

Headsets: Audio Quality and Durability makes Sound Business Sense

By Rod Jones 1 August 2018

Contact centre and call centre professionals throughout the world agree: It's all about the quality of the spoken communication between the agent and the customer or called party. Quality conversations result in quality service and quality sales.

Poor voice quality results in confusion, frustration, tensions, misinformation, poor customer satisfaction, long call handling times and increased stress levels for agents and customers. These are all the things that any call centre manager wants to avoid. At any cost.

According to research carried out in the US by The Customer Experience Foundation, around 30% of customer experiencing poor voice quality said it happened in more than half of their calls with call centres, while a whopping 68% of those said that this has led them to hang up as a result. Of the 3,925 consumers surveyed, 26% said they had to redial to complete a transaction. Overall customer impressions are that call centres with poor voice quality just don't care or that they place little value on the customer.

Possible Causes of Poor Call Centre Voice Quality



There are several factors that can negatively affect call centre voice quality. From a technology perspective, these could include poorly managed or badly configured VoIP or SIP trunks, or failure to implement Quality of Service (QoS) over the enterprise network. Or simply, over-utilisation of available bandwidth. Also bear in mind that given the sophistication and complexity of typical Windows workstations, incorrect configuration or audio settings can be the direct cause of poor voice quality.

In addition, consider the generally high levels of call centre background noise. This can often rise to as high as 80 decibels. That's equivalent of having a food blender or vacuum cleaner on your desk, operating at full power! Other factors could include insufficient use of 'sound dampening' materials, over-crowding of agents and poor noise management policies.

Not all Headsets are Created Equal

An important point to remember, is that not all call centre headsets are created equal. It is the call centre manager and executive's responsibility to know and understand the differences, and to specify the most appropriate headsets to be used in their specific call centre or contact centre environment.

The technology, customer experience, user comfort, durability and cost are the key criteria to consider.

The first aspect of modern call centre headsets to get to grips with, is to understand the differences between 'noise blocking' and 'noise cancelling' features. In the case of 'noise blocking', the headset creates a physical barrier to external sound. For example, in-ear 'buds' or particularly large over-ear cushions fashioned from noise absorbent material. This type of headset does little to block out typically high levels of call centre ambient sound. They also tend to become extremely uncomfortable to wear over extended periods. Directional microphones also tend to be the mark of low-cost 'sound blocking' headsets; they do very little to screen out or to mask background noise and rely on the agent positioning the microphone within a few millimetres of his or her lips. Often agents need to cup their hands around their mouth and the microphone to try and block out background noise, so as not to annoy customers or callers.



Noise Cancelling

Well-engineered 'noise cancelling' headsets, with earphones designed specifically for call centre or contact centres, use sophisticated technologies that generate 'noise cancelling' sound waves. These sound waves dynamically and effectively mask out or cancel much of the external ambient noise. Similarly, high quality noise cancelling microphones effectively focus on the agent's voice and block out much of the background sound.

When specifying or testing so-called noise cancelling call centre headsets, one also must be cautious of the practice of some low-cost headset manufacturers to deliberately introduce a high-frequency 'white sound' into the headset earpieces to theoretically mask out ambient noise. This vaguely audible background 'hiss' can, for many agents, become extremely annoying, distracting and can even cause dizziness and disorientation. And it does very little to mask out or reduce the background noise that is so annoying to customers.

Acoustic Burst

Acoustic burst occurs in a headset earphone when, for some technical reason, the sound 'spikes' well over normal or safe limits; these being between 70dB and 85dB at the earpiece.



These 'spikes' can be caused by the likes of static, system faults, power surges, network anomalies as well as sounds and noises made by excessively frustrated callers!

Acoustic bursts or 'spikes' over a 105dB threshold are not only extremely uncomfortable or even painful to agents, they can cause extensive damage to the user's eardrums and might even result in permanent loss of hearing. In many countries, it has become mandatory through legislation for call centre or contact centres to only utilise headsets incorporating built-in technologies to protect users from acoustic shock.

Durability

Many call centres or contact centre consider headsets to be nothing more than expensive consumables. In cases where low-cost low-performance headsets are procured, the probability is that durability is not a major feature. Call centre agents are tough on headsets.

Unless they are designed for the torturous call centre environment, large numbers of headsets will fail, will end up in the bin and will need replacement.

Low-cost, 'cheap-and-nasty' headsets certainly do work out to be nothing more than expensive consumables. What's more, they are probably the source of a great deal of customer dissatisfaction, agent frustration and because of staff turnover and extended call handling times, operational costs soar.

On the other hand, headsets designed specifically to address the realities and the challenges of the modern call centre or contact centre, not only have the technical characteristic necessary to ensure high quality voice communication, they are comfortable, safe and extremely durable.

Repair, Refurbish and Recycle

High audio quality headsets designed specifically for the punishing call centre or contact centre environment not only provide greatly enhanced customer experience, but through an effective and efficient Repair, Refurbish and Recycle programme, they can become exceptionally valuable managed assets.



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