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High Quality in a Small Center

A q&a with Steve White, founder of Taction, a small, coastal Maine outsourcer that offers high-quality "boutique" call center services.

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Waldoboro, Maine-based outsourcer [Taction](#) describes itself as a "boutique contact center in mid-coast Maine with 100 seats and a small, flexible management team." Their emphasis is on high quality, rather than cost-savings.

"We've actually fired clients who wanted our agents to give customers less than their best or to focus only on average handle times," they told us.

Their client list has included Samsonite and Samsonite Black Label, Cuddledown, SmartPak Equine and Canine, Eastman Kodak, DineWise. Katahdin Cedar Log Homes, J.H. Breakell & Company Jewelry, School Specialty Publishing, Lotus 1-2-3, and Harbor Sweets.

Taction's founder Steve White recently answered some questions for us about being an outsourcer, a small call center, and their dedication to high-quality customer service.




What are the key challenges that smaller call centers face?

Steve White: The smaller call center faces several key challenges unlike the ones that beset their larger counterparts. It's important to identify these unique challenges, face them head on, and even turn them to the company's advantage. Doing so can be exciting, intellectually stimulating, good for building the spirit of teamwork, and great for the call center's overall health and success.

As an outsourced call center, some of our key challenges are:

- Finding the delicate balance between putting too many eggs in one basket with just a few large clients vs. having so many smaller clients that we dilute our attention and effectiveness. This is overcome by a) experience, we've been in business since 1983, and b) selecting our clients carefully based on their needs

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and expectations and our ability to cater to both not just in a satisfactory manner but with excellence. We choose clients who are open to consultative collaboration, who have good marketing plans, and who are willing to work with us to train our agents well and often.

- Having a limited budget. There are many ways to overcome this within each department, from IT to HR, and we've outlined a few successful tactics below.

- Having sufficient call volume. Huge call centers can use their monthly cash influx to leave a big footprint and operate multiple centers. We have to be more careful about how we attract the right client, and we have set up data/phone redundancy and back-up power supplies within our facility to ensure that having only one location is not a drawback, and in fact, cements our strong teamwork ethic and warm family culture.

What the small call center offers that larger ones cannot is incredible attention to the client and the client's customers.

How did Taction deal with the budget limitations inherent in setting up a smaller call center?

Steve White: Technology is critical to any contact center. One obvious challenge for smaller centers is a limited budget. Buying the most expensive top-tier equipment is the easiest and safest choice, but it's not always an option.

When Taction set out to buy a new switch several years ago, we decided to think outside the box. After doing much research, we took an opportunity to be a beta tester for a company now called [eOn](#). We also joined eOn's Users' Group and networked with other companies using the same switch.

In return, we got a sophisticated switch that lets us accurately and inexpensively record 100 percent of our calls. Many call centers, even large ones, do not offer this critical service. Multiple other benefits include faster skills-based routing of calls, emails, e-faxes, and e-chats and seamless integration with our proprietary order-entry software and with our clients' software.

A smaller budget also means our small, flexible IT department finds creative ways to not only stay competitive, but to keep us ahead of the technology curve. We run numerous open source software applications, including ones that back-up selected PCs, run the robust FAQ system in our intranet, and track work tickets for the IT department (that one is called "Bugzilla").

The IT team has also begun using virtual machines as an inexpensive way to reduce our hardware dependency.

Another challenge is overlapping IT coverage for our 24/7 schedule. All of the IT staff have pagers and cell phones, and they know each other's jobs well enough to cover for them in an emergency. "We think some of our 'negatives' are positives. In a larger center, money gets thrown at problems, but that's not always the best solution," says Chris Blum, a

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programmer at Taction.

What about deciding on critical call center software?

Steve White: Again, having a smaller budget means doing lots of homework before making any capital purchase. When Taction bought new workforce management, we conducted a one-year search of 12 vendors to find the right solution. When it came down to the finalists, we compared them using a checklist with dozens of points, including everything from accuracy, to support, to price.

Another operational challenge is that with lower call volume, Erlang doesn't always work in our favor. Our supervisors and managers combat this by keeping a very close eye on service levels throughout the day. We also overstaff to ensure that our service levels are met, and if things slow down sufficiently, agents have the option of putting their name on a "go home early" list.

We need to have all of the tools that a larger center has, but this is great for our clients. We are incredibly scalable, up and down, to meet their needs. Because we're smaller, our scheduler doesn't have as many options about filling work slots, but it also means she knows our agents' needs and can take those into account. This is a big plus when it comes to employee satisfaction.

How does Taction find and keep qualified agents?

Steve White: Like many smaller call centers, Taction is located in a rural area. The available labor pool in mid-coast Maine is smaller than those in suburban and urban areas. We don't offer a career track as long as ones that might be available at a large center. Our medical benefits are generous, but we aren't offering a pension plan at this time. And because we have a two-person HR department, ramping up rapidly for occasional larger-scale hiring is a bigger challenge.

We've addressed these issues in numerous ways. We did a salary study of the mid-coast area to be sure that our entry level pay for unskilled agents was in the middle of the range being offered by other companies. We wanted to be sure we were offering a fair wage. We also offer a small wage differential to those who work overnight and on weekends.

Because upward mobility is limited here, agent positions have to have other benefits. One of those is flexible scheduling. We love it when parents and retired people apply for positions here. Parents can work around their children's schedules, and retired people, who aren't necessarily interested in a long-term career or even full-time hours, can work a schedule that they enjoy. While doing so, they tend to apply a work ethic, professionalism, courtesy, and knowledge that sets a great example for younger workers.

We also participate in community events, donate to local charities, and help laid-off employees find new jobs by coaching them on their interviewing skills and resume compilation. All of these activities create great word of mouth, which actually accounts for nearly 90 percent of our recruitment and has served us better than all of the paid newspaper, internet, and radio ads we've placed in the past.

Are potential clients wary of Taction's small size? Do they expect you to have the same high level of technology and infrastructure as the large outsourcers?

Steve White: The majority of clients expect us to have the same basic capabilities as large companies, and in most cases we do. However, while they expect our level of technology and infrastructure to meet their needs, they also seek a more intimate understanding of their products, their company culture, and their particular way of doing business. This is where we excel because of our size. Clients who are small to midsized, who are growing, who want to complement or replace their existing sales and support structure, or who want 24/7 without the overhead, know that we will give them personalized service. Our management is easily available and our career agents truly care about their customers and feel personally involved in each client's success.

Medium-sized clients who might get lost at a larger company get lots of attention at Taction because we've set things up that way. High-touch service to our clients and their customers is our niche in the competitive call center market.

Do you have any advice or best practices for effectively running a small center?

Steve White: Make the customer experience a top priority. We have a saying that lasting profitable relationships are built one experience after another. Communicate that philosophy throughout your organization. We're here for our clients and their customers. Making them happy is our priority. All of our employees know that and they walk the walk.

Ask your agents to focus on average order value (AOV), not average handle time (AHT). The savings of 15 seconds of support is far outweighed by lost customers, poor word of mouth, customers calling back, and lower repeat business. The average order value can say a lot about customer satisfaction. If an order is larger, it usually means the agent helped meet all the customer's needs. Focusing on average handle time, however, can lead to unhappy customers. At a minimum, it can mean apathetic customers who will defect to the competition easily.

While supervisors and schedulers need to know AHT for coaching and planning purposes, it should not be a key performance indicator (KPI) for agents. Agents should understand the basics of "conversation control," but they should never feel they don't have the time to be friendly, courteous, and helpful to the customer.

Give your agents the tools they need to provide first call resolution whenever possible. Taction works closely enough with its clients that many feel comfortable providing business rules and empowering agents to use those rules to make decisions about offering alternative products, refunding shipping charges, and otherwise satisfying customers. People want to do a great job, and that happens when you give a well-trained, accountable, professional agent the ability make smart decisions about solving or enhancing a customer situation.

Most important, focus on your people. Taction's average agent tenure is 5.3 years, so we feel confident that our advice here is sound. It includes:

- "Survey, survey, survey." Taction recommends using a third party that is an expert at crafting and conducting surveys -- we use The Omega Management Group in Massachusetts. (Omega also conducts our client satisfaction survey and we're proud to be the first outsourced contact center ever to win their prestigious NorthFace ScoreBoard Award, a national honor given to companies that provide superior customer satisfaction.)
- Reward and recognize your people. Catch them doing things right and help them do

things right. An Accolades & Achievements board hanging near our break room features comments from delighted customers and clients who have praised our agents. We often see employees standing at the board, reading the accolades or studying "Team of the Month" posters and lists that show who's had perfect attendance or gone a month without making an error.

- Create a culture of constant improvement. Employees should feel free to make suggestions and take initiative. Praise people for doing well, but don't punish them for being imperfect. Show them how to learn from their mistakes, instead. I'll never fire someone for making an honest mistake, but I'll fire them for lying about it.
- Have a continuous improvement program. Taction agents get a monthly report card, called AAA for Achievement, Attendance, and Accuracy. It gives agents points for providing a suggestion to improve Taction or to help a client improve a process, a service, and so on. If the suggestion is actually implemented, the agent gets even more points. The report card also shows them their number of errors. Taction asks agents to sign off when they make an error that causes Taction to buy back the transaction from the client under our "on time, error free" guarantee.
- Don't lose sight of the basics -- monitor, forecast, have flexible scheduling, train often, give immediate performance feedback, and coach employees who need help, both on the spot and in continuing education classes.
- At a big call center, great supervisors are critical. But in a small center, it's important to also have a leader who is approachable and sets a positive example. When your agents care enough to share their thoughts and opinions because they want the company to be a better place for its employees and its clients, you're doing something right.

