



Your Call Routing Needs An Upgrade

Every growing franchise organization should re-evaluate its marketing tools and methods.

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Call routing does not have the buzz of mobile marketing, QR codes, social media or other technologies touted as the next big thing. Call routing simply gets incoming customer calls where they need to go, as quickly as possible, helping to provide the best customer experience your franchise can offer.

In fact, when it works well, it seems to just happen in the background, and companies tend to forget about it, with problems being the exception rather than the rule.

Periodically, every growing franchise organization should re-evaluate its marketing tools and methods, including those used to route calls. Perhaps more sophisticated reporting can be used to generate better marketing metrics or to make better decisions, perhaps a threshold in size or price makes it worthwhile to re-examine the use of a call center or perhaps a growing base of customers relying on smartphones warrants a more effective call-routing method.

Upgrading your call routing can be as simple as implementing a basic plan that incorporates geolocation, which takes advantage of past call histories or current sales data in real time to make call-routing decisions. Geolocation also enables sophisticated visual reporting that allows your organization to integrate call data with other relevant data such as

sales, marketing expenditures and drive times. Call-routing technology can make many things possible for your business that have not yet been realized.

How does your company know when it is ready for a call-routing upgrade? Here are five signs that indicate a better call-routing solution will likely provide better results.

1. YOUR COMPANY WANTS TO BUILD A BRAND OR CONSOLIDATE OPERATIONS USING TOLL-FREE NUMBERS.

On occasion, issues arise between a franchisor's desire to build a brand using nationwide toll-free numbers and a franchisee's desire to primarily rely upon local numbers to drive call traffic. There is not a single right answer to this conflict, but from the corporate or franchisor level, it is hard to dispute the importance of building a brand using one phone number that everyone can reference and use, no matter where they are.

Sophisticated call-routing solutions can incorporate both nationwide toll-free numbers and local numbers seamlessly, providing the best of both worlds for the franchisor and the franchisee. With the use of visual reporting tools that track both toll-free and local numbers, it is relatively easy to see where calls are coming from and to measure the local and national impacts of different marketing methods.

In addition, sophisticated call-routing solutions can determine whether a customer is a first-time caller, regardless of which number that customer called. First-time callers can be routed to the specific person or location that is best prepared to handle the inquiry.

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2. YOUR LARGE NETWORK OF FRANCHISES RELIES ON OUTSOURCED CALL CENTERS.

Your business may have already recognized the value of toll-free numbers to control costs and build your brand at the franchisor level. Initially it made sense to utilize a call center to process callers for any number of reasons unique to your size, business model or time available. But now the cost per lead is getting out of hand or the number of complaints and hang-ups is rising.

Call centers are expensive on a per-call and per-minute basis and are necessarily limited in how they can help your customers. Conversations must be carefully scripted, and since call center employees know next to nothing about your products or services, they won't be able to help your customers, as well as your company could and they likely won't be around to ensure your customers are happy. Then there's the decline in the customer experience felt by the caller who has to be transferred to someone else or worse, asked to call another number. A major credit card company recently built an entire marketing campaign around problems with outsourced call centers for customer support.

If a potential customer responds to your marketing efforts and takes the initiative to call, it's usually better to send the customer directly to someone who knows exactly how to help him or her. In the franchise industry, this is almost always the franchisee.

3. YOUR INBOUND CALLS ARE INCREASINGLY COMING FROM CELL PHONES RATHER THAN LAND LINES.

Smartphones represent the biggest single technology-driven change to your demographic, no matter what business you are in, and you have to respond practically and intelligently.

Among other things, smartphones present new challenges for call-routing systems. With land lines, routing calls

based upon the fixed location of the caller is very straightforward. With smartphones, and all cell phones for that matter, call routing gets more difficult, not just because smartphones are mobile rather than fixed, but also because there is no national directory for cell phones the way there is for land lines. Further, with the number portability of smartphones, your company can no longer rely on area codes to roughly determine where the caller may be.

A detailed explanation of the specific call-routing problems this causes and their various technical solutions is beyond the space available here, but here are two ways that sophisticated call-routing providers can address the cell-phone challenge:

- Real-time dips to location services, which simply means partnering with another firm that can provide the instant location of a cell-phone caller so that the call can be routed correctly.
- Use of mobile apps that can use the GPS on a smartphone to identify its location before routing the call.

4. YOUR ORGANIZATION IS STRUGGLING WITH VALUATION ISSUES FOR NEW FRANCHISE LOCATIONS.

This is obviously a non-trivial problem and enormously important to rapidly growing franchises. Accurately assessing the true value of a new franchise area has value to the franchisor and the franchisee. Modern visualization tools give companies the flexibility to define franchise areas without being limited to using DMAs, counties, ZIP codes, or census tracts or blocks. The key is being able to aggregate the relevant census, demographic, tax, income, sales, or other available data by your custom areas to produce a set of metrics that can reliably and consistently be used to generate a valuation.

Having an objective set of metrics can also help minimize the inherent difficulties in comparing areas that differ widely in population density, demographics, real estate costs and so forth. Just as important,

franchisors can also use these tools to help identify the best opportunities to expand in metropolitan areas.

5. YOUR ORGANIZATION IS GROWING RAPIDLY.

Rapid growth is a good problem, but when it's not managed well, it can cause successful enterprises to fail. Regardless of the specific call-routing solution currently in place, as growth passes certain thresholds, it is always a good idea to recheck your assumptions and costs and look at new capabilities that may not have been cost effective or practical previously. For some franchisors, the tipping point occurs at 10 locations. For others, it may be 100 or 1,000.

The key question is where are the bottlenecks? Does your current call-routing solution have any capacity issues that may cause it to fail as your franchise continues to grow? Are there ways to automate call routing to be able to add new offices quickly or react to disasters that would necessitate rerouting? Ultimately, this question ties back to the quality of the customer experience and your business doing what it can to ensure that your growth isn't hurting it in any way.

As with any technology, sometimes it's hard to know when your system has outgrown your current call-routing solution and is ready for the next step. With the ubiquity of smartphones, tablets and mobile apps, making sure your customers get the best experience possible whenever they call is still vitally important to your success. ■

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