

Video Transcript

How to Reduce AHT in a Call Center by CareforCustomers

How to reduce average handle time in a call center. AHT is the common acronym for average handle time and AHT is typically defined as the average time it takes to handle all the calls answered in a call center during a defined period of time, say, a day, a week, a month, etc. If you work in a call center, you probably hear the question asked, "Hey, what was your AHT yesterday?"

Why is AHT important to a call center operation? Two reasons. Number one, AHT can be a good indicator of the level of service you are providing to your customers and, number two, it is an excellent indicator for how much it is costing to run your call center. Many call center operators will ask questions like, "Should AHT be within a certain range?" or "What is the right AHT for say billing calls?" or "Should AHT always be going down or should it go up?" The answer to those questions is, it depends. It depends on what you're looking to achieve. What is the goal of the center? What are your business and customer priorities?

Stay tuned and we'll look at the factors that decrease or increase AHT, both in a positive and negative way. First, let us go through the list once and then we'll go back and get into more detail on each item.

1. employee training
2. customer greetings both automated and spoken
3. information systems
4. telephone systems and a CDS
5. IVRS and auto attendant
6. service level
7. business processes
8. call control
9. call types
10. staff experience
11. customer self-help

Those are the 11 critical items that will impact AHT in your call center. Now, let's get into some detail about these issues and how they impact AHT.

So, back number one, training. Training is the first and probably most important topic in our Discussion. Good, relative, and applicable agent training will pay for itself many times over. Well trained agents answer customer calls correctly, they take less time to understand the

customers issues because they've been trained well, thus their AHT is usually lower. Well trained agents are more satisfied with their job and thus have lower staff turnover and the add-on benefit is that you get a happy customer and fewer repeat telephone calls, thus saving your operation time and money.

Customer greetings factor into AHT. Have you noticed that the opening and closing greetings imposed on call center agents are getting longer and longer? I dare you to find a customer who likes these extra words. No one really wants to be asked how they're doing today, why? Because the agent asking the question probably doesn't really care and the customer knows it, and it's never said in a genuine way anyways. If you require your staff to say a specific greeting at the beginning or end of a call just realize that the greeting is adding seconds to every agents AHT. Try this greeting, "Thank you for being our customer, how can I help you?"

Number three, systems. This means desktop computers, networks, databases, etc. They all factor into AHT. If the system response time is slow then a call or email or chat conversation will take longer to process. If agents have to wait for the computer screen to refresh then those extra seconds add up to unnecessary and wasted minutes and hours in your call center and that time is added on to the AHT. Slow system response time may be an issue in your call center. Here's how you can check. Simply take some time during the busiest hour of your operation and watch several of your agents working. Concentrate on the screen, not the agent, and see how fast the response, and count how many different screens or systems they have to access in order to complete the call. I'll bet you come back with some time-saving suggestions and a better appreciation for the importance of fast system response.

Telephone systems and a CDS track call time. Once a call is answered by the telephone system. They do a very good job in tracking and recording all the data related to an agent's performance on the phone. It is a very good idea to check that all the reports you get from these systems, you'll want to ensure that the system is only counting the time when your agents are actually connected with the customer and not when the customer just connected with the telephone system. It is not unusual to see telephone reports missing certain call types or queues or gates to which calls are routed. If this is happening then the AHT reported is not a true reflection of what your agents are actually doing, and that needs to be fixed. Here's a tip, place test calls at specific intervals during the least busiest period of your call center, make 10 to 20 calls at least 30 seconds in duration and make sure that there's an equal interval within the given hour. This volume and the total call duration should show itself up on your telephone reports. If it does not then you know you're not recording everything properly. Double check with your telephone system technician to ensure all the data related to your operation is being properly recorded and reported, and double-check to make sure it is accurate.

Number five, IVRS and auto attendants can have a positive impact on a call center operation and they help to lower AHT by collecting customer information or presenting answers to common questions such as hours of operation or mailing addresses etc. These systems also route the right calls to the right agents for handling, thus saving AHT. If you install an IVR you can easily estimate the savings that you can achieve through these systems.

Number six, low service level or put another way, lots of customers waiting on hold means that your agents are getting call after call. If your agents do not get a decent break between calls then they will get worn down and AHT will rise. A couple of issues come into play here. First of all, the longer customers wait the more they complain. Complaining takes time. If the customer does not complain then the agent will likely apologize for them waiting so long. Either way, this is an activity that takes time and thus AHT goes up. Another interesting thing also happens, agents will talk longer to happier customers to avoid the risk of getting an irate customer who has been waiting on hold for a long time. Poor service levels drive up AHT

Number seven, most of the processes used in a call center are developed by people in a nice calm cozy office environment. These processes tend to be built outside the reality of the call center environment where there are so many different factors that come into play. I've never seen or been part of a process of development where it is done on the phone with live customers. Develop all of your processes with your most experienced call center agents in the room. They know the systems, the sub-text, and the the workarounds. They can quickly tell you what works and what doesn't. Also, get a commitment from the team who develops the processes that they will take at least 50 live calls from real customers using the process they developed. If they won't, or worse, can't, then double-check the process to ensure that is the most efficient that it can be. If a bad process takes ten seconds longer than it should, chances are you will be stuck with this process for months before it's changed again, and that can lead to thousands of additional minutes in AHT. Don't accept any new process without first being field tested with your most knowledgeable agents.

Number eight, call control. Your agents' ability to control their customer conversations is a very important factor in lowering AHT. Customers will be mad, upset, confused, or disgruntled so they will want to explain their situation in great detail or they will want to talk about the weather, their grandkids, where the agent is located, or Sunday's football game. The goal of call control is to ensure your agent gets the customer back on track and talking about the reason for their call. Call control is a technique and a skill that ensures the agent identifies and fixes the

customers issue in the shortest period of time. Call control is a skill that needs to be taught and practiced. The good thing about call control is that payback is immediate and it's typically very significant.

Number nine, call types. If your agents work in a queue where they get many different types of calls, say billing calls, customer service calls, or accounts receivable calls then their AHT will be a combination of all of those call types. Always know what the average handle time is for each call type. If you remove one call type say accounts receivable and you know that those calls are typically the longest calls they take, then you should see a dramatic decrease in your AHT. Be aware of changes in marketing, sales, product promotions, or other departments that can have an impact on your customers. Should your company start a new promotion that is complicated to fulfill or hard for customers to understand then this will impact AHT. Be aware of these changes and report them to your management team so you can accurately allocate any additional operating costs back to the offending departments. The lesson here is to make sure you know what is impacting your AHT.

For good or for bad, number 10. The experience of your staff is a factor in AHT. I'll always remember when I started managing a call center, I had one agent who sat in the back corner never talked to anyone. What was funny was that he was the agent who received the most compliments from our customers. He'd learned what he had to do, did it well, and his customers loved him because he was fast, efficient, and kept talked to a minimum. His AHT was always the best. What I remember the most about him when he was the fastest typist I have ever seen. Again, he took the time to learn how to type on a keyboard with both hands and all ten fingers. The system was fast but he was much faster. You simply can't beat an experienced agent.

Finally, number eleven, customer self-help or self-service tools are almost a necessity in today's modern call center environment. These tools tend to reduce the number of calls coming into your call center but do little to reduce AHT. Most self-help tools will remove the easier call types. This means that your staff will be typically left with more difficult customer calls and these calls will tend to have a higher AHT. The overall benefit to your Center is great. It's just that you have to understand that the impact of self-service will have on your remaining calls. You will be left answering less calls but those calls will tend to have a higher AHT simply because they will be more complex type calls.

Finally, I'd like to leave you with one thought. I've had this question asked to me a number of times, if one particular person on a team can achieve a certain AHT can't everyone else? The answer is a qualified, no. People ask why? Well, it's because you've employed people and not

robots. People for better or for worse perform at different levels. It's the same reason why a classroom full of students all taught the same material by the same teacher at the same time do not get the same marks on their examination. Train them well, use good effective processes, and you will always improve your AHT.

I hope you have found this valuable and I want to thank you for watching.