

WEATHERING THE STORM

Weathering
the Storm
During
Irregular
Operations in
Your Customer
Contact Center

ISG



Most enterprises maintain elaborate plans and procedures for disaster recovery and business continuity. It is not uncommon to see hundreds of pages dedicated to recovery, not to mention dozens of individual departmental documents outlining local procedures in the event of disaster. Detailed attention is dedicated to these most important processes; far less time, however, is dedicated to the more likely scenario of contact center irregular operations.



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“Irregular operations” can be triggered by a variety of causes depending upon the industry. They can result from new software releases in the high-tech field, bad weather for the travel and transportation industry, or concentrated benefits enrollment periods for healthcare companies. Many enterprises view irregular operations as an evil that goes with the territory and simply must be endured occasionally. Operations managers generally expect performance to suffer along with their average monthly performance statistics that they have worked hard to maintain. We have generally experienced a “woe is me” reaction: Can anything really be done to improve performance during such difficult, even hopeless times?

From our experience, far more can be done than most enterprises believe possible. Following is a five-step process to plan for and improve performance related to irregular operations:

1. Let your customers know what’s happening. Don’t assume your customers know you are going through a difficult time. For example, all airline employees know that freezing rain at their airport hub can cripple system operations, but a caller from Florida or another warm-weather region may be completely unaware of such conditions. Have a pre-call announcement recorded and ready to use to deliver a customized message. Informed customers are more likely to understand and cooperate, and customers calling with less-pressing issues who are able to access Web services or call later in the week are more likely to do so. Here are a few suggestions for providing key information to customers:

- Advise callers of their approximate hold time. If you have this feature in your portfolio of contact center technologies, you should use it. Callers have a higher threshold for holding when they know how long the wait will be. If a caller has a pressing need to talk to a live agent about a situation, then waiting for 15 or 20 minutes will be less of a nuisance once he or she knows the worst-case scenario.
- Don’t run sales promotion recordings while customers are holding during periods of irregular operations. Callers frustrated by long hold times are far more likely to resent a sales pitch about the next upgrade when they are experiencing problems with their current software.
- Don’t overreact. Some enterprises have purposely “busied out” 800-number phone circuits so customers receive a busy signal when they attempt to call during excessively hectic times. Although this may save the enterprise short-term usage charges for 800 service that would have been incurred while customers hold for the next agent, we don’t recommend that you consider this extreme measure. Most callers only hold for long periods of time when they really need to get through to you. The longer-term resentment and potential lost sales will far outweigh the cost.



Brainstorm with the contact center staff about what can be done to improve operations during critical times. Be creative.



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2. **Develop a checklist of changes that can be implemented to improve irregular operations.** Brainstorm with the contact center staff about what can be done to improve operations during critical times. Be creative. If the checklist contains fewer than 10 solid items, then you aren't being creative enough! Fewer than 30? You can still do better! There are a number of emergency ideas that may be common to nearly all contact centers, while others may be more industry-specific. The ability to increase the workforce is a major issue, but don't just focus on calling agents in to work overtime. It's an expensive option and often takes time to implement. Again, be creative. For example, most enterprises are reluctant to permit untrained employees to help on the phones. This is a valid concern under normal conditions, but if utilized correctly, it can be a big help during irregular operations. If your enterprise can isolate a number of simple call types, then management, administrative staff and other department personnel already on site may be able to help by handling these calls, freeing the trained staff to handle more difficult calls that require more expertise.
3. **Work-at-home agents may be the best option.** If your company does not currently use work-at-home agents, it may be time to revisit or rethink this special resource. Improvements in voice over Internet protocol (VoIP) and Cloud Computing have drastically improved the viability and cost-effectiveness of work-at-home agents (especially if the irregular operations are triggered by bad weather). Agents who work out of their homes tend to be a highly reliable resource and can be available quickly when needed, whereas traditional on-site staff may struggle to get to work in a timely fashion when weather is poor.
4. **Initiate "quick call-handling" procedures.** During regular operations, there is generally a good reason for each call-handling process or procedure that is in place. During irregular operations, though, fundamental call dialogue may make no sense. Dissect each aspect of normal call procedures and determine which steps can be eliminated during irregular operations. Lengthy recaps and canned disclaimers can be resumed when the crisis passes; during irregular operations, they may take up valuable time that instead could be used to help callers with a greater, more immediate need. Make sure that centralized operations management staff members have the authority to launch the "irregular operations procedures" when metric thresholds are tripped. This is particularly critical with large contact center networks.
5. **Conduct a debrief meeting after each irregular operation experience, and update the irregular operations checklist.** A few days after the latest irregular operation has passed, life will be back to normal and important lessons learned can quickly evaporate. Take the time to conduct debrief meetings with affected staff members. Invite support personnel and outside departments to the meeting. Log new ideas, test them and determine if they should be added to the irregular operations checklist.

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