

## Feature Article

# Call Center Networking: Getting Together with Competitors for a Common Cause

by Susan Hash

*Although, technically, they're competitors, a group of call center managers in southwestern Virginia find value in regular meetings to share ideas, best practices and resources.*

If you're in a constant competition with other call centers in your area when it comes to recruiting capable, customer-oriented agents, consider an approach taken by managers in southwestern Virginia. Instead of competing for the same labor force in an area with a population of approximately 200,000, call center managers worked on a joint project with local community colleges to ensure a steady pool of customer care candidates.

A year and a half ago, the managers, from companies in diverse industries—formed a networking group to meet regularly and to talk about common issues, share ideas and resources—and work together on joint, mutually beneficial projects. It was an idea launched by Sandy Ratliff, director of marketing for Virginia Southwest Promise, the marketing arm of the Virginia Coalfield Economic Development Authority (VCEDA).

“Working with new call center managers as they located their operations here, it was apparent they had common issues like finding qualified employees and training, as well as the perceptions in our region about what goes on inside a call center,” says Ratliff.

She suggested (and hosted) a “get together” reception where the managers could meet each other and discuss their common issues. The initial reception was such a success, the managers decided to make it a formal networking group. They meet bimonthly, hosting networking luncheons that rotate among the group members' facilities. Today, the networking group is running strong, consisting of 12 inbound call centers in the southwestern Virginia region, including

AT&T, AT&T Wireless, Crutchfield Corporation, Travelocity.com, Sykes Enterprises, Verizon, LogistiCare, and others.

### **Taking Staffing Needs to the Local Colleges**

Finding and training call center agent candidates was a critical challenge shared by all of the group's participants. When the VCEDA began actively recruiting call centers to the region in 1996, says Ratliff, the local community colleges quickly stepped up to the plate by establishing a frontline call center curriculum.

The Teleservices Career Studies Certificate program was jointly developed between Southwest Virginia Community College and Mountain Empire Community College, says Dr. Barbara Fuller, professor and coordinator of workforce development for Southwest Virginia Community College. “We felt that we needed to be prepared to help the call centers with their startup needs, as well as with their staff retention needs.”

The 29-credit hour curriculum for frontline customer care associates includes courses in computer keyboarding, business communications, introduction to and overview of call center services, principles of sales and marketing, business math calculations, professional development, geography and lifestyle management. Students can complete the program in two semesters.

The frontline certificate program was a great start, says Dan Minahan, director of southwest Virginia Operations for Crutchfield Corporation, the nation's largest direct integrated marketer (catalog, call center and Internet) of consumer electronics products. “But then we

found that we had another need—professional development to help us fill our management positions.”

Fuller, along with a workforce development coordinator from Mount Empire Community College, began attending the call center networking meetings to develop an additional curriculum to help develop call center staff.

“We took the fishbone approach to planning the courses—outlining what their staff currently know and what they need to know,” says Fuller. “We developed the courses to include specifically what the call center managers wanted.” The new career studies program for customer contact supervisors, designed for individuals who plan to move up the career ladder in customer care operations, includes courses on how to train, human resources management, supervision, quality assurance and operations management.

### **Sharing Ideas and Best Practices**

In addition to finding ways to supply their contact centers with well-educated candidates, the networking group’s bimonthly meetings have proven to be truly beneficial for its members. Minahan points out that holding the meetings at various call centers creates a valuable learning and sharing opportunity.

“Every time we meet, we get a tour of the hosting facility and we can pick some ideas that we can bring back to our own call centers,” he says. “We also discuss common concerns and share best practices with each other. Many times, we’ll find that we’re using the same types of applications, or we’re at different stages of implementing call center applications. We can then pick up some efficiencies from each other.”

A recent group effort centered on the challenges shared by double-income working families during the winter months. “When it snows, it causes some problems,” Minahan says. “The schools close or delayed, then people have to scramble to make arrangements for their kids. Employees start to miss work or come in late.”

In a networking meeting, the managers decided to reach out to the local school board officials to let them know how school closings

and delays impact the call center environment and to learn more about the factors behind such decisions.

“I spoke with the assistant superintendent here in my county,” Minahan says. “I got a lot of understanding of the conditions for which they close schools, how those decisions are made, and how early in the morning they make those decisions.”

Minahan and other managers who met with their local school board officials then shared what they learned with the rest of the group. “Of course, we’re not interested in making the decision on whether or not the schools will be closed, the idea was to get the information out to our employees so we can make their lives easier and make the business run a little better,” he says.

The networking group’s activities are not always call center specific. Last year, one group member headed up a call center vs. call center challenge to raise funds for breast cancer awareness. In the end, the centers raised about \$5,000.

Some of the more informal get-togethers

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provide learning opportunities of a different sort, such as which call center has the best batting average. Coincidentally, says Minahan, even before the networking group started, many of the managers got together and formed a co-recreational softball league in which the call centers play against each other.

### **Benefits Outweigh Initial Concerns**

Developing solid relationships with like-minded managers in similar roles has proved to be a win-win situation. Although, he admits having initial concerns about the competition for employees, Minahan says that the benefits have been much greater than any doubts. “I would encourage call center managers to get involved in a group or some kind of network so they can

share ideas and see how other companies are doing things,” he says. “Also, if one of us has to call another for a business reference it’s nice to know who’s on the other end of the phone.”

Other members agree. Our networking group is unique because we’re all competing for the same candidate pool, and we meet to talk about common issues,” says Sherry Wildasin, a Pennsylvania native who recently moved to the area to manage the AT&T Wireless call center, which opened in Lebanon, VA, last June. She says that the networking group has helped her to learn more about her employees as well as her new locale.

Southwest Virginia Community College’s Fuller adds that she also values her continuing involvement with the networking group. “It’s an exciting opportunity to keep abreast of companies’ needs and to be able to assist them with their employment requirements. I would like to see this happen in other industries, as well.”