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Rules of Engagement
Beat burnout in call centers with rewards and recognition

Training, motivation, opportunity for advancement: These aren't the words that come to mind when describing a career in a contact center. The call-center industry is notorious for its employee turnover—annual attrition rates of 100 percent aren't uncommon—and the nature of the job doesn't exactly foster self-motivation or high employee engagement levels.

But telesales and service agents are instrumental to sales success, so motivating them should be a priority. Unfortunately, "the job is very transactional in nature, so finding ways to motivate folks in that [function] can be a challenge," says Mike Tripp, executive vice president of contact center operations for Connextions, a provider of outsourced call-center and fulfillment services. "You have to keep folks motivated so the last call is as fresh as the first." That's why a priority for the Orlando, Florida, company is its agents' career development. That is unusual for the industry, as only 38 percent of call centers offer a formal skill path for their staffers, according to a survey by the Incoming Calls Management Institute (ICMI), a call-center consulting and research firm based in Annapolis, Maryland.

Todd Harris started at Connextions in 2001 as a contact-center agent, unsure of what to expect from the environment. But in his second year he entered a management benchmarking program (in which high-potential employees are mentored and given individualized career-development plans), after proving to be a top salesperson. He was promoted last year to program supervisor in the Web sales division for Connextions client Blue Cross Blue Shield of Florida, currently overseeing about 19 agents, with plans to hire more. "People may come here thinking it's just a call center, but it's a stepping stone to building a career," Harris says.

Incentives should also play a role in managing telesales agents, a tack that is a little more common to the industry; the ICMI survey says 63 percent of companies offer some sort of performance reward and recognition for their agents. At Connextions, these take the form of weekly sales contests in which top sellers receive gift certificates or merchandise, and an Employee of the Month program that lets managers and peers nominate staffers for top performance or a willingness to go above and beyond for coworkers. These employees receive plaques or certificates and small cash bonuses, but the most appreciated rewards include a lunch with executives for 10 to 15 of the top candidates, and a special parking spot for the ultimate winner—a much-coveted prize, considering the size of the Connextions lot. For some of the farthest spaces, the walk can be a quarter-of-a-mile, Harris says.

It's not just the formal programs that have an impact. "Programs to recognize the top folks are appealing, but it's also about making sure all 1,100 people get touched on a daily basis," Tripp says. "You have to provide good coaching, feedback, and direction. Even thanking them for covering their shift, saying goodbye, hello—it's about making sure they don't turn into just a number."

The combination of these efforts have helped keep attrition rates at about 20 percent in some accounts, Tripp estimates. And Harris points out that "I've had agents for three, four, five years, and no one plans on leaving any time soon. Knowing each agent, knowing what motivates them and what brings them up or down," he says, makes all the difference. —Julia Chang