What an Acceptable Average Wait Time is for Customer Service

This blog will discuss an acceptable time for customers to reach an agent when calling a call center.

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SQM Customer service Quality Assurance Software

This blog will discuss an acceptable wait time for customers to reach an agent when calling a call center. Making it easy and quick for a customer to reach an agent provides a positive first impression, and if it is not achieved, it makes handling the call even more challenging and emotionally draining for agents and poor customer service.

Knowing if an average wait time (AWT) is acceptable can be challenging because it is complex, and there are a lot of considerations. For example, if the AWT is low on the surface, it might seem to be a good thing, but it could be an overstaffed issue. On the other hand, if the AWT is high, it is likely to have lower customer satisfaction and a higher call abandon rate.

It is common for the AWT to reach an agent to be substantially higher due to operating in a pandemic era, agent turnover, work-from-home, and longer average handle time. Furthermore, SQM Group's research shows "in the past year, the average wait time to reach an agent increased from PreCovid-19 for 60% of call centers".

Many call centers use "Your Call is Important to Us" phone message while a customer is on hold waiting to talk to an agent. However, the longer they are made to wait to reach an agent, the less important they are made to feel. In this blog, insights will be shared on what AWT means, why it matters, acceptable AWT for customer service, and options for reducing AWT.

What Does Average Wait Time (AWT) Mean?

Average wait time, also known as the average speed of answer (ASA), refers to the average time inbound calls take to be answered from when a customer is placed in the queue to when an agent answers the customer's call. It does not include the time a customer spends navigating the interactive voice response (IVR) menu, but it does include the time a customer spends in the

queue, and the phone is ringing to reach an agent.

Average Wait Time Formula

Understanding the average wait time formula is fairly simple to understand. Take the total wait time for calls that were answered by an agent and divide it by the total number of answered calls. For example: let's say the total time in a queue and ring time for those calls was 100,000 seconds, and the agents answered 3,000 calls, which = an Average Wait Time of 33 seconds.

The AWT does not mean every call got answered in 33 seconds. There will be customers whose wait time is much lower or higher than the AWT.

Why Does Average Wait Time (AWT) Matter?

AWT or ASA are key performance indicators that a call center uses to measure its efficiency and effectiveness performance to provide valuable insights to understand the impact it has on the customers, agents, call center, and at the enterprise level.

After evaluating AWT or ASA, it is crucial to understand the impact that a current or high average wait time or speed of answer has or could potentially have on performance. It is common if AWT or ASA is high, it negatively impacts a call center in the following ways:

- Lower First Call Resolution Rates

Customers that abandoned their call and then called back for the same reason as the initial call consider that they called twice to get their call resolved. Thus, these customers tend to have lower customer satisfaction. Also, low First Call Resolution (FCR) can significantly increase AWT because of the increased call volume due to lower FCR.

- Higher Call Abandon Rates

A well know fact is the longer the wait time to reach an agent, the higher the call abandon rates. Thus, a high AWT or ASA creates high call abandon rates, as well as lower customer satisfaction.

- Lower Customer Satisfaction

Customers who experience two minute or longer wait time to reach an agent will be less satisfied with their call center experience. Thus, in many cases, they will have an overall lower Csat rating even if the agent resolved their call.

- Lower Agent Satisfaction

Customers who have a long wait time to reach an agent are often dissatisfied with their experience right from the get-go and take it out on the agent who is handling their call. Dealing with customers who have had long wait times can be emotionally exhausting for agents.

- Higher Average Handle Time

When customers have a long wait time, they start the call by complaining about how long it took to answer the call. Therefore, the average handle time (AHT) is higher due to the time spent by the customer vetting about the wait time and the agent apologizing for the long wait time.

- Higher Cost Per Call

As previously mentioned, high wait time increases average handle time. Thus, the increased AHT creates a higher cost per call.

What is an Acceptable Average Wait Time (AWT) for Customer Service?

The call center industry standard for service level is 80/20, which means that 80% of the calls are answered by agents within 20 seconds. However, [our research shows](#) that "only 16% of call centers are able to achieve the 80/20 industry-standard consistently". Using call abandon and Csat data can be insightful for determining an acceptable AWT standard for customer service.

SQM Group's research shows "the average time when customers abandon their call is 2 minutes and 36 seconds". Furthermore, our research shows that "calls that are answered by an agent within 2 minutes after going through the IVR menu have no negative impact on overall customer satisfaction interacting with a call center".

Therefore, a legitimate business case could be made that an acceptable average wait time for customer service is 2 minutes or less. Put differently, service levels can be relaxed to 95% of calls being answered by agents within 2 minutes or, said differently, a 95/120 standard.

It should be noted that if the customer call is answered by the agent between 1 to 120 seconds, there is no difference in Csat. Therefore, shooting for a lower wait time of fewer than 2 minutes does not buy a higher Csat. However, wait times higher than 2 minutes do have a negative impact on the overall call center experience Csat. Put simply, it is acceptable for customers to have an agent answer the call within 2 minutes, and when it is longer than 2 minutes, Csat drops.

The 95/120 standard could be appropriate for many call centers but not all or certain lines of business. The question about this standard is how it would affect the call abandon rate and if the customers that abandoned will call back or use another touchpoint (e.g., email, chat, website) to handle their inquiry or problem.

To help determine an acceptable average wait time for customer service standards, there are four options to consider such as:

1. Relax Service levels – Consider a relaxed service level standard (e.g., 95/120, 80/60). If this option is chosen, an acceptable call abandon rate must be ensured. A low call abandon rate can be achieved by offering an option for a callback, wait time notifications, and engaging IVR messages.

2. Average Time When Customers Abandoned as a Guide – To determine a service level standard consider using the average time customers abandon the call. This approach might lead to a more relaxed service levels approach option.

3. Continue to use the 80/20 Industry Standard – This might be the best option for a call center because it is considered the industry standard. However, given that only 16% of call centers achieve this industry standard, it is worth thinking about other options for determining an acceptable wait time standard for customer service. Furthermore, many call center managers think low AWT is a customer service differentiator, but in most cases, it is not because most customers expect to have the phone answered within an acceptable time (e.g., 2 minutes or less).

4. Benchmark average wait time – Gain an understanding of the AWT compared with the industry or similar industry to determine a standard to use for an AWT target.

How can Average Wait Time (AWT) be reduced?

Six ways to reduce queue average wait times to reach an agent for customer service calls:

1. Train and Coach Agents to Deliver First Call Resolution

When providing training and coaching to agents, concentrate on calls that agents struggle with resolving. Low First Call Resolution (e.g., below 70%) is one of the main reasons why call centers struggle with achieving AWT targets. The benefits of providing focused agent training and coaching on First Call Resolution (FCR) are to not only reduce call volume but to also lower average handle time. Training and coaching agents on improving FCR might be the best option for a call center to lower the AWT.

2. Use an in-Queue Callback Option

It is no surprise customers don't like high AWT. Therefore, providing them the option of a callback can reduce the perceived wait time and provide higher Csat. Furthermore, it's much better than listening to company ads or elevator music. A callback is also known as virtual queuing because the caller does not lose their place in the queue, or they can schedule a time for the call. When the company's call center callback takes place, a customer receives a call and

connects them to an agent.

3. Accurately Project Call Volume

By accurately projecting AHT and call volume using historical data, one can be more effective at properly scheduling agents. This will help determine how many agents are required to achieve an acceptable AWT standard. It can be tough to project call volume right all the time. Therefore, good workforce management will be needed to quickly adapt to provide acceptable wait time even when call traffic goes up, or there is high agent absenteeism.

4. Optimize Call Routing

One of the biggest complaints about using a call center is the IVR navigation menu. Many customers feel the IVR menu is confusing and route them to the wrong area or agent. Use customer feedback to redesign the IVR menu and test to ensure that it is routing customers to the right area or agent. Also, test to ensure that the changes reduced the AWT to reach agents.

5. Evaluate Agent Staffing Requirements

Hiring more staff is obviously a potential solution if service level targets cannot be met. However, they might be an opportunity to use analytics to forecast the call demand when marketplace condition changes (e.g., peak season, product, service, and billing issues) or changes in new service level targets. It is common for call centers to use outsourcers to handle calls when they are not meeting AWT targets.

6. Educate Customers About Self-service Touchpoints

Many of the call-type reasons customers are calling about have low call complexity and can be handled with self-service touchpoints (e.g., chat, IVR, and the website). However, in many cases, customers are not aware of the touchpoints that can handle their call reason. A best practice is after a customer goes through the IVR menu and is told about the approximate time they will be on hold to reach an agent, educate them on self-service touchpoints that can resolve their call reason. In some call centers, agents educate customers about self-service touchpoints they can use to resolve their call reason in the future.

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