

CALL RESOLUTION IS GOVERNED MORE BY PERCEPTION RATHER THAN ACTUAL SKILL BASE - New research challenges notion that skills are lower offshore

The same call – two very different outcomes

Agent based in India

"She just didn't know what she was talking about..."

Same call with a UK based agent

"...that's the company at fault, not her, she was just doing her job yes, it wasn't right but..."

Groundbreaking independent research could be set to change the way we view offshore call centres. This unique study has managed to demonstrate for the first time that companies using offshore call centres are passing blame onto advisors rather than take responsibility themselves. It comes as the same research reveals that whether the advisor is in the UK or offshore is not the issue – in fact 2 out of 3 people don't care where the advisor is based as long as their query is resolved.

Consumers may claim they have a negative experience with an offshore-based advisor, but if one equal call with exactly the same resolution is taken – customers are more likely to blame the Indian/offshore advisor, rather than the company, rating their skills lower. For customers there is a clearer empathy with the UK based advisor – and it is the organisation that is left accused, not the advisor. Contrary to previous thinking, this research reveals for the first time that it is not about whether the process is scripted or even that skills are actually any lower but that once a foreign accent is heard blame is then apportioned to the individual and not the company.

Key findings:

- 2 out of 3 people don't mind where the operation is based as long as their enquiry is resolved.
- One call with equal resolution leads to 2 different perceptions yet Indian/offshore advisors rated lower than UK counterparts.
- The issue regarding offshore call centres is about perception –where the '**background noise**' influences public attitudes.
- The findings challenge the idea that just moving from one offshore location to another will offer any advantage (it doesn't matter whether the call centre is in India, South Africa or Estonia –the over riding factor is that it is offshore in the first place). The methodology provides a new way to test potential locations before committing.

The problem can be put down to the perceived negativity in the collective UK conscious –or what Intersperience Research term '**background noise**'. This is a largely media generated phenomenon that influences perception when speaking to an advisor based offshore. The research, which examined customers from leading UK financial service providers, demonstrated as a result of this factor that the companies behind offshoring do not take responsibility and instead allow the blame to pass to the advisor who is left 'hanging out to dry'.

'**Background noise**' is essentially generated by the creation of 'urban' myths (perceived or real) surrounding Indian/offshore call centres where people are essentially influenced by media coverage. Therefore when customers came to make a call they already had pre-conceived attitudes towards offshore call centres. Not surprising -in just one recent week;
"Customers hang up on overseas call centres" Daily Telegraph (12/5/07)
"Rethink on foreign call centres as customers voice growing concerns" The Scotsman (5/5/07)



intersperience

Intersperience set out to test the hypothesis that it was not about the skills and attitude of the advisors in India but the influences on the UK based customer before they pick up the phone. The idea is that **background noise** is the real factor behind a negative experience.

By using role play and reversing the calls intersperience were able to demonstrate that as expected there was more empathy with a UK based call advisor, yet the same call to India met with resistance (and at a considerable level at times). The researchers were able to test this by playing out a series of the same calls voiced by an Indian advisor and a UK advisor to a series of robust consumer panels. The research clearly demonstrated that the same individual call, with exactly the same resolution and outcome, could lead to two very different perceptions despite the fact that it was exactly the same.

Agent with Indian Accent

"I'd have put the phone down straightaway on that one"

"I wouldn't have lasted that long...no way"

Same call, with English/UK accent

"...it's the system that's let it all down at the end of the day."

Paul Hudson, Consultancy Director Intersperience Research said:

"This research clearly casts doubt on the way organisations view the problem and the assumptions they make about customer service and perceptions. Whilst there is no doubt that there is a perceived problem amongst customers that they receive a lower performance from offshore call centres, our research clearly casts doubt as to how valid this perception is, by which I mean if you take one equal call the customer consistently thinks the Indian advisor has provided a worse service, when in reality the call is exactly the same. Much of this is down to the baggage that customers have before even making the call – the assumption that the experience will be worse thanks to the negative publicity."

Research Background:

Study conducted March –May 2007 (the culmination of 7 years work in this area)

The customers were from leading UK financial service companies.

Calls between agents and customers (in the UK and India) were recorded and then reversed creating a carbon copy. This created a customer perception model to measure 'background noise'.