

FORECAST FOCUS



SCHEDULE ADHERENCE: A Fun Exercise for Your Agents

By: Jon Pratz, Human Numbers

In the best-run centers, agents understand the importance of their individual contributions to the operation's success.

Customer-centric companies invest a substantial amount of time and money toward the development and success of their contact centers. Most centers have at least one workforce manager to help guarantee that success. Along with the workforce manager, there are generally other expenses, such as workforce management software and/or forecasting and scheduling personnel. Yet all of these resources are wasted when agents fail to adhere to their schedules.

One of the most important lessons that managers can provide to their frontline staff is the impact that a single agent can have on the center's performance by going to lunch a little earlier than scheduled, running out for a quick break, or returning from lunch or break late.

In the workforce management world, there is one widely known exercise that is used to demonstrate the importance of schedule adherence. We are staunch advocates of this exercise, and we try to incorporate it into seminars as often as possible. It seems obvious, but we all need to be reminded once in awhile of the impact that we have on our environment.

This simple exercise can be conducted cheaply and is easy to set up. After multiple demonstrations of the exercise, we've found some different variations and additional props to be helpful in getting the point across to agents. The following are the basic items that you can use, and what they represent.

REQUIREMENTS

- Eight balls (inbound customer calls) that are soft and easy to

toss from customer to agent (tennis balls work well)

- A container for the balls (the queue)
- Table or chair for the container
- (Optional) Props such as hats, headsets or badges to designate the agents

To begin the exercise, ask for 12 volunteers. You can adjust the amount of participants based on the size of the room you're in, the number of people in the audience and the amount of time you have to conduct the exercise. If you have trouble getting the audience's involvement (which is common), simply pick a certain group, side of the room, or a specific row or two to participate.

Assign six people to be "agents," and the rest to be the "customers." Have the agents line up arms-length from each other, preferably perpendicular to the seats of your audience.

Place the container (the queue) on a table or chair, centered, about six to eight feet across from the line of agents.

Have the customers form a single line behind the container of balls. Customers will stand in the line across from the agents when they have a ball and are looking for an available agent. When all agents are on a call, you should have a row of agents with a row of customers facing them—any other customers must wait in line behind the container. A customer must wait across from their agent until their "call" is finished (ball is back in the container), at which point they will return to the back of the queue line.

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Get the rest of the audience involved by asking them to keep track of the customer's wait times in line.

Write a different number on each of the balls to indicate different handle times. When an agent catches a ball, he must toss the ball up in the air or pass it around his back the number of times printed on the ball. One variation used to demonstrate the effectiveness of having multiskilled agents is to write "transfer" on one of the balls. This will simulate an agent receiving a call that he is unable to complete without the help of another agent, department, supervisor's assistance, etc. Agents who receive the "transfer" ball must wait for another agent to be available, throw it to them, and then take the next call.

Round 1

To start the first round, each customer acquires a ball and then proceeds to a spot across from an available agent. The customer then passes the ball to their agent, who handles it for the amount of seconds written on the ball, and then returns to the queue line when their call is over.

When an agent has finished his call, he will throw the ball back into the container from where he is standing in line. The agents standing farthest from the container may have a hard time making the shot. If they miss, they will have to leave their "desk" to retrieve the ball, which now represents "after-call work." You may have agents either try the shot again,

or simply drop the ball into the container after they pick it up.

Stop the round after a few minutes or when the first customer has cycled through a few times. Discuss with everyone how the flow of calls went. Was there a lot of waiting? Was there much frustration?


Round 2

For the second round, start the process over again. After one minute, demonstrate the effect of losing a single agent by removing one from the group. Some fun props to use as a reason for the agent leaving could be a bathroom key pass, a candy bar or bottled water. Toss the prop to the agent and tell him that he decided it was a good time for him to take a break. After another minute, have another agent take a break while the first is still out.

Debrief

Stop the exercise after a few more minutes and discuss what everyone witnessed. Ask the customers about their level of service. Ask the agents how they felt when their peers went on their breaks. Get feedback from the audience on what they observed, and ask: "What difference did one person make in this exercise?" The ultimate goal is to try to get agents to explain why they should adhere to their schedule.

Everyone who has worked in a call center knows how stressful it can be to have calls

backing up in the queue, and knows the frustration you will hear from the callers when you finally do get to them. This exercise is easy to put together, fun to facilitate and really gets the point across to agents about the impact that every individual can make on the level of service customers receive. It is also a simple way to demonstrate that the purpose of creating efficient schedules is to provide the best possible service to the customers. 

Editor's Note: A copy of this exercise can be found on page 3 of this article.

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Pipeline Publishing Group, Inc.

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Schedule Adherence Exercise

Objective

Create knowledge and awareness of the importance of schedule adherence by effectively communicating the impact that a single agent can have on customer service and resource utilization. The exercise will effectively illustrate how individual agents fit into the overall goal.

Requirements

Six people to assume the role of “agent”

- Six people to assume the role of “customer”
- Remaining audience members are observers
- Eight tennis balls (the “calls”)
- One container to hold the balls (the “queue”)
- Adequate space for the agents to be standing across from the customers

Round 1

Ask for 12 volunteers to act as agents and customers.

Select six volunteers to be your agents, and ask them to stand in a row, a few feet apart from each other. Instruct them that they will be receiving “calls” from customers. They will handle each call for 5–7 seconds (give each agent a different time). They should count the seconds out to themselves (one, one-thousand, two, one-thousand three, etc.), then return it to the container by throwing the ball from their position. Agents who are farther from the box have farther to throw the ball. Any call that doesn’t go into the box has to be picked up by the agent and counted as “after-call work” before taking a new call.

Line up the remaining six volunteers—your “customers”—behind the container (call queue), which should be placed about 6–8 feet across from the agents, centered. Instruct your customers to pick up a ball from the box, find an available agent to stand across from, and toss the call to their agent. Any customer waiting in line for an available agent should count their hold time. A new call can’t be taken until the old call is released.

Start the call exchange and let it run for about 3 minutes. Stop and review delay times with customers. Ask the agents how they feel. Ask observers what they noticed.

Round 2

Remove one agent from the line to go on break. Begin the call exchange again.

After 2 minutes, remove another agent (because they saw their friend go on break and decided to leave, too) and continue the exchange. Make sure customers are counting delay times. Stop after 1 minute.

Review delay times with customers. How different did agents feel about their ability to handle inbound calls after someone was “missing”?

Debrief

Review the differences in delay time based on various agent situations. Include observers in discussion.

- What was the effect on customer service?
- What was the effect on agents?
- What happened when a call was dropped outside of the box and went into ACW?

Ask the group: “What difference did one person make in this exercise?” (Try to get them to explain why they should adhere to their schedule.)

Point out that THEY are that one powerful person in their own call center. When you do something that is not scheduled, it has a direct impact on utilization and adherence, which, in turn, has a direct effect on the customer.

Ask for additional questions, and close.

Source: *Human Numbers*, www.HumanNumbers.com. Questions about this exercise? Contact us at (678) 494-1506; Tiffany@HumanNumbers.com (Tiffany LaReau) or Jon@HumanNumbers.com (Jon Pratz).