



Offshore Company Call Centers a Concern to U.S. Consumers - Purdue University Study Sponsored by Kelly Services

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TROY, Mich., Sept. 21 -- A consumer's experience with a company's customer call center has a significant impact on their future purchasing behavior toward the company, and perceptions concerning offshore call centers play a role. This is according to the latest Call Center Study led by Dr. Jon Anton, of Purdue University's Center for Customer-Driven Quality, in conjunction with researchers at BenchmarkPortal, Inc. The Call Center Study was sponsored by global staffing provider Kelly Services.

(Logo: <http://www.newscom.com/cgi-bin/prnh/19991208/KELLYLOGO>)

"The study reveals that 85 percent of U.S. consumers felt their most recent contact with a call center met or exceeded their expectations -- with the vast majority also believing that their call was being handled by a domestic call center," according to Dr. Anton, the Director of Benchmark Research. Of concern for U.S. companies considering offshore outsourcing is that 65 percent of American consumers would alter their buying behavior toward a company if they knew or had the impression the business was using an offshore call center, regardless of the level of satisfaction the customer received from the call center experience. This response was found to be consistent across all call categories -- high value calls (product information, purchases, reservation), low value calls (account or order status), technical support, and complaint calls.

According to the Call Center Study, sentiments of nationalism and loyalty to America play a strong and more influential role in the purchasing decisions of American consumers than does their overall indifference towards the issue of offshoring. Although this business practice has been in effect for decades, offshore outsourcing continues to spark debate as the interrelation of jobs, productivity, global competition, and free trade continue to grow. "The decision to implement offshore outsourcing of call centers is about companies being allowed to make choices in the best interest of their business," said Teresa Setting, vice president, Kelly Services. "Some will choose offshore outsourcing as a solution; some will not. Regardless of which option companies decide to implement, an important element to consider which is often overlooked is patriotism."

U.S. consumers surveyed noted technical support issues as their primary reason for contacting a customer service center. The majority of customers seeking this type of assistance noted that their purchasing behavior toward a company would be adversely impacted based on the offshore location of the company's call center. Conversely, the research shows that more than a quarter of the respondents indicated there would be no impact on their purchasing behavior if their technical calls were handled by an offshore call center. Dr. Jon Anton explained, "An interesting cut of this data further reveals that with respect to technical support calls, college educated respondents and individuals age 18 to 35 were even more likely to indicate that their buying behavior would not be impacted if these calls were handled by contact centers located outside the U.S. This suggests that perhaps members of generation X and Y and those with higher levels of education are more apt to embrace a global economy."

Offshore outsourcing is an option that many U.S. companies are exercising, but one they cannot take lightly. According to Dr. Jon Anton, "As American companies consider opening call centers in other countries to serve and sell to U.S. customers, they would be wise to weigh their expected cost benefits against the possibility of potentially alienating their American customers."

A key challenge with outsourcing call centers in general, but especially when considering international locations, is maintaining consistent service quality. The Call Center Study reveals that more than half of the respondents who were dissatisfied with their recent customer service call cited agent-related issues, both general and communication.

General agent-related issues included representatives lacking professionalism, and/or customer service skills, and long wait to resolve problems, as well as service agents reading from and/or not deviating from scripts, and those who were ill informed. Reasons related to communication skills included language difficulties (poor English, difficulty understanding) -- although this individually ranked among the lowest factors, having little effect on a customer's call center experience -- agents who mumbled and/or spoke too quietly or too quickly, agents who were constantly asked to repeat themselves, and poor communication skills overall.

"The results of this study confirm that the call center experience has a significant impact on how American consumers perceive a company, and how likely they are to repurchase from U.S. companies that outsource their customer service calls to offshore locations," said Setting. "With this in mind, companies would be prudent to view their customer support call centers as crucial elements of their customer strategy, akin to marketing and loyalty programs."

The Purdue University Call Center Study was conducted to better understand how the American public's attitude and perception of companies is shaped by their experience with call centers as a point of contact for companies as well as to provide insight into how American consumers have reacted to the offshore outsourcing of service calls and if it had any impact on their purchasing behavior. A survey of 721 U.S. consumers was conducted. Selected from a broad database, this sample accurately represents all U.S. consumers (age 18 and older) at a 95 percent confidence level with an error rate of plus or minus 4 percent. Nearly half of the respondents had contacted a call center within the month prior to participating in this survey.

About Purdue University's Center for Customer-Driven Quality

Purdue University's Center for Customer-Driven Quality is the only University-based research center focused on understanding, researching and educating undergraduates, graduate students and business leaders on how building and enhancing customer relationships is the core competence of the 21st century.

About BenchmarkPortal, Inc.

BenchmarkPortal is the custodian of the Purdue University Center for Customer-Driven Quality database of contact center metrics, the largest in the world. It provides reports, products and services for contact centers in the areas of operational metrics, customer satisfaction measurement and agent satisfaction measurement. For more information about BenchmarkPortal, call 805-614-0123, or visit <http://www.BenchmarkPortal.com>.

About KellyConnect

KellyConnect is an exclusive Kelly Services program made up of the "best practice" tools necessary to recruit, assess, train, and retain top-performing call center agents worldwide. KellyConnect provides individuals skilled in customer service, sales/telemarketing, collections, market research, and help desk functions to inbound and outbound call centers/contact centers. Kelly's comprehensive understanding of the call center industry and environment is unique in the staffing industry and has helped Kelly to staff nearly 4,000 call center locations in the U.S. Visit <http://www.kellyconnect.com> .

About Kelly Services

Kelly Services, Inc. (Nasdaq: KELYA, KELYB) is a Fortune 500 company headquartered in Troy, Mich., offering staffing solutions that include temporary staffing services, staff leasing, outsourcing, vendor on-site and full-time placement. Kelly serves 200,000 customers through 2,500 company owned and operated offices in 26 countries. Kelly provides employment for nearly 700,000 employees annually, with skills including office services, accounting, engineering, information technology, law, science, marketing, light industrial, education, health care and home care. Revenue in 2003 was \$4.3 billion. Visit <http://www.kellyservices.com> .

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NOTE TO EDITORS: A summary report of the call center research is available by contacting Kelly's Public Relations Department at +1-248-244-4305.

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