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How a Personality Test Designed to Pick Astronauts is Taking the Pain Out of Customer Support

By E.B. Boyd

"Making a call to customer support" is probably second only to "getting a root canal" on most people's lists of "fun things I'd really rather not do today." If you've seen NBC's *Outsourced*, your opinion of call centers has likely plummeted still further. Despite the energy that companies invest in trying to improve call center operations, most seem to fail miserably at mastering this most basic human skill—communication.

Now eLoyalty, a company that builds tools and services for call centers, has created a system that compiles personality profiles of each individual caller and matches them with a customer service representative who works best with that

personality type. The system is based on a methodology NASA used to weed out astronaut candidates and that Bill Clinton used to tailor his speeches. It's already having a marked impact on reducing call frustration and improving customer satisfaction rates.

The methodology, called the Process Communication Model, was created in the 1970s by a clinical psychologist named Taibi Kahler. He divided people into six main personality types, each of which has a different communication style and each of which has different stress triggers. If you know the personality type of the person you're speaking with, Kahler explained, you can modify your own communication style to work more effectively with them, prevent misunderstandings, and avoid inadvertently pushing the other person's buttons.

For example, a "Workaholic" personality type is all about the facts. When they call support, they want to focus on the task at hand and blaze through the call as quickly as possible. For them, small talk is nothing but a time suck. A customer service rep who starts chitchatting in a well-meaning effort to establish rapport will only put the caller in a foul mood, which will poison the rest of the interaction. "Reactors," on the other hand, are all about relationships. A customer service rep who doesn't acknowledge their feelings will make them feel cold and shut off.

The personality assessment and communication model has been used everywhere from professional coaching to psychotherapy. At NASA, Kahler worked with staff psychiatrists to help develop a model that could predict which astronaut candidates would be best capable of handling the tasks required on space missions. "Persister" types, who strive for perfection and encourage others to reach their peak performance, were identified as the best fit and have historically made up the majority of personality types in the program. The prognosis for "Dreamers," on the other hand, who tend to be sensitive, shy, and introverted, was dismal, and few if any ever made it into space. (See p. 2 of this document [1] for a description of the six types and their use in the space program.)

In call centers, eLoyalty's system uses the PCM framework to compile a personality profile of each caller from the moment they first contact the center. The system, which is automated, analyzes the caller's language patterns and other behavioral cues to identify their personality type. (A team of 250 linguists, behavioral scientists, and statisticians have compiled a massive set of linguistic libraries and behavioral algorithms to parse callers' every word and mode of expression.)

Each time the customer calls back, the system uses the existing profile to steer them to a customer service representative who's the best match for their personality type, and it continues to analyze their subsequent conversations to deepen and enrich their profile.

eLoyalty, which has clients in the banking, health care, and insurance industries, among others, is the only organization in the call center industry licensed to use PCM. Typical call center quality assurance programs train reps in specific issues and rely on supervisors listening in to a small percentage of calls, and providing coaching to individual reps. The automated eLoyalty system not only allows a larger proportion of calls to be analyzed, but it moves coaching out of the realm of intuition and grounds it in evidence about how to communicate effectively.

"We're taking all of the subjective and manual components of that coaching and call scoring process and making them objective, transparent, automatic, and statistically significant," eLoyalty Vice President for Sales and Marketing Jason Wesbecher told *Fast Company*.

eLoyalty's package, which includes a suite of analytic tools in addition to the personality assessment, seems to be working. A banking client saw the attrition rate among customers struggling with the most serious issues drop from 7% to 1%. Another client using the system saw their J.D. Power rating rise from the high single digits to the low single digits (in the J.D. Power system, one is best). And according to Wesbecher, call center operation costs drop as much as 15% in the first year to 18 months that clients use the eLoyalty system.

"The call center is often considered the red-headed stepchild of an organization," Wesbecher said. "But the reality is that what happens inside of those phone calls is a tremendously powerful extension of that organization's brand. How well or poorly you handle those phone calls has a huge impact on what that customer thinks about you."

[*Photo by Howie Le [2]*]

Links:
[1] http://www.scribd.com/doc/17867981/The-History-of-the-Process-Communication-Model-in-Astronaut-Selection
[2] http://www.flickr.com/photos/hawee/3599320521/