

FORECAST FOCUS



WFM: Life After the First Forecast

By: Tiffany LaReau, Human Numbers

It takes a lot of analysis and sweat to generate an initial forecast. But that's just the beginning:

A look at the ongoing tasks to ensure flexibility and greater accuracy.

Effective workforce management practices are based on a solid, consistent methodology with a clearly defined goal in mind. Writing out the roles and responsibilities with tangible things like delivery dates, frequency and purpose will allow you to quantify your results and will make it easier to incorporate them into a performance measurement.

While forecast accuracy and schedule effectiveness are important, it's just as critical to be reliable and accountable for the diligent prep work that leads to those results. Restricting your "success meter" to a pass/fail model using forecast accuracy alone will lead to indecipherable results, because forecast accuracy gauges the performance of the call drivers and the business, not necessarily the forecasters themselves. The ability to methodically perform the steps required to generate forecasts and schedules and deliver the results accurately and on time should be weighted high on your priorities list.

The Work Doesn't End When the First Forecast Is Generated

Workforce managers place much emphasis on generating that first solid forecast and workable set of schedules. After all, a very significant amount of analysis goes into it, especially with unfamiliar call groups. But it is dangerous to expect to rest on a single good forecast for an extended period of time. Call drivers are

known to change on a regular basis — for example, scripting changes that lead to handle-time differences, new marketing promotions, external changes due to the economy, new technology offerings, etc. The workforce manager's plan needs to include regular strategy meetings with the call center managers, repeating forecasts and constant reanalyzing of methodologies. A successful forecast not only accurately predicts the true demand of volume and staff requirements, it also responds quickly to any change in the environment, and can easily migrate itself to absorb the current trends in an organic way.

To produce the best level of balance, I recommend reviewing daily, weekly, monthly and quarterly repeating tasks, such as those illustrated in Figure 1. These responsibilities are limited to forecasting and scheduling only; therefore, tasks related to tracking and real-time management are excluded from this list. (The forecasting role looks outward to call drivers; the scheduling role looks inward to the agent behaviors; and a tracking/real-time manager role is a different type of personality altogether.) It's also important to consider the condition of the working environment. For instance, in the best environments:

1. Senior management's support is present and visible.

Continued on page 2

Continued from page 1

2. The necessary tools and resources needed to perform the job are in place.

3. Lines of communication exist with easy access to the departments being served.

Don't underestimate the importance of these conditions — they can make or break your ability to produce results. Taking steps to make sure that they're in place up front can help to assure a cozier existence, allowing you to focus on the challenges of forecasting and scheduling, rather than a distraction from a computer that is too slow or a difficult manager who may need additional training.

Let's take a look at the ongoing tasks that take place after generating the first forecast.

Daily Tasks

I touch three items on a daily basis. The first one is collecting, cleaning and normalizing yesterday's ACD data. This can actually be done once a week (for the previous week) rather than daily, it just depends on how often you receive your ACD data. I prefer to do this daily because that is when I also look for abnormal activity,

and it's easier to spend an hour or two each day drilling down into the dataset intervals rather than saving it all for once a week.

Because the raw data is reviewed daily, it's also natural for the day-of-week (DOW) and time-of-day (TOD) distributions to be updated and refreshed at the same pace. In situations where I normalize ACD data weekly, it makes sense to update the DOW and TOD patterns weekly, also. Regardless of how frequently it happens, these factors are reviewed by individual day.

The third daily task is to optimize schedules. Optimizing too far in advance can create extra work, especially if the people in your call center change their plans often. One person's absence may necessitate a lunch and break change for another person, and if the vacation gets canceled, all three exceptions would need to be undone. Waiting until the final acceptable time allows you to manage absences, meetings and other special changes that you may not have known about earlier. But the frequency and advance notice has to be considerate to what the agents will tolerate as realistic demands from

you. It's possible that an agent is willing to have a different lunch time every day, but expects to be given more than two hours' notice before you dictate that change to them.

Weekly Tasks

There are four weekly tasks, but not all of them happen every single week. The first one is the mini-forecast. This task does repeat weekly, because it is solely controlled by me, the impact is always positive on the business, and it never imposes on the supervisors nor agents. The purpose of the mini-forecast is to pull in any last-minute changes that I am notified about regarding call drivers, and to refresh the DOW and TOD distributions using the most recent data. Even call centers that are "locked" into their forecast by an advanced number of days can still benefit from a mini-forecast, especially if there is significant change in the call patterns, because it would never hurt to have more accurate forecasts.

The interval and daily reforecast happens every two to four weeks, depending on the volatility of the call group itself. If a group is

Continued on page 3

Figure 1: Repeating Tasks



Continued from page 2

very stable and experiences small amounts of change, and this stability has been demonstrated to me over a period of three or more months, I will reforecast once every four weeks. Groups that are newly developed are reforecasted more frequently, every two or three weeks.

Schedules are generated based on agent tolerance. My ideal would be to generate new schedules with each change in volume, which means a schedule change on a daily basis. My reality is that I am allowed to change schedules on a far less frequent basis. Some groups allow it weekly, some monthly, some never.

Meeting with team managers is a weekly task, but since it depends on the manager's availability, it may not always happen that frequently. The weekly meeting agenda usually includes the following type of subjects:

1. Review the weekly forecasting and scheduling packet;
2. Discuss upcoming holidays and special factors; and
3. Collect any changes to employee schedule preferences.

Monthly Tasks

Once a month, I pull in all of the historical data and reforecast volumes. Ideally, it would

only happen for six months out. Typically, it happens 12 months out, and I try to limit it to 18 months out at the maximum. The monthly reforecast is important because I use it to calculate the required staff. Knowing about these fluctuations in advance helps the call center plan when they need to hire (when understaffed), and when they can add training (when overstaffed).

I also pull in the handle time at the monthly level, and compare it to the previous six months of handle times. This provides a way to gauge upcoming handle times which are critical for determining staff and directly impacts budgets.


The monthly team managers' meeting agenda usually includes the following:

1. Review last month's volumes and forecast accuracy;
2. Look at forecast, discuss current forecasting method and collect input; and
3. Review changes in handle times.

Quarterly Tasks

Once a quarter, I analyze the past three months' of assumptions that I had been using for the long-term models. This includes anything that affects budgeting information, with the most emphasis placed on validating the assumptions that are directly related to shrinkage, presence factors, and utilization. My

long-term models always show actual in the past, forecasts in the future, so each quarter I replace the forecasts information with actual for the past three months. This is an exercise that is done with the team managers — it's an important task that keeps everyone aware of the impact to the forecast when too many people are allowed to take vacation, or too many meetings occur.

The final step is to republish the long-term models with the fresh forecasts and updated assumptions. If you have the technology available, the optimum way to publish your results is through a data repository system that gives your audience instant access to copies of your latest reports, and automating this as much as possible. 

Tiffany LaReau is the Workforce Manager and Owner of *Human Numbers*, a forecasting and scheduling service provider.

✉ Tiffany@HumanNumbers.com
☎ 678-494-1506

ABOUT US

Contact Center Pipeline is a monthly instructional journal focused on driving business success through effective contact center direction and decisions. Each issue contains informative articles, case studies, best practices, research and coverage of trends that impact the customer experience. Our writers and contributors are well-known industry experts with a unique understanding of how to optimize resources and maximize the value the organization provides to its customers.

Pipeline Publishing Group, Inc.

PO Box 3467, Annapolis, MD 21403

443-909-6951 | info@contactcenterpipeline.com | www.contactcenterpipeline.com

