Chapter 2

Consistency and Control

Objectives

When you have completed this chapter, you will be able to:

- Appreciate the need to work in a controlled and consistent manner
- Understand how standard operating procedures (SOPs) assist with control
- Know that some SOPs have a legal basis
- Explain how to align SOPs with SLAs
- Know the key customer-facing SOPs
- Appreciate the need for call ownership, especially when issues are escalated
- Analyse the real time workflow of a call
- Explain the importance of After Call Work time
- Know how telephone systems quantify time
- Describe the benefits of using time frames
- Understand the need for a professional approach to note taking

Consistency, Confidence and Control

There's an old adage in the customer service industry: *"if you are going to provide a poor level of service at least be consistently poor!"* Of course, we would prefer that you aim to provide the best possible, world class service, but the point of the story is that it's good to be consistent:

- If your service is good one day and not so good the next customers will be uncertain whether *you* know what you're doing
- If your service is poor but has always been poor, customers will at least know what to expect!

In reality, of course, poor service is also likely to drive customers away so don't take this as permission to aim for mediocre performance.

We've already touched on how you measure service quality through the metrics in your SLAs, but this chapter focuses on how you can ensure that your service delivery team fulfils the SLA requirements in a *consistent* way.

> *The best way to provide a consistent level of service is to train everyone in the use of documented procedures.*

No one likes unnecessary bureaucracy, but written procedures can actually make your life easier by ensuring everyone is aware of workflow paths and what to do in specific circumstances.

When properly documented procedures are implemented and followed, a service delivery team is on the way to world class quality.

Another benefit of following procedures is that you have greater *confidence* that you are working within the scope of your support remit. When a customer makes inappropriate demands or requests, you are better equipped to remain in *control* if you follow procedures.

Initiative

Procedures create boundaries within which you must work, but there is still room for you to be human. *Initiative* is an important asset for a service delivery professional—by this, we mean that if a customer asks you to do something that is not within your scope, you should use your initiative and *think* what would be the next best or most appropriate alternative; this is the key to being *assertive*, which we'll tackle later. Consider the following phrases—which one is more customer focused and positive, even though it's really saying "No"...?

"I'm afraid I am not authorised to do that from this desk"

or

"Let me find out who can do that for you..would you mind if I put you on hold for 30 seconds?"

A support professional who has no initiative lacks the 'human element' that is required for good customer service.

Before we move on, let's make sure we understand the principle of initiative—it's working within procedural guidelines while acknowledging the customer's right to *try* and make you bend the rules; not that you *will* actually bend the rules unless you or your supervisor judges it to be appropriate.

Standard Operating Procedures

Think about your service delivery team. If a customer with an ongoing issue calls back would they need to speak to the same person as before, or would anyone be able to provide an update or take the issue forward? On a world class service delivery team it shouldn't matter to whom the customer speaks—anyone should have access to the customer's records and be able to assist. In order for this to work, procedures need to be established and followed.

Your team leaders and managers often work with the front line staff to put in place numerous procedures that make the whole process of service delivery work smoothly and consistently. You should follow these procedures at all times, even if it seems that they are restricting your ability to assist your customers. That may sound strange, but not following procedures is one main way that service delivery doesn't work properly or in a controlled manner.

> *"That's not what happened the last time I phoned in about this..."*
>
> *"The last person I spoke to said you could do that on your system..."*
>
> *"I didn't have to answer these security questions last time…"*
>
> *"When my friend phoned in, they gave him that special offer, why can't I have it!?"*
>
> *"I'm sorry, but they shouldn't have told you that"*

Ever heard one of these phrases before? It's what happens when a professional does not follow procedure; even if they *think* they are doing a customer a 'favour' by cutting corners, it often causes problems further down the line or sometime in the future.

Two of the biggest headaches occur on Help Desks when:

- Professionals work beyond the scope of the problem and wander into areas not specifically within their remit

and

- Professionals produce their own 'unofficial' support sheets and 'bibles' and circulate them

  Instead, you should use the SOPs in place to highlight the need for a new documented solution. If no such SOP exists, push your team leader / manager for one.

▸ ***Consider the following:***

The support team for an Internet Service Provider is dealing with a customer with a connection problem. The team checks the customer's login and password details, billing status, line status and asks the customer to perform some basic checks on their modem (supplied by the ISP).

What should happen if the problem seems now to be with the customer's computer? How far should the support team take the call? What happens if the support professional gets the customer to change a setting on their computer and this stops the whole thing working?

Commercial considerations

In some circumstances it might be appropriate to 'go the extra mile' for a customer and 'exceed expectations', but whatever is done 'beyond the call of duty' should only happen on the basis that it is commercially beneficial to do this and is strictly within established SOPs.

Legal Considerations

Some SOPs will be put in place to meet legal requirements. Two classic examples are SOPs relating to:

The Data Protection Act (DPA)

Not following DPA checks when verifying a customer's authenticity can be a serious matter. You must verify to your satisfaction that the person with whom you are speaking is who they say they are. The checks you make will generally be to confirm a passcode/account code and some personal details that only the genuine person would know.

Further details may be found on the Information Commissioner's Web site: *http://www.dataprotection.gov.uk/*

Premium Rate support lines

In the United Kingdom, ICSTIS (the Independent Committee for the supervision of Standards of Telephone Information Services) lays down rigid guidelines for how premium rate services are provided, including:

- The minimum age of agents handling premium rate calls
- The maximum amount of time a single call may last
- The maximum amount of time a caller may be placed on hold
- When and how to remind a caller that they are paying for a premium rate call

ICSTIS regulations require every person working on a premium rate service line to be trained in the guidelines. The training can be provided by your in-house training services as long as the training itself meets certain criteria.

Comprehensive information about the ICSTIS regulations can be downloaded from their Web site: *http://www.icstis.org.uk/*

SLAs and SOPs in Alignment

Many of the SOPs are put in place to support your efforts to work within your SLA requirements; they will outline escalation routes, contact procedures, call logging procedures, emergency procedures and so on. In fact, it is often a good idea when drafting or assessing procedures to focus on the matching SLA component–this makes sure that the procedures are of benefit instead of a hindrance. Here's an example:

SLA metric: *Monthly customer satisfaction rating greater than 7.5*

SOPs: *How to survey customers*

How to collate results

How to distribute results

Remedial action to take if rating not satisfactory

Having these actions documented not only removes the doubt over how the tasks are to be performed, but it also helps establish procedures to ensure that if the primary person appointed to complete the procedure(s) is not available then someone else will take on the task AND they will know what to do.

Scripts and Scripting

Scripts are not quite SOPs, but if you do work to a script then there is probably an SOP that says that you must use them! Scripts serve two main purposes:

- Scripts ensure consistency
- Scripts provide guidance about the correct way to deal with an enquiry or solve a technical problem.

Again, there is also the issue of legal requirements—many Call Centre scripts start with the 'legal requirements' wording.

One point to remember when working with scripts is that with the exception of legal wording it should NOT be considered a major sin to deviate from the exact wording of the script—this will ensure that you sound natural in your delivery and not as if you are reading from, well, a script!

One of the important things to remember when delivering a service to a customer is that you need to establish a rapport—the customer wants to know you are capable of helping them AND that you are human!

Customer-facing SOPs

In reality, all SOPs are customer facing because all of them help you service your customers, but some are more customer facing than others. This group of SOPs seems to be the most trivial but is, in fact, among the most important that you must apply consistently because they define how you interact in real time with the customer. These SOPs are invariably based on identified service delivery best practices and have been refined over time. Implementing these SOPs consistently is a good step towards becoming a world class Service Desk.

Standard Greetings

Every member of a service delivery team should use the same, basic standard greeting. This not only 'brands' the team as a single entity, but gives the customer their cue to participate in the conversation. A typical standard greeting would comprise the following parts:

Lead-in

The purpose of this is to focus the customer on the fact that you are ready to engage in conversation. The lead-in does not contain any useful information so it is not important if the customer misses it, but it ensures that if the customer's attention was elsewhere (chatting to a colleague, for example, whilst waiting in a queue), they 'tune in' ready for the next part.

> *"Good morning", "Good afternoon" etc.*

Ident

The Ident confirms that the customer has been connected to the service they want, for example:

> *"You're through to customer service", "Help Desk" or whatever your organisation calls itself.*

Some may include their name as part of the ident:

> *"You're through to customer service, my name is …"*

Lead-out

This is the customer's cue that it is their turn to speak. The Lead-out can be open or closed-ended according to the policy of the team/organisation:

> *"How may I help you?" (Open-ended)*

> *"May I have your equipment ID please" (Closed-ended)*

> *"May I have your policy number please" (Closed-ended)*

For absolute control, it is considered preferable to use a closed-ended lead-out because although there is an implication that you can help (you have, after all answered the call!), the customer must 'do as you say' in order to get further. Some feel that a closed-ended lead-out sounds too aggressive, but the key is that once a standard greeting has been agreed, everyone uses it.

- ***What if you use the closed-ended lead-out above and the customer doesn't know their policy number?***

Placing a customer on hold

The big-big-big golden rule of putting someone on hold is knowing how to do this properly on the telephone kit you are using. Find out!

The cardinal sin is to use the mute button instead of hold. Why? Well, many call monitoring systems want to collate 'hold time' for analysis because, for example, it might indicate that one or more people keep putting customers on hold in order to refer to a colleague and this might indicate a training/knowledge issue. Using the mute button does not tell the monitoring system that you have placed a customer on hold—it clocks up 'talk time' instead and this can lead to inaccurate statistics.

There's no ideal maximum hold time length, but as a rough guideline, if you expect to have to put someone on hold for longer than 30 seconds do think carefully before you do so.

Hold Time

Also remember that your organisation (or a trade organisation to which your company belongs) may have a code of practice for the maximum amount of time a person can be place don hold..

- ***Exercise: Identify some ways to NOT put someone on hold:***

The last exercise identified how NOT to put someone on hold, so what's the right way? Over to you again…

- ***Exercise: Identify the correct way to put someone on hold:***

Call Escalation & Call Ownership

The principle of call escalation is simple; you do not have the resources at your disposal to deal with the customer's enquiry so you bring in additional resources to assist.

Many support teams have a 'pass the buck' attitude to escalation but this is NOT in the best interests of the customer or the Service Desk.

What escalation is NOT: Washing your hands of the whole issue.

The principle of *call ownership* applies here—one person (usually the customer's first contact) owns the call and so they must ensure that it is dealt with properly to the satisfaction of the customer. If other people work on the call, and even if someone else closes it, that's fine, but the call owner has a responsibility to ensure that someone is dealing with it.

Ownership of an escalated call means monitoring its progress to ensure that things happen during the time frame stated in the applicable SLA. If not, then remedial action needs to be taken by, for example, alerting a team leader or manager.

Some organisations do not like the principle of call ownership and prefer that the person *currently* working on a case is the one who takes responsibility. Time and time again, this attitude leads to *nobody* taking ownership, or makes it difficult to find the customer's 'champion', so when a customer calls back to find out the status of their call it's virtually impossible to find this out.

- ***Can you think of any times when call ownership might be transferred?***

Call ownership also applies to incoming calls about ongoing problems where you are not the call owner and also to calls that get routed through to the Service Desk incorrectly. If you receive such a call, take it upon yourself to find out who should be dealing with the call and pass the customer to them. DO NOT simply refer the customer back to the main switchboard or ask them to call in again—the likelihood is that if it went wrong the first time, it'll go wrong again and this leads to one angry customer. If you cannot identify the correct resource for the customer there and then, take their details, give them a time frame, find out and call them back.

Real Time Call Analysis

In order to complete (note: not 'close') a call, it progresses through several stages. Knowing these stages and what happens at each one allows you to ensure that you don't miss out any critical elements. This analysis starts after the call introduction; we assume you have already picked up the phone and greeted the caller. This call anatomy describes the building blocks for a call as follows:

Discovery

Here you are attempting to find out what the customer wants. Sometimes this is easy because the customer actually tells you. On the other hand, you might be working on a Help Desk and the customer says: "My computer has gone wrong, what's happened?"

This stage *is* the questioning phase and there are essentially two types of question that you can ask, closed-ended and open-ended:

A **closed-ended** question structures the response for the customer and can be answered by one word, often "yes" or "no", or by a very brief phrase, for example a question like: "Have you tried rebooting your pc?"

An **open-ended** question leaves the form of the answer up to the person answering and so elicits much more thinking or information, for example: "Can you tell me what you can see on the screen?"

- Closed-ended questions are most appropriate when the Service Desk Professional wants to verify that they have understood the customers problem or wants to retain control of the conversation
- If a Service Desk Professional wishes to encourage more customer involvement, open-ended questions are preferable because they require a more complex response. Open-ended questions begin with Who, What, Why, How, When, Tell me, Describe, Explain to me

Fifty percent of being able to effectively troubleshoot lies in asking the right questions upfront so you have all the detail you need.

Action

Having discovered what the customer wants, you have to assess what action you need to take to satisfy their needs. This may be as simple as providing them with some information from a computer screen, or it may require you to escalate the call to someone else.

Reaction

Having taken action, you need to identify whether it really has satisfied the customer. This could be done by simply asking the customer whether that was the information they needed. If the issue was a technical one, you might ask the customer to repeat the failed task to see whether it is now working. The customer's reaction to your checking will tell you whether you need to take further action or whether you can complete the call. If you discover that you are in an Action-Reaction loop then it's time to either reappraise your understanding of the issue by returning to the discovery phase, or to escalate.

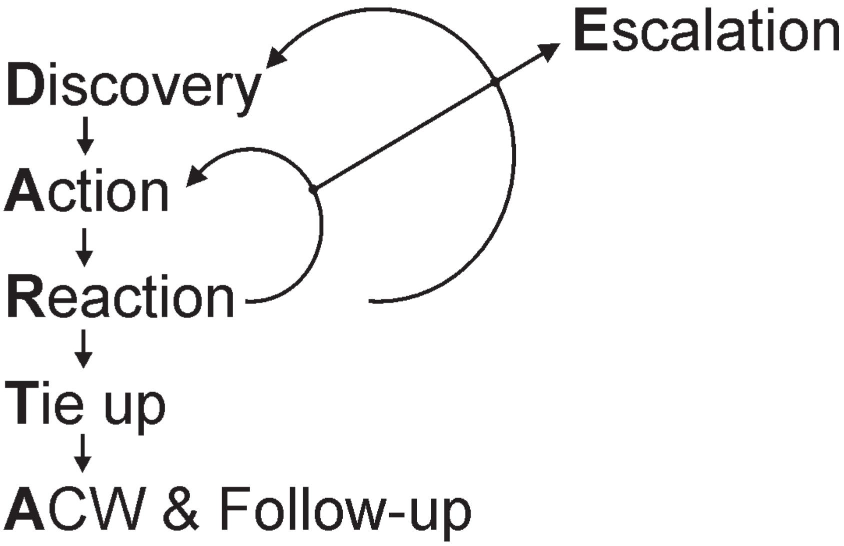
Tie up the Call

Tying up the call is where you finish your case entry for the customer and end the call. SOPs for this point in the call may require you to use a standard completion ("Thank you for calling") and / or require you to quote specific pieces of information ("Your reference for this call is ….").

After Call Work and Follow-up

Follow-up might involve several tasks:

- After Call Work (ACW, or Wrap Time) to complete your notes—covered next
- If the case cannot be closed, you may need to escalate it or do further research
- You may need to contact the customer with new information, or to ask further questions
- Your customer contact might have identified a weakness or gap in a procedure that needs to be highlighted
- You may identify a pattern or trend emerging that needs further investigation
- You may identify a need for a technical bulletin or an update to a Web-based Frequently Asked Questions list



Call Time Monitoring

Category: Guidelines

First Covered in: Service Desk Professional

From a telephony perspective, calls follow another pattern with regards to how time is tracked. As far as most ACD (Automatic Call Distribution) systems are concerned, your working time can be divided into five phases:

- Idle Time (not taking a call)
- Talk (Busy) Time
- Hold Time
- Wrap Time (After Call Work or ACW)
- Signed Off

Most of the 'DARTA' anatomy fits into talk, hold and wrap time. Follow-up loosely fits into wrap time, although you may need to do further work when you are signed off the desk. Time away from actively taking calls still needs to be tracked and this is normally done through the case management system.

Your telephone system may be used to track your current working state; it may have buttons to signal your current state, or you may need to dial a code for each one. These codes are usually given to you on a look-up sheet—make sure you use the right ones at the right time (this can take some discipline) because it's very easy to nip away from your desk without signing off. If you continually do this, expect your team leader or manager to have words!

Wrap Time

Wrap Time / ACW is an ***essential*** part of the service delivery process (having wrap time is a *best practice*); it's the time you take to complete a customer's notes and get ready for the next call. Some telephone systems will automatically place you in wrap time when you hang up a call, others require you to hit a button. The amount of time allocated to ACW may be fixed by the ACD system and/or your team leader or you may be allowed to control your own. There is always pressure to reduce ACW to the absolute minimum, but do not sacrifice documentation quality for the sake of making the 'figures look good'.

Organisations that skip on Wrap Time (ACW) often manage escalations and follow-up badly because they do not have comprehensive notes.

Not only does skipping ACW ultimately waste time but it annoys customers when they have to go over the same points again and again.

Time Management

The proper tracking of time is essential for capacity and workflow planning; supervisors and team leaders can often be seen tearing their hair out because someone has left for lunch and then attended an afternoon meeting without signing off, so they show 'in wrap' for several hours!

Interacting With Others

It's inevitable that you will need to deal with other people many times throughout the day. These people may be colleagues, members of other departments, customers or third party vendors. The way in which you speak to these people can have a positive or negative effect on their attitude to helping you with the task in hand. One of the trickiest areas is usually chasing outstanding issues or follow-up because it is always tempting to criticise or complain about actions that have not been taken, but direct criticism often leads to conflict or bad attitude.

We'll cover communication skills more fully in a later chapter, but here a quick plan for dealing with follow-up:

Give a Time Frame

Whenever someone else becomes involved with an issue that you own, always quote a time frame for their response—this doesn't need to be done aggressively, but as a 'handy helper' for them to manage their time better. Here's an example- what works best for you…

> *"Can we agree to have this done by 3pm this afternoon? If there's a problem with that do let me know as soon as possible"*

> *"…and I need it by 3pm OK"*

Quoting time frames is a powerful management tool—it also indicates that you mean business!

If you need to follow-up work that seems not to have been done, the approach should be one of 'mutual concern' on behalf of you and the customer—again, here's an example:

> *"It's 3pm and you haven't called me. Have you done that fix or not?"*

> *"What's the status on the fix as it's 3pm and I'll need to update our customer"*

Notice the use of "our"—helping the customer is a joint effort for all teams in your organisation. The use of 'our' implies mutual accountability and it is always preferable to think in collective terms rather than encouraging conflict between departments by playing the blame game with "you".

Conflict between departments, even over the most trivial of things, is a common problem within the Help Desk industry.

Recording Information

Remember that as well as completing your notes during wrap time, you should have begun taking notes almost as soon as you started the conversation with your customer. Making quality notes is very important because as well as being for your personal use, they may be read by escalation teams, third parties *and the customer*— this requires discipline and a degree of common sense in what you write about the customer.

This section covers some of the key elements of good note taking and although it's here in the context of verbal communication, the issues covered also apply when documenting written correspondence—there's more about this later.

Real Time Note Taking

It's quite a difficult task to speak, listen and type simultaneously, but it is a valuable skill for several reasons:

- It improves accuracy—notes are taken at the time rather than written down and entered into the system later.
- There's less opportunity to filter your notes later by omitting what you think isn't necessary and there's no danger of being unable to read your writing.
- You save time. Typing your notes directly into the case management system is quicker than writing them out by hand and then typing them up (once you are up to speed).

Real time note taking is a skill that takes time to master—we suggest that focusing on the topic one day a week for the first few weeks is a good way to get up to speed—for example, have Tuesdays (or any day you want!) as 'real time notes' day and ask everyone to put up a note on their desks to really encourage 'less paper' during the exercise.

Once you master the skill, you will find that the quality of your documentation goes up.

Abbreviations and Terminology

Real time note taking in any form encourages corner cutting, such as the use of abbreviations. Shortening words is not a crime here, but in order for the notes to make sense to other people on your team and elsewhere, your abbreviations should be understood by all concerned. We encourage the creation of a **standard terminology list** that is available to everyone on the Service Desk and anyone else who might need to read your notes.

As well as abbreviations for in-house products, services and departments, make sure that the glossary includes the specific words to be used for common items. For example, should your notes refer to 'screens', 'terminals', 'VDUs', 'monitors' or 'displays'? Does your organisation differentiate between a 'terminal problem' (a problem with a screen/keyboard connected to a larger computer elsewhere) and a 'monitor problem' (a computer screen). Again, the key here is consistency and the avoidance of ambiguous abbreviations.

Professionalism

Common courtesy dictates that customer records *never* include derogatory comments about the customer. Not only is it possible that the customer might at some time see these notes, but it also clouds other people's opinion of the customer.

It is always tempting to write down something to 'mark' a difficult customer, but take a breath before you do this and remember that customers will react differently according to circumstances (just like you!)—they may be calling to confirm some good news about their bank balance, or you might have just shipped the wrong item to them. In this respect, just because you might have caught a customer on a 'bad day', this should not be reported to the rest of the team as it is not relevant to the customer's wants or goals.

You may have to acknowledge frustration by expressing empathy (we'll cover this later), but this should ***not*** affect the quality of the service the customer receives, nor the way you write up your notes.

Avoid emotive statements in customer records—just report the facts.

Make sure that all customer notes are factual and informative and not a source of potential negative feelings or confrontation.

Recording Customer Attitude

Although we need to be careful when taking notes when a customer is being disagreeable (rightly or wrongly), it is important (and permissible) to make sure that everyone that sees the notes is aware of the situation. This is easy to do with the correct, matter of fact, terminology—for example:

Rather than: "This guy's doing my head in—what an idiot!"

Try: "The customer is annoyed—this is the third time they have returned the goods"

This second sentence will help anyone using the notes when speaking to the customer—for example, a manager calling the customer back could easily put into their conversation at an early stage: "I understand that this is the third time the goods have been returned—I can understand why you are frustrated."

Chapter Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to help you:

- Appreciate the need to work in a controlled and consistent manner
- Understand how standard operating procedures (SOPs) assist with control
- Know that some SOPs have a legal basis
- Explain how to align SOPs with SLAs
- Know the key customer-facing SOPs
- Appreciate the need for call ownership, especially when issues are escalated
- Analyse the real time workflow of a call
- Explain the importance of After Call Work time
- Know how telephone systems quantify time
- Describe the benefits of using time frames
- Understand the need for a professional approach to note taking

Everything that a service delivery team does is measured and monitored. This chapter has covered some of the whys and hows. We have also considered the benefits of taking and managing proper customer notes.