I defer my payment?" "How do I enroll in deferred-payment plan?"	• Send customers link for down payment and enrollment in deferred-payment plan after first call • Promote deferred payment on web/app
Missing document	13%	"Please call back to provide additional information"	• Ask customers for information needed during interactive voice response (IVR) tree • Define standard procedure for customer call-backs
Duplicate bill	11%	"Can I get another copy of my bill?"	• Educate customers on downloading bill copy via web • Add self serve functionality in IVR for easy access for live callers
Other bill-related	8%	"Where's my bill?"	• Design FAQ on website for troubleshooting

To capture similar results, the first step to reduce calls—or even remove the need for customers to call at all—is to develop and test a set of hypotheses using existing data. Many call systems and agent notes have the information needed already available. Proper analysis could open the door to answering why your customers are calling again, so you can save trouble for them and cost for you.

Guy Benjamin is an associate partner in McKinsey's New York office, **Jeff Berg** is a partner in the Southern California office, **Vinay Gupta** is a knowledge expert in the Waltham Knowledge Center, and **Nimish Jain** is an associate partner in the San Francisco office.